

The Formation and Fragmentation of the Pakmodrupa Tradition: Authority, Conflict, and Politicization in the Kagyu Lineage

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Introduction

The Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism is traditionally categorized into two main branches: the "Dagpo Kagyu," which traces its lineage back to Gampopa and the Indian Mahāsid-dha Naropa, and the "Shangpa Kagyu," which descends from Niguma. Within the Dagpo Kagyu, Gampopa (Sgam po pa, 1079–1153) established a cohesive monastic community that later diversified into various sub-schools. Following Gampopa, his prominent disciples spread the Kagyu teachings, leading to the emergence of the "Four Great" lineages: Karma (Karma Kamtsang), Barom, Tsalpa, and Pakdru (Pakmodrupa), along with several "eight minor" Kagyu subsects (che bzhi chung brgyad), all ultimately linked to the disciples of Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo. The Pakdru Kagyu (phag mo gru pa bka' brgyud), named after Gampopa's disciple Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170), became a significant tradition within the Dagpo Kagyu. Known in Tibetan as Lang Pakmodrupa, this lineage eventually gave rise to a powerful political entity, the Pakmodrupa dynasty (1354–1434), with its origins rooted in the life of Pakmodrupa in the 12th century and the subsequent schism after his death.

This paper explores the development of the Pakdru Kagyu tradition, emphasizing issues of authority and conflict in its early history. It highlights Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo's role as a charismatic founder, including his legendary demonstrations of occult knowledge, and examines the division between his two main successors, Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa. Special focus is placed on the disputed handling of Pakmodrupa's relics (his stupa) and how this conflict led to the establishment of distinct institutions: the Drikung ('bri gung) and Taklung (stag lung) Kagyu sub-schools. The paper outlines how Jigten Sumgön's Drikung Kagyu gained spiritual and secular prominence in east-central Tibet, reaching its peak before the dominance of the Sakya school under Mongol influence. Throughout the discussion, the construction of religious authority is emphasized, illustrating how hagiographic texts (rnam thar) and ritual objects (monastic stupas, relic-

vessels) were used to validate lineage claims.

The sources for this study include Tibetan hagiographies of Pakmodrupa, Jigten Sumgön, Taklung Thangpa and *The Blue Annals* (Deb ther sngon po), a major Tibetan chronological religious history composed by Go Lotsāwa Zhonnu Pel, records the full lineage of the Dagpo Kagyu sects. as well as secondary English-language scholarship (e.g., David Jackson, Matthew Kapstein, Dan Martin). Tibetan terms and names are presented in Wylie transliteration, with relevant Tibetan quotations included for clarity. The analysis is contextualized within the sectarian politics of Tibet, demonstrating how religious influence was closely linked to worldly power, making symbols of sanctity sources of contention among followers and patrons. The Pakmodrupa case thus provides valuable insights into the politics of reincarnate-lineage formation, the significance of relic veneration, and the narrative construction of charismatic authority within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

The Pakdru Kagyu and Its Founder

Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo (1110–1170), a disciple of Gampopa, is revered as the founder of a significant branch of the Kagyu tradition. He was a Tibetan monk from the Neudong region who initially studied under Sakya masters, including Sachen Kunga Nyingpo, before moving to southern Tibet in the 1150s to learn from Gampopa. Gampopa recognized his spiritual achievements and, as the story goes, praised his commitment by presenting him with a bowl of tea/millet and imparting the complete Mahāmudrā teachings. Pakmodrupa was known for his strict adherence to the Vinaya, even participating in alms rounds, which contributed to his reputation for purity. In 1158, he established a modest hermitage at Pakmodru in Neudong, which eventually developed into a monastery named Densatil,¹ the name literally means the "Main Seat" or "Core Seat," symbolizing its status as the central seat of the lineage. This monastery became the center of the Pakmodrupa (Pakdru) Kagyu school, which is recognized as one of the "four great" Dagpo Kagyu lineages in Tibet.² While hagiography presents Pakmodrupa's journey as a smooth progression, his initial studies with Sakya masters, his later shift to Gampopa, and the combination of strict Vinaya with comprehensive Mahāmudrā teachings—suggest a more complex and strategic religious environment. His Sakya

¹ Jean-Luc Estournel, "Densatil Monastery: The Commemorative Stupas of the Lang/Pakmodrupa Dynasty," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/densatil-monastery>.

² Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau*, ed. Kurtis Schaeffer (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), pp. 41–46.

training did not contradict his Kagyu identity; rather, it provided him with a wider range of resources to draw upon later. This anticipates a pragmatic and situational use of multiple scholastic and lineage resources.

The story about the tea/millet bowl and the focus on alms rounds serve as rhetorical tools for establishing legitimacy: they frame tantric charisma within a context of public purity, making holiness understandable to lay supporters and local elites. Similarly, the conversion of a simple hermitage at Pakmodru into Densatil transforms geography into memory—subsequent monumentalization (such as stupas and relic worship) enhances the founder's authority and solidifies patronage networks. Lastly, categorizing Pakmodrupa's school as one of the "four great" Dagpo Kagyu lineages is a retrospective classification that oversimplifies the more complicated twelfth-century context; Pakmodrupa's lineage, therefore, should be seen not simply as one branch within a stable school, but as a charismatic and institutional nexus from which several later Kagyu traditions constructed their authority.

Charismatic Authority of Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo

In Tibetan historiography, Pakmodrupa is depicted not just as a scholar but as an exceptional siddha. His biography (*rnam thar*) and subsequent compilations are filled with miracle stories that emphasize his charisma. For instance, The biography records that Pakmodrupa used miracles to heal the sick and possessed the ability to know what was happening in other places. In biographical texts of the early Pakmodrupa Kagyu school, Pakmodrupa's religious authority rested not only on the profundity of his teachings but more fundamentally on his prescience of local calamities and absolute mastery over his physical form. According to his hagiography, Pakmodrupa once employed the doctrine of dependent origination (*rten 'brel*) to manifest supernatural powers and gauge the spiritual attainment of his disciple Taklung Thangpa.³ The texts frame dependent origination not merely as a philosophical understanding, but also concretely as a technique capable of intervening in physical ailments. Within their historical context, such narratives serve to entrench the guru's central status as a subduer of both natural and transcendent forces.

³ Pelchen Chokyi Yeshe, and Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo. "Phag mo gru pa'i rnam thar gzi brjid 'bar ba'i sgron me." 'Bri gung bka' brgyud chos mdzod chen mo, edited by Ra se dkon mchog rgya mtsho and 'Bri gung a mgon rin po che, vol. 15, [*'Bri gung mthil dgon*], 2004, p. 20. Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW00IW501203_3FE5C1, p. 51.

Concurrently, the texts establish an unbreakable causal link between illness and sectarian discipline. When recording the deaths of several monks who contracted smallpox ('brum nad) while traveling abroad, Pakmodrupa explicitly states that the root of this tragedy lay not in flawed meditative realization, but in their transgression against the guru's commands (bla ma'i bka' las 'das pa).⁴ This hagiographical rhetoric, which frames loss of life as a direct consequence of disobedience, effectively constructed an uncompromising culture of Guru Authority among the early devotees: to stray from the guru's protection and spiritual blessings is to incur dual obstacles to worldly survival and spiritual liberation. Such narratives of foresight, predictions of calamities, and interpretations of omens were common themes that legitimized Pakmodrupa's authority and the sacred lineage he represented.

In addition to these miraculous events, Pakmodrupa's life is characterized by profound devotion. Buddhist bibliographies indicate that he constructed stupas, regularly performed Dharma rituals, and ultimately achieved realization. On a literal level, he was acknowledged as a disciple of esteemed teachers and a strict follower of the Vinaya.⁵ However, the legends serve a symbolic function: by portraying him as a powerful "siddha king" with clairvoyant abilities, the Pakdru Kagyu tradition gained prestige and momentum. His charisma drew many followers, out of the eight hundred monks, five hundred held canopies.⁶ Yet, among them, Pakmodrupa stated that his successor would not be someone with an honorary umbrella, but "an upasaka who had attained the tenth level of a bodhisattva," meaning a fully realized lay yogin.⁷ This cryptic remark hinted at his choice of Jigten Sumgön (a layman) as his heir, dismissing the notion that his lineage would be passed to a purely monastic figure of rank. Such themes – a saint among saints and a highly qualified successor – firmly established the Pakmodrupa tradition on a foundation of mystical authority.

Disciples and the Stupa Dispute

Pakmodrupa's primary disciples in Ü were Jigten Sumgön (Jig rten gsum mgon, 1143–1217) and Taklung Thangpa Tashi Pel (Stag lung

⁴ *Ib.*, pp. 56–57.

⁵ Dan Martin, "Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyelpo," Treasury of Lives, accessed July 01, 2026, <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Pakmodrupa-Dorje-Gyelpo/2539>.

⁶ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, 2 vols. (Chengdu: Sichuan Minzu Press, 1984), vol. 2, p. 662.

⁷ Gyalwang Rinchen Püntso, and Won Sherab Jungne. sPyan snga 'bri gung gling pa dang 'bri gung skyob pa 'jig rten mgon po'i rnam thar. Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW8LS37368. Accessed 1 July 2026. [BDRC bdr:MW8LS37368], p. 21.

thang pa bkra shis dpal, 1142–1210). Both hailed from the Kham region of eastern Tibet and began their studies with Pakmodrupa later in life. Unlike other lesser disciples who established smaller Kagyu lineages, these two are particularly highlighted in the tradition. Pakmodrupa recognized Taklung Thangpa as the reincarnation of the Kadampa master Jeyülwa Zhönu Ö (1075–1138) and encouraged him to create monasteries;⁸ he founded Taklung Monastery in northeast Lhasa in 1180. Jigten Sumgön, on the other hand, received the complete Kagyu teachings and was acknowledged as the main heir. After Pakmodrupa's passing in 1170, it is said that Jigten Sumgön received a final blessing from his master in a vision. He then donated all his belongings to build a grand memorial stupa at Densatil in honor of his guru, which housed Pakmodrupa's relics, especially his cremated heart, and became known as the Tashi Wobar ("Radiating Light of Auspiciousness") stupa.⁹ Pakmodrupa's acknowledgment of Taklung Thangpa as a Kadampa reincarnation appears more as a strategic effort at ecumenism rather than a genuine doctrinal integration. It represents a purposeful blending of Kadampa's moral authority with the esteemed yogic reputation of Kagyu to validate new institutions such as Taklung Monastery. In contrast, the narrative surrounding Jigten Sumgön, along with the heart-relic and the early Tashi Wobar stupa at Densatil, illustrates the politics of relics—transforming succession claims into a tangible pilgrimage site that could draw in both financial support and labor.

The fate of Pakmodrupa's relics and the stupa led to a conflict between Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa. After Pakmodrupa's cremation, Jigten Sumgön quickly took steps to protect his teacher's remains. According to Jean-Luc Estournel's reconstruction history of Densatil states that the first of the great stupas was constructed in 1170 to hold "the heart of Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo," which astonishingly remained whole after cremation.¹⁰ Jigten Sumgön placed this relic and other sacred items inside the stupa, thereby embedding his guru's blessing in the new monastery. However, by this time, Taklung Thangpa had already left Densatil to establish Taklung Monastery in 1180.¹¹ Some later accounts suggest that Taklung Thangpa felt sad over losing control of Pakmodrupa's relics to Jigten Sumgön. Although the

⁸ Taglung Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. sTag lung thang pa bkra shis dpal gyi rnam thar. sGom lha gser khang. Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC), purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1PD44712. Accessed 2 July 2026. [BDRC bdr:MW1PD44712], p. 10b.

⁹ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 2, pp. 663, 707, 712.

¹⁰ Jean-Luc Estournel, "Densatil Monastery: The Commemorative Stupas of the Lang/Pakmodrupa Dynasty," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/densatil-monastery>.

¹¹ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 2, pp. 704, 712, 724.

textual evidence is limited, the tradition recalls a "stupa dispute," indicating a disagreement over the rightful ownership of the master's remains and the authority they represented.

Regardless of the specific details, the result was a distinct division. Jigten Sumgön, as the guardian of the stupa at Densatil, went on to create his own branch (Drikung Kagyu) from that base, while Taklung Thangpa established a separate Taklung Kagyu centered around his new monastery in the north.¹² The Blue Annals commentary notes that by the early 13th century, there was "apparent tension between the Taklung and Drikung branches" of the Kagyu lineage.¹³ Although both schools continued to claim Pakmodrupa's legacy, they did so independently. Symbolically, the monks of Drikung held the physical remains of Pakmodrupa (later returned it to Densatil) and the lineage throne, while Taklung developed its own ritual center and followers.

In summary, the charismatic authority of Pakmodrupa Dorje Gyalpo was transmitted through two sets of hagiographies (those of Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa) and was ritualized through the fate of relics and stupas. The conflict over these relics was not just personal but also institutional: controlling Pakmodrupa's stupa meant inheriting his legacy. This reallocation of sacred objects signified the politicization of succession. While tradition identifies these two as the main disciples of Pakmodrupa in Ü, their narratives also illustrate how authority was transmitted across different regions and contexts. Both individuals originated from Kham but established their influence in Ü, indicating that charisma and support could be relocated through networks rather than being tied to one's birthplace. Pakmodrupa's acknowledgment of Taklung Thangpa as a Kadampa reincarnation serves as a strategic link between the moral authority of the Kadampa and the yogic prestige of the Kagyu, positioning new foundations like Taklung not as innovations but as restorations. The narrative surrounding Jigten Sumgön and the Densatil reliquary also implies that the possession of relics—particularly the cremated heart—was an assertion of succession: the stupa embodied memory, drew pilgrimage economies, and supported institutional development. Lastly, the focus on two "primary" heirs may reflect later historical accounts that streamlined a more diverse group of disciples into a more straightforward lineage.

¹² *Ib.*, pp. 704, 724.

¹³ *Ib.*, pp. 672–673.

Institutional Differentiation: Drikung versus Taklung Kagyu

The division among the disciples led to the formation of two distinct Kagyu sub-traditions. Jigten Sumgön and his followers became known as the Drikung Kagyu ('Bri gung bka' brgyud), named after Drikung Thil Monastery located to the east of Lhasa, while Taklung Thangpa's lineage was referred to as the Taklung Kagyu (Stag lung bka' brgyud). Both are classified as part of the "eight minor" Kagyu lineages that trace their origins back to Pakmodrupa. The Drikung Kagyu was established in 1179 when Jigten Sumgön, after a brief tenure as abbot of Densatil (1177–1179), left to found Drikung Thil Monastery in Ü (central Tibet). The Taklung Kagyu traces its beginnings to Taklung Thangpa's founding of Taklung Monastery in 1180.¹⁴ By the late 12th to early 13th centuries, two distinct institutions had emerged, each focused on a powerful teacher-disciple lineage.

Although both branches shared a common foundation in the teachings of Gampopa and Pakmodrupa, the Drikung and Taklung traditions developed their own unique identities. The Drikung Kagyu, led by Jigten Sumgön, placed a strong emphasis on rigorous retreats and the ongoing practice of Guru Yoga, as Jigten Sumgön himself engaged in nearly continuous solitary meditation.¹⁵ In contrast, Taklung Thangpa's school also valued meditative practice and monastic discipline,¹⁶ reflecting Pakmodrupa's Kadampa roots. Both traditions honored Pakmodrupa as their patriarch, yet each cultivated its own line of reincarnate lamas over the centuries, such as the Drikung Chetsangs and Drikung Chungtsangs, compared to the later Taklung Shabdrung Rinpoches in the Taklung lineage.

Whether or not these prophecies originated from Pakmodrupa, the existence of two lineages allowed each to perceive itself as fulfilling the guru's intentions. However, in practice, the reality was one of separate networks of patrons and disciples. Notably, even after the split, the Taklung Thangpa followers continued to support Densatil, with Taklung Thangpa returning at least three times with significant offerings (including scripture collections and wealth) to the Pakmodrupa seat.¹⁷ This indicates that while the division was significant, it was not entirely hostile. Over time, however, the two branches seldom

¹⁴ *Ib.*, pp. 672, 724.

¹⁵ Khenpo Könchog Gyaltsen, trans., *The Great Kagyu Masters: The Golden Lineage Treasury*, ed. Victoria Huckenpahler, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), p. 237.

¹⁶ Dan Martin, "Taklungtangpa Tashi Pel," *Treasury of Lives*, accessed July 02, 2026, <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Taklungtangpa-Tashi-Pel/4368>.

¹⁷ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 2, p. 728.

reunited, leading to divergent paths for each.

The Rise of the Drikung Kagyu and Sakya Hegemony

In the 13th century, the Drikung Kagyu became an important spiritual and political entity in Tibet.¹⁸ The Drikung Thil monastery emerged as a central hub, rivaling the Sakya school, and drew followers from both local nobility and foreign supporters. Under the guidance of subsequent Drikung leaders, the school gained military and political influence through alliances with Mongol groups, leading to the 1290 campaign when another Mongol group and allied forces attacked Drikung. Some historians identify a Mongol prince named Duwa as the Chagatai supporter behind the sTod Hor faction that backed Drikung's resistance.¹⁹ However, claims that the Drikung were the first Tibetan monks invited to the Mongol court, prior to the rise of Sakya authority, lack evidence; it was actually Sakya Paṇḍita who was called by Prince Köden in 1244, establishing a relationship that supported Sakya-Mongol rule thereafter.²⁰ Instead of merely portraying a sectarian conflict between "Drikung and Sakya," this episode illustrates the dynamics of monastic influence amid the fragmentation of imperial power. Drikung sought support from patrons in the steppes and border regions to counter the Sakya-Yuan alliance, not due to any ideological connection with a Mongol lineage, but to restore balance among estates, pilgrim traffic, and local militias. This strategy turned out to be quite risky: as Yuan court politics became more stable around Sakya supporters, Drikung's secular authority became a liability, leading to the attack in 1290. The key issue is not which school reached the Mongol court first, but rather which groups each school could rally when the Mongol empire was divided (Kaidu versus Khubilai).

The emergence of the Drikung Kagyu caused concern among their competitors. The alliance between the Mongols and the Sakya school began when Köden called for Sakya Paṇḍita in the mid-1240s, leading to their meeting in Liangzhou in 1247. Under Qubilai, this partnership was formalized with the promotion of Phags pa and the establishment of a central bureau for Buddhist and Tibetan matters, which centralized authority in the hands of the Sakya.²¹ The threat posed by Drikung

¹⁸ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), pp. 11, 30–31, 54–55.

¹⁹ *Ib.*, p. 30.

²⁰ Sun Penghao and Chen Qingying, "The 1983 Copy of Köten's 1244 Letter to Sa skyä Paṇḍita," *Revue d'Études Tibétaines* 64 (2022): 614–616.

²¹ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: IsMEO, 1990), pp. 34–35.

intensified in the late 1280s, reaching a peak in 1290 when Mongol forces, led by Prince Temür Buqa and Sakya Ponchen Ag-len, attacked and destroyed Drikung Thil, resulting in a reported massacre of monks.²² Some historians suggest that the sTod Hor troops involved in this campaign were sent by Duwa of the Chagatai ulus, hinting at Drikung's connections to a competing Mongol faction.²³ Claims that Drikung monks were the first Tibetans to reach the Mongol court are disputed by historical records, which indicate that Sakya Paṇḍita was summoned by Prince Köden in 1244 and met him in 1247, with the partnership later solidified by Qubilai's support of Phags pa.²⁴ Monasteries like Densatil (the seat of the Pakmodru) and Drikung served not only as spiritual hubs but also as centers of institutional and economic influence in central Tibet.²⁵ When viewed in context, the conflict from 1285 to 1290 was more about a failed attempt at negotiation within a divided Mongol society than a religious battle. Drikung's connections on the steppe aimed to redirect land and pilgrimage routes away from Sakya influences; however, as Qubilai's coalition became stronger, these connections turned into weaknesses, leading to the sack in 1290. Importantly, the defeat did not eliminate authority but rather transformed it—destruction, reconstruction, and the narratives of martyrdom turned defeat into a form of symbolic power.

Before the Sakya dominance became established, the Drikung Kagyu had already merged religious influence with tangible secular power through a sort of "temple-state" system. Drikung Thil served as a central hub where officials (sgom-pa) managed local governance, labor, and taxes, while lands provided by noble patrons supported the monastery's financial foundation.²⁶ During the same time, the Taklung Kagyu expanded in two directions—around Lhasa (Taklung) and eastward into Kham, particularly with the establishment of Riwoche in 1276,²⁷ but its institutional presence was still less significant than that of Drikung. By the mid-thirteenth century, the Drikung school had become one of the most powerful religious forces in Ü, exercising influence through its estates, patronage networks, and administrative institutions.²⁸ This development was interrupted by Mongol political dynamics and the strengthening of a Sakya-Yuan alliance. The Mongol

²² *Ib.*, p. 30.

²³ *Ib.*, p. 30.

²⁴ *Ib.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ib.*, pp. 55–56.

²⁶ Sperling, Elliot, "Some Notes on the Early 'Bri-gung-pa sgom-pa." *Journal of the Tibet Society* 7 (1987), pp. 33–36.

²⁷ Henss, Michael. *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet*, vol. 1. Munich: Prestel, 2014, p287.

²⁸ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990), pp. 35–45.

attack on Drikung Thil in 1290, in collaboration with Sakya, significantly diminished Drikung's secular authority, although the school maintained its religious influence; thereafter, Sakya's dominance continued until the mid-fourteenth century when its political power declined.²⁹ In summary, Drikung's prominence before Sakya was based on a strategic combination of charisma, land holdings, and administrative functions; the transition to Sakya control was more a result of shifting imperial relationships and the redistribution of property and patronage than of any doctrinal advantage. Drikung's pre-Sakya authority appears more like a negotiated corporate structure than a straightforward theocracy, with abbots acting as managers, estates generating income, and charisma serving as the binding force. The decisive factor was not religious doctrine but rather the ability to broker deals: Sakya's closer integration with Yuan institutions redirected resources such as property, labor, and pilgrimage, preserving Drikung's religious reputation while diminishing its worldly power.

Politically, the era of Pakmodrupa and his successors came to an end. It wasn't until 1354 that a Kagyu lama, Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen, overthrew the Sakya rulers and established the Pakmodrupa dynasty, ironically reviving the name of Lang Pakmodrupa.³⁰ Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen (1302–1364), a member of the Lang aristocratic lineage, received his education at Sakya monastery and under prominent masters of the Pakdru Kagyu at Densatil, rather than the Drikung Kagyu school. Although he preserved spiritual connections with the Drikung tradition, his political rise was primarily facilitated by backing from Pakmodru regional groups. Following his appointment as the Pakmodru myriarch in 1322 and the subsequent conferment of the Yuan dynasty title of Situ, he progressively consolidated both monastic and secular power in Central Tibet, thereby establishing the foundation for Pakmodru dominance.³¹ Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes Changchub Gyaltsen's pragmatic engagement with multiple Kagyu networks. However, his career also exemplifies the fluid and dynamic nature of sectarian identity in fourteenth-century Tibet. Concurrently, his receipt of Yuan imperial titles marks a transition for the Kagyu from authority grounded primarily in personal charisma toward a hybrid model of imperial-monastic sovereignty.

²⁹ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: IsMEO, 1990), pp. 11, 30–31, 54–56, 136–139.

³⁰ *Ib.*, pp. 115–118.

³¹ Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols: The Yüan-Sa-skyä Period of Tibetan History* (Rome: IsMEO, 1990), pp. 90–91.

Constructing Authority: Texts, Ritual, and Relics

During these changes, the remaining sources highlight how authority was established both through texts and symbols. Textually, each lineage promoted biographies of its masters. The biographies of Pakmodrupa, Jigten Sumgön, and Taklung Thangpa (along with their notable disciples) were crafted to validate their spiritual credentials. These biographies often emphasize miraculous occurrences and prophetic visions. For instance, Phagmodrupa repeatedly foretells Jigten Sumgön's future meditative attainment, while later episodes describe visionary signs such as the transformation of his body-maṇḍala into Heruka and the appearance of Heruka shooting an arrow into his heart, thereby revealing the meaning of secret mantra.³² Similarly, Taklung Thangpa's early life features visions of Pakmodrupa's portrait emanating warmth, interpreted as a karmic sign.³³ In later works, such as the 15th-century Blue Annals, the authors explicitly highlight lineage and prophecy. Go Lotsawa, for example, presents Taklung Thangpa as the founder of the Taklung Kagyu and claims that several of Taklung Thangpa's followers had visions equating him with Pakmodrupa.³⁴ These narratives elevate Taklung Thangpa's significance and intentionally connect him to Pakmodrupa's legacy.

However, the necessity for such retrospective framing indicates that a genuine division existed that needed justification in writing. The act of documenting these lives, accompanied by stylized Tibetan praise-poems and carefully selected anecdotes, is itself a demonstration of authority. In the Pakmodrupa tradition, Pakmodrupa's supposed instructions, such as "the successor is to be a tenth-bhūmi upasaka." The texts of Drikung Kagyu and Taklung Kagyu offer differing interpretations, with the aim of contesting the succession and orthodoxy of Densatil Monastery.

Symbolically, relics and ritual objects played a similar role. The stupas at Densatil serve as the most concrete evidence. Eighteen stupas were later reported at Densatil, containing the relics of successive abbots from the Pakmodrupa lineage. These stupas became significant pilgrimage sites, elaborately adorned. The Project Himalayan Art essay notes that Densatil's fame is based on "the eighteen stupas...housing the relics of a long lineage of abbots of the Lang/Pakmodrupa

³² Khenpo Könchog Gyaltzen, trans., *The Great Kagyu Masters: The Golden Lineage Treasury*, ed. Victoria Huckenpahler, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), pp. 236, 239–240, 253.

³³ *Ib.*, pp. 88–89.

³⁴ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 2, pp. 728–729.

dynasty," particularly the eight large, jeweled stupas.³⁵ The first of these, constructed immediately after Pakmodrupa's death, housed his heart. This Tashi Wobar stupa contained Pakmodrupa's preserved heart and other relics from his cremation.³⁶ Through such consecration, the guru was made physically present; pilgrims who circumambulate these shrines reaffirm the strength of the Pakmodrupa lineage. The fact that Jigten Sumgön first relocated this stupa and its sacred relics from Densatil to Drikung Thil, only to later be compelled to move it back to Densatil Monastery, further show the stupa's significance.

In ritual practices, both Drikung and Taklung Kagyu preserved Pakmodrupa's memory. Ceremonies at Taklung and Drikung would invoke his prayers and relics, maintaining the teachings of the Kagyu path he imparted. Donations of wealth and gold to these monasteries, such as Taklung Thangpa's contributions at Densatil, also served as ritual affirmations of lineage connections.³⁷ Even the physical arrangement of monasteries was influenced by the memory of Pakmodrupa, with chapels, shrines, and reliquaries dedicated in his honor.

Thus, textual and material culture worked together. The hagiographies claim the intangible mantle of spiritual realization, while the stupas and relics provide tangible evidence of it. Control over these symbols equated to control over guru-status. The dispute over stupas between Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa can be understood in this context: each recognized that possessing Pakmodrupa's relics would establish them as his true successor. Ultimately, Drikung Kagyu retained the relics and became the more politically assertive faction, while Taklung Kagyu developed its own sanctuaries and academic reputation. Both, however, grounded their authority in the memory of Pakmodrupa as a powerful master.

Conclusion

The history of the Pakdru Kagyu, from its establishment by Dorje Gyalpo to its division under his successors, illustrates the connection between religious legitimacy and conflict in medieval Tibetan Buddhism. Dorje Gyalpo's charismatic presence attracted followers due to his reputed miraculous insights and strict discipline. Following his death, the sacred status he held became a point of contention. Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa, who were once fellow disciples, disagreed over the rightful ownership of their master's relics and stupa,

³⁵ Jean-Luc Estournel, "Densatil Monastery: The Commemorative Stupas of the Lang/Pakmodrupa Dynasty," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/densatil-monastery>.

³⁶ 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, *Deb ther sngon po*, vol. 2, p. 663.

³⁷ *Ib.*, p. 728.

highlighting deeper succession issues. This disagreement led to the formation of two distinct Kagyu orders (Drikung and Taklung), each with its own line of abbots and power structures. The Drikung Kagyu gained significant influence in Tibet until their power was diminished by Sakya-Mongol dominance, while the Taklung Kagyu preserved its academic reputation.

Authority was conveyed through texts and symbols, with lineage histories creating a sense of continuity with figures like Tilopa, Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa, while also fabricating favorable narratives for Pakmodrupa and his descendants. It has been shown that prophecy is a recurrent strategy of legitimation in Tibetan religious literature, especially in the treasure tradition, where retrospective predictions and recognition narratives help authorize both texts and their transmitters.³⁸ Additionally, ritual objects such as stupas containing *sharīra* served not just as monuments but as active sources of legitimacy. The decline of the Drikung Kagyu following a failed rebellion highlights how even powerful lama traditions can falter when political circumstances shift. Nevertheless, the legacy of their founder persisted, represented in the relic stupas and the name "Pakmodrupa," which was later revived by the anti-Sakya ruler Tai Situ in the 14th century.

In summary, the rise and division of the Pakmodrupa tradition exemplifies the intricate relationship between charisma, inheritance, and political context in Tibetan religious history. It demonstrates how claims to spiritual authority—rooted in both legendary narratives and physical relics—can be utilized to advance competing agendas. The split between Jigten Sumgön and Taklung Thangpa illustrates that schisms within a religious lineage often depend on material considerations as well as doctrinal or personal factors. In the case of the Drikung and Taklung Kagyu, the fate of a single stupa became symbolic of the entire tradition's trajectory, influencing Tibetan Buddhism for centuries.

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³⁸ Janet Gyatso, "The Logic of Legitimation in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition," *History of Religions* 33.2 (1993): 97–134.

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