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BIOPOLITICS AND VAJRAYANA BUDDHISM

Biopolitics, as Michel Foucault argued, views populations through an economic lens, as capital to be preserved and multiplied to keep the nation or tradition afloat and strong. In the secular sphere, this concerns keeping the population healthy, numerous, and reproducing, largely through the promotion of an ideal way of life or body, so that the nation may maintain supremacy in the global relational and economic arena.

Religions also engage in biopolitics with various doctrines describing how adherents should conduct themselves in certain situations and how they should treat their body in a way that aligns with the faith. Occasionally, the biopolitical aims of a religion may mesh with the aims of a larger government. Nevertheless, the biopolitics of a religion may run completely counter to the biopolitical agenda of a ruling power. In an important sense, the performance of the Vajrayana Buddhist rituals of Deity Yoga, Chod, and Lulu may be construed as constructing a biopolitical sphere running counter to that found in the West and in powers neighboring its cultural area.

Through the construction of a *counter-biopolitics*, enforced through a combination of doctrinal teachings and ritual practices as well as propagated and enacted on behalf of the local community by charismatic spiritual leaders, a religion may circumvent the biopolitical doctrine of a larger governing entity beginning at the individual level and subsequently growing to the community level and beyond.

A striking example of the potential for the creation and establishment of micro-biopolitical fields by religious specialists may be observed in the ritual practices and accompanying ritual doctrines found within the area of Vajrayana practice. But what may one define as the biopolitical? An all-encompassing definition can be hard to pin down. It is not that a definition is elusive, but that facets of the biopolitical are found in differentiating, multitudinous areas of every-day life within the secular governmental and religious hierarchies.

In his lecture series given at the Collège de France in the late 1970s and entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault describes over the course of three hundred and forty odd pages the framework in which what we now know as the “biopolitical” was birthed. To Foucault, the origin of what is biopolitics may be found in the early manifestations of both the modern liberal democratic system

and justice, a concept according to Foucault which was brought about to ensure equity and security within the marketplace.

As elaborated by Foucault, justice originated in relation to the matrix of the economy, and to this day notions of justice are seen to be tightly bound to the economic realm and its ever shifting tides.¹ Until recently, society had as its ruling power and judicial mediator the figure of a king, a visible sovereign entity who possessed the power to regulate and protect much of society with the exception of the economy, the maintenance of which fell to the sovereign's ruling body of viziers to regulate.

The role of the sovereign was in a sense the fulfilment of a social contract. In the example of Christendom, the sovereign was a figure that was able to make the ultimate dictatorial decision, but also someone who ensured the salvation of his people, spiritually and physically in the sense that the ruler was the protector of the state in which his subjects dwelled.² The sovereign figure assured the physical and spiritual salvation of the realm, but the matter of actual bureaucratic government fell to appointed ministers, particularly in regards to the maintenance of the state's economy.

This economy and its associated regulations and laws directed towards the maintenance of justice that protected participants in the market further burgeoned with globalization and extended to regulations and decrees that would ensure the state's growth and protection in the global market economy by enacting mandates that assured "the maintenance of a state's competition with foreign powers, particularly through constant monetary enrichment and steady population increase."³

Further, according to the concept of *raison d'etat*, or the "art of government," which originated in the police state as described by Foucault,⁴ the modern objective of these economic states, as in the form of the modern liberal democratic government, is to maintain an atmosphere of competition with no state rising too far above or below its peers, in other words, political economy.⁵ This particular notion of the political economy, particularly after the Second World War, found itself within the practice of liberal democratic governments which had risen to the fore and still present the style of rule maintained by most Western states.

These governmental entities have vested interests in the global economy, and utilize various lenses related to political economic practice to analyze the performance and maintenance of government and how to improve upon these things. Particularly

¹ Michel Foucault and Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 30.

² Foucault and Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 4.

³ Foucault and Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 5.

⁴ Foucault and Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 9.

⁵ Foucault and Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 14.

during the latter half of the twentieth century and continuing into the present, these economic lenses were turned on the human population in an effort to maximize their output as human capital.

In short, what we now refer to as biopolitics relates to the stock that governmental powers have invested in their human subjects. Regarding the practices and concerns of modern economic powers, biopolitics refers to the optimization of their citizens, keeping them healthy so that they may produce economically and reproduce biologically to continuously ensure that the given governmental power is able to perpetually strengthen itself in regards to its population and its economic power, thus maintaining supremacy on the global scale.⁶

Biopolitics and Religion

Concerned with health and continuous growth, the biopolitical can be found with little effort virtually everywhere in the modern world, primarily in the public and political spheres but also in less overt places such as religious institutions or even select social groups. The *religio-biopolitical* sphere exists simultaneously with the governmental, mirroring the latter's attempts to influence groups of people to utilize their bodies for certain ends in a type of economy like that propagated by the secular biopolitical sphere.

One may conjecture that these goals held by a religious biopolitical sphere can supplement the biopolitical machinations of the larger governmental power by encouraging continued adherence to the biopolitical norms propagated by the latter that pertain to economic and biological reproduction and other endeavors that would safeguard the secular power's economic and biological supremacy; that being said, religious organizations also have their own biopolitical beliefs and ends that are taught to adherents and that may potentially be utilized to construct spheres of opposing biopolitical influence within the larger, secular biopolitical system.

Concerning the biopolitical within the religious realm, all faiths view the human body in certain ways that could be conducive to the reinforcement of an accompanying secular biopolitical regime. However, certain faiths espouse doctrines and bodily beliefs that could be seen as in direct opposition to the overarching secular biopolitical systems in which they exist.

For example, general Buddhist thought can be seen as posing the question, "what is the body and does it fundamentally exist?" – a query which is diametrically opposed to the general biopolitical system whose focus is the idea of a singular, whole human form that must be safeguarded and optimized for the betterment of the state. I aim to analyze the conceptions of the body projected in

⁶ Foucault and Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 5.

Buddhist thought and ritual, particularly within the Vajrayana branch of the practice, in relation to the notion of the biopolitical.

More precisely, I examine here the practices of the Deity Yoga, Chod, and Lalu rituals and how they can aid in the individual's or group's simultaneous realization and circumvention of a biopolitical regime. Further, I examine how the practice of these rituals and the observance of Vajrayana doctrine may aid in the construction of microbiopolitical entities under charismatic leaders such as lamas or yogins.

One of the more recent contributors to the conversation regarding religion and the biopolitical is Anya Bernstein and her piece *More Alive than all the Living*, in which she describes the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism practiced by the Buryat people and this religion's relations with the Russian governments over the past century. Bernstein points to the fact that the lamas of the Buryat people circumvented the biopolitical regime of the USSR and current Russian Federation, a regime which demanded absolute adherence and conformance to the Russian ideal body.⁷

Conversely, one may see the uncanny abilities and accomplishments of these lamas as constructing a micro-biopolitics within a system of macro-biopolitics seen in the Russian governmental power. The macro-biopolitics of the former Soviet Union and the current Russian Federation advocate a typical Western ideal of the human body: it must be healthy and strong as befitting the idealized image of the Russian citizen and must be able to work and reproduce to continuously improve the might of the nation both economically and militarily, ideas lying in opposition to general Buddhist doctrine and ritual practice.⁸

To better understand the potential of these rituals, one must understand the officiants that possess the authority to perform and preside over them. The officiants are charismatic religious figures who are thought to possess uncanny attributes and a liminal quality that allows them to relate to their surroundings in ways not comparable with other human beings.

Shamans and other mystics found within the Vajrayana cultural area, such as yogic practitioners and incarnate lamas, are able to interact with the world and society in a particular way due to their liminal nature; this is achieved through initiation into their particular spiritual paths and maintained by a liminal, solitary lifestyle highlighted by the performance of austerities and rituals in addition to occasionally adhering to certain lifestyle strictures such as celibacy.

⁷ Anya Bernstein, "More Alive than all the Living: Sovereign Bodies and Cosmic Politics in Buddhist Siberia," *Cultural Anthropology* 27 (2012): 264.

⁸ Bernstein, "More Alive than all the Living," 267.

As described by Mircea Eliade in his analysis of the phenomenon of shamanism around the world, the initiations which give the shaman his ability are either a spontaneous vision or a rite that enables a vision, which, for all intents and purposes, renders the shaman temporarily dead to surrounding society. Within the traditions of Central Asia, an area where shamanism intermingles with Vajrayana Buddhism, these visions entail that the shamanic initiate are exposed to a graphic vignette of his or her own body being dismembered and reconstituted by the local gods and familial, shamanic ancestors.

Eliade points out that it is precisely because of this initiatory experience that the shaman can perform the ecstatic feats of soul flight, divination, and exorcism.⁹ Because of the perceived, temporary death and catatonic state followed by symbolic resurrection the shaman experiences, he is able to transcend the human condition and perform mystical feats. Similarly, within a Vajrayana Buddhist context, meditation on death and the performance of certain austerities empower ritual practitioners to similarly transcend conventional reality.¹⁰

This transcendence by way of achieving an ecstatic state within the contexts of ritual may be examined alongside and applied in relation to the concept of biopolitics. This is shown particularly in regards to spiritual leaders and religious practitioners who utilize the transcendent state to simultaneously realize the prevalence of the overarching biopolitical regime, spread a doctrine running counter to the overarching regime, and then construct a field of micro-biopolitics within the existing macro sphere by imparting ritual practice and doctrine to others within the community.

Deity Yoga

The process of transcending the human condition is prevalent in all shamanic rites, as this transcendence of humanity grants the shamanic practitioner the power to go between the realms of existence for divinatory, exorcistic, and other ritual purposes. These shamanic feats, which entail the transcendence of the human condition to accomplish uncanny ends, can also be located within various rites and practices found in the Vajrayana Buddhism prevalent in the Himalayan and steppe regions of Asia.

Within Tibet in particular, the shamanic tradition runs quite deep. Aspects of pre-Buddhist shamanic aspects appear in contemporary Bon and Vajrayana rituals, the latter of which was profoundly influenced by Vedic practices, which subsequently migrated north with the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet and Central Asia. Among the Central Asian peoples, the shaman and their abilities of transcendence are associated with birds,

⁹ Mircea Eliade, "Initiatory Sicknesses and Dreams," in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 33-64.

¹⁰ Mircea Eliade, "Initiatory Sicknesses and Dreams," 63.

particularly eagles, beings equated with the divine and of simultaneous physical and spiritual ascension.¹¹

Further, a correlate of this concept is found regarding the divine royalty of pre-Buddhist Tibet, themselves thought to be sovereign shamans who were held to transcend their bodies upon death and in short, not truly die but arise in an alternate, adjacent state of existence.¹² The achievement of personal ascension found in pre-Buddhist shamanic practices correlates with multiple concepts found within Vedic practice, both of which meshed with the ideas of Buddhism when it was introduced to Tibet.

This emphasis on achieving personal ascension gradually filtered through these multiple traditions, from which emerged the practice of Deity Yoga, a rite in which an individual practices an active meditation where they visualize themselves as a Yidam, or a tutelary deity held dear to the practitioner. The Yidam embodies certain qualities that the practitioner wishes to emulate, a feat that is accomplished through this meditative yogic practice.¹³

The practice of visualization is regarded as a powerful act in all the schools of Buddhism and it can be said to tie in to the concept of not-self that is a cornerstone of Buddhist doctrine. Not-self harkens to the concept of impermanence, itself a concept tied to suffering within the Four Noble Truths: “that existence is never free from forms of suffering, suffering is caused by clinging, that cessation of suffering is possible, and that the path to the cessation of suffering is through adherence to the Dharma.”¹⁴ Few things in this world are held to be permanent, as many things that conventionally exist will at some point pass away or change.

The ideas of impermanence held in Buddhist thought and practice center around this knowledge that everything in existence is impermanent and will pass away only to rise again in another form at a further point in time. Regarding the human body and the idea of a self: the body is simply a collection of matter assembled in a fashion dependent upon past karmic echoes that houses a shifting consciousness.

This concept can be seen to run counter to the general western concept of the biopolitical. A biopolitical regime puts much focus on the wholeness and maintenance of the human body in addition to the notion of an individual consciousness. Western-oriented biopolitical systems can then be viewed as capitalizing on the

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, “Obtaining Shamanic Powers,” in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1964), 69.

¹² Anya Bernsteain, *More Alive than all the Living*, 268-270.

¹³ Yeshe Tsogyal, “Vajrayana Mind Training,” in *Dakini Teachings: Padmasambhava’s Instructions to Lady Tsogyal*, trans. Erik Pema Kunsang (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1990), 113.

¹⁴ Patrul Rinpoche, *Words of my Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), xlii-xliii.

innate trepidations held within the psyche to accomplish ends resulting in the increased value and production of existing and future human capital.

Through ritual practices such as deity yoga, an individual can veritably, if not conventionally, change themselves to a deity. By individually transcending the human condition through ritual, one may attain the attributes of the desired deity by visualizing and subsequently dissolving the deity back into oneself, thus absorbing that being's knowledge and other ideal attributes. The practitioner may then utilize the deity's knowledge and attributes to circumvent and leave the realm of the biopolitical through realization that facilitates the attainment of nirvana.

This realization allows one to break samsara, the cycle of rebirth and re-death in this lifetime, but also allows one to circumvent an existing biopolitical regime. Through the practice of Deity Yoga, one realizes true nature, that of not-self. By realizing one's true nature, one realizes that it is only their mind that potentially binds them to the world and subsequently, a biopolitical regime by the notion of clinging to the physical form, which is one of the roots of worldly suffering.¹⁵

The realization of true nature and, subsequently, the realization through yogic practice that the human body is both permeable and not ultimately real can then be shared with others and spread throughout a community, which can potentially lead to the construction of a micro-biopolitical framework centered around the original individual or group of ritual practitioners who may then further instruct others in this yogic practice. The spreading of ritual knowledge and doctrine, centered around an individual or small group of individuals can thus further expand the micro-biopolitical field within the macro and enable this growing group of practitioners to circumvent the ideals of the larger regime.

The efficacy of visualization may be truly taken advantage of when the practitioner becomes cognizant of reality and their own perceptions. This harkens back to the concept of impermanence: it is a human tendency to think of themselves as having a central essence, or ego, something relatively immune to the shifting vagaries of the surrounding real.¹⁶

The innate desire to protect this ego from surrounding factors causes suffering to arise, which itself is centered in clinging, and primarily to the idea of the human form and the desire to protect it from various external factors. This concept of clinging as the cause of suffering can be summed up in the emotion of jealousy;

¹⁵ Matthieu Ricard, "Buddhist Perspectives on Mental Imagery," in *The Dalai Lama at MIT*, ed. Anne Harrington and Arthur Zajonc (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 70.

¹⁶ Ricard, "Buddhist Perspectives on Imagery," 70-72.

“jealousy itself as an emotion would be unable to exist without a sense of self-importance held by the individual.”¹⁷

The practice of deity yoga can be held to accomplish two tasks. First, it encourages the realization that the concept of the self is in fact malleable and based in the center of the mind. Second, upon completion of the yogic practice, it stimulates the adoption of the enlightened deity’s attributes by becoming that being and dissolving it into your consciousness, thus ideally preserving qualities within the individual that are held by the being, such as enlightenment and compassion.

The practice itself is a ritual and as such, preliminary activities must be performed before the central performance may take place. The practitioner must first cleanse themselves with water and enter into a seated meditation. The ritual thus begins with the practitioner seeking refuge in the highest concepts of the Dharma and in beings which embody these concepts, such as deities and celestial bodhisattvas, in addition to “one’s innate mind, where emptiness and compassion are truly realized.”¹⁸ By doing this, the practitioner “opens themselves to the prospect of enlightenment” and is then able to take a bodhisattva vow to “save all beings.”¹⁹

Following these preparatory steps, the practitioner may then begin to manifest the deity. Primarily, the being is envisioned either in front of or adjacent to the practitioner. If the individual is practiced in this meditation, he or she may envision their own form dissolving into nothingness and subsequently arise as the deity being venerated. Subsequently, the method involved in the popular “For All Beings throughout Space” sadhana – a deity yoga meditation in honor of the celestial bodhisattva, Avlokitesvara – has the practitioner envision the deity manifesting above the head of the meditator.²⁰

Ritual and Visualization

Regardless of the practice level of the ritual performer and their visualization abilities, the next primary step within deity yoga practice is the complex visualization of the deity manifesting out of a seed syllable envisioned as either in close proximity to the meditator or replacing the meditator’s body entirely. During this process, the practitioner is simultaneously maintaining the generated image of being surrounded by the multitudinous beings of the various realms of existence.

¹⁷ Ricard, “Buddhist Perspectives on Imagery,” 70.

¹⁸ Stephan Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” in *The Buddhist Experience: Sources and Interpretations*, ed. Stephan Beyer et al. (Encino & Belmont: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1974), 140.

¹⁹ Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 140-141.

²⁰ Janet Gyatso “An Avlokitesvara Sadhana,” in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 267.

The seed syllable will differ depending on the deity invoked; for example, in the “For All Beings throughout Space” sadhana, the deity is manifested out of the syllable “HRIH.”²¹ In a similar meditation dedicated to Cakrasamvara, the deity is made manifest out of the syllable “HUM.”²² The seed syllable is a key part of deity yoga, as the syllable itself is thought to “encode the enlightenment of the figure that it symbolizes.”²³ One may find a parallel with contemporary biopolitical matrices in this practice, which enables the meditator to see the human corpus as no longer a whole entity but rather a conglomerate of interchangeable parts, something to be addressed in the coming paragraphs.

The seed syllable coalesces out of emptiness, as if being perfectly drawn by a phantasmal calligrapher whose ink is brilliant light. As the syllable manifestation becomes whole, the deity is seen to gradually arise out of the same amorphous light that makes up its corresponding seed syllable. When the deity is fully manifest, the practitioner intensely scrutinizes all aspects of the being’s form, as each aspect possessed by it holds a significant meaning, particularly the being’s skin color, attire, and handheld implements.

For instance, if the deity being manifested holds a lotus, it symbolizes bodhisattva nature; just as a lotus blooms in a mire, so too do bodhisattva beings appear among the laity to radiate their enlightenment as the bloom’s beauty is magnified by the surrounding swamp.²⁴ Upon the contemplation of the deities’ attributes, the practitioner then envisions both themselves and the rest of the beings in all of the worlds simultaneously reciting prayers and acclamations towards the summoned deity, who is thus envisioned as being pleased with the praise. Within the Avilokitesvara Sadhana, the deity is envisioned as emitting amorphous light beams that are envisioned to enter all beings, including the practitioner, thus transforming all beings and the practitioner into Avilokitesvara, who is the lord of all compassion and whose demeanor and ways will now exist within the practitioner as they are now the deity.

Subsequently, the envisioning of all beings in the multiverse transforming into Avilokitesvara serves as symbolizing the reality of the meditator as being transformed into the pure land, or the home realm of Avilokitesvara.²⁵ The envisioned transformation of surrounding reality thus facilitates the transference of the bodhisattva’s attributes to the practitioner and all other beings who, for all intents and purposes, are manifestations of Avilokitesvara himself, symbolizing the inborn ability possessed by all beings to realize the bodhisattva’s attributes.²⁶

²¹ Gyatso, “An Avilokitesvara Sadhana,” 268.

²² Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 141.

²³ Gyatso, “An Avilokitesvara Sadhana,” 268.

²⁴ Gyatso, “An Avilokitesvara Sadhana,” 268.

²⁵ Gyatso, “An Avilokitesvara Sadhana,” 266-269.

²⁶ Gyatso, “An Avilokitesvara Sadhana,” 268.

While maintaining the multi-layered visualization, the meditator will chant a mantra associated with the summoned deity, endeavoring to focus on the words of the mantra, themselves thought to be imbued with the power and encoded with the enlightenment of the deity just as the seed syllables are. The mantra serves as an offering to the invoked deity, an incantation recited to empower the being, and also as a reminder of emptiness: “and on top of my head is HE, on my neck is RU, on my heart is KA, for HE is the causelessness of all events, RU is the impermanence of all events, and KA is the abodelessness of all events. And I awaken compassion when I contemplate these things, for I think: It is because they are ignorant of these things that beings fall into the world; when I have become the Lord Heruka may all beings become aware of them.”²⁷

Individuals well versed in the practice of deity yoga may invoke multiple deities at once or at least envision multiple seed syllables which subsequently represent other deities and their associated attributes. These syllables will then melt into the practitioner as the yoga is performed, thus empowering the practitioner and all envisioned beings. An example of multiple syllables being envisioned can be found in *The Meditator Becomes the God*: “and on the top of my head is AH, on my heart is HUM: and light radiates forth from these syllables and arouses the body and speech and mind of all Those Who Have Come. And their body and speech and mind cleanse the three poisons of beings, and return into me with the light, and dissolve into the three syllables.”²⁸

The ritual comes to fruition with the act of dissolution. When ready, the meditator, whilst chanting the mantra of the summoned deity, slowly begins to dissolve the reality and the beings which they have envisioned back into themselves, and enough performance of which alters the practitioners’ awareness, letting them realize that reality itself is, in a sense, a manifestation of their own mind; the mind assigns values to the various aggregates that it is presented by way of the five senses.²⁹

The dissolution of the environment, the beings within the environment, and the deity itself is a multi-tiered process in which the meditator visualizes the simultaneous dissolution of all factors into themselves, beginning with the envisioned reality and the envisioned beings, which dissolve into one focal point, and which may be either a seed syllable or an object of importance to the conjured deity, such as a lotus of Vajra.³⁰ This syllable or implement is thus absorbed into the practitioner, who will thus take on its qualities in this reality.

²⁷ Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 145.

²⁸ Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 149.

²⁹ Ricard, “Buddhist Perspectives on Imagery,” 73-78.

³⁰ Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 152.

Finally, there remains the deity in empty space, who becomes amorphous light and dissolves into its associated seed syllable, which subsequently is “erased,” or dissipates in reverse of how it was envisioned to be formed, as if painted by an invisible brush with light for ink. The syllable then is said to be erased and all that remains within the mind is “pure sound” and perfect emptiness, upon which practitioner contemplates and to whose mind the sound is thus bound.³¹ The sound thus reverberates into the practitioner’s body and is fully absorbed, upon which the meditator slowly arises from the meditative state into waking life.

The envisioning of the deity, all extant beings, and the deity’s abode and the subsequent absorption of all these things is held to impart the powers and qualities of the deity into the conventionally real body of the practitioner. However, within the ritual itself and the various sadhana texts regarding different versions of the ritual, there exists not only a method for circumventing the biopolitical, but there are also parallels with concepts inherent to contemporary biopolitics that may thus be subsequently countered or even used to enhance the teachings of the Dharma as it is seen in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

Parallels with Genetics

One may see similarities with modern concepts of genetics in the seed syllable of the deity, which is said to encode its own being and qualities just as a strand of DNA contains the template for qualities possessed by individual humans. In addition, this ritual highlights both the impermanence and permeability of the human form, which can then be seen to counter the various ideals held within Western biopolitical systems that seek to enforce the idea of a whole, singular body that must be protected and nurtured for the ultimate fulfilment of the nation-state.

With concerns towards the biopolitical, the contemporary fields of genetics and medicine can open a debate concerning the wholeness of the human body. Current advancements in genetics and other medical technologies that allow human modification, such as organ transplants and various grafting techniques, allow for the alteration and modification of existing human beings seen as whole individuals, thus bringing the wholeness of the individual into question.

This quandary coincides with Buddhist thought as far as the theory of no-self is concerned, as it teaches that very few things, human beings especially, can be thought of as ultimately real and permanent fixtures of reality. The deity yoga ritual can thus serve to draw attention to a metaphysical aspect of modern biopolitics in relation to contemporary biomedical pursuits, which highlight the interchangeability of forms inherent to both the deity yoga ritual and the modern medical sciences. With current advances in

³¹ Beyer, “The Vision and the Word,” 153.

the biomedical field there has come a “rupture with the perception of an integral body. The body is increasingly seen not as an organic substratum but as molecular software that can be read and rewritten.”³²

The practitioner envisioning the summoned deity and all the beings of the universe dissolving into his or herself and granting their collective attributes to the practitioner can be seen as spiritually modifying the practitioner’s body with the ideal, perfected attributes of the summoned deity. This can be understood as the rewriting of one’s “spiritual” DNA by which one’s inner nature is altered.³³

With this thought, one may conjecture that this ritual practice can also aid an individual or group of individuals in recognizing the biopolitical matrix in which they either dwell or are adjacent to, and allow them to circumvent it by either gaining realization – which will allow them to either cease reincarnating in a biopolitical system, or reincarnate as a bodhisattva who will continue the propagation of doctrine and ritual practice that can help other beings achieve the realization to escape the cycle of re-birth and re-death – or utilizing the knowledge gained from envisioning and reabsorbing a deity into oneself to spread ritual and doctrine to the surrounding community, planting the seeds to grow a micro-biopolitical system within the macro-biopolitical system.

By conjuring a being of immense power out of nothingness within the mind’s eye and then reabsorbing this being back into oneself, an individual may thus impart the lessons learned to others, subsequently formulating a field of micro-biopolitics within the larger biopolitical matrix that can then be used to counter the larger biopolitical hegemony. Practices of envisioning and granting attributes are not localized exclusively to deity yoga within a Tibetan Buddhist context; such qualities may also be found in other rituals, particularly Chod – a practice with many shamanic elements that focuses on the impermanence of the human form by envisioning the practitioners own graphic death.

The practice of such a ritual serves to not only focus the practitioner’s mind upon the inevitability and liminality of the death experience, but also to dispel fear and the concept of clinging as practiced by the ego.

³² Thomas Lemke, “The Disappearance and Transformation of Politics,” in *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York & London: New York University Press, 2011), 93.

³³ Lemke, “The Disappearance and Transformation of Politics,” 94. Lemke goes into further detail on the increasing “interchangeability” of the human body here and the contemporary ability to modify and edit the human form. I took the liberty of viewing the outcome of the deity yoga ritual through this particular lens of modern biotechnology.

Chod, the Rite of Severance

Chod, translated from Tibetan as meaning “severance,” is a ritual that focuses on interaction with supernatural entities. As such, one may postulate that Chod is a syncretistic practice, as it shares similarities with the practice of Central Asian Shamanism, particularly as far as death meditation and envisioning of sacred dismemberment by supernatural entities are concerned.³⁴ Regardless of syncretic tendencies with shamanism, the ritual is commonly held to have been brought about by Macig Labdron: a Tibetan tantric practitioner who has been elevated to the status of a celestial bodhisattva due to her involvement in the rite’s inception, and whose wrathful form, the “Wrathful Black True Mother,” is the deity the practitioner seeks to embody within the ritual.³⁵

Another indicator of Chod’s shamanic roots is the use of ritual implements. A chodpa carries a plethora of ritual materials: a flute, a drum, a piece of human or animal flesh for subduing demonic forces, a piece of woven hair, a ritual bell, and a piece of Persian cloth. For the Chod rite, only two of these implements are truly necessary for the initiation and maintenance of the ritual: the *damaru*, a drum, and the *kangling*, a bone flute, often crafted from a human tibia – yet another part of the ritual which will aid the chodpa in his meditation on impermanence.³⁶

To begin, the chodpa drums at a rhythmic pace, and invites all sentient beings to accompany him in the space he has set aside for the rite. This invitation of drumming and incantation is then joined by the *kangling*, the sounding of which serves as a clarion call to the sentient beings summoned and also as a tool to partially subdue the more malevolent entities present. The entities summoned consist of beings both intentionally invited, such as Buddhas, wrathful deities, and hungry spirits. Demons are the uninvited guests drawn by the sounding of the *damaru* and *kangling* that are nonetheless welcomed and placated all the same.³⁷

As the chodpa drums and sounds the *kangling*, he begins a form of active meditation in which he visualizes sentient beings as

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, “Symbolism and Techniques: Tibet, China, the Far East,” in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 436-437.

³⁵ Patrul Rinpoche, “The Kusali’s Accumulation: Destroying the Four Demons at a Single Stroke,” in *Words of My Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 298-299.

³⁶ Giuseppe Tucci, “The gCod Tradition,” in *Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 89.

³⁷ Stanley Royal Mumford, “Rituals of Death,” in *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*, ed. Stanley Royal Mumford (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 206.

present and representative of all the beings in the universe. In addition to representing all beings, the assembled entities are seen as recipients of karmic debt, which the chodpa seeks to repay in return for merit. While envisioning these entities, the practitioner chants an incantation that serves to dedicate the rite to all the visualized entities assembled while simultaneously expressing gratitude to them and their presence.³⁸

Once the chodpa visualizes the sentient beings to be present, he then begins the process of visualizing himself as a deity. Usually, the deity will be the wrathful form of the celestial bodhisattva, Macig Labdron, the traditionally held founder of the Chod rite.³⁹ Once visualized as this deity, the chodpa visualizes themselves as cutting up their corporeal body into millions of pieces by way of the deity's sword. In one description of the ritual, the chodpa as the deity prepares his corporeal body for consumption by the otherworldly host in a very specific manner.

Visualized first is the severing of the top half of the skull. Then, the deity flenses the skin from the chodpa's body and spreads it upon the ground. Next, she is visualized as dismembering the limbs, torso, organs, and bones, and spreading them out onto the mat of flayed skin in the pattern of a great mandala.⁴⁰

The deity is then visualized as collecting the viscera and placing all pieces of the chodpa's body inside the basin of his skull, thus severed from his corporeal body. His skull is then visualized as being used as a massive cooking pot by the practitioner – who is visualized as the wrathful deity – from which she dispenses the chodpa's body to the visualized entities summoned. Dispensing of the chodpa's body to the assembled multitude from the chodpa's skull signifies the endless compassion and good will that the chodpa expresses towards all beings.⁴¹ Another aspect of the chodpa's compassion is that the body parts being taken by the supernatural throng are visualized as transforming into the object that the given entity most desires, which could be the chodpa's unchanged flesh, medicine, or a piece of clothing. Whatever is desired, the body part visualized will become that thing.⁴²

While the chodpa is visualizing his body being divvied up by Dorje Phagmo, they are continuously chanting, continuing the invitation addressed to all beings to come and partake of the visceral feast that has been provided for their benefit. At the ritual's height, the chodpa sees that the assembled supernatural host of wrathful deities, ghosts, and demons are illusions created from his own mind; they are simply "terror evoking illusions."⁴³

³⁸ Mumford, "Rituals of Death," 207.

³⁹ Patrul Rinpoche, "The Kusali's Accumulation," 298.

⁴⁰ Mumford, "Rituals of Death," 206.

⁴¹ Patrul Rinpoche, "The Kusali's Accumulation," 301.

⁴² Mumford, "Rituals of Death," 206.

⁴³ Tucci, "The gCod Tradition," 91.

At the height of the ritual, the chodpa envisions that the visceral gift of their own body pleases the assembled host to such a degree that they themselves are transformed by the compassion of the practitioner; the assembled male beings are held to become Avlokitesvara while the assembled female beings are held to become Tara, and all realms of samsara are held to be liberated by the practitioner's boundless compassion.⁴⁴ As this vision is brought to fruition, the visualized, now deified host and the visualization of the practitioner as Dorje Phagmo, may then be slowly dissipated and reabsorbed into the Chodpa as amorphous light, akin to the practice of deity yoga.

The performance of Chod is primarily concerned with accomplishing multiple ends: the gaining of merit for oneself and for all beings, the active meditation upon the impermanence of the body, the immanence of death, and general change. Active meditation upon these things serves to banish fear and clinging tendencies from the practitioner if carried out properly. The ritual can be performed for oneself, or it can be performed on behalf of others: mainly an individual who has died or for an entire group such as a village. The rite is often performed around the time of funerals in various parts of Tibet to produce merit for the deceased in order to facilitate their rebirth in an auspicious realm.

An instance of Chod being performed on behalf of the deceased is described in Stan Royal Mumford's work, "*Himalayan Dialogue*." Within, a Chod ritual is performed on behalf of a woman named Samden at her funeral ceremony. In this setting, Chod reflects aspects of the other practices performed at a Tibetan funeral. Of note is the distribution of rice cakes to the people of the deceased's village and other neighboring villages. The distribution of rice cakes symbolizes repayment of karmic debt.

Chod mirrors this and is karmic repayment to the supernatural realm. The practitioner will visualize dismembering themselves to feed a host of supernatural entities, mirroring the distribution of rice cakes in the realm of the living.⁴⁵ Further, Chod may also be performed as a sort of exorcistic or sacrificial ritual when a village is afflicted with pestilent or inclement weather, things attributed to the Yullha, or local gods.⁴⁶

Chodpas, the yogic adepts specializing in the performance of Chod, rites of divination, and exorcism, are fascinating figures within the Tibetan Buddhist context, as they are initially trained in monasteries by monks learned in such rituals, though they refuse to confine themselves to monastic life once their training is complete. Though a bit of a stretch, this can be seen as an emulation of what their practice is meant to accomplish, as they sever themselves from common Tibetan society and live as

⁴⁴ Patrul Rinpoche, "The Kusali's Accumulation," 302.

⁴⁵ Mumford, "Rituals of Death," 205.

⁴⁶ Tucci, "The gCod Tradition," 92.

wandering yogis. They will live in the company of outcasts such as beggars and lepers and will also make their homes near charnel grounds or other places associated with death.⁴⁷

Chodpas, like their monastic brethren, serve as figures that may circumvent the traditional, Western-oriented biopolitical regime. Since the general notion of biopolitics is primarily concerned with the preservation and propagation of human capital through traditionally-held views on economic and biological reproduction furthered by the state, Chodpas and monastics may be conjectured as figures completely antithetical to this practice. They completely remove themselves from common society, which is the template upon which the biopolitical propagates itself.

As far as the Chodpas themselves are concerned, their transgressive ritual practices and the accompanying doctrine, beliefs, accoutrements associated with their ritual, and their chosen living spaces serve as a visual refusal of, or foil to, a system which depends upon and reinforces doctrine that preys upon the clinging nature of humanity – primarily the desires of bodily preservation, which lead to the preservation of existing human capital and the production of new human capital.

Conversely, through performance of rituals at a community level, practitioners such as chodpas may facilitate the construction of their own subtle biopolitical system, which simultaneously exist under and run counter to the overarching biopolitical system in which abandonment of the normative bodily ideal is facilitated by the performance of rituals, such as Chod and exultation of doctrine. These rituals negate the idea of a whole, individual form that is subject to base desires, which lead to propagation and sustenance of the ego. This micro-biopolitics of the ritualists and spiritual leaders would facilitate a new norm in which clinging to the body and the fear that this clinging generates would no longer be the foci.

Through the charismatic spiritual leader, the micro-biopolitical field in which the Vedic and subsequently Buddhist idea that the human form is “dividual,” permeable, ever changing, and not conventionally real⁴⁸ would be the key paradigm and would be propagated in a similar manner to the secular biopolitical system. Theorists such as Foucault observed that what constitutes the biopolitical is based on economics, and primarily economic notions and practices applied to the population.

The notion of a religious micro-biopolitics operates with the same notions, but in addition to a hypothetical economy based on the corpus of the devotee, there is a spiritual economy constructed and propagated by spiritual leaders which serves to influence

⁴⁷ Tucci, “The gCod Tradition,” 92.

⁴⁸ Diane P. Mines, “Personhood and Rank,” in *Caste in India*, ed. Diane P. Mines (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2009), 31.

adherents. In the contexts of Tibetan and Buddhism and Bon, the idea of a karmic economy which stretches across time and space is propagated. Karma, Sanskrit for “action,” is the notion that every action performed by humans has a consequence, namely karmic weight accumulates to an individual’s consciousness and stays with them through subsequent rebirths and re-deaths.⁴⁹

This Karmic weight may be negated by the generation of merit through blessings and rituals performed by a spiritual leader, or by individual acts of good deeds accompanied by beneficent intention,⁵⁰ such as the giving of alms to renunciates. These ideas of karmic accumulation and cessation that garner personal merit – a cosmology centered upon rebirth and re-death within the cycle of existence known as Samsara, a doctrine teaching the impermanence and permeability of the body, and a body of syncretic ritual practices which combines these facets – serve to construct a micro-biopolitical field.

This subsystem would run counter to a larger system of secular biopolitics, which predicated upon the egoistic attachment to the body in order to propagate human capital and continue economic and population dominance at the global scale.

At both the individual and communal levels, the performance of Chod serves to empower those involved on their own path to enlightenment and to simultaneously bring the participants great merit, necessary to facilitate either the achievement of nirvana in the present lifetime or a subsequent rebirth that will enable this achievement. As its nomenclature suggests, the performance of this ritual is meant to sever not just the visualized limbs of the practitioner, but also attachment to the self, with total enlightenment and the realization of the concept of no-self as the goal.

In all Buddhist traditions, clinging is one of the primary causes of worldly suffering. In the Chod ritual, this clinging by the ego is severed; clinging to the body results in desires and fears, particularly towards harm and death.⁵¹ To fully confront this clinging of the ego to the physical form, many lamas encourage future chodpas during their training to make their homes near and perform their ritual in graveyards or desolate, lonely places, as these environments are associated with death and loss. Chodpas are also encouraged to perform their ritual activity at night, in order to fully realize fear so that they may understand it and defeat it. Living near and performing Chod in such places serves to reinforce the truth of impermanence and impending

⁴⁹ Patrul Rinpoche, “Actions, the Principle of Cause and Effect,” in *Words of my Perfect Teacher*, trans. Padmakara Translation Group (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 101.

⁵⁰ Patrul Rinpoche, “Actions, the Principle of Cause and Effect,” 123-131.

⁵¹ Ricard, “Buddhist Perspectives on Mental Imagery,” 70.

death, thus empowering the ritual performer to sever its influence and further themselves along the path to the realization of no-self.

Akin to the initiatory visions of shamans among the Central Asian peoples, the Chod ritual centers around the envisioned death of the ritual practitioner. Though, unlike the fever dreams of the shamans, the chodpa is not reconstituted by the envisioned deity and the multitudinous spectral host. This lack of spiritual reconstruction serves to further remind the ritualist of the impermanence of the physical body. Combined with the visceral living space of the Chod practitioner, the ritual itself may serve as a focal point for discussing the impermanence of the physical form and the role of the ego in the every-day life of the general laity, Tibetan or otherwise.

This focus on the impermanence of the body may also be drawn into discussions regarding the biopolitical, as the human corpus itself is the lynchpin and basis of the entire regime. This ritual may hypothetically serve as a multifaceted tool which accomplishes many outcomes, such as awakening one at the individual level to the nuances involved in the maintenance of a biopolitical matrix, that serve as a catalyst for the circumvention of said regime by multiple individuals at once, or developing the notion of a “vital politics” in regards to the individual practicing the ritual itself.

Vital politics is a term used heavily by the theorists Wilhelm Ropke and Alexander Rustow, representatives of the German post-war neoliberalist thought movement. “Vital politics” as used by both theorists refers to “a new form of the political grounded in anthropological needs and possessing an ethical orientation.”⁵² These needs and this ethical orientation are further elaborated upon by Lemke as being within the sphere of society. Families and community groups will interact with and aid each other while simultaneously allowing the continuation of the overarching biopolitical schema by maintaining the comfort and desire of the individuals within these social units.⁵³

The practice of Chod can be seen to promote vital politics in the sense that its performance generates merit for a group and helps to unite a community in a funerary or sacrificial setting in which the community is altered or put at risk. Further, the practice of Chod carries the idea of conquering individual fear and attachment by way of the performer offering his/her own flesh to the ultimately self-generated demons and hungering spirits.

Through engaging and conquering these apparitions, the practitioner realizes that he/she, like general suffering, is self-generated and may be overcome, leading to the cessation of the cycle of re-birth and re-death, which is further imparted at the

⁵² Thomas Lemke, “Vital Politics and Bioeconomy,” in *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, trans. Eric Frederick Trump (New York & London: New York University Press, 2011), 105.

⁵³ Lemke, “Vital Politics and Bioeconomy,” 106.

community level by ritual performance and propagation of doctrine.⁵⁴ By overcoming fear and clinging, the possibility of ultimately breaking free from potential rebirth in the extant biopolitical system and its associated vital politics is realized. That being said, one may postulate that ritual activity in general helps to propagate the vital politics existing within both macro- and micro-biopolitical systems.

Both the Deity Yoga and Chod rituals focus on the propagation of the belief that the human body is both permeable and impermanent and that through this permeability and impermanence there is to be found self-empowerment and liberation. Said goals run counter to the Western influenced macro-biopolitical regimes that propagate the belief that the body and ego are whole and must be protected. However, many practices in the Vajrayana cultural area with syncretic origins seem to veer away from the Buddhist concepts of permeability, impermanence, and the dividual form.

Such practices are often healing rituals, which seek to restore a degree of wholeness to one or to a group who is sick, mentally or physically. Within the Vajrayana cultural area there exists such a ritual that serves to unite a community unit in the healing of an afflicted individual or group whose origins may be seen to have arisen within the shamanistic practices that predominated in the Central Asian plateau and steppe regions before the coming of the Dharma.

The Soul Ransoming Ritual: Lahu

Within the context of the Vajrayana Buddhism of Central Asia, evidence of the shamanic traditions that were precursors to Buddhism are still extant. Much akin to the other groups inhabiting Central and Northern Asia such as Mongol diaspora, the folk religion of the Tibetans was one which emphasized the figure of the shaman and this individual's abilities in healing and interacting with the unseen.

The shaman is a magico-religious practitioner whose defining attribute is the induction of a state of ecstatic trance in which he or she transcends the mundane realm – or if you like, the human condition – to traverse the various levels of the distinctly Central Asian cosmology of existence to accomplish certain ends, notably healing, divination, and the guidance of recently deceased souls to their respective resting places.⁵⁵ With the introduction of the Dharma to Tibet, the duties of the shaman largely passed to monastic and yogic tantric masters, notably the performance of rituals attending to the needs of a given community.

⁵⁴ Patrul Rinpoche, "The Kusali's Accumulation," 304.

⁵⁵ Mircea Eliade, "Shamanism in Central and North Asia I. Celestial Ascents. Descents to the Underworld" in *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1964), 205-209.

One such ritual is that of the *Lalu*, roughly translated to English as “soul ransom.” To understand the purpose of this ritual, it is important to understand the relationship of a Tibetan with the world around him or her. Popular belief holds that the land of Tibet is permeated with supernatural beings; nigh innumerable gods, spirits, and demons. These powerful entities are believed to inhabit every facet of nature, even the homes of Tibetans, and they are incredibly humanlike in their dispositions.

When praised, they are said to be happy, but if disrespected, they can swiftly bring their wrath to bear upon the unsuspecting person. As such, great care is often taken to propitiate these beings, so much so that universally throughout Tibet, there is an offering of smoke from burning juniper and *tsampa* to the local deities and spirits. At their best, these beings coexist relatively peacefully with the Tibetan people, but at their worst, they are purported to be quite malicious, going so far as to steal people’s souls.

The idea of the soul, or a similar phenomenon, is pervasive throughout many of the world’s belief systems, though concepts of it differ by region. Western thought holds that without the soul, the body is dead, as an individual has only one, and it is vital for all the body’s systems to properly function. In the Tibetan view, this is simply not the case. As to what the Western mind perceives as a solitary supernatural construct, to the Tibetan mind it is part of a triad of energies that are all vital for the proper function of the body.⁵⁶

The presence of Buddhism in Tibet has had a unique impact on indigenous ritual and belief, particularly in regards to the local beliefs concerning the human soul. As Buddhism continued to grow in Tibet, monastics encountered rampant local belief in the soul, which was at odds with the teachings of the Dharma. In Buddhist canon, the soul is not held to be in existence as one of a western intellect may understand it to be. That which makes up an individual and what may be considered a soul, or a personality, is the result of a series of events or causalities that have led to what we consider to be an existing person.

Something may be conventionally real, but lacking in a true essence. For something to be ultimately real, that thing must be a quintessence, it cannot be made of a series of aggregates and come into fundamental being due to cause and effect. As far as something akin to a soul is concerned within Buddhist doctrine,

⁵⁶ Samten Gyaltzen Karmay, “The Soul and the Turquoise: A Ritual for Recalling the *La*,” in *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals, and Beliefs in Tibet*, ed. Samten Gyaltzen Karmay (Kathmandu: Mandala Books, 1998), 311.

there is the Alayavijnana, which is considered the “storehouse of consciousness” within a stream of karmic continuity.⁵⁷

This argument regarding what truly constitutes the personality or soul of an individual can be applied to the realm of the biopolitical. In many cultures, belief in a soul often accompanies some level of belief in an ego or self. Belief in the self or whole individual is often predicated upon by a governmental biopolitical regime to ensure ends regarding the preservation and propagation of human capital are met. As mentioned by Buddhist doctrine and authors such as Ricard, the origin of suffering in the world comes from various degrees of clinging, particularly to concepts or things such as the physical body.

This notion of clinging to the body, wanting it to be healthy, long-lived, and fit, is the paradigmatic cornerstone of Western biopolitical systems, as the main goal of said systems is to maintain healthy human capital that will propagate future healthy human capital. Buddhist doctrine stands opposite to this, as one of the main goals of Buddhist practice is the realization of no-self and the subsequent realization that a cease of clinging will lead to a ceasing of suffering at the individual and group levels.

This doctrine in itself leads to subsystems of biopolitics within Buddhist communities, particularly in Tibet, as ritual practitioners and learned lamas preach this idea, draw followers to themselves, and then beseeching their adherents to further the doctrine and hold dear Buddhist biopolitical ideology.

Despite the longstanding presence of the Dharma in the Vajrayana cultural area, in particular Tibet, belief in what could be compared to a soul or some form of higher aspect of the self is prevalent. The soul, or the “la” as it is known in the Tibetan language, is part of a triad of vital energies extant within every human being. The word is similar in structure and pronunciation to the word “lha,” which denotes a high spirit or god in Tibetan.

The fact that an individual possesses a la is accepted throughout Tibet, but the understanding of what it is differs slightly from region to region within the Tibetan Cultural World. Some hold that it is an individual’s personal deity, or the deified soul of the person.⁵⁸ Others claim that it is simply the soul aspect of a person’s energy triad and that a person is born with five individual gods that are associated with different parts of the body and watch over that person for their entire life.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Giuseppe Tucci, “The Soul,” in *The Religions of Tibet*, trans. Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 192.

⁵⁸ Geoffrey Samuel, “The Folk Religion and Pragmatic Orientation,” in *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, ed. Geoffrey Samuel (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 186.

⁵⁹ Geoffrey Samuel, “The Folk Religion and Pragmatic Orientation,” 187.

The La is a vital part of life, but so too are the other components of being, respiratory breath and vital force, known as “uk” and “sok.”⁶⁰ Out of these three, the vital force is the only one that can be thought of as being a permanent fixture in the human body.

Respiratory breath and the soul are impermanent in the sense that they are not constants within a human body; the breath for its constant depletion and replenishment, and the soul in the sense that it can potentially take flight from the body at various times due to various stimuli such as prolonged illness or external forces such as spirits or traumatic events the victim bore witness to.

After fleeing the body as the result of one of these events, the soul can take up residence in environmental features such as trees, rocks, and streams without endangering itself. In some parts of Tibet, a family will plant a juniper tree when a child is born that will be the symbolic house of the newborn’s la. As such, when soul flight occurs, the la will then reside in the tree planted for it.⁶¹

That being said, if the soul wanders outside of the body or any of these temporary dwellings, it is at risk of degenerating or being captured by gods or demons, and despite the soul’s natural tendency to leave the body, prolonged absence can result in weakening and the eventual death of the individual whose soul has absconded.⁶²

As such, summoning the soul back to the victim’s body is paramount and of equal prominence are the material components necessary to perform the ritual. Of great import in the Lalu ritual is the sacrificial offering. The specialist overseeing the ritual must gather valuable materials to craft effigies vital to the rite; one of the victim of soul thievery, and others corresponding to the spirits involved and the beings involved in the ritual’s origin myth. Of paramount importance are gold and turquoise due to both material’s supernatural properties and what they represent within Tibet.

Within Tibetan culture, as in many others, gold and turquoise are highly sought after, particularly the latter. Turquoise is believed to represent the soul and as such, is used in many rituals. In Lalu, turquoise is tied around the devotee’s neck by the ritual officiant, symbolizing his or her own soul. After the ritual is over, the devotee must forever care for the turquoise implement, since damage or loss of it may have ill effects to the owner, as the soul will have a greater chance of being lost once again.⁶³

Apart from the gold and turquoise, the materials associated with the performance of the ritual are varied by region, but there are

⁶⁰ Karmay, “The Soul and the Turquoise,” 311.

⁶¹ Samuel, “The Folk Religion and Pragmatic Orientation,” 187.

⁶² Karmay, “The Soul and the Turquoise,” 315.

⁶³ Karmay, “The Soul and the Turquoise,” 318.

many correlates, particularly in terms of ritual effigies. Figurines of tsampa dough that differ based on gender and age of the devotee are necessary for the ransoming of the soul of the individual, as well as similarly composed figurines representing the gods and demons being beseeched by the ritual's performance as well as their respective entourages.

In addition to these figurines, a separate must be made that corresponds to the clan of the devotee. This figurine is central to the ritual, as it is given a piece of turquoise to hold and is placed within a bowl of water filled with fragrant herbs, medicine, two stones, white and black representing the "lake of the soul."⁶⁴

Of necessity are two altars, one white and one black, as they are necessary for the corresponding figurines to be placed upon, as well as the symbolic offering of tsampa dough known as *gtorma*, for each group of supernatural entities. A white, square treasure is used for the gods, and a red, triangular treasure is used for the propitiation of the demons. Furthermore, the officiants utilize drums, cymbals, and bells throughout the rite, and make use of white and black dice to determine whether gods or demons are responsible for the devotee's illness and to determine whether certain points within the ritual are effective, such as the propitiation of the gods or demons responsible.⁶⁵

The *Lalu* is performed by three specialists, often monastics that have been initiated into the performance of the ritual. The monks actively meditate and perform the ritual simultaneously, beginning with a visualization practice very much akin to Deity Yoga. The leader of the ritual must visualize himself as the sage, now the enlightened deity Tsewang Rindzin, whose magical powers that have been transferred down through the ages by way of his lineage are now inherent in the ritual practitioner.

Tsewang Rindzin, the head officiant, now possesses his powers and may summon the spirits responsible for the misfortunes of the devotee who requested the ritual. The officiating and assistant monks must maintain this meditation throughout the entire process for it to have any effect. In addition to this active visualization meditation, the monks utilize drums and chant an opening invocation in which their lineage to Tsewang Rindzin is made clear, and by his teachings and powers they are granted power over the offending spirits.⁶⁶

This invocation possesses a coercive quality in addition to defining the lineage back to the great sage. A noteworthy portion of the opening formula is quite aggressive: "If you do not return the soul and do not take leave, remember that I am Tsewang Rindzin; one hundred thousand wrathful deities, emanations of my mind will fill the air. Armed with dreadful weapons, they will

⁶⁴ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 327-328.

⁶⁵ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 329.

⁶⁶ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 330-331.

reduce you to dust. It thus behooves you to leave and return to your abode!"

Once the invocation is completed in its entirety, the spirits or parts of their collective essence are seen to be confined within soul ransom effigy, which is then thrown outside of the home or the ritual space by an assistant acolyte of the ritual practitioners.⁶⁷

Upon the soul ransom effigy being disposed of, the monks begin invoking the gods and saints of the land. The monks will chant sutras associated with these figures, as tradition holds that the offending spirits will be repelled by the power of these words. In between recitations, the offending spirits will be reprimanded, and the leading monk will demand the soul be returned to the devotee, which usually occurs in the face of a sonic onslaught of divine mantra.

To prevent the relinquished soul from straying back into the clutches of spirits, it is evoked into one of the tsampa effigies constructed for the ritual in order to house it until the rite's end. The recitation of the mantras of the gods and the invocation is performed without the accompaniment of instruments, presumably for the power of the words to resonate.⁶⁸

The summoning of the soul into the tsampa effigy is dependent on the power of divine invocation. The deified sage's name is invoked, as are the names of the local gods, in order to compel the soul to dwell within the turquoise pendant held by the ritual figurine. This has varying degrees of success, as the soul may not be ready to respond to the invocations. Depending on whether the soul has inhabited the figurine or not, the effigy is placed facing a certain direction: right for soul inhabitation, and left if the soul has not decided to inhabit the figurine.

The invocation of the great sage and other deities is accompanied by bells, cymbals, and the drum, which all the monks will play. Eventually, the cymbals and bells will cease and only the drum will remain constant. At this point in the ceremony, the acolyte of the monks will stir the water within the sacred bowl representing the soul lake, and will place the figurine within the moving waters.

The figurine will be propelled around the bowl and depending upon which side it stops, the invocation was either successful or ineffective. If ineffective, the invocation and the stirring of the figurine within the soul lake may be repeated up to nine times until the figurine stops moving on the auspicious side of the ritual bowl.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 331.

⁶⁸ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 332.

⁶⁹ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 332.

Upon the figure coming to rest on the auspicious side of the ritual bowl, the names of the sage and the deities will be invoked once more as the devotee who called for the ritual is summoned to reach into the bowl and produce one of the stones within the bowl, white or black. Depending on the stone that is drawn from the water, the ritual may proceed.

If the white stone is drawn, then the soul is indeed within the figurine, if not, then the black stone will be fated to be drawn by the devotee. If the devotee draws the black stone, then the invocation and stirring of the soul water may be repeated up to three consecutive times until positive results are achieved.⁷⁰

Depending upon whether the drawing of the soul stones was successful, the pairs of white and black ritual dice will be used to determine the ultimate success of the ritual or whether a subsequent ritual must be performed to propitiate Yama, the Lord of Death, in the devotee's name. Both the devotee and the acolyte of the presiding monks will go before the white and black altars erected for this ritual. The devotee will throw the white dice upon the white altar of the gods, and the acolyte will throw the black dice upon the altar of demons and malignant spirits.

Before the devotee and the acolyte begin throwing dice, the monks will chant a prayer which Kong-tse, or Confucius, supposedly recited when he confronted demons. The fact that Confucius is invoked in this ritual serves to show how much external influence has allowed the evolution of the Bla Bslu ritual into what it is today. After the chant, the devotee and the acolyte will roll their respective pairs of dice at the same time, and if the white dice show a higher number, then the ritual was successful, if not, then the dice may be rolled an additional three times. If after these three times the black dice continually show a higher number, then Yama must be propitiated.⁷¹

Upon the success of the dice rolling, then the ritual will begin to come to a close. The presiding monks will drum and chant an invocation to the demons and the lords of death, commanding them to return from whence they came. During this chant, the lead monk will remove the turquoise from the ritual tampa effigy, and the acolyte will throw the effigy outside of the ritual space. After the effigy has been disposed of, then the lead monk will take the turquoise and drape it around the devotee's neck, symbolizing that his or her soul has been returned. The devotee must take utmost care with this turquoise, as if it is lost or damaged, then their soul may be, once again, in danger.

During this time, the lead officiant continues to envision himself as the grand sage Tsewang Rindzin. He invokes "the blessings of the Buddha, the magical power of the protective deities, the

⁷⁰ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 333.

⁷¹ Karmay, "The Soul and the Turquoise," 334.

strength and magic of the eight kinds of gods and demons” all of which will coalesce into a “white syllable A, which will then dissolve into the body of the devotee and unite with his or her consciousness, which is symbolized by the syllable “RNRI.” Upon this visualization, the devotee is gifted with the boon of long life and spiritual immortality.

Upon the lead monk completing this visualization, he will ring a ritual bell and bless the devotee who called for the ritual, saying “May the life of this donor, which is exhausted, weakened, or lost, be recalled by Tsewang Rindzin.” Upon this pronouncement, the chief monks will then perform a prayer addressed to the gods for the benefit of the donor and all sentient beings to end the ritual.⁷²

The *Lalu* as a healing ritual doesn’t necessarily dispel the notion of the biopolitical or help the practitioners or victims truly realize no-self and the accompanying liberation, but it does serve to highlight the extant biopolitical matrices within rural Tibetan life, particularly those constructed at the religious level. The notion of the soul fleeing the body can be seen to point towards the prospect of impermanence, but the process of luring it back to its home body and the belief that it is necessary for a healthy body can be seen as a correlate to Western, liberal democratic biopolitical sensibilities.

However, what the *Lalu* can serve to accomplish is the construction of a miniature biopolitical matrix within an already existing one, which is found in the devotion and reverence to the spiritual leader who performs the *Lalu* and heals the victim of soul loss. If able to successfully complete rituals benefitting the community, such as *Lalu*, the practitioner could thus construct a microbiopolitical field centered in the doctrine and ritual practices of Vajrayana, complete with a spiritual economy centered on karma, production of merit, and the notion of the ideal body as dividual, impermanent, and capable of liberation and subsequently unbound from an overarching, secular, biopolitical regime.

Conclusion

The biopolitical is extant in all spheres of society; from the halls of political power to the sacred cloisters of religious authority, aspects of the umbrella term that is biopolitics are extant. Biopolitics in this way refers to the treatment of human beings as capital, viewing and analyzing their ability to benefit a given nation or power through an economic lens. This capital must thus be preserved and encouraged to propagate to ensure the continued economic supremacy of a given power.

In short, biopolitics can be seen to encompass the subtle machinations of ruling powers utilized to influence the continued

⁷² Karmay, “The Soul and the Turquoise,” 334-335.

economic and biological reproduction of citizens, to encourage the populace to utilize their bodies in ways that will ensure that the ends of the ruling power are met.

This biopolitics, the system in which human beings within a given matrix are influenced to utilize and view their bodies, is not local to the modern secular governmental power. Contemporary religions exhibit their own form of biopolitics on adherents that can be in line with a ruling power or can circumvent it. Through the doctrines and ritual practices propagated by respected spiritual leaders, this religious biopolitics is spread and sustained by regular action within a given community, particularly in the regular performance of sermons and rituals.

Such religious action is apparent in the Vajrayana cultural area, where Chod, Deity Yoga, and Lalu are visible to varying degrees, as are the specialists that perform them. These rituals, developed over time from syncretic sources such as indigenous Central Asian shamanism and Vedic tantra and infused with the Dharma of Buddhism, propagate a bodily and world view that is antithetical to more Western-influenced systems of biopolitics, which are held by neighboring global powers such as the Russian Federation.

The teachings propagated by Vajrayana doctrine and associated ritual practice encourage the view that the body is a divisible, impermanent construct made of various aggregates arranged in such a way due to previous karma that houses the consciousness. This bodily construct is impermanent, and will be shed for a new construct upon death unless, through ritual practice and religious adherence, the “dividual” person is able to break free from Samsara, the cycle of re-birth and re-death, by way of achieving realization and subsequent liberation.

Through the strict practice of Vajrayana ritual, an individual may break out of this cyclical existence and thus escape being reborn in an earthly biopolitical regime. Simultaneously, in a given lifetime, the doctrine associated with these rituals – which espouses impermanence and the idea of a temporary dividual body that will pass away – and the idea that liberation from Samsara is possible within a single lifetime are its own version of biopolitics propagated to communities by charismatic religious and ritual leaders within the Vajrayana context by successful execution of ritual performances such as Chod, Deity Yoga, and Lalu; the performance of which convey blessings and merit upon not only the individual practitioner, but the surrounding community as well.

This Buddhist biopolitical sphere espouses a worldview that does not focus on the preservation of the body, but one that focuses on the eventual abandonment of the physical form in the achievement of liberation from the cycle of re-birth and re-death. This form of religious biopolitics is thus directly opposed to the

biopolitics of many Western powers which places great emphasis on the preservation and propagation of the human body in order to retain economic supremacy in the global political arena.

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