

Presence in Tibetan Landscapes:  
spirited agency and ritual healing in Rebgong

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## SUMMARY

This thesis intends to add to the field a sense of how deities pervade ordinary life in Tibetan cultural regions and what this means for those who live there. The study thus aims to develop understandings of the types of ritual healing which take place in this environment, one wherein landscapes are inhabited and experienced as embodiments of spirited agencies. In the thesis I suggest that, for my fieldwork regions of the Rebgong valley at least, ritual healing can best be understood a process by which beings are brought into right relations, both mutually and in connection with other beings, human and deity. I suggest here that all practices, whether ritual or medical, pertaining to health and well-being in Rebgong are predicated upon this type of epistemology; a cultural matrix of healing. This matrix is one in which healing is by definition is about humans and deities maintaining right relationship. I explore what this sensibility means for those who live in the Rebgong valleys primarily through ethnographic accounts of three particular ritual practices in Rebgong villages: the renewal of the *labtsé* tributes to the mountain gods, the Leru harvest ritual, and the performance of a tantric ritual *cham* dance.

Forms of ritual healing I discuss in the thesis include circumambulation, medical and tantric practices, those of the trance or spirit mediums, dance and divination. I argue that all these rites and practices connected to health and well-being in a broad sense can be understood under one cultural matrix of healing in which spirited agency is focal. I argue that inherent to understanding this matrix is a focus on how deities, as embodied landscapes, appear within it, and how they are understood to exist and interact with human affairs, particularly those relating to health and well-being. In this regard, themes that I explore throughout the thesis are those of luck, purification, empowerment, embodiment and blessing. The study is intended, in a Bakhtinian sense, as a body of words which do not bring closure but rather seek to engage in a dialogical conversation that simultaneously responds to past scholarship and anticipates response.

## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

This work has not been submitted in substance for any other degree or award at this or any other university or place of learning, nor is being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree or other award.

This thesis is being submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD. It is the result of my own independent work, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references. The views expressed are my own.

I hereby give consent for my thesis to be available online in the University's Open Access repository and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Candidate: Dawn Helen Collins

Date: 30<sup>th</sup> November 2014

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## INTRODUCTION

*The language of the body expresses a discourse which reaches far beyond conscious categories of understanding – which is why it is so powerful.*

- Hildegard Diemberger 1993: 121

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Dance is my first language; the language of the body. That could be said of us all, but for those with special affinity for movement it is particularly so. During my years of formal dance training, in both classical ballet and contemporary dance, I became increasingly curious about the health of my body as instrument. Health is something dance artists are constantly seeking to optimise for their enhanced expression in the studio and on stage, and yet full health seems elusive and much of any professional career is generally spent working with or through a variety of psychophysical issues. Such issues encompass combined aspects of being, which could be broadly termed mental and physical, which experientially are intrinsically combined in its complex process on a spectrum between good and ill health. Alongside formal dance training I began exploring ways in which my own body could be used to engender a greater sense of health and well-being in others, by taking courses in oriental forms of massage. This curiosity about health and healing<sup>1</sup> was the initial impulse which eventually gave rise to this research. In this introductory section I aim to set forth the impulses and rationale underlying my research, to position myself in regard to it and describe its methodological concerns, to indicate some theoretical frames for this thesis and to outline its structure.

The search for increased health and longevity is inextricably intertwined with one's own cultural and personal situation and spirituality. Many factors come into play

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<sup>1</sup> When using the term 'healing' throughout, I am intending a wide scope of reference, indicating a broad range of practices which are therapeutic, and are experienced by the bodies of individuals who are considered as embedded in their communities (cf. Connor 2001).

during an individual's journey from illness towards health and, in the Rebgong region, site of the fieldwork underpinning this research, there are a wide spectrum of cultural, linguistic and spiritual spheres which intersect at any individual juncture along that path towards health. A prime starting place for exploring this intersection in any particular case is the site of the body, and my interest in what makes us well, and what to do when wellness fails, began with the body. I have worked with the body in an intense way for many years, as professional performer and as therapist of both Thai massage and Shiatsu. This, and my continuing practice, has brought me an experiential knowledge of the body's psychophysical nature; the physical form as a non-discrete entity. The common denominator between feeling an energy line or point of access<sup>2</sup> along it and the depth of what is moving for someone through touch, knowing when or where to rest or be in movement with another's body, requires the same kind of openness to subtle forces as it does to be in the timing of a dance and instinctively be in a state of fully aware sensory response with the music(ians) and the other dancers. As I became more familiar with notions of subtle bodily manifesting in the oriental healing arts I practice, this led to a wish for deeper understandings beyond conceptual frames for the processes I saw unfolding. The boundaries between performance, healing, philosophy and transformative states of being started becoming more fluid for me. My explorations of Buddhist thought and practice only deepened a sense of the interconnectedness of being that unfolds in moments of openness.

It was when I was studying oriental forms of massage that I first became acquainted with medical systems within which abide the notion of subtle bodily channels and the energies they carry. The first form of massage I studied, which was from Thailand, is said to have its roots in an ancient Indian system known as Āyurveda. There was no hugely theoretical component to the courses I took in Thai massage, which was the traditional way it was taught to foreigners in the early nineties. Instead, I learnt several sequences of massage hand, foot, knee and elbow techniques which, combined with assisted stretches based on Indian yoga postures (S. *āsana*),<sup>3</sup> formed a

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<sup>2</sup> In Shiatsu practice these are known as *meridian* and *tsubo* respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this thesis Tibetan terms will be given phonetically according to my understanding of the Amdo dialect spoken in the region where I undertook fieldwork. Where bracketed transliterations are provided, these will be given according to T. Wylie's system. Proper names will not use italics and their root letters will be capitalised. The diacritics of Sanskrit terms in *devānagari* will be given according to the

whole treatment of one or two (or even three) hours. These sequences, which appear to me rather like dance duets in which one member is more passive than the other, can be combined with hot compresses or herbal saunas. Although there was no theoretical side as such in my training, the sequences were aimed to open and free-up any blockages along a system of energy lines or channels (Thai: *sem*) around the body, through which I was told vital its energy (Thai: *lom*) flows. One of the Thai therapists at the temple in Bangkok where I studied invited me to spend time with them in the healing area of the temple and I was subsequently adopted as a sort of apprentice. As the therapists were working they would sometimes point to the receiver, nod knowingly at me, and say ‘lom, lom’, the context of which indicating that the receiver’s energy, *lom*, was flowing and so the massage was doing its job well.

I later began studying another form of body therapy, Shiatsu, a body therapy from Japan whose theoretical roots are in Chinese medicine. To briefly gloss Shiatsu theory broadly as I was taught it functions in practice, I learned that subtle systems of channels called *meridian* lines, connected to body organs and to elemental forces, were responsible for health and well-being. Conversely, blockages or imbalanced relations between these channels and their related organ and elemental systems were presented to me as symptomatic of illness processes caused by harmful elements, such as damp or wind, having entered the body. Suffice it to say that I understood my function as Shiatsu therapist as broadly being to assist the process of a receiver’s body-mind complex to realign itself, via diagnostic techniques<sup>4</sup> and then through the application of pressure to particular points (*tsubo*) along the channels crossing the body’s landscape. At that time, I was more interested in learning how to practically help people through massage than in the theoretical aspects of the different systems I studied. However, as my bodywork practice developed, I began to wonder what precisely was happening with the body’s energies and the way in which applying pressure to points along their channels, the *sen* or *meridian* lines, helped people heal. What was particularly curious to me in this

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US Library of Congress system and italicised. Abbreviations used for bracketed terms will be as follows: T.: Tibetan; C.: Chinese expressed in *pinyin*; S.: Sanskrit; P. Pāli; T.: Thai. Since neither Tibetan, Chinese, Sanskrit or Pāli terms are pluralised by the addition of a letter s, the English pluralising letter s will not be added to them.

<sup>4</sup> The main one of these I learned was that of palpating the receiver’s belly area to determine which of the organ systems needed attention, and what type of attention, tonifying or dispersing, the energy along each *meridian* thus required.

regard was that the Thai system of *sen* lines and the Shiatsu system of *meridian* lines did not follow precisely the same trajectories around the body. If there was such a thing as a subtle bodily system of channels around which vital energies flowed, the treatment of which could heal illness and alleviate pain, wouldn't these channels and the power points along them which I was applying pressure to with the intent to help, be in roughly the same place, person to person? After all, the study of anatomy gives us to understand that our hearts, lungs and livers are.

Not long after I completed my Shiatsu training, and whilst working as dancer and therapist, I consulted a European therapist who was practicing Tibetan<sup>5</sup> Medicine in London: Sowa Rigpa is a system of medicine based upon the Four Medical Tantras, the *Gyüshi* (T. *rGyud bzhi*). She decided the best course of treatment for my ills was to put a large gold needle into the crown of my head. During the treatment sessions I had with her we began discussing the processes of Tibetan acupuncture. The techniques she was practicing came within Sowa Rigpa theoretical frames and, once again, the channels, this time known as *tsa* (T. *rtsa*) appeared to not to be in precisely the same location as either the Thai or Shiatsu therapeutic systems locate them. This is not to suggest that none of these systems are internally coherent. For example, in the Chinese medical system underlying Shiatsu practice,<sup>6</sup> the acupuncture point known as 'gate of the wind' (C. *feng meng*), is located the same approximate distance to the side of the spine lateral to the second thoracic vertebra on any person (Deadman, Al-Kafaji & Baker 2007).<sup>7</sup> Just as each person's body organs are approximately located in the same places person to person, so are the power points and channels within each separate theoretical system of *sen*, *meridian* or *tsa*.

The term *tsa* is used to refer to quite a wide range of things which are not necessarily correlate-able, at least not in biomedical terms. It is variously translated into

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<sup>5</sup> When using the term 'Tibetan' throughout, I refer to a complexity of populations revealing linguistic, cultural and socio-historical similarities, whose geographical situation is fluid (cf. Richardson 1984; Goldstein 1994; Samuel 1993; Huber 1999a).

<sup>6</sup> Although it should be noted here that there is a Shiatsu system known as Zen Shiatsu, which does not claim to base itself in Chinese medicine, and upon on which the meridian system differs.

<sup>7</sup> As pointed out to me by Geoffrey Samuel, although the Chinese Medicine meridians and point-locations are precise, this has only been the case in Traditional Chinese Medicine since the 1930s, 'perhaps' (personal conversation with Geoffrey Samuel based on information he got from Vivienne Lo).

English as pathway, channel, vein, blood vessel, artery, root, nerve or pulse. The latter term can refer to the pulse(s) in Sowa Rigpa. It also appears in the term *tsalung* (T. *rtsa rlung*),<sup>8</sup> referring to yogic exercises, the practice of which has the dual effect of supporting tantric realisation and assisting body whilst suffering disease. Recent research shows that the practice of *tsalung* may benefit even sufferers of conditions as painfully chronic as ones labelled ‘cancer’ in biomedical terminology (Chaoul 2006). It is the *tsa* that comprise the primary and secondary channels of the subtle body to be transformed by a tantric practitioner through impacting them by means of yogic techniques. Therefore, I thought it might be possible to argue here that the activities of tantric practice and healing both employ techniques designed to transform the subtle body; to act upon and via the *tsa*; tantric yoga involving visualisation techniques in this transformation: the visualisation of self as deity.

As has been described, my study of oriental massage techniques entailed that of the oriental medical systems and approaches to healing underlying them, themselves rooted in the philosophies of the peoples concerned. It became apparent that the ways in which people from different cultures and sensitivities respond to touch and interpret the meanings of their own healing processes vary enormously. However, that the touch of body with body could reach beyond any conceptual differences and make a difference to well-being became equally clear to me; and that this might be effective even if only the subtlest of touches was involved. That examples of such ‘touch’ in aspects of healing systems such as found in Tibetan cultural regions, could entail only that of contact through visualisation and the transmission of healing through breath, fascinated me. Could it truly be possible to heal someone by chanting syllables over effigies to be discarded, by becoming possessed by a deity, by sprinkling a patient with water blessed by the utterance of syllables known as *mantra*; in short, through prayer?

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<sup>8</sup> It can also mean the root of something; grass/plant life. Such problems of translation are common with general Tibetan terms and their possible Sanskrit equivalents. This is also the case with Chinese language. Interestingly, a similar translative conundrum arises regarding the Chinese term *mai*, variously translated depending on context as ‘blood vessel’, ‘channel’ or ‘pulse’ (See Lo 2007). Lo described *mai* as “the earliest word associated with pathways around the body”, choosing to translate it as ‘channel’ (Lo 2005).

## *Opening into the Research*

When I began my research it seemed evident to me that if the tantric practitioners of Rebgong, the *nukwa* (T. *sgnags pa*),<sup>9</sup> can heal through the power of their practice and since tantric practice functions on the level of subtle body, it is on this level that healing must occur. Therefore, it seemed to me that I would find, through the unstructured interviews I planned to undertake amongst *nukwa* in Rebgong, answers to the kinds of questions that had originally arisen for me from my practice of Thai massage and Shiatsu. If the body does possess a subtle system of channels and points along them which a practitioner can touch to bring healing, then surely these channels should be approximately in the same place relative to different bodily structures across systems, in the same way as hearts, lungs and livers.

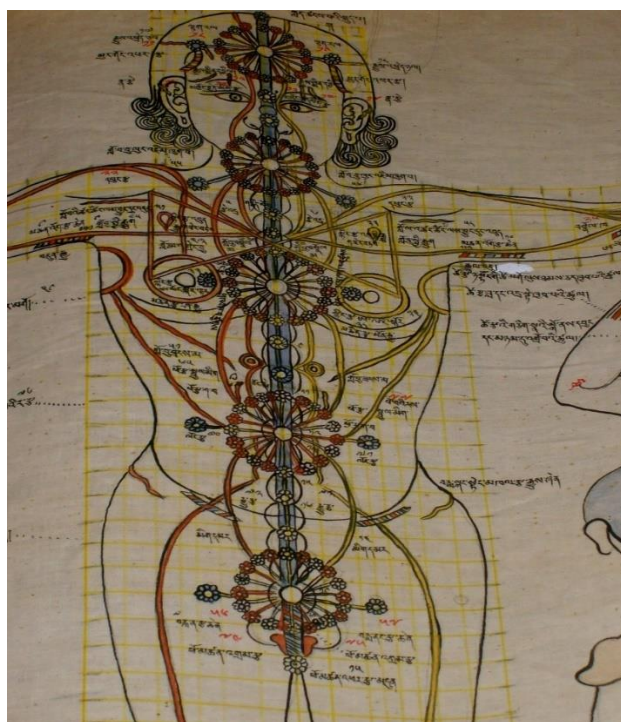
Extrapolating from this supposition, it seemed to me that if people in Tibetan cultural regions consider *nukwa* healing effective, it must be because of the presence of deity in the breath or spittle of these powerful tantric practitioners. I supposed that the breath or spittle, or the recitation of sacred syllables (S. *mantra*) and ritual performance, must be considered as functioning as an action on the part of a purified, mantric subtle body (the *nukwa*) that affects the *tsa* of the person to be healed. In similar fashion, the *tsa* of the spirit medium, the *lawa*, open to receive deity, when in trance would be medium for the healing winds of that embodied deity to pass to others. My theory was that the healing breaths of the *nukwa* or deity winds of the *lawa* thus travel through the porous non-divide between the internal subtle body channels of the *nukwa* or *lawa* to touch the *tsa* of others and so heal them. I thought at the outset of my research that it would be possible to make sense of how the healing practice of the *nukwa* and *lawa* function and form part of a coherent cultural healing matrix through examining connections between tantric subtle body and Sowa Rigpa theories of the *tsa*.

The first problem I encountered with my theory as to how healing involving the channels and through breath may work is that it was predicated upon a sort of conflation of what may be meant by *tsa* in tantric theory and what is meant by it in the context of healing, whether through *nuk*, wind, breath or Sowa Rigpa. This conflation hinges on

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<sup>9</sup> I amusing Rebgong Amdo phoneticisation of Tibetan terms throughout, to reflect the dialects of my fieldwork region.

the fact that Sowa Rigpa practitioners do practice *tantra* entailing the ability of tantric practices (relating to the *tsa* of the subtle body) to empower action upon the *tsa* and so treat illness. This brings me back to my question regarding the apparent differences between the locations of channels in the different massage systems I practice. If the channel networks of medical theories which are used to promote healing and denoted by the terms *sen*, *meridian* and *tsa*, relate to a subtle body network, surely they should be locatable in the same way as hearts, lungs and livers. Similarly, here, surely what is meant by *tsa* in the Tibetan Science of Healing, underpinned as it is by tantric practice, should correlate with what is meant by *tsa* in tantric yogic practice. This question is linked whether or not it is possible to find the subtle channels physically within the body (Gyatso 2004) and whether the referents of the medical and tantric texts are identical in this regard.



**Tibetan medical *thangka* depicting elements of the subtle body**

In the context of the Chinese medicine theory which underpinned my Shiatsu practice, Hsu suggests that early notions concerning the nature of the quite undefinable subtle winds, impulses or energies often referred to as *qi* 氣,<sup>10</sup> were developed

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<sup>10</sup> The term *qi* is often found translated by 'air', 'breath' or 'vapour'. In her analysis of a Han Dynasty text representing the earliest still extant relatively comprehensive account of pulse diagnostics, Hsu says the

through medical practices and the doctor's learned sensitivity to the patient's mind-body complex in early Chinese diagnosis through tactility (Hsu 2005). These findings appear to imply connections between concepts of phenomena that could be viewed as relating to subtle bodily systems, such as the phenomenon described as *qi* in Chinese texts, and medical practice. However, some Tibetan medical commentators, such as the eighteenth century Lingmen Trashi (T. gLing-sman bkra-shis), maintain that tantric systems do not correlate with the physical body and thus have no place in medical theory, being merely meditation maps.<sup>11</sup>

There is an ancient debate historically on the subject of the differing accounts of subtle bodily systems found in medical and tantric material and the findability of the energetic channels etc. described there. The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century religious scholar and medical practitioner Tsultrin Gyaltzen (T. Tshul khrim rGyal mtshan), in his erudite account reviewing the literature to date and addressing controversies over the correlation or apparent contradictions in medical and tantric theories of subtle bodily systems, concludes that the two projects have different intents and descriptive capacities yet are referring to the same general thing in their discourses and that thing does exist, since there are many things not visible to the naked human eye which do (Garrett and Adams 2008). In light of this analysis, these two *tsa*, the channel networks of Tibetan medical theory and those of Tantric practice, do point towards the same general subtle bodily system but are highlighting quite different aspects of it in doing so.

In addition to my theory of how *nukwa* and *lawa* healing works not being congruent with medical and tantric theory due to a simplistic attempt on my part to make terms like the *tsa* have identical referents across disciplines, in my interviews with *nukwa*, there was only one respondent who I thought said he thought healing through *mantra* might be operating in the way I proposed. This was during one of my earliest

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use of *qi* found in Chunyu Yi's case histories there possibly 'designates a movement or motion, impulse, or change in the *mai*' (*mai*: vessel-pulses), thereby proposing an approximation of *qi* in these case histories as 'vapour impulsion'. Her article further explores the concept of *qi* as a categoriser found as last constituent of compounds, denoting the 'potential for change' possessed by their first constituents (Hsu 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Gyatso says that Lingmen Trashi, from dPal-spungs monastery, makes this statement in a work explaining 'difficult points' in the *Gyüshi*. However, unfortunately, he does not expound on the statement in his work (personal communication with Professor Gyatso). See also Gyatso 2004.

conversations with a *nukwa* about the topic. It was disappointing to later realise, and I am grateful to Nicholas Sihlé for gently pointing it out to me at the time,<sup>12</sup> that the way I posed the question was so highly suggestive that the fact that the *nukwa* nodded his head and said ‘yes’, did not necessarily even mean he even understood the interpreter’s rendition of what I was saying, let alone shared my view of how his healing practice was working.

With the failure of my inquiry into notions of the subtle body as frame for understanding ritual healing in Rebgong, I returned in my research to the landscape and how the body and environment function interactively on a subtle level. In order to better understand processes of healing, I now engaged in exploration of lands; bodily landscapes, the presences inhabiting them and their ritual expressions as integral aspects of an environment layered with deities and spirits. I became not so much interested in what rituals connected to healing do or are thought to do, but in how they are situated in embodied landscapes, their empowerment by the spirited agencies they express and evoke, how their invocations are transmitted through blessing, and how they transform as they dance with a world in constant flux.

### ***Research Ways and Means***

My fieldwork was undertaken in Rebgong, a valley of village communities in the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. The ethnographic research included in this study was primarily conducted in and around the Rebgong region during three trips of approximately ten months in total, undertaken during 2008 and 2009. The field data of the ethnographic sections was drawn from participant observation and semi structured or informal interviews, or in informal conversations as they naturally arose, kept in note form as well as in personal diaries. Interviews were recorded using a voice recorder whenever possible, although this was not always appropriate due to sensitivity to surveillance or encounters being mobile or in environments where the use of camera or other recording equipment would draw undue attention and disrupt the content. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants in order to, as far as possible, preserve anonymity in what were and continue to be sensitive times. Although none of the

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<sup>12</sup> I also wish to express my appreciation to Nicholas Sihlé for including me in his trips to interview several *nukwa* when our different fieldwork projects brought us to Rebgong at the same time.

ethnographic research presented here is drawn directly from almost eighteen months of residence in Lhasa, accompanied by periods of travel within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), prior to embarking upon it, the experiences and knowledge gained there have certainly enriched and informed it.

On my first visits to the city closest to the region of Rebgong in 2007 local people had been happy to welcome me into their homes. However, from 2008 onwards, in the wake of Tibetan protests before and during the Olympic games, after some people hosting foreigners had received visits from local police asking for detailed information of every foreigner they had hosted, it appeared better to rent despite the substantial increase in living costs entailed by the price of hotels and hostels licensed to accept foreigners and the disruption entailed by having to keep moving. Fortunately, however, the university had a system whereby I could move out of formal group classes and continue my language classes privately. This achieved the dual purpose of going at my own pace and time and being able to spend more of the latter at my fieldwork site, Rebgong, which is a good four-hour bus journey from Xining, the capital city of the Chinese Province of Qinghai.

I had originally planned for my fieldwork to be undertaken in two stages, the first a reconnaissance period of around three months and the second a more extended period of around seven to eight months. Due to the unavailability of research permits in the aftermath of the 2008 protests and subsequent restrictions surrounding the Beijing Olympics, the best course of action appeared to be to register as a student in Xining. I did eventually become a foreign language student at the Nationalities University there, and benefited much from the language instruction I received. The language classes were taught interactively in a student focused way by skilled native speakers. The journey towards a student visa was in itself a fairly complex and lengthy process involving no small pile of paperwork. This was time consuming and necessitated me spending more time in Xining than I would otherwise have wished. However, there is something to be gleaned from it in terms of the light it shed on perceptions of foreigners and the implications of that in understanding my position in the field. It also enabled the continuing journey of language acquisition that is necessary for everyone undertaking research in such multilingual communities.

The challenge such language acquisition poses, both in terms of time and resources, as well as the limitations on access it can pose, presents no small obstacle to the research being undertaken by outsiders in areas such as Rebgong. There are seriously huge time and skill demands for long term ethno-historical research taking place in such multilingual environments, many of whose dialects are not accessible at distance, since they are site specific and only learned aurally. In my own case, my education in classical Tibetan at a European University prior to visiting Tibetan cultural regions did not even avail me access to the most basic of conversations in any form of colloquial Tibetan. Everyday life in Tibetan regions within the PRC involves a constant juggling of different tongues and approaches, requiring instant assessment of whomever one meets in order to ascertain which will work best. Prior to embarking upon my fieldwork, I had already accumulated almost eighteen months' language immersion in Lhasa Tibetan, during my time living in Lhasa, studying and teaching at Lhasa University. However, very few Tibetans in Amdo spoke anything intelligible as Lhasa Tibetan. I had also undertaken my first Chinese language course in the winter break from university in Lhasa. However, on coming to live in Qinghai, I was now immersed in both versions of a Chinese dialect known locally as 'Qinghaiese' and a wide variety of Amdo dialects. I studied both Chinese and Amdo simultaneously with local tutors on an almost daily basis throughout the period of my fieldwork.

It would be physically impossible for a researcher to become fluent in all Amdo and Chinese dialects, especially given the variety in Rebgong. The locals themselves are not fluent in all the local dialects. Even if this were possible, the relationships within such closely knit valley communities are such that nobody from outside would be granted any access excepting that of an extremely superficial, touristic level, were it not through their connections to long-standing community members. This is particularly so in the case of 'foreigners' (the English term used locally for white people amongst those involved in tourism), whose very presence is usually subject to various degrees of suspicion due to enduring local notions of those outside the community as corrupt and deeply suspicious. Even outsiders who have spent years, if not decades, living in Tibetan regions of the PRC, for example teaching language, working for travel agencies or NGOs, and/or travelling researching local cultures in the interests of cultural preservation, still tend to be treated with suspicion by many local people. Indeed,

friendships and contact between non-Chinese, particularly white foreigners,<sup>13</sup> and Chinese nationals is tempered by this climate of suspicion and the temporal status of the non-Chinese who are perceived as at best possibly subversive and at worst as spies working on behalf of government forces; anomalous persons forced to navigate the borderlands of belonging.

The situation as described above necessitates those researchers who are not native to Rebgong conduct interview through long-standing community members, functioning as interpreter-translators, whatever the level of their language abilities. This of course leads to another set of challenges relating to the researcher's relationship with the translator and the translators with the interviewees. For example, on one occasion my translator kept refusing to elaborate on anything being said which related to ritual practices, since he considered 'us', as scientifically minded modern folk, to be above such things. Another example concerns that of the translator who candidly admitted to me he had found a previous foreign researcher he had worked with to have been asking 'totally pointless' questions. His liking for me and wish to believe my reasons for being there more meaningful unfortunately resulted in my being misrepresented in one interview as someone likely to bring money into the region at some future point in time, which was the only meaningful purpose this particular individual could see for 'foreigners', by which he meant people from 'developed' countries, having interest or involvement there.

All the above raises the question of research ethics. Interviews or recordings were with full knowledge and permission of participants; however, this begs the question as to what precisely that is. In a cultural environment where one's appearance as anomaly is inescapable; attempting to present oneself and one's aims in a way that is understandable is arguably impossible. Attempting then to transmit even a vague notion of what doctoral research might be is even more so. In my experience, communicating some basic idea of what a doctoral project, or academic research in general, is to someone who has not undertaken one is often farcical enough even in the case where the other person has a decent level of literacy and cultural familiarity with such

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<sup>13</sup> I will follow Kleisath's article dealing with the racial positionality of white researchers in Tibetan contexts here in hereafter using 'white' in preference to 'western' (Kleisath 2013).

educational systems. Doing so in Rebgong involved leaping across cultural and linguistic divides to people in places where such projects hardly exist, most of whom were illiterate. An additional layer to this, in my case, was that of my female gender. Presenting self as woman, alone, unmarried, childless yet well over the usual age for marriage and childbearing (around twenty-five on average in these regions), was not without its challenges in overcoming the obstacles this list of anomalous features presented to closeness, as noted by Beth Merian, another lone female researcher working in a nearby region (Merian 2012: 13ff.). Being strangely divorced from normative familial contexts and, therefore, anomalous in a strange land, meant my being firmly consigned to the category of outsider and decidedly foreign. However, much as this might have closed doors on certain types of access, and here I am thinking of the inner circles of homesteads dominated by married women and the elderly whose province childrearing so often is, I found other types of access usually denied women were open to me. For example, my presence in male ritual events and at normatively exclusively male social gatherings, as will be seen in later chapters. In working in such politically sensitive environments, the question of how or even if it is possible to move without harm is always paramount. As Merian comments, quoting Malkki, in such contexts measures of success in fieldwork are determined not so much by a determination to reveal as by being sensitive to what stones are best left unturned (Merian 2012: 20). I would like to suggest that it is within informal and social situations that the type of interaction best lends itself to enabling this sensitivity. Dialogue is thus a useful form of ethnographic expression in this context. As noted by Craig, in the recreation of dialogue, a moment of encounter is recreated, with the hope that the reader will be transported to that moment of spontaneous expression and the ideas it generated, located as they are in particular spaces and times (Craig 2012).

### ***Presences, Empowerments and Embodiments***

In Tibetan cultural regions, the presence of deities is evidenced in what could be described as its most visible embodiment by the practice of circumambulation, of *korwa* (T. *skor ba*). During this practice, that takes place every day all year round, people circumnambulating, in a clockwise direction for Buddhists and an anticlockwise

direction for practitioners of Bön,<sup>14</sup> objects considered to be holy or to have power. By encircling such objects, whether they are temple, statue or *stūpa*, the practitioner hopes to accumulate merit via the power such objects possess. This empowerment or blessing can be considered as achieved via the movement around powerful objects, perceived as active embodiments of deity presences.

The phenomena of *korwa* has been extensively discussed by Charlene Makley in relation to gender and ‘mandalisation’, by which she means the configuration of power places on the schema of a tantric deity *maṇḍala*, a circular formation wherein the centre represents the closest proximity to the *ney* (T. *gnas*), prime site of the deity’s power (Makley 2007, chapter 3). Makley describes the practice of *korwa*, whether of monastery, mountain or other place believed blessed and empowering through its connection to deity worlds, as the practice ‘par excellence’ in Tibetan regions, its religious popularity due to the efficacy it is believed to have in purifying obstacles to worldly and eschatological goals (Makley 2007: 155).<sup>15</sup> However, and as Makley highlights, beneath the apparent equalisation of social status superficially indicated by the fact that all participants in a particular *korwa* share a common path and direction, lies the reality that each individual treading on it has a specific set of boundaries regarding the power places they pay homage to; these are not spaces in which differences dissolve (Makley 2007: 137). In the case of Labrang Buddhist Monastery, site of Makley’s fieldwork and in a region of the Plateau neighbouring the site of mine, she details boundaries affecting gender and social status in regard to who can normally

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<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting here that the term Bön is problematic since it is generally used as a gloss for a plethora of both pre and post Buddhist religious practices and practitioners existing in Tibetan cultural regions, and seen to originate particularly in the ancient kingdom of Zhang Zhung and Guge (present Ngari Prefecture, TAR). I am using it here as gloss for non-Buddhist traditions in Tibet, including the later Bön that emerged in the late 10<sup>th</sup> century and which, unlike its predecessor, exhibits strong Buddhist influence (Stein 1988; Karmay 1998:157ff). Whilst the links that contemporary practices have with a Bön of antiquity are disputable, the term is applied here for convenience, on the understanding that it is often used in scholarship to denote the broad range of indigenous non-Buddhist traditions that comprise the fabric of Tibetan religious life (see Snellgrove 1967, 2003 [1968] and Namkhai Norbu (1995). Samuel gives a detailed exploration of the term Bön as signifying historically specific religious complexes whose circumstances are variable (Samuel 1993; 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Robert Ekvall, a Christian missionary and anthropologist of sorts who lived in the region of modern day Qinghai-Gansu borderlands in the early twentieth century, described this long-standing tradition as the most social of practices in Tibetan regions (Ekvall 1964b: 248).

use the outer and inner circumambulation paths of the monastery and enter specific areas of its grounds. In doing so, she highlights the socio-political aspects to the practice of *korwa* and discusses how boundaries to sites of deity presence, *ney*, are (re)negotiated in response to changing times, yet with clearly marked delineations for Tibetan actors (Makley 2007: chapter 3).

The socio-political aspects of such ritual practices points towards what Makley, drawing on the work of Janice Boddy, terms the ‘politics of presence’ (Boddy 1994: 418; Makley 2013a, 2013b). Boddy uses the term in talking about Mariella Pandolfi’s discussion of tarantism in Southern Italy during the 1960s. Rural women no longer exhibited the symptoms of hysteria and dancing mania originally believed to be caused by the bite of a wolf spider. However, they still expressed the condition in narrative accounts of their bodies, using what Boddy terms ‘iconic language’ and linking these to their maternal heritage. Boddy describes this as ‘a verbalized possession of women by other women, their history, and the history of the village of the whole... a politics of presence, of individualized yet also generalized resistance to domination on a number of levels at once’ (Boddy 1994: 418). She comments on the fact that this verbal possession replaced actual bodily possession as state hegemony is extended to transform bodies, fencing them in with controls which split them into pieces (Boddy 1994).

Makley applies these observations to her work in Tibetan regions, advocating that, in contrast to scholastic predilection for structuralist-functionalist approaches (eg. Evans-Pritchard and Turner), ritual practices be considered as within a frame that is ‘irreducibly’ historical (Makley 2013b). She critiques such approaches on the basis that analysing ritual performance in relative isolation from local histories and other everyday contexts divorces it from the multiple meanings the ritual has for its participants. She advocates instead an approach which, from the point of view of a politics of presence, views divine beings as operating to voice places as the territories of particular communities and under specific leaderships. Makley draws inspiration from Bakhtin’s dialogics in articulating this perspective on voice as having ‘inherent dynamics’ (Bakhtin 1981: 275). Different forms of authority require constant reassertion through embodiment by particular people, and this (re)assertion takes the form of a continuous conversation, a dialogic enterprise which simultaneously reaches backwards into history and forwards into future possibilities.

In the context of the Leru (T. *klu rol, glu rol*) harvest festival in the Rebgong valley, which will be the subject of Chapter Four of the present study, Makley highlights the respective authorities of spirit medium and village leaders, one of whom represents the party-state's interests in the village. She skilfully shows how two competing authorities, that of mountain deity and the state, are voiced through embodiment within the village community by spirit medium and party-state official respectively, and are 'commensurate processes... in a high-stakes "politics of presence"' (Makley 2013a: 668; cf Makley 2013b). On Bakhtin's dialogics, every author or agent involved in ritual performance is simultaneously responding to previous actors and histories, whilst anticipating future responses. It is this non-static, dialogical frame which Makley advocates applying to studies of ritual and performance, an approach which I follow in this thesis. As Makley highlights in her work, such focus on the demands for ritual presence found within Tibetan communities not only spans a variety of religious forms of embodied engagement with deities, but also dynamically incorporates their socio-political settings (Makley 2013b: 190-191). Drawing upon such work, I hope in this thesis to situate ritual healing within the broader contexts of human relations and their discourses with, and empowerments by, the embodied presences of deities and other spirited agencies.

### ***A Cultural Matrix of Healing***

The spaces within which lives are enacted in Tibetan cultural regions, and the manner in which their perceived territorial borders are marked, has intrinsic connection to perceptions of self, identity (re)formulations, health and well-being. In relation to this, this thesis will explore the notion of a cultural matrix of healing; as a general frame to understand an approach to life and healing. Contemporary biomedical, or allopathic, medicine sees disease as a repetition of a particular problem, requiring repetition of tried and tested medical solutions to solve it. More ancient systems, such as the Greek, which travelled to India and then Tibet, take an approach in which illness is seen as a holistic matter involving the whole organism, its symptoms being a manifestation of this and treatment depending on taking the whole situation into account (Samuel 1993:192). Disease on this model is perceived of as a complex; a process rather than an entity. In contrast to biomedicine, Sowa Rigpa does not connect any particular symptom directly with a particular disease entity, making the starting point for understanding illness diametrically opposed. As the medical anthropologist Mark Nichter succinctly

puts it, ‘Much of traditional medicine is illness process, not disease entity based.’ (Nichter 1992: 227) This implies the distinction Arthur Kleinman famously made between disease and illness, in which he uses the term *disease* to refer to a health professional’s theoretical casting of a disorder according to his or her form of practice. ‘The healer – whether a neurosurgeon or a family doctor, a chiropractor or the latest breed of psychotherapist – interprets the health problem within a particular nomenclature and taxonomy, a disease nosology, that creates a new diagnostic entity, an “it” - the disease.’ (Kleinman 1988: 5). In opposition to this, Kleinman uses the term *illness* to evoke the human condition of symptoms and suffering, and how the sufferer, those close to her and their community, deal with the sickness. Illness is an experiential process involving those affected in monitoring and responding physically to the needs of the suffering person. Any illness is thus characterised by its own set of cultural frames, which are specific to the community within which the sufferer lives and orients to. Illness is an experience that is collective and culturally constructed (cf. Kleinman 1988). And illness for Tibetans of Rebgong is a process in which spirited agencies can and often do play pivotal roles. Illness is thus understood as an interactive process of an embodied experience of discomfort, its sphere and peripheries remaining open to multiple interpretations and reformulations over the course of the ill health the person experiences, as will be illustrated by the story of the nomad woman Domba’s health seeking journey contained in Chapter Two.

My first encounter with this phenomenon came when, after months suffering colds and flus in Lhasa, I visited the Tibetan hospital there, seeking a longer term solution to what I viewed as an ongoing and deep-seated condition which was causing me to keep falling ill. The doctor took my pulses and completed other checks associated with diagnosis in Sowa Rigpa. Then he prescribed that I stay in the hospital for a couple of hours to receive a drip. In the ensuing discussion he assured me that a drip, which he said was not harmful because it contained only substances associated with rehydration, would be much more effective in treating my condition than traditional Tibetan medicine. It would also be much quicker. He expressed the view that since I was a foreigner I probably didn’t realise that Tibetan doctors were now equally able to dispense effective *jamen* (T. *rgya sman*), ‘Chinese Medicine’ (which is how Tibetans refer to the hybrid biomedical practices found in the PRC) such as I could find in my country. I pointed out that I had lived in Europe for most of my life and never been offered an intravenous drip for a cold or flu. The doctor then said he could prescribe me

some *rilbu* (T. *ril bu*; traditional medicinal pills) if I insisted, but that if I didn't improve within three days I could come back for the drip.

Every traditional doctor administering remedies such as herbs or acupuncture whom I have consulted in the past, whether Chinese, Tibetan or White, has recommended giving the treatment at least a couple of months to take effect, since such things take time. The emphasis in treating patients at the Tibetan Medical Hospital, at least for the Tibetan doctor who saw me, appeared to hinge on prescribing treatments believed to demonstrate fast and evident efficacy. This particular incident provides illustration of a vernacular classification highlighted by Schrempf in her article entitled 'Between Mantra and Syringe', 'syringe' referring to the intravenous drip offered to me by the Tibetan doctor at the Lhasa Mentsikhang and prevalent as treatment method across the Plateau. Schrempf says that both practitioners and patients in contemporary Amdo share a distinction between 'old', slow moving and deep-seated illnesses, and 'new' illnesses, defined as ones which erupt quickly. Traditional treatments such as the *rilbu* of Sowa Rigpa are thought best for 'old' sicknesses, whilst 'new' ones respond well to fast and hard-hitting 'biomedical' treatments such as the drip I was offered. Schrempf says colds are generally considered to fall into this latter category (Schrempf 2010: 160-161).

Due to my training in Chinese medicine as pertaining to Shiatsu, I had in fact come to this doctor specifically because I felt my cold condition had gone deep in the body. I didn't consider it an illness which had erupted quickly and so could quickly be dispelled by the sachets of Lemsip cold remedy I had with me in my bag of medicines from Europe. Rather, I had gone to receive herbal remedy precisely because my present cold was in the wake of months of recurrent similar conditions which refused to completely heal. Perhaps I would have received a different response from the doctor if I had expressed this more precisely rather than relying on my pulses to do the talking for me, or if I had been Tibetan. However, in any case the incident did seem indicative of a general trend towards presenting biomedicine as superior in terms of efficacy, at least for certain conditions or patients, and thus a standard by which medicine from other traditions could be judged.

Evidence based medical systems must necessarily have a rule to measure by. For biomedicine this is the Random Controlled Trial (RCT), and central to that is the notion

of placebo. During a RCT, evidence of efficacy is thought to be obtained by testing the medicine in question against a placebo, defined as a substance which has no efficacy; which does nothing. As Moerman has pointed out, the notion of placebo as something which produces a therapeutic effect yet is inert in terms of the condition being treated is flawed. However, the tester attempts to remove the object from any social context, in order to eliminate preconceptions regarding efficacy as far as possible through blinding,<sup>16</sup> it is still a substance exchanging hands in a particular context and, as such, has meaning for the person receiving it (Moerman 2002). In terms of meaning, it is perhaps best to distinguish the placebo itself from what has been described as the placebo response, ie. the phenomenon of patients' conditions changing due to symbolic aspects of a therapeutic interaction (Harington (ed.) 1997; Brody 2000). This type of response could indeed be considered present in all therapeutic encounters, since the meanings the patient understands within them have direct repercussions upon their health and well-being. As scholars have noted, transferring RCT methodology and its attendant concepts across different cultures and their medical traditions involves huge challenges of cultural translation (Adams et al. 2005; Miller et al. 2007; Craig 2010, Saxer 2013: 156ff.), and attempting to do so has far reaching repercussions for cultural and ethnic identities. What has meaning in terms of illness and treatment in one cultural context may have a completely different meaning in another. The notion of placebo is a case in point. I was once half way up a sacred mountain in Bhutan when I saw ahead of me three Tibetans, one of them a doctor I knew from Lhasa who was presumably attending the same conference on Asian medicine as I the following day. The doctor was bent over a plant and, as I approached I heard he was discussing its medicinal properties with the others.

“Is it medicine?” I asked him in Lhasa dialect. Before he had looked up and recognised me, he replied with a phrase he often used when we met up in Lhasa and talked of such things: “Tsangma men ré!” (Everything is Medicine!; T. *tshang ma sman red*). If everything is medicine, evidently there can be no thing that has no effect; nothing that could be used as a ‘control’ in the sense of it having no properties. This makes the very notion of a placebo an anomaly for Tibetan perspectives, as is highlighted by Craig in her study of efficacy in which, during the trial of a Tibetan

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<sup>16</sup> Blinding is the process during RCT in which those participating, whether by taking substances or administering them, do not know who is getting the medicine on trial and who the placebo.

medicine, a Buddhist *lama* blesses a placebo in order that its ingestion may at least be of benefit to its recipients (Craig 2010). The prime focus of this thesis is not Tibetan Medicine, or the traditional medicine theory and practices that come under the rubric of Sowa Rigpa. However, as outlined in its introductory section, this thesis does employ the notion of a cultural matrix of healing as key in framing understandings of the cultural matrix underlying the forms of healing it discusses. In order to understand what kinds of things such a matrix entails and how they inform understandings of the pluralistic healing palette engaged with on the Tibetan Plateau, it is thus necessary to highlight salient aspects of Sowa Rigpa. Firstly, the intimate connection between health and environment in Tibetan cultural perspectives, and how that is generally viewed as operating, is exemplified in the ethos underlying Sowa Rigpa. As mentioned in the previous chapter, according to Sowa Rigpa's seminal texts, the *Gyüshi* (T. *rGyud bzhi*), a healthy environment is one in which the three dynamics potentially causing harm, the *nyépa* (T. *nyes pa*), wind, *lung* (T. *rlung*), bile, *tripa* (T. *mkhris pa*) and phlegm, *beken* (T. *bad kan*), dance in harmony with the agentive elements of earth, *sa* (T. *sa*), water, *chu* (T. *chu*), fire, *mé* (T. *me*), air, *lung* (T. *rlung*) and consciousness/space, *namka* (T. *nam mkha*). The participants of these dances are embodied by sentient beings, human and non-human or deity, their realms intersecting as they weave choreographies whose unhealthy states are ultimately caused by the root causes of all suffering, the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist three poisons of the mind, *duk sum* (T. *dug gsum*; S. *kleśa*), ignorance, craving and anger.

The body, its wellness, illness and capacity to heal, are thus understood in the Buddhist frame of Sowa Rigpa as both manifestation of the result of previous actions spanning lives and the raw material for development on the path to enlightenment. Although expressing such understandings in this way could suggest them to be the province of an educated elite, headed by monks, in fact this is not the case, as will be demonstrated by the story of the nomad grandmother Domba (Chapter Two), whose primary stated motivation for finding some measure of healing for her condition was to be able to attend the monastery and engage in Buddhist practices. Her health in the next life, and the positive influence on her *karma* that the Buddhist practice enabled by that health would bring, was of far more importance to her than any other reason for being well. As this demonstrates, in understanding approaches to illness, its causes and cures, explored in this thesis, it is important to build up a picture of the culture and history which underlie and give form to perspectives about health and their attendant rituals.

For those in Tibetan cultural regions, whose perspectives and rituals are founded in origin myths, mythohistories and an understanding of ritual healing wherein the elements and all that exists arise in causal chains leading to an intricate web of interconnected being in which beings move from life to life depending on causes and effect, it does not make sense to talk of an inert object existing in isolation from the processes of being which at once constitute and (re)form it. Pathways towards a balanced psychophysical well-being are thus attended by rituals which profoundly impact those travelling upon them. The import of such rituals has tended to be overlooked in Eurocentric and biomedical cultural settings. This is arguably to their detriment since, as Kleinman asserts, the psycho-social aspects of the healing process are key to its success (Kleinman 1979). If, as Brody argues convincingly, the rituals in medicine themselves can and do profoundly impact the health of patients, then medical practitioners would do well to make efforts towards better understanding and practice of them (Brody 2010). To take this further, and particularly relevant in cultural settings where the agency of spirits and deities in promoting health or causing disease is readily acknowledged, rituals involving them are an important part of health seeking. Since these beings and attendant rituals act, at the very least through symbolism, on the structure of human existence, it is necessary in exploring health and well-being in such cultural contexts, to understand the action of such beings upon health and wellbeing, and to develop a language for that (Samuel 2010). The theatre of these rituals may be as concise as giving a logical explanation as to why a medicine works and so administering it in a way that engenders confidence, or may be as complex as that of the Leru in Rebgong, which aims to evoke the presence of mountain gods.

In attempting to frame this research in a way which would adequately encompass such a broad and complex spectrum of ritual healing and the spirited agencies who empower it, I was intrigued by the notion of a ‘cultural logic of healing’, introduced by Mona Schrempf in her work exploring health seeking behaviour in Amdo. (Schrempf 2010:157). This behaviour traverses just such broad spectrum of material as that addressed here. Schrempf’s work appears in a collection edited by Adams, Schrempf and Craig, who suggest a paradigmatic frame for the papers on Sowa Rigpa’s ongoing negotiations with biomedicine and other modernities, which they entitle ‘a Sowa Rigpa Sensibility’ (Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2010). What these ways of framing research point to is that a type of culturally conditioned epistemic orientation

towards what is meant by medicine or healing underlies the complex ethnographic material scholars attempt to make sense of in speaking about Tibetan cultural regions such as Rebgong, Amdo, site of my fieldwork. In a more recent development of her ‘cultural logic of healing’, Schrempf refers to ‘a fundamental cultural principle’ as subset of it (Schrempf 2015). The guiding principle she is referring to here is the close connections between humans, the spirit world and environs in rural Bhutan, a principle which she says falls within the rubric of the overall epistemic ‘cultural logic’ of the region in regards to ritual healing. As Schrempf notes in respect of this guiding principle, within its overarching frame of cultural logic, it is ‘one that cuts across otherwise rigidly maintained institutional boundaries between religion and medicine, whether state orchestrated or reified within academic disciplines.’ (Schrempf 2015: 493) This seems to me to have much relevance for the exploration of healing rituals to follow here. In considering this, it occurred to me that the containment, in fluid manner of a variety of principles within one overarching epistemic rubric, or logic, recalls the notion of a matrix. As defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary (ninth edition), a matrix is ‘a situation or surrounding substance within which something else originates, develops, or is contained.’ The word ‘matrix’ connotes womb, place of origin, that within which something is developed, that which frames it - as a gemstone is framed by the surrounding rock in which it is embedded. In this thesis I would like to suggest that, for my fieldwork regions of the Rebgong valley at least, the ritual healing described here is embedded in a cultural matrix of healing within which spirited agency is focal.

In terms of a cultural matrix of healing, I mean here one in which healing is understood in a wide sense and includes ‘concerns that are as much religious or spiritual as medical’ (Samuel 2011a: 319). It is these concerns that this thesis is interested to explore and to situate within an understanding of healing which defines its aim as to make well through harmonising bodily energies, both mutually and in relationship with energies of the environment and with other beings. Such beings are understood within Tibetan worldviews to include deity and spirit beings as aspects of an existence in interdependent flux. I suggest here that all practices, whether ritual or medical, pertaining to health and well-being in Tibetan cultural regions are predicated upon this type of epistemology; a cultural matrix of healing. The sensibility of which the matrix is formed is one in which healing is by definition about achieving correct or right relationship within one’s bodily structures and within their relations with environmental and deity landscapes, on a model wherein the boundaries between internal and external

worlds are porous (Craig 2012: 6). I hope here to explore and deepen understanding of practices aimed towards healing as painted with the broad brush stroke of this matrix. The presence of deities and spirits, how they appear in this kind of model, how they are understood to exist and what their effect is on health or healing, is far from being a simple matter. The pantheon of deity and spirit beings found in Tibetan oral and textual traditions is unknowably vast. The realities of village practice tend to be comprised of a process of interaction and negotiation between a broad spectrum of elements, rather than a discrete enactment within clearly defined parameters. Likewise, the deities so central to these processes are presented here not as phenomena dividable into compartments, according to purpose, but as parts of layered wholes, their presences all-pervasive cultural winds.

### *Chapter Overview*

In summary then, this thesis is an exploration of presence and spirited agency viewed through the stories of performative transformations towards wellness in Rebgong; the ritual enactments connecting human, spirit and divine realms. A central argument is that such elements are integral to health and well-being within Tibetan communities, as demonstrated by ethnographic research undertaken on the Tibetan Plateau, making an understanding of them essential to studies of practices relating to health in this and other Tibetan cultural regions. The thesis suggests the development of an approach to understanding such phenomena situated in local understandings of landscapes, and reflective of the fluid understandings of environment and psychophysical existence that are the locus of realisation in ritual practice. Such an approach situates is located in and enacted from understandings of sacred spaces and of how those of the environment and the body interface on subtle levels to either create or undercut health and well-being. In Tibetan regions divine presences underlie both ritual practices and more routine quotidian ritual actions such as visiting a doctor, embedded as these are in their socio-political and historical contexts, the politics of their presences. I am hoping with the thesis to add to the field a sense of how such deity presences pervade ordinary life in Tibetan cultural regions and what this means for those who live there. I argue that these presences, however interpreted, are implicit in all aspects of life on the Plateau. They pervade the very fabric of existence, as embodied in environmental and bodily landscapes, lending to those people who inhabit such spaces a particular sensibility in their approach to life, to health and to healing. This makes an understanding of divine presences and their

embodiments not only a useful frame for, but integral to studies concerning these regions.

Following on from the present introductory chapter, Chapter One introduces Rebgong, site of my ethnographic research, and situates it within the Tibetan cultural regions of the Plateau of which it forms part, historically, socially and in terms of its ritual healing. I describe and highlight some of the wider kinds of presences and concerns which pervade everyday life in the valley's villages. I hope to give a sense of what it means for the peoples of my fieldwork site to inhabit the landscapes that they do and what these mean for them. In this thesis I suggest that, for my fieldwork regions of the Rebgong valley at least, the ritual healing described here is embedded in a cultural matrix of healing within which spirited agency is focal.

Chapter Two describes the types of healers and healing practices found in Rebgong. The chapter frames the research in the complex understandings of deity relationship with and impact upon health within environments, understood as both inhabited and embodied. Ritual healing in Tibetan cultural regions is predicated on the power of deity worlds to bless, empower and to transform. Therefore, healing in a broad sense involves relations with these spirited agencies, whose presences underlie individual and communal health and fortune. The chapter includes several ethnographic vignettes which illustrate the types of practitioners working within the cultural matrix of healing found in Rebgong and begin to elucidate some central themes of the thesis, such as empowerment, embodiment and blessing.

Chapter Three gives account of the evocation of local deities of the place and mountains through the *labtsé* ritual in which their presences are annually invoked or purified via a series of propitiatory offerings made on the mountainsides overseeing village territories under their auspices. It begins firstly by situating the rite in context of the mythohistories and origin myths which inform the conception and continual renewal of spirited agencies through such rituals. It then contextualises the ethnographic section with background on the village and its longstanding relationships with spirited agencies. An ethnography of the annual renewal of the Jiangjia village *labtsé* then forms the basis for discussion of the deity presences: territorial or ancestral, local, household or those of the mountain gods, and the ritual maintenance of right relations with them, thereby preserving good fortune, health and well-being. Rituals invoking and involving deity presences are concerned with the maintenance of appropriate relations between them

and the human beings with whom they share spaces. Therefore, such rituals are vital to the health and well-being of human communities, in terms of freedom from disease and natural disasters. What meanings are envisioned by those who call down the gods during ritual practices is thus discussed via the notion of spirited agency central to a cultural matrix of healing.

Understandings of relationships between human beings and deity or spirit worlds are further developed in Chapter Four, which focuses on the Jiangjia Leru harvest festival, and the deity presences it invokes. It is concerned with the structures of deity and human realms, the centres and peripheries of power, models of embodiment and how these interact with and are invoked to influence human worlds. The chapter discusses the intimate connection between household rituals in Tibetan cultural regions and those involving whole communities, such as the Leru. It explores the phenomenon of becoming spirit mediums in these areas, and the import of initiation rites to ‘open’ subtle bodily systems in order to facilitate embodiment. The chapter further develops discussion of presence in terms of the sensibilities evoked by interaction with deity worlds, highlighting the pivotal role of these realms in a cultural matrix of healing.

Chapter Five relates the above to ritual dance performance, exploring themes of agency and presence in spirited landscapes, authenticity and transformation, contested authorities and identity (re)formation. These themes are discussed in connection to modes of possession/trance and mediumship. This chapter continues exploring the themes of embodiment, empowerment and blessing begun in previous chapters. It discusses the descent of blessings from deity to ritualists wherein the centre bears closest proximity to deity is presented as frame for understanding notions of blessing. The chapter contrasts the way in which in the shamanic idiom of the Leru’s spirit medium the gods are called down to manifest themselves through possession, whereas in the idiom of the religious specialist, such as in tantric rituals such as the Rebgong *cham* described here, the gods are evoked and manifested through a different kind of embodiment. However, the chapter problematises making a clear divide between the shamanic idiom and that of the religious specialist, attempting instead to view the danced ritual practice described from point of view of the politics of presence and thus to acknowledge voices from deity and spirit worlds as authoritative on their own terms.

Chapter Six looks at how the ritual healing enacted by *nukwa* and *lawa*, operating within tantric and shamanic idioms respectively, works in practice. In examining ritual healing enacted by the Rebgong *nukwa*, it takes as starting point the Tibetan tantric practices these *nukwa* engage in, since it is the empowerment as an embodiment of deity these confer which are perceived as source of *nukwa* healing powers by those who seek them out for treatment. This chapter aims to better understand what happens when *nukwa* and *lawa* heal through their different types of deity embodiment, and how this could be framed within a cultural matrix of healing. It approaches this through an analysis of what the people of these regions understand by blessing, and how this may be transmitted. In short, it assumes on the basis of the research thus far, that forms of healing using *mantra*, breath, spittle or deity possession, suppose it is through the blessing of deity worlds that healing occurs. The chapter proposes that subtle energies are thought to be transmitted through the evocation of deity for empowerment and blessing, carried by winds, water or possession, by means of embodiment characterised as *nukwa* and/or *lawa*. It explores how this may occur according to the logic of the cultural matrix within which these healing rituals are performed.

I draw the thesis to a close with a concluding section in which I overview its central themes and present some closing comments meant, in a Bakhtinian sense, as words which do not bring closure but rather seek to engage in a dialogical conversation that simultaneously responds to past scholarship and anticipates response.



**What do they mean, these places, these lands for these people?**

## CHAPTER ONE - EXPLORING REBGONG GROUNDS

*The sacred and the being-to-be-translated do not let themselves be thought one without the other:*

*They produce each other at the edge of the same limit.*

- Derrida 1998: 213

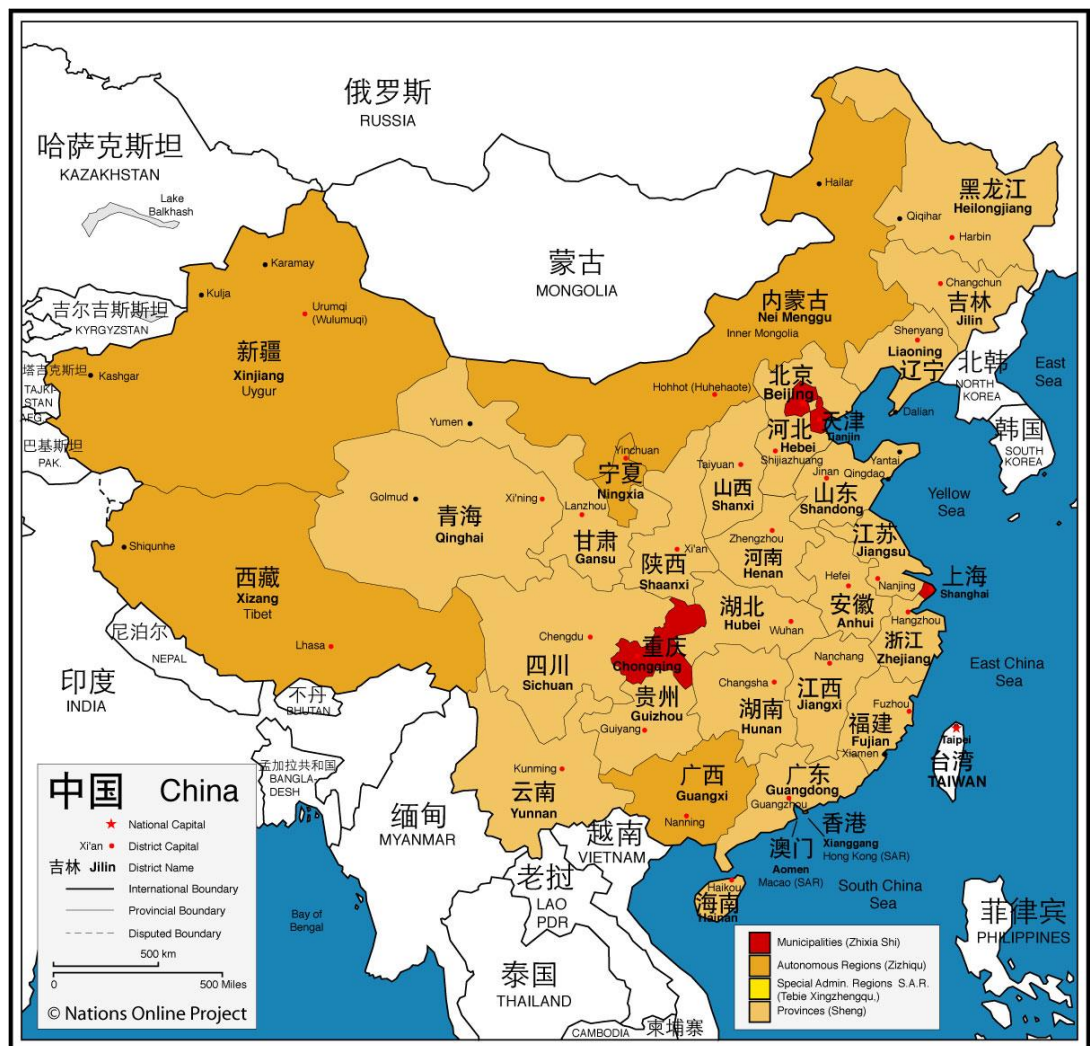
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This chapter will introduce Rebgong, site of my ethnographic research and situate it within the Tibetan cultural regions of the Plateau of which it forms part, historically, socially and in terms of its ritual healing. I will describe and highlight some of the wider kinds of presences and concerns which pervade everyday life in the valley's villages. I hope to give a sense of what it means for the peoples of my fieldwork site to inhabit the landscapes that they do and what these mean for them.

### ***Tibetan Grounds***

Tibetan grounds or what has been understood as the geographical and political borders of 'Tibet' and how these have persisted or not over time, have been much contested. When using the term 'Tibetan', I mean to describe here a complexity of populations revealing linguistic, cultural and socio-historical similarities, whose geographical situation is fluid (cf. Richardson 1984; Goldstein 1994; Samuel 1993; Huber 1999a). As will be detailed in this chapter, the population of Rebgong, and indeed the wider regions of which the valley communities form part, is very varied. A broad variety of ethnicities and traditions co-exist across the Northeastern Tibetan Plateau, maintaining the diverse cultures and the narratives that underpin these against a shared backdrop of party-state control, as exercised by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Indeed, an overarching narrative subscribed to by the party-state is that all these diverse peoples are Chinese, their differences grouped according to ethnic characteristics and described as 'nationalities', *minzu* (C. *mínzú* - 民族); distinctive parts of one unified whole. This narrative is contested by a second, subterranean yet prevalent counter narrative in which, pre-1950, Tibetans were not under Chinese rule nor considered themselves as Chinese. According to this narrative, the situation for Tibetans post-1950 is one aptly described by

Fischer as ‘effective occupation’. By this is meant that in terms of the ability of Tibetans to function and determine their own living conditions, politically and economically both regionally and nationally they have been disempowered by the Chinese (Fischer 2014: xxx). The ‘Chinese’ of this second narrative are the Han Chinese, the majority *minzu*, of the first. Thus someone unaware of these narratives and the backdrop of power balance they lend to any theatre of speech, might inadvertently subscribe to one or the other through their choice of words, thereby either alienating or gaining affinity with those listening. For example, non-subscription to the party-state narrative is implied by the use of the words ‘Tibet’ to describe tracts of land or ‘Tibetans’ to describe a non-Chinese people rather than a Chinese ‘nationality’.



administrative map of the People's Republic of China<sup>17</sup>

As is indicated by the complex natures of these overarching and contesting

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/china\\_administrative\\_map2.htm](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/china_administrative_map2.htm) (last accessed on 15/08/2015)

narratives and the multifarious peoples who situate their lives in relation to them, living in regions of the Tibetan Plateau involves a certain degree of skill in cultural translation. This translation does not only relate to these overarching narratives, but to multiple less far reaching ones infusing all aspects of life, from the most in depth conversations to the most perfunctory. An example of the latter category is that, when entering a shop or a restaurant, the first assessment that has to be made is what language to use when addressing the shop keeper. This will be based on a brief examination of their appearance, or on what language they are speaking, if they are. Of course Chinese language, as lingua franca of the PRC, within which these regions now fall, will always work to some extent. But it may not produce the best results, depending on the ethnicity and cultural background of the person or people you are talking to, which of the above overarching narratives they are likely to subscribe to, which type of Chinese you are speaking ('Beijing-ese' is very different from 'Qinghai-ese'), and whether or not the person in question actually understands much of it. Particularly older generations of ethnic groups classed as minority ethnic groups in China, 'minority nationalities' (C. *shǎoshù mínzú* - 少数民族), such as Tibetans, may speak little or no Chinese. Here I am not interested so much in whether or not there is an ontological truth to be told about narratives such as those described above, but rather in how such stories frame peoples' realities, filter through their speech and determine or flavour their relations. The practices and ritual healings described in this thesis are set against the backdrop of such narratives and the presences which they inform or evoke as authentic.

### ***Amdoan Narratives***

The Rebgong valley, my fieldwork site for this thesis, sits to the south side of the yellow river, nestled between mountain ranges. Home to a population of over 80,000 people, Rebgong is a reflection of the multicultural landscape of Amdo (T. A mdo), a wider region of the Tibetan Plateau which encompasses it. The term Amdo refers to a historical Tibetan regional division of the Plateau into the tripartite provinces (T. *chol kha gsum*) of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo (T. dBus gtsang, Khams, A mdo). I use the term Amdo throughout, to loosely refer to a large portion of land in the east and northeast of what Tibetans were describing as 'Tibet' for at least three centuries prior to the changes brought by the People's Republic of China (中国; M. Zhongguo) post 1950. As explored in detail by scholars such as Wu Qi, the origins of the term Amdo, and its referent over time, are

unclear (Wu Qi 2013). Indeed, scholars such as Glen Tuttle argue that the notion of Amdo as a broad cultural territory may well not predate the sixteenth century prominence of the Geluk Buddhist sect (Tuttle 2013).<sup>18</sup> With its average elevation exceeding fourteen thousand feet, Amdo as cultural linguistic region now roughly corresponds to Qinghai (青海) excepting Yushu TAP, western Gansu (甘肅) and northern Sichuan (四川) provinces, in the south-western regions of the People's Republic of China, as shown on the maps below, which also detail areas designated as Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (藏族自治州; M. Zangzu zizhizhou) and Counties by the PRC. As illustrated by the way in which the borders of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo differ in the maps given below, there is no precise consensus upon them. Broadly speaking, Amdo's west and north west are framed by the plains known as the Changtang in Tibetan, the deserts of inner Asia and the Kunlun Mountains (崑崙山), and its southernmost reaches by the upper Yangtze River (长江; T. 'Dri chu).

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<sup>18</sup> Tuttle's point here is based on the fact that the seminal 1698 historical work, the Golden Beryl, by Desi Sanggyé Gyatso's (T. sDe srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho), despite being largely organised geographically, surveys Gelukpa monasteries without reference to Amdo as a region (Tuttle 2013).



map showing Tibetan tripartite division of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo in relation to Chinese Provinces<sup>19</sup>



map showing alternate version of the tripartite division of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo, in which the boundaries appear more fluid<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.tibetmap.com/TARbr.html> (last accessed 20/07/2015)

<sup>20</sup> [www.khamfilmproject.org](http://www.khamfilmproject.org) (last accessed 20/07/2015)

Early accounts of Amdo areas in European languages date from the first half of the twentieth century, since the region was reasonably accessible to outsiders (Rockhill in the 1890s; Huc and Gabet in the 1840s). These include those of Christian missionary turned anthropologists such as Ekvall (1939, 1952, 1954a, 1954b, 1956, 1964a, 1964b, 1981) and Hermanns (1949, 1959), as well as other travellers (eg. Teichman 1921; Filchner 1929, 1933 and Rock 1956). The role played by Amdo in historical Tibet was that of a borderlands or buffer zone, standing as the region did, on the East-West trade route near the Hexi corridor (河西走廊; M. *Hexi Zoulang*),<sup>21</sup> and being situated between empires such as those of Tibet, China, Mongolia and the Minyak/Tangut. The peoples of Amdo, have preserved allegiances to royal clans, legacy of the Tibetan Empire, beyond the decline of the aristocracy which took place in the mid 800s. When the Chinese Song Dynasty emerged to overtake the Tang in the late 900s, Tibetans in the Amdo regions of Liangzhou and Tsongkha were strongly established. The Liangzhou Tibetans were very successful horse traders; the Tsongkha Tibetans raised an army of 40-60,000 to fight the Tanguts and were recognised by the Song in 1041. Despite incursions into Amdo territories by the Song, they were unable to make much progress beyond areas such as Kokonor and surrounding areas. However, the Mongols took control of historical Tibet in 1252, consolidating Buddhist Sakyapa religious predominance there, and their presence lives on in descendants who inhabit regions of Amdo such as Rebgong. Sakya influence upon Rebgong resulted in the establishment of a local ruler, Pakpa (T. 'Phags pa), who sent his disciple Lhajé Draknawa (T. Lha rje brag sna ba) to rule over the twelve local rulers and their twelvefold division of Rebgong. When visiting the Yuan court, Lhajé's son was given the title of *nangso* (T. *nang so*) and this position continued until 1957. Later rulers received titles from both Lhasa (T. Lha sa) and Beijing (Tuttle 2011). Due to Mongolian protection, Amdo remained stable during the late fourteenth century fall of the Yuan Dynasty and rise of the Ming, where central Tibet did not. Located as it was in the borderlands between Ming and Mongol centres, Amdo Tibetans managed to maintain a degree of sponsorship from both powers whilst maintaining affiliations with central Tibetan monasteries (Davidson 2005; Kapstein 2006; Nietupski 2011; Horlemann 2012).

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<sup>21</sup> The Hexi corridor is a natural land passage stretching approximately 1,000km from Lanzhou to the Yumen Pass (玉門關), west of Dunhuang (敦煌) in contemporary Gansu Province.

The continuity of religious institutions in Amdo was maintained intact throughout the period 842-950, during which they became fragmented in other Tibetan regions, allowing for the reemergence of Buddhism during its revival phase in Tibet, circa eleventh century. Similarly, the decline of the aristocracy in historical Tibet was in contrast to Amdo's maintaining its royal clans (Nietupski 2011: 2). Amdo continues with this trend of maintaining its traditions in relative autonomy up till recent times. Until the 1950s much of Amdo was self-governed by Tibetans and using Amdo Tibetan, rather than the Ütsang Tibetan of Central Tibet (Nietupski 2011: 1-3). Amdo also maintained its distinct language and literacy even throughout the Maoist period. (Fischer 2014: xxxvi). This historical background is what underpins the prevalent narrative amongst Amdo Tibetans in which they appear as more authentic keepers or holders of their religious traditions, customs and linguistic forms than is generally found in Ütsang or Kham. This view is underlain by history in that it was in Amdo that the Buddhist monastic code and ordination lineage is evidenced as maintained during its tenth century dissolution elsewhere in Tibet (Galambos & van Schaik 2015).<sup>22</sup> To return to Makley, applying Boddy's 'politics of presence' to such Tibetan regions, this narrative can be viewed as voiced and re-authenticated by the spirited agencies who will appear in later chapters of this thesis. Particular within the narrative are regions of Amdo falling within the Chinese Province of Qinghai, which have the reputation of having held most strongly to their cultures and linguistic heritage (Fischer 2014: xxxvi).

Rebgong is situated in the north-eastern part of Qinghai Province, about 180km south of its capital Xining. Three of Asia's greatest rivers have their sources in Qinghai: The Yangtze, the Mekong and the Yellow or Huanghe River, known as the Machu (T. rMa chu), or the 'Peacock River' by Tibetans. Qinghai also bears the Tibetan name Tso ngyon (T. mTsho sNgon) and the Mongol name Kokonor, all translatable with the same meaning in English: Blue Lake. Qinghai is almost completely divided into six prefectures: five 'Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures' (M. Zangzu zizhizhou) and one 'Tibetan and Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture'; the capital Xining not having been accorded autonomous status (Meriam 2012: 5-6), and additionally Haidong. This latter point is evidenced in the contrast between types of architecture and people found in Xining and

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<sup>22</sup> There is documentary evidence of Buddhist monastic culture existing in the 960s, in Damtig, site of a monastery and cave temples located in modern day Qinghai (Galambos & van Schaik 2015).

that of other places in the province. Xining rises up from Qinghai's surrounding plateau as a towering conglomerate of the tall and new, predominantly populated by urban Han Chinese.

As Rock, an explorer who worked in the region during the 1920s, points out, prior to the 1928 creation of Qinghai Province, the region was smaller, part of its eastern regions being apportioned to Gansu Province and part of its western ones to what Rock calls 'Tibet'. He describes its western boundaries as 'ill-defined and more or less arbitrary' before the Chinese controlled the territory (Rock 1956: 3). Today's Qinghai province covers an area of over 720,000 square kilometres and its average altitude is over three thousand metres above sea level (Meriam 2012: 5). According to the PRC's sixth national population census, taken in 2010,<sup>23</sup> there are 5,626,703 people living in Qinghai, almost half of which, 2,208,708, live in the provincial capital of Xining. Qinghai rose to become a comparatively affluent province within the PRC by the late 1970s. However, during the 1980s and 1990s its provincial level jurisdiction was classified by the party-state as the worst performing of all the provinces. By the late 1990s, the PRC officially declared almost 85% of the 49 counties in Qinghai as poverty stricken, either at national or provincial level. Despite efforts by central government during the 1950s to develop both Qinghai's extraction industries, such as salts and oil, and defence installations, Qinghai has a limited industrial base and communications infrastructure. It is perhaps best known for its 'Reform through Labour' programmes,<sup>24</sup> which, like its industrial and defence developments, relied heavily on subsidies from central government (Goodman 2004: 379-380). Qinghai is a borderland full of both environmental and cultural contrasts. The north east corner is populated with agricultural peoples, the upper regions contain highlands and grasslands, to the west there are the marshlands of the Qaidam Basin, and to its east the Islamic counties of Hualong and Xunhua, which were lands of the Hui warlord Ma Bufang prior to 1949.

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<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Fischer for sharing with me his copy of the parts of the census with data on Qinghai.

<sup>24</sup> These were camps set up during the 'Cultural Revolution' to 're-educate' people opposed to the communist regime.

## *The Valley of Rebgong*



map in Tibetan locating Rebgong (the red spiral dot) within the tripartite division of Ütsang, Kham and Amdo shown in the maps<sup>25</sup>

The spaces inhabited by the valley communities amongst whom I conducted fieldwork and referred to as Rebgong by Tibetans, are described by the PRC as in Tongren County, Huangnan Prefecture, Malho in Tibetan (T. rMa lho). Malho is one of the six Autonomous Prefectures in Qinghai Province, five of which are Tibetan and one Mongolian. As has been described, Qinghai is one of the least developed, provinces in the PRC, with one of the lowest incomes. Within Qinghai, Malho features amongst the three poorest areas, the others being the Tibetan Autonomous Regions of Golok (T. mGo log) and Yushu (T. Yul shul) (Horlemann 2002: 242-244). The PRC division of Huangnan/Mahlo splits it into four counties: Tongren, Zianzha, Zeku and Henan, with Tongren being the most populated and its seat or metropolitan area. According to the 2010 census, the population of Tongren stood at 92,601, Zeku being the second most populated county, at 69,416; with Jianzha coming in third with 55,325 and Henan Mongolian Autonomous County having 39,374.

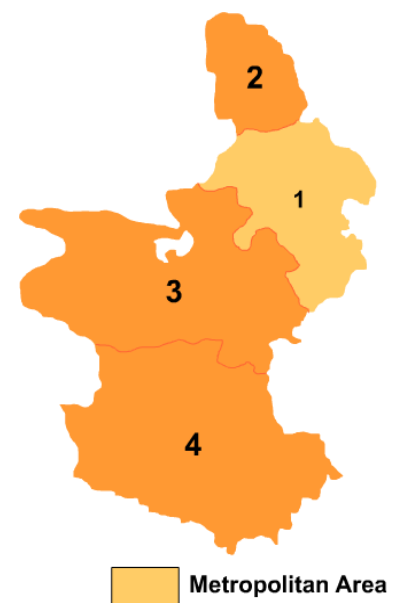
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<sup>25</sup> [www.voa-tibetanenglish.com/content/article1561623.html](http://www.voa-tibetanenglish.com/content/article1561623.html) (last accessed 20/07/2015)



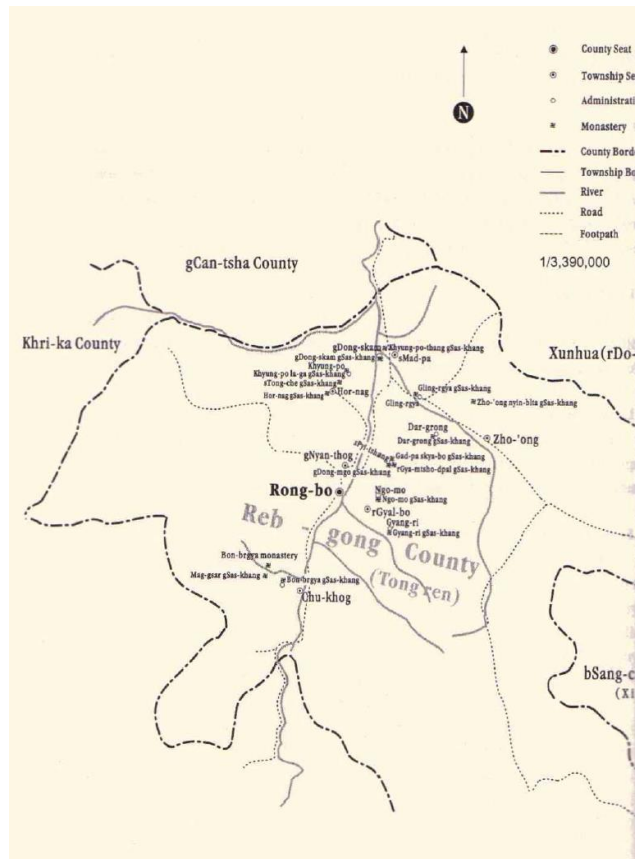
map showing the location of Huangnan Prefecture within Qinghai Province<sup>26</sup>

map of Huangnan prefecture showing its four counties  
 no.1: Tongren - the main seat or metropolitan county of the prefecture  
 no. 2: Jianzha Tibetan Autonomous County;  
 no. 3: Zeku Tibetan Autonomous County  
 no.4: Henan Mongolian Autonomous County<sup>27</sup>



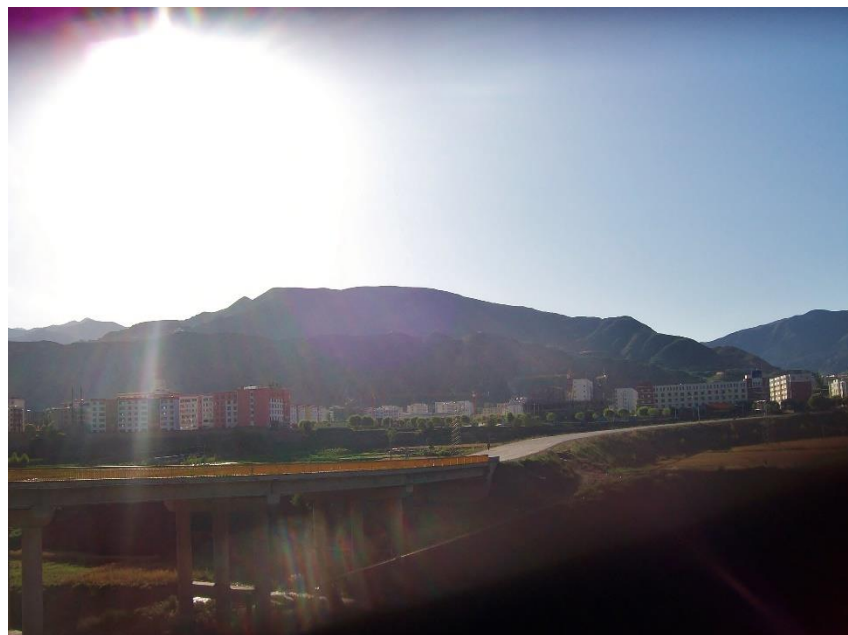
<sup>26</sup> <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAR-TAP-TAC.png> (last accessed 14/08/2015)

<sup>27</sup> [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Huangnan\\_mcp.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/92/Huangnan_mcp.png) (last accessed 15/08/2015)



map of Rebong County reprinted from Karmay and Nagano (eds) 2003

Rebong is found at the lowest end of the Guchu (T. dGu chu) river (M. Longwuhe), a tributary of the Machu River. Its villages spill out from its county seat of Rongwo town, meandering up and across the slopes of the valley's sides. The region is



the bridge over the Guchu on entering Rongwo town, Rebong

predominantly Tibetan, with ethnic groups classified by the PRC as Tu, Han, Hui, Salar, Mongolian and others, comprising the rest of its population. Rongwo town is named for its largest monastery, a seat of the Gelukpa (T. dGe lugs pa) school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose founder Tsongkhapa (T. Tsong kha pa) was born near modern day Xining,<sup>28</sup> and which first began to establish itself in Rebgong early in the seventeenth century (Dhondup 2011: 42). Rongbo Gonchen (T. Rong bo dgon chen), founded in 1342, is the third largest Gelukpa monastery in Amdo and its sprawling complex sits to the south of Rebgong's market streets, flanked by prayer wheels and fronted by a large golden statue of the Goddess Dröma (T. sGrol ma; S. Tārā), a 'peaceful' deity from the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

Since the ruling authority in the region shifted away from monastic institutions, the town of Rongwo (C. Longwo) now houses prefectural and county buildings running parallel to the Guchu which administer the over 80,000 strong populace of the valley as the Chinese county of Tongren. In PRC terms, Longwo is the seat of Tongren county and Huangnan prefecture, which were established in 1928 and 1952 respectively. The area of the Longwo/Rebgong valley, immediately surrounding Rongwo town and monastic complex is populated by villages, which spread upwards into the mountains encircling the town. Local history divides the Rebgong villages into eighteen outer and twelve inner groups, dating the founding of these latter groups as in the fourteenth century. They were each ruled by a titled lord and formed in contrast to the eighteen outer groups, whose historical region extended much further both to the north and south of present day Rebgong (Dhondup 2011: 36ff; Weiner 2012).<sup>29</sup>

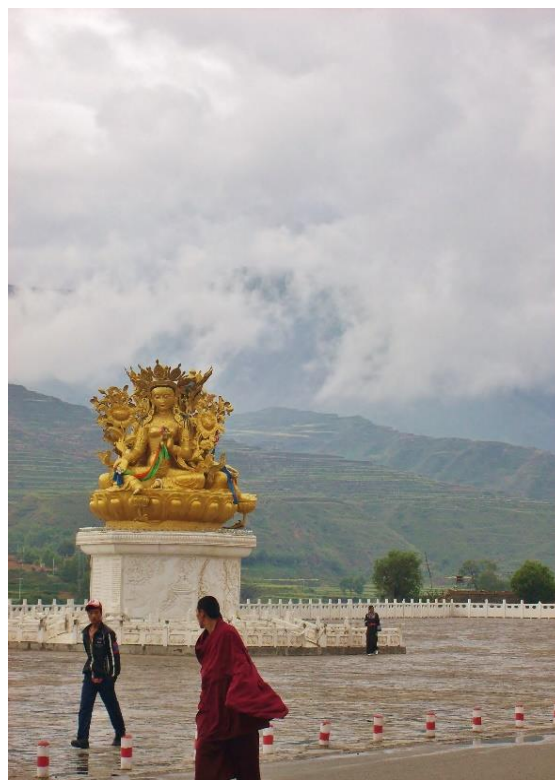
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<sup>28</sup> Present day Kumbum Monastery (T. sKu bum dgon pa) is built at the site of Tsongkhapa's birthplace.

<sup>29</sup> There is scant textual reference for the history of these groups, but what exists suggests their founder as Dodeybum (T. mDo sde 'bum), son of Lhajé Dragnawa (T. Lha rje brag sna ba), the Sakya doctor and tantric practitioner to whom, according to a widely accepted origin myth, Rebgong's rulers trace their origins (Dhondup 2011: 36, 37, note 15).



**the road through the market streets to Rongwo Monastery in Rebong**



**the statue of the Buddhist deity Dröma  
in front of Rongwo Monastery**

When looking down upon Rongwo town from the mountain sides, it is possible to see the older parts of the town surrounding Rongwo and to its South looking quite different to the administrative buildings by the river and the more recently built parts of the town, with high rise apartment blocks of a kind found all over China, to its North.



**looking down on Rongwo – the golden roofs of Rongwo Monastery  
in the older part of the town can be seen to the far right**



**the contrast between the older side of town with Rongwo monastery (on the left)  
and the newer more Chinese style architecture (on the right)**

The people of Rebgong undertake a variety of activities and it is usual to find that one or more family members of any given household do not live there all year round. Maintaining the household often entails one or more of its members working outside the county, at least for periods of time in the year. Large communal festivals such as the Leru, which will be discussed in Chapter Three, are thus a focal point for those absent members of the households to regroup around. Apart from those working on the market stalls and at local cafes and shops, the administrative and construction workers, the monastics and the soldiers at the army base, there is also a burgeoning business in internet cafes and halls, a variety of hotels and tour agencies, and a mix of schools and colleges in and

around Rebgong. More traditional means of livelihood do also continue, such as that practiced by the lineage of artists known as the Rebgong art school; as does agriculture and farming, with a mixture of farmers and herders to be found in Rebgong.



**crops drying on the streets of Rongwo town**

Farming in the valley is mostly livestock-based, concentrating on sheep, yak and horses. Qinghai has a long tradition of both settled and nomadic pastoralists, although the latter have been going through a period of transition over the last decades, due to the state-led provincial policy of settling nomadic herders that began, along with the ‘Reform through Labour’ camps, during the 1960s (Goodman 2004). Rebgong is not a traditionally nomadic area, such as neighbouring Sogwo (Henan county) in Southern Malho. However, nomadic peoples from Zeku county’s grasslands have been obliged to settle on the borders of Rongwo town as a result of the resettlement programme, causing some consternation to the Rongwo residents. Due to being reliant on government subsidies, the nomad settlement is marginalised and the nomads regarded as without income and so potentially criminal (Ptackova 2011).



**a nomadic herder herding yak in neighbouring  
Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, known by Tibetans as Tsolho<sup>30</sup>**

Tibetans within Rebgong, and indeed across Amdo, identify themselves as culturally distinct from those found in Ütsang or Kham. In Qinghai, which as we have seen, covers much of the area traditionally known as Amdo, they tend to take pride in the fact that after the end of the ninth century Tibetan Tubo Empire they were not ruled as a singular people under one leadership (Karmay 1994b; Shakya 1999; Goodman 2004). In Rebgong particularly, this tendency of Amdo Tibetans to self-identify as more independent thinking and culturally sophisticated than peoples from other Tibetan areas is strengthened and localised by the number of culturally significant people born in or connected to the area. Historically important religious figures include the Buddhist teacher, *lama* (T. *bla ma*), who taught Tsongkhapa the founder of the Gelukpa school mentioned earlier, Chöjé Dhundrup Rinchen (T. Chos rje don grub rin chen, 1309-1385). Another influential scholar to originate in Rebgong is Sharkalden Jyatso (T. Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho, 1606-1677).

Rebgong is also known for its Tibetan cultural heritage, and particularly famed for its traditional art works. A number of key figures in artistic and cultural terms have emerged from or trained in the region.<sup>31</sup> The fine art practices in Rebgong, in particular

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<sup>30</sup> [www.thelandofsnows.com/amdothe-qinghai-part-of-amdo](http://www.thelandofsnows.com/amdothe-qinghai-part-of-amdo) (last accessed 21/08/2015)

<sup>31</sup> For example, the teacher of the Buddhist master Tsong Khapa (1357-1419), who founded the Gelukpa (T. dGe lugs pa) school, Chöjé Döndrup Rinchen (T. Chos rje don grub rin chen); the scholar Sharkalden Gyatso (T. Shar skal ldan rgya mtsho) (1606-1677); the yogi Zhabkar Tsokdrung Randrol (T. Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol) (1781-1851); the writer and historian Genden Chöpel (dGe 'dun chos 'phel) (1903-1951); and the artist Shawo Tsering (T. Sha bo tshe ring) (1920-2004). The founder

the painting, woodcarving and sculptural traditions found there, have become respected throughout Tibetan cultural regions (Gruschke 2001: chap 3; Stevenson 1999, 2000). Consequences for Rebgong that followed from the exceptional winds of change sweeping through Amdo include implementation of reforms related to the ‘Great Opening of the Western Regions’ (*C. xibu da kaifa*). These began seriously in 2001 with the Prefecture-led developments to the tourism industry, which entail plans to expand Tibetan Buddhist art production, making it more commercially viable (Makley 2013). The region is important in these contexts, and its relative, yet fragile, accessibility in the years since Rebgong opened to foreigners in 1989 (for the first time since the 1949 formation of the PRC), has allowed it to receive more attention from scholars; something this study hopes to make contribution.



**one of Rebgong’s famed artists at work**

Amongst scholars and intellectuals, perhaps the most famous who originated from Rebgong is the poet-scholar Gendun Chöphel (T. Dge ’dun chos ’phel, 1903-1951). Another of note, stories about whom abound in the area, is the yogi Shabkar Drukrandrol (T. Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol, 1781-1851). A tradition of high culture in the form of a lineage of artists also originates and continues in Rebgong. The master artist Shawo Tsering (T. Sha bo tshe ring, 1920-2004) was born in Rebgong. Another claim to being a cultural centre is given by the fact that the founder of modern

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of contemporary Tibetan literature, Döndrupjal (T. Don grub rgyal) (1953-1985), also studied in Rebgong (Yangdon Dhondup 2011: 33-34).

Tibetan literature, Döndrupjal (T. Don grub rgyal, 1953-1985) studied in Rebgong and was born in a neighbouring county (Dhondup 2011: 33-34). In a poem entitled 'Rebgong', Gendun Chöphel speaks nostalgically of his separation from his homeland and wish to return, serenading Rebgong as equal in sacredness to the most revered of the holy places of India:

'I've drunk of holy Ganga's glistening wave,  
I've sat beneath the sacred Bodhi tree,  
Whose leaves the wanderer's weary spirit lave.  
Thou sacred land of India, I honour thee,  
But, oh, that like valley of Rebkong,  
The sylvan brook which flows that vale along.'<sup>32</sup>

A more recent Rebgong poet and writer, Sakyil Tseta, has also written a poem in praise of Rebgong, which compares Rongwo monastery to a black nomad tent:

'As precious in the king's heart as the blood boiling in it,  
Is the sparkling Rongwo monastery  
A majestic black tent in the blue grass  
Or a line of young wild yaks on the craggy mountain?'<sup>33</sup>

This would appear to suggest that, to the mind of the poet at least, nomadic life and habitation are in some way synonymous with the highest and most spiritually worthy that Tibetan culture has to offer, suggesting nomads and the nomadic life is still held in high regard at by some Tibetans living in settled communities.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.tsanpo.com/letter/14600.html> (last accessed 20/08/2015)

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix I for the full Tibetan text of the poem. The poem was translated into English by Dhondup Tashi Rekjong and Tenzin Dickyi. The English translation can be found here: <http://tibetwebdigest.com/rebkong/> (last accessed 21/08/2015)



**The black yak hair tents of nomadic herders can be seen here along the route from Xiahe County, Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, to Zoige County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province.<sup>34</sup>**

### ***Mother Tongues and Father Mountains***

As has been discussed, Amdo is an indiscrete category for a fluid region inhabited by diverse peoples. Communities known to have settled in what is now Qinghai include Mongols; Monguor (T. Hor;<sup>35</sup> often designated in Chinese as the Tu); the Tangtuts and Muslim communities such as the Hui (evidenced in the region as far back as the fourteenth century) and Salar. The Turkic-Altaic speaking Salar are also evidenced as settling in neighbouring Xunhua county (T. rDo sbis) in the fourteenth century. Others include the Bao'an<sup>36</sup> and the Dongxiang,<sup>37</sup> both of whom speak Mongolian-Altaic

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<sup>34</sup> I am indebted to Professor Geoffrey Samuel for use of this photo, taken on his visit to the region in 2010.

<sup>35</sup> The Amdo peoples who come from Mongol speaking origins generally refer to themselves by this term, or that of Sogpo (T. Sog po), although the Rebgong Monguor also refer to themselves as Dordo (T. Dor rdo) (Dhondup and Diemberger 2002; Diemberger 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Some of those of Tho kya village, known as Bao'an in Chinese claim to have originated from Mongol soldiers under Gengis Khan. Like the Bao'an, the Monguor inhabitants of other villages in Rebgong, such as gNyan thog (M. Nianduhu), Seng ge gshong (M. Wutun), sKa gsar (M. Gashari), and sGo dmar (M. Guomari), claim themselves to be descended from Mongolian frontier soldiers (dGen 'dun Chos 'phel in Samten Norboo (trans.) 1978:25; Kalsang Norbu, Zhu Yongzhong & Kevin Stuart 191-192).

<sup>37</sup> Most of the Bao'an and Dongxiang live in Gansu.

languages, the Han Chinese and those known as Tibetans (Huber 2002; Yangdon Dhondup 2011). All of the languages spoken in the Rebgong region today appear to be have come there after the arrival of the Tuyuhun people, late in the third century CE, who are themselves of unknown linguistic origins (Janhunnen 2006: 117; Samuel 2013c: 6).

The highly diverse ethnic landscape in Amdo has resulted in the fact that most people in regions across Amdo, including Rebgong, naturally learn to function, to varying degrees, in two or more languages, in order to best survive in the midst of such diversity. Across Amdo there is widespread borrowing of lexical and syntactical features and mutual influence across the genetically unrelated languages of the region. In his work on the origins and formation of this linguistic patchwork, Janhunnen suggests that a whole series of differently originating languages accommodated to each other to form today's rich tapestry. Of the three main linguistic strands found in the region, the Altaic (Turkic and Mongolic), the Tibetan (or Bodic) and the Chinese (Sinatic), it is the Altaic which Janhunnen suggests is the most ancient in Amdo (Janhunnen 2003, 2006, 2007).

The villages which spread out from the town of Rongwo, which nestles on the Rebgong valley floor, and continue up into the surrounding hillsides, each have individual linguistic traits and are linked to particular mountains. Correspondingly, they usually bear at least one Chinese and one Tibetan name or Tibetanised Chinese name, or names if the village has subsections, and have affiliations with particular mountain deities.<sup>38</sup> As can be seen by the way that places bear multiple names, these geographical spaces and the borders between them are understood differently by the diverse groups whose cultural identities and heritage are inextricably linked to the region. Hence the discussion of geographical spaces involves a certain degree of translation in terms of naming and where precisely the referent spaces to such names, and the territories of their associated mountain deities, are located and bordered. Indeed, translation issues arise quite prominently in such border regions, populated as they are by a linguistically complex and diverse plethora of ethnic groups. Life across the Tibetan Plateau generally involves functioning, if not in, at least with, a number of languages and/or dialects on a daily basis.

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<sup>38</sup> One example of this is Tho kya, which is the Tibetan name for one of three subsections of a village; 'Lhawa' is the name given for the three, yet the whole conglomerate of these is known as Bao'an by the Han Chinese. The subsections also have Mongour names.

This can prove challenging even for those who have grown up there, and much of a person's efforts around schooling are necessarily focused on language learning in order to be best prepared for a working life navigating multilingual environments.

### *Social Landscapes*

Since the 1950s, and particularly the decisive watershed of 1958, exceptional winds of change have swept through Rebgong, and Amdo in general. As has been mentioned, historically, eastern areas of the Plateau can be distinguished from other regions by their lack of central governance, and its Tibetan communities in Amdo by their already being under Chinese jurisdiction in 1949 when the PRC was formed (Huber 2002: xvii). Post 1911, a Hui Muslim warlord clan named the Ma gained power in Amdo, becoming governors of Qinghai during the latter twenty years of Republican rule.<sup>39</sup> In 1931, the Republicans ended the *tusi* system whereby local Tibetan chiefs nominally administered Imperial edicts, replacing it with the formation of counties headed by Hui or Han magistrates answerable to central government. It was this county system that was later adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) post 1949. They also added 'Tibetan Autonomous' prefectures to counties in Amdo. These new, prefecture boundaries imposed by the Party State often cut across Tibetan majorities. The communist government's 1950s efforts towards collectivisation met with armed opposition in Amdo, 1958 being a crucial threshold, were suppressed by the People's Liberation Army. This was followed by the reforms initiated during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. After the Cultural Revolution drew to a close, the 1970s and 80s brought a new spate of reforms, said by the State to aim at increasing prosperity. Successful amongst these were the reforms in agricultural production, which were aimed at improving the incomes for poor rural mountainous or arid regions, such as Rebgong. These included allowing individual families to profit from working a section of land on condition they contribute a set amount of their produce to the collective, and the establishment of free farmers' markets. Reforms of industry similarly included increased autonomy locally, allowing individual enterprises to profit from production and accord bonuses for productivity; the encouragement of collectives and individual enterprise. Such adjustments were accompanied by sweeping reforms in policy under Deng

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<sup>39</sup> Makley reports Rebgong elders as blaming the Ma for deprivation in the early 1920s, caused by enforced taxes (Makley 2013b).

Xiaoping, which led to a reprieve for cultural practices and religions. This period is often described as one of revival.

As Huber points out, general overviews such as the one given above can give the impression that reforms and their implementation at local level were uniform in nature, whereas in fact the opposite is, and continues to be, the case (Huber 2002: xx-xxi). The repercussions for local communities and their responses to the sometimes radical changes to their lives entailed by such reforms are correspondingly varied. For example, Fischer finds demographic link between nomad resettlement programmes, which radically reform access to land and livestock, and the incidence of self-immolation as a form of protest.<sup>40</sup> The effects brought by the latest economic and infrastructural changes wrought under the CCP's 'Great Opening of the Western Regions' (*M. xibu da kaifa*) are still being felt on a number of levels and in a variety of ways across the Plateau. Fischer's work highlights that the population distribution means that although there are more Tibetans than Han Chinese and other ethnic groups in areas classified by the PRC as Tibetan Autonomous prefectures of Qinghai, such as Huangnan, this does not translate as Tibetans having more authority or power in those regions. Those in positions of political and economic power tend to be living in the urban areas and these are predominantly populated by Han Chinese. In Qinghai also, Fischer argues, in relation to Tibetan and Muslim ethnic groups, that recent restructuring and reforms to the labour market have caused a rupture in traditional economic hierarchies and thus been key in fuelling nationalism and the mix of grievances and prejudices underlying interethnic tensions (cf Fischer 2014). This could be related to Makley's 'politics of presence' in describing the often conflictive spacial negotiations that are inextricably linked to identity and with which various groups engage; an engagement she argues in the 'frontier zone' of Amdo is 'foundationally a spacial politics' (Makley 2013). The impact of such transformations, in conjunction with rising globalisation facilitated by media advances and greater accessibility to Tibetan areas provided by the comparative ease of travel technological advances afford, has only served to further diversify and intensify the cultural collage of Amdo.

This broad cultural mix of peoples found in Amdo is not historically subject to a

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<sup>40</sup> <http://culanth.org/fieldsights/100-the-geopolitics-of-politico-religious-protest-in-eastern-tibet> (article written in 2012, last accessed 24/11/ 2014)

particular cultural, religious or socio-political hegemony. The explorer Ekvall, who lived in the region during the 1920s and 30s, mentions 'unclassified' aboriginal groups whose languages had not been recorded or identified, the 'most obscure' of which he says had their lands taken by 'Chinese military colonists' along the border. Contact took place between various groups who were trading along this border. Ekvall writes that Muslim traders occupying parts of the then Gansu and Qinghai Provinces, spent months at a time, sometimes years, trading in 'the Tibetan country', whilst Tibetan nomads went to the border at particular times of year for shorter periods measuring a month or so to trade with Tibetan farmers settled at the border, as well as Chinese or Muslim traders (Ekvall 1939).

As is evidenced in early accounts and commented upon by contemporary scholars (see Huber 2002; Nietupski 2011; Dhondup 2011, 2013b; Samuel 2013c), Amdo's ethnic terrain is a complex cultural collage. Ethnic groups labelled variously across time have borne designations such as Tibetan, Mongol, Mongour, Tu, Salar, Han and Hui. The precise identities of and the definition of the cultural boundaries between such designations are ambiguous to say the least.<sup>41</sup> In contemporary Rebgong certain individuals even seem able to move fairly fluidly between official designations for particular purposes. A theme that continually emerges in studies regarding identities within the contemporary People's Republic of China is that of centres and borderlands, both geographically, figuratively and ethnically. Harrell's analysis describes central regimes or groups, in this case the predominantly Han Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as cultivating civilising projects in respect of ethnic minorities living within their jurisdiction but peripheral to their central position, in the case of China these being the peoples not labelled Han Chinese (cf. Harrell 1996). The CCP initiated a schema for recognising and categorising ethnic groups or nationalities (*C. minzu*) in the 1950s, fifty-four such groups out of the four hundred or so who had registered names with the CCP being recognised by the late 1950s, their number having risen to fifty-six at the time of writing. The predominantly CCP have constructed this civilising identity in respect of minority groups perceived of, and appearing in histories of China for over two thousand years, as stereotypically at best backward or primitive and at worst bestial

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<sup>41</sup> As exemplified in the wide range of literature describing life across the region in the online resource for the Tibetan Plateau, the Asian Highlands Perspectives series (<http://plateauculture.org/asian-highlands-perspectives> - last accessed on 09/04/2014).

(cf. Litzinger 2000). In the tradition of Empire and imperialism, of domination and subjugation, as presented in the discourse on Orientalism given by Said (1978), conquering groups propose their own national and cultural identity as superior and attempt to convert, educate and civilise minority groups within their perceived borders; to civilise the Other in juxtaposition with which they are in fact formulating their own identities. Thus, and paradoxically so, if the success of such civilising projects were to be measured by how completely they manage a homogenisation of the Other, they would inherently be doomed to fail, since the identity of the civilisers, be they Christian missionaries or Han Communist Party cadres, depends upon the continual existence of those-to-be-civilised.

Interestingly, and despite CCP rhetoric against Han ‘chauvinism’, although the Han are recognised as a *minzu*, in popular discourse they are seldom if ever referred to as such and the term *minzu* is taken as synonym for non-Han (Mullaney, T., Leibold, J., Cros, S., Bussche, E. (eds). 2012; Joniak-Lüthi 2013). Developing a schema for categorising and recognising these peoples at the margins, often geographically as well as politically and economically, has been problematic to say the least, as acknowledged by the CCP. The original schema for official recognition required groups to have a language, territory, economic life and psychological makeup in common (Litzinger 2000: 8). Even one of these criteria, that of language, poses an arguably insurmountable challenge, given that there is no consensus regarding the boundaries between what is considered a language and what is considered a dialect.<sup>42</sup> In the face of such diversity as presented by the over 400 self-named groups who applied for recognition, I think it is safe to say, at least regarding groups found within Tibetan cultural regions such as Rebgong, few if any of these criteria could be absolutely obtainable in any given case. To give example, one Amdowa from a Rebgong village officially designated Tu, when asked about the *minzu* categories, replied, “What is Tu? We do not know. We are Tibetans.” He further explained that there are four Rebgong villages whose inhabitants are officially categorised by the CCP as of Tu nationality: Sengishong (T. Seng ge gshong), Thörja (T. Tho skya), Nyentok, Gasar and Gomar,<sup>43</sup> meaning in official terms that they should generally share common language, territory, economic life and

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<sup>42</sup> This point and the confusion ensuing from it is highlighted by Kolås and Thowsen 2005: 38-41

<sup>43</sup> The traditional grouping of ‘four’ villages, or *khri tse bzhe* in Tibetan, actually refers to the five listed above.

psychological makeup. However, he said that in fact only three of these villages share common descent and linguistic heritage, being considered locally as stemming from Mongolian soldiers who settled in the area. In the village of Sengishong, although the people bear the same *minzu* designation as Nyentok, Gasar and Gomar, their language, a mix with Chinese, is unintelligible to inhabitants of the other villages from their Tu *minzu*, even though these villages can communicate easily with each other.<sup>44</sup> To further complicate matters, not everybody from one village need bear the same *minzu* designation. A girl from Nyentok told me she was involved in transforming her *minzu* categorisation from Tibetan to Tu, since this would afford her entitlement to more time during some of her school exams.<sup>45</sup> This demonstrates not only that not everybody from one village need bear the same *minzu* designation, but also that it can be changed at will under certain circumstances, as is common in identity politics.<sup>46</sup>

Regarding the above, at least in respect of Tibetan cultural regions, I would suggest there is much to be gained by viewing the subject of ethnicity according to Barth's analysis. He proposes that ethnic boundaries can be seen as maintained, not by any external schema for externally recognisable features, but by determining the limited set of cultural features that (re)define any given ethnic group from its own perspective in continuity (cf. Barth 1998 [1969]). The salient feature of this analysis for purposes here is that membership criteria providing continuity for ethnic groups on such grounds are necessarily in flux. I would further suggest that the spaces within that element of flux operates are found not at the central axis of any given group, but on its margins, in the borderlands where membership is less concretely a given. The identity formation of ethnic groups in China has been viewed by Mackerras and Litzinger as evolving in contest or contrast with each other, or 'the other' (Mackerras 1996; Ellingson 1998). This analysis is borne out by Suzette Cooke in her account of 'nationality' identities which suggests the notion of blood kinship as fundamental to ethnic categorisations made by the PRC and problematises the classification of the Tu nationality as category and in relation to the Hui (Cooke 2008; and quoted in Samuel 2013c: 9). The work of Litzinger on the Yao also supports these conclusions (Litzinger 2000). As discussed by Harrell, dominant groups, such as the Han, in the case of the PRC, can be viewed as formulating their

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<sup>44</sup> Personal communication, May 2013.

<sup>45</sup> According to Roche, there was an attempt made to change all the villagers' identity cards from Tu to Tibetan (personal communication).

<sup>46</sup> Personal communication 2009

identities in juxtaposition to the perception of a backward, underdeveloped or native other, seen as marginal to the more sophisticated, civilised or developed self (Harrell 1996). Samuel presents convincing argument for viewing identity in Tibetan cultural regions generally in more provisional terms (Samuel 1994) and Gerald Roche, in his study of the Mangghuer in Qinghai, suggests cultural histories best understood by a shift of focus away from ethnic groups and boundaries (Barth 1998) towards the flow and exchange of cultural resources across them (Roche 2014). All of the above points to the lack of either a temporal or spatial 'single or discrete A mdo' (Huber 2002: xiii), and consequently, the sense in choosing to approach study of regions such as that of my fieldwork site Rebgong, with a view permitting the boundaries of geographical, cultural and linguistic spaces, and the identities of their inhabitants, to be considered as of a fluid nature.

The deeply rooted spiritual affiliations of a people are perhaps never so much in evidence as when they are faced with a threat. The preceding discussion of ethnicity and tensions between ethnic groups, framed by the sweeping socio-political changes across Amdo of recent years, has created such an environment. One very visible manifestation of such tensions is that of the wave of self-immolations in the Kham and Amdo Tibetan regions of the PRC which began in 2011; a phenomenon particularly affecting Rebgong. These number more than one hundred and forty known cases since 2009.<sup>47</sup> They came to a head in Rebgong in 2012, during which Rebgong saw over thirteen self-immolations. Among the first self-immolations there were those of two men in one week, just after the 10<sup>th</sup> March, so-called 'uprising day'; a day commemorating the 1959 uprising in Lhasa which precipitated the Dalai Lama's flight into exile (Samuel 2013c: 17 n.3). The first of these self-immolations was committed by a monk from Rongwo monastery, who set himself alight in front of his monastery, and the second by a farmer who self-immolated at the Rongwo vegetable market. Such acts, understood as protests, were followed by mass gatherings in support of the protesters,<sup>48</sup> and the Chinese government have reacted

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<sup>47</sup> <http://www.voatibetanenglish.com/content/article/2876473.html> (last accessed 02/10/2015)

<sup>48</sup> The thirty four year old monk, Jamyang Palden, survived his initial injuries and a clinic was set up for him at his monastery to save him from possible arrest in hospital. Sonam Dhargye the farmer, a father of three in his forties, lost his life in the fire (<http://tibetburning.com/list-of-martyrs/> - last accessed 29/09/2015; <http://www.savetibet.org/newsroom/tibetan-survivors-of-self-immolation-repression-and-disappearance/> - last accessed 29/09/2015).

to clamp down on the region, including arresting and imprisoning individuals for involvement in the protests.<sup>49</sup> It seems pertinent that these men chose to locate their acts at places connected with their livelihoods and life trajectories, perhaps highlighting the intimate relation between socio-economic exclusion, marginalisation and discontent amongst groups of the population thus disempowered (cf Fischer 2014).<sup>50</sup> The timing of the March self-immolations implicitly relates them to the religious figure of the Dalai Lama, suggesting a spiritual protest as aspect of such discontent; the freedom to practice religion.

### *Spirited Landscapes*

The tapestry of religious practice in Rebgong is as rich and varied as its people, and the depth of its weave underlies life there with poignant longevity. The first Tibetan state in the area, the late 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century Galrey (T. rGal sras) state, like the Tangut state (T. Mi nyag) with which it was in conflict, was probably Vajrayāna Buddhist. Prior to this there is thought to have been a Bön presence, and a legendary Bön sage, (T. Dran pa Nam mkha') a contemporary of the eighth century Buddhist tantric practitioner Guru Rinpoché (T. Gu ru Rin po che; S. Padmasambhava), is said to have sojourned in Rebgong (Samuel 2013c: 7). These strands of religious practice, Buddhist and Bön, are still found in the region, in a variety of manifestations, lay and monastic, celibate and non-celibate. Islam and Confucianism are also in evidence in Rebgong.

The affiliation of various groups falling broadly under Buddhism, are primarily the Tibetan Gelug (T. dGe lugs) and Nyingma (T. rNying ma) schools). Despite Buddhism being in decline in central Tibet following the Imperial Period (618-842), pockets of Buddhist monasticism and the lay structures supporting them survived intact in parts of Amdo such as Tsongkha and Liangzhou (Davidson 2005: 86). The rise of the Tibetan Gelugpa (T. dGe lugs pa) school of Buddhism under Mongol patronage during the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Amdo, led to the construction of the major monasteries still extant in the region, such as Rongwo monastery in Rebgong (Nietupski

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.refworld.org/docid/521e0afed.html> (last accessed 2/10/2015)

<sup>50</sup> In connection with this, it is worth pointing out that, although factors such as the unrest caused by the pastoralist resettlement programmes etc. have been cited as possible contributive cause of the wave of self-immolations (Fischer 2014: 32, 361).

2011; Dondup 2011; Tuttle 2012; Samuel 2013c). These monastic institutions had links to central government in Lhasa but retained political autonomy (Samuel 1993: 89-90).

Information about pre-Buddhist religions on the Tibetan Plateau is scarce, since it appears these traditions were primarily oral. However, by extrapolating from the unique features found in the Buddhism which came to Tibet from India, it is evident that to some extent Tibetan Buddhism assimilated or absorbed aspects of systems indigenous to the Tibetan Plateau, such as funerary practices or rites relating to the *yullha* or *shidak* (T. *yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*); the powerful ancestral mountain deities (Hildegard 1993). With the rise of Buddhism on the Plateau, tantric deities to a large extent transplanted indigenous ones as sources of power for those local hereditary chieftains who once drew upon the mountain deities for their authority (cf Mayer 2014). However, this shift was not complete and certainly, in places such as present day Rebgong, the Buddhist or Bön adept, the *lama* (T. *bla ma*), as representing the Buddhist deities, and the spirit medium, the *lawa* (T. *lha wa*), as representative of the mountain deity, co-exist as parallel and sometimes contesting authorities.

As Robert Mayer convincingly argues, this rise of Buddhist traditions was catalyst for a parallel development of Bön along similar structural and institutional lines, complete with the emergence of texts in order to maintain and develop Bön alongside the new ‘Lamaistic ritual economy’ (Mayer 2014: 48). Part of this new order to ritual life on the Plateau was the emerging phenomena of the *gompa* (T. *dgon pa*), which has historically covered a variety of possibilities, such as military outpost or trading centre (Samuel 1993, 2013c: 11), as a place of worship. This word, *gompa*, has primarily come to mean a monastery or temple. Within that, it can refer to a Buddhist or Bön monastery, a celibate or lay tantric temple, or the temple of a local mountain deity, or *shidak* (Samuel 2013c; Dhondup 2013b; Mayer 2014). Rebgong, tantric practitioners from Bön and Buddhist traditions sometimes share the same village *gompa* (Dhondup 2013b: 126) Rebgong’s main Buddhist *gompa*, Rongwo Gompa, was founded in 1342 by its Sakya hereditary chieftains, the *nangso* (T. *nang so*), so its origins were presumably Sakya (T. *Sa skya*), although it later became Gelug and continues to be so (Dhondup 2011). Rebgong is site of the second largest Bön community in Amdo. The largest Bön *gompa* of Rebgong, Wönjia (T. *Bon brgya*) sits around 30km to the South West of Rongwo *gompa*, rising up out of its surrounding rock like a small fortress. Fifteen smaller Bön *gompa*, known as

*sékhang* (T. *gsas khang*)<sup>51</sup> are scattered through the surrounding villages across Rebgong, their ritual officiates known as *wön* (T. *dpon*) and their community the *wönmang* (T. *bon mang*). The Rebgong *wönmang* is unusual in that it comprises monastic and householder lineages of practitioners, who coexist and maintain important and distinctive roles in the community (Millard 2013).

A theme which will be explored and frame the ethnographic case studies of this thesis is that of the two motifs punctuating the spiritual landscape of Rebgong: the *lama*, the Bön or Buddhist monk or lay tantric adept; and the *lawa*, spirit mediums for the *shidak* (T. *gs/zhi bdag*), ‘the owner of the base’, as mountain gods are commonly called in Rebgong. As will be later discussed, these motifs could be understood by reference to the notion of the shamanic idiom and that of the religious specialist, as broad framework and lens from which to view them. The deity landscape, from which the processes of embodiment and evocation found in rites pertaining to *lawa* or *lama* motif arise, is profoundly complex. Possibly the most extensive scholastic effort to catalogue its beings was undertaken by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz in the 1950s (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996 [1956]), who describes how Tibetan traditions tend to describe their worlds via mythological discourse.<sup>52</sup> The first Tibetan king, Natri Tsampo (T. *gNya' khri btsan po*), believed to be of divine origin, had, as one of his ancestral precedents, the local mountain deity Odé Gungyal (T. *'O lde gung rgyal*). This deity is portrayed as father to all earth's local deities, who are described in the eleventh or thirteenth century Deyu Chöchung (T. *lDe'u chos byung*) by Kepa Deyu (T. *mKhas pa lde'u*) as greater in number than ‘atoms of a mountain’ (Karmay 1998: 387). Although a general tripartite division of deity and spirit beings can be made according to their abodes in the three worlds of sky, earth and underworld: 1) the *la* (T. *lha*) of the highest spaces, such as snow mountains; 2) the *tsen* (T. *btsan*) of intermediate spaces; and 3) the *le / lü* (T. *klu*) of lowest spaces; the underworlds, this classification is perhaps an over-simplification of a complex cosmos. What it does highlight, however, is the intimate connection between these multifarious deity or spirit beings and the physical landscapes they embody and protect.

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<sup>51</sup> The name *sé* (T. *gsas*) is said by Rebgong Bönpo to originate in the ancient kingdom of Shangshung (T. Zhang Zhung), and to mean ‘deity’ (Millard 2013: 151).

<sup>52</sup> The expression ‘discourse’ is intended throughout as referring to the parameter surrounding a particular field in terms of its perception and its discussion (cf. Foucault 1970).

For the seventy-five or so villages of Rebgong, each has its own mythohistory regarding Tibetan ancestry in the region and the deities who formed and who protect its territories. These include a tale in which the seventh century Tibetan king Songten Gampo (T. Srong bstan sgam po) sent his minister Gar (T. mGar) to bring back the Chinese princess Wenjing promised to him in marriage, and the people of Rebgong are descended from a child born of the affair between Gar and the Princess. In another popular mythohistory, the Rebgong people are descended from Lhajé Dragnawa (T. Lha rje brag sna ba), a doctor, tantric practitioner, and three hundred men sent by the thirteenth century Sakya hierarch Drogön Chöjia Shakpa (T. 'Gro mgon chos rgya 'phags pa) to propagate Buddhism. A deity who has particular significance for the people of Rebgong is the Sakya protector deity Gurgön (T. Gur mgon; S. Mahākāla), and Rebgong rulers would go to make offerings at the Sakya *gompa* when in Central Tibet (Dhondup 2011: 37-38).

The use of the term 'mythohistory' above is intended to express a notion of history in which the aim is not to produce an objective narrative. Traditional Tibetan historians reveal through such non-objective narratives an ability to accommodate multiple versions of a single event. This approach is discussed in academic scholarship on Buddhist historiography, wherein the categorisations of religious thought and textual genre can be, to a large extent, retrospectively created in response to cultural or social forces (cf. Davidson 2002). This can be said to make the historiography of a discipline inseparable from its ideology, a statement which can perhaps be made of all histories. An example of this taken from Tibetan context is the way in which 'The Clear Mirror', a fourteenth century Tibetan Buddhist history, replaces the indigenous account of the universe with a Buddhist, Indian version, attempting thereby to legitimise the first Tibetan king by attributing to him Indian descent (Taylor & Yuthok (trans.) 1996: 15, 81-2). I would suggest that the paradigmatic form of such narratives can be viewed, as in the case of histories generally, as one which includes mythic elements, in the sense of elements, interpretive choices and perspectives that cannot be strictly justified in objective terms. These mythological histories are of intrinsic value to Tibetan ritual practice and so deserve attention here. An example of how rituals can be founded on mythological accounts is that of those sacred ritual dances, *cham* (T. 'cham<sup>53</sup>) in which performers enact the roles of mythological characters in order to expiate negative influences in the

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<sup>53</sup> The Tibetan term 'cham is variously spelt 'chams or 'cham in texts. Here the spelling 'cham will be used throughout.

community. As Ana Marko discusses, social position and relationships can be reaffirmed during rituals such as those involving *cham* dances, through recourse to mythology (Marko 1994: 135-153). This will be explored in the context of a Rebgong *cham* in Chapter Four of this thesis. Although it is not always possible to say whether myth precedes ritual, it is clear that ritual is contextualised by myth and, as such, myth is indispensable to it (Karmay 1998: 245-8).

The deity and spirit worlds of Tibetan cultural regions are understood to be the guardians of the natural environment with whom a particular set of propitiatory relations must be maintained if people are to live in harmony with the land and avoid natural disasters. Developments in understandings of deity identities and functions occurring with the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, involve the notion of ‘purification’ of indigenous deities through subjugation or propitiation by Tantric Buddhist means. This was a method by which many deities became assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon and given new identities there. The Buddhist mythological and political discourse in which this transmigration of deities occurred began with the Indian yogi Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoché in Tibetan), who subdued non-Buddhist deities and spirits during the foundation of the first Buddhist monastery on the Tibetan Plateau. In distinguishing between indigenous local deities, those from the introduced Buddhist pantheon, and those sworn to protect it thus transforming their previous identities, attempts at classification have been made by creating a distinction between those beings whose motivations and capabilities are considered mundane, of this world, and those whose goals are viewed as supramundane in that they bear capacity for bringing themselves and others to enlightenment in Buddhist terms; an ultimate state of awareness.

The idea of worldly deities existing in juxtaposition with other-worldly deities entails a kind of polarisation of deity groups, or a spectrum upon which deities could be classified as more or less enlightened in Buddhist terms, with pre-Buddhist local deity or spirit beings presented on Buddhist readings as having the most pragmatic of orientations (cf. Samuel 1993). However, the implementation of this division is anything but black and white. Texts relating to indigenous deities who were considered as converted to Buddhism often position them at the gates of the Buddhist tantric edifices, protecting the realm of initiation into it yet remaining worldly beings with pragmatic orientations. However, in other textual accounts they can be regarded as emanations of the principal deity of a tantric *maṇḍala*; as appearances generated by a

realised Buddhist deity within their enlightened realm. Some pre-Buddhist deities are considered to have negated their conversion to Buddhism and their vow to protect it, due to the maturation of negative *karma*. There has been much speculation over the status of individual indigenous deities as either mundane, worldly beings, or as supramundane, semi-enlightened Buddhist protectors (Tucci 1980 [1970]: 164; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 [1956]: 134-144, 205-6).

In relation to this, as Hildegard Diemberger points out, the redefinition of pre-Buddhist elements in Buddhist terms, ‘far from being merely an ancient event, has instead been the object of controversy and negotiation up to the present day’ (Diemberger 1998: 46). Geoffrey Samuel further developed the motif of two generalised orientations towards the worldly or the supramundane in his frame for understanding Tibetan religions which contrasts those of shamanic nature with monastic, clerical types of engagement (Samuel 1993). Once again, these categories are anything but discrete and perhaps best understood as motifs or orientations upon a spectrum of praxis across which individual communities and individuals move. Sherry Ortner demonstrated in her article questioning the value of polarised representations, that it is possible to attribute the quality qualifying for inclusion in one category to its polar opposite category. In support of this argument, she attributes the relational quality a former article of hers applied to shamanism to monasticism, and the individualist quality her former article applied to monasticism to shamanism (Ortner 1998). I would suggest that between an orientation which is, broadly speaking, eschatological and one which pertains to the affairs of this world, there exists a spectrum of process. Here I do not mean process in the sense of a progression from one point to another, from worldly to enlightened, but rather process in the sense of an ongoing negotiation. As Charles Ramble highlights in his ethnographical account of the Nepali village of Te, on the ground, ‘for villagers whose position has not hardened into a conscious ideological alignment’ (Ramble 2008: 148), confrontations between apparent polar opposites like *lama* and *lawa*, are not reducible to black and white scenarios. This is no less true for the village communities of Rebgong.

## CHAPTER TWO – HEALING LANDSCAPES

*Attempting contemplative practices without clear understanding of the body...  
is like trying to milk an animal by tugging at its horns.*

- Drapa Jyaltzen (T. Grags pa rgyal mtshan)<sup>54</sup>

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This chapter will describe the healing practices and types of practitioners found in Rebgong. Ritual healing in Tibetan cultural regions is predicated on the power of deity worlds to bless, empower and to transform. Therefore, healing in a broad sense involves relations with these spirited agencies, whose presences underlie individual and communal health and fortune.

Whatever the mundane trajectory of any particular health-seeking journey might be in terms of particular healing technologies engaged along the way, such technologies, on the Tibetan Plateau in general, and in Rebgong in particular, demonstrate a medical pluralism broad in range and rich in content. Any particular pathway towards relief from illness, towards healing, might incorporate a number of means to that end. These can be broadly classified as either within the idiom of the religious specialist, within that of the shamanic idiom. Amongst those in the first of these groups are receiving healing through the blessing of deity via consulting a practitioner of the Tibetan Science of Healing, or Sowa Rigpa (T. gSo ba rig pa), blessing from tantric adepts known in Rebgong as *nukwa*, and diagnosis via the divination of a tantric practitioner who is a *lama* or a lay diviner, a *mowa* (T. *mo ba*). Prime amongst the second is that of receiving ritual healing from a *lawa*, a spirit medium embodying the *shidak*, the mountain deity. A possible third category, which appears at face value not to fit into either idiom, is that of receiving diagnosis and treatment of a biomedical nature. It should be emphasised that these groupings are for sake of structure and not intended to imply discrete categories. Practitioners of medicine and ritual healers do function across their boundaries, as will be seen.

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<sup>54</sup> An eminent Buddhist teacher from the Sakya tradition, quoted in Chaoul 2006: 3

## *The Science of Healing*

Practitioners of Tibetan medicine are known by a number of names, the most current of which for Tibetans in Amdo are *menwa/menpa/menba* (T. *sman pa*), and *menla* (T. *sman lags*, the *lags* being an honorific suffix). It can be noted that *menwa* also includes practitioners of systems other than Sowa Rigpa and so functions as a more general term for doctor. Other terms include *amchi* (spelt variably: T. *am chi*, *am ji*, *em chi*) and *lhajey* (T. *lha rje*). Use of *amchi*, a word of Mongolian origin, designates expertise in the Science of Healing known as Sowa Rigpa (T. *gSo ba rigs pa*) that is quintessentially Tibetan, whilst avoiding an ethnic designation as such and its attendant possibility of igniting identity politics (see Craig 2006; Pordié (ed.) 2008.). Amdo Tibetans usually refer to Sowa Rigpa as *Ūermen* (T. *bod sman*), which literally means ‘Tibetan medicine’. This distinguishes Tibetan medicine from a number of colloquial terms for forms of biomedicine, such as ‘Chinese medicine’, *jamen* (T. *rgya sman*), ‘communist medicine’, *tangmen* (T. *tang sman*) or ‘outsider/foreigner medicine’, and *shilukmen* (T. *phyi lugs sman*).

Within the system of Sowa Rigpa as portrayed in its seminal texts, the *Gyüshi* (T. *rGyud bzhi*), there are three causes of harm, or dynamics that can potentially cause harm, *nyépa* (T. *nyes pa*), *lung* (T. *rlung*), *tripa* (T. *mkhris pa*) and *beken* (T. *bad kan*), translatable as ‘wind’, ‘bile’ and ‘phlegm’ respectively, which are cause of disease. The translation of the term *nyépa* is problematic. It has often been viewed as corresponding to the Sanskrit *doṣa* and glossed as ‘humour’, the three *nyépa* then presented in terms of balance or equilibrium (e.g. in Dhonden 1986 or Clark 1995; cf. Samuel 2014b). A more recent proposition for their translation, made by a Tibetan doctor-scholar, is that of ‘dynamic’.<sup>55</sup> In relation to this, these *nyépa* are presented in the *Gyüshi* as corresponding to the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist ‘three poisons’ (T. *dug gsum*; S. *kleśa*), ignorance, craving and anger, viewed as root causes of all suffering states.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> This translation of *nyépa* as ‘dynamic’ is proposed by Dr Mingji Cuomu (personal communication 2015)

<sup>56</sup> This reference can be found in Chapter Eight of the *Gyüshi*’s second section, the ‘Explanatory Tantra’ (T. *bShad rgyud* ).

A bodily or natural environment that is a healthy one is one in which the *nyépa* dance dynamically within the agentive elements of earth, *sa* (T. *sa*), water, *chu* (T. *chu*), fire, *mé* (T. *me*), air, *lung* (T. *rlung*) and consciousness/space, *namkha* (T. *nam mkha'*). Once health has been lost, the three principal diagnostic methods *tey*, *rek* and *dri* (T. *bltas regs dris*) employed by the Sowa Rigpa practitioner are visual observation (in particular of urine and tongue), taking the pulse, and questioning. In addition to prescribing medicinal compounds or powders and recommending changes to diet and behaviour, external therapies such as massage, bloodletting and moxibustion may also be employed. It is also notable that Sowa Rigpa's seminal text, the *Gyüshi*, is comprised of comprehensive compilations of medico-religious texts. The Buddhist *Gyüshi* finds its counterpart in a body of medical texts framed by Bön and known as the *Sorig Bumshi* (T. *gSo rig 'Bum bzhi*). These are said to be authored by the founder of Bön, as portrayed in its post eleventh century forms, Tönpa Shenrab (T. *sTon pa gShen rab*) and may possibly predate the *Gyüshi* (Yang Ga 2010). Sowa Rigpa's seminal *Four Tantra* and commentaries are concerned with the diagnosis and treatment of disease, including ritual instructions.

Such ritual instructions practiced by *menwa* revolve around the figure of Sanjé Menla (T. *Sangs rgyas sMan bla*; S. Bhaṣajyaguru), who is central to the origin myth of the *Gyüshi*. A traditional Tibetan doctor's medical practice would traditionally be grounded in the practice of Buddhism or Bön and may also employ ritual and the use of amulets in treatment. Ill-health is often portrayed as a state caused by elements or spirit harm and manifesting as a psycho-physical phenomenon operating in intricate relation with the natural environment; one in which all substances have healing potential. According to Sowa Rigpa, health is viewed as the body in its natural state, a state which is 'unaltered and unchanged' (T. *rnam par ma 'gyur pa'i lus*).

This state is illustrated on the second of seventy-nine *thangka* commissioned in seventeenth century Lhasa by the Fifth Dalai Lama and depicting the teachings of the *Gyüshi* from a commentary on it composed by his regent. The image used on the *thangka* to portray this state of health according to Sowa Rigpa is a tree, following the texts in using an image from the natural environment as metaphor for the concepts they espouse. The understandings contained in the *Gyüshi*, reveal its particular approach; one which views the health of an individual as inextricably connected to that of the whole

community and the landscape they inhabit, as is evident in the elemental interplay underpinning Sowa Rigpa's theoretical frames.

Doctors practicing Sowa Rigpa are ideally bound by a code of ethics pertaining to that of the bodhisattva; a being who vows to attain enlightenment in order to free all sentient beings from the suffering realms of cyclical existence. This can be understood on Buddhist or Bön cosmologies, but the salient feature here for doctors is that such practitioners treat their patients with no wish for personal reward and with compassion equal to that with which they would treat their closest relatives, indicative of close soteriological and philosophical connections between the Tibetan sciences of medicine and religion. This 'pure heart' ideally underlying the practice of Sowa Rigpa is arguably at the heart of issues concerning efficacy (cf Craig 2012).

The spectrum of possible standard treatments falling within the purview of a practitioner of Sowa Rigpa include medical compounds, based on plant, mineral and some animal-derived ingredients, along with therapies such as cupping and gold-needle moxibustion. However, a *menwa* might also recommend treatments such as taking 'precious pills', *rinchen ribu* (T. *rin chen ril bu*). These pills are referenced in the *Gyüshi*, and their production is a skilled procedure, due to the fact they are based on processed mercury and other heavy metals (Gerke 2012). Samuel suggests they are an example of aspects of the *Gyüshi* which appear to have origins in Indian *tantra* and alchemy (S. *rasāyana*), in contrast to the main body of the *Gyüshi*, which appears to draw on classic Ayurvedic texts from India, such as that of Vagbhata (Samuel 2011b).<sup>57</sup>

It is perhaps important to mention, although not a focus of this thesis, that the inextricable relationship between ritual and more apparently 'medical' practices such as prescribing substances, giving acupuncture or moxibustion, has led to a certain amount of tension in Sowa Rigpa's ongoing negotiation with modernity. This is explored in a number of studies which discuss the interactions and negotiations between biomedicine, the pharmaceutical market, modernity and Sowa Rigpa with its 'traditional' cultural context (Janes 1995, Schempf (ed.) 2007; Pordié (ed.) 2008; Craig and Adams 2009;

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<sup>57</sup> Substantial parts of the *Gyüshi* are directly based on Vagbhata (Emmerick 1977), but other parts appear almost certainly derived from China or the Greco-Arab tradition, or to represent local Tibetan developments (Samuel 2011b).

Adams, Schrempf and Craig (eds) 2010; Hofer 2011; Craig 2012 and Saxer 2013).

These address issues from the point of view of both health professionals and those who seek their assistance. Such studies highlight how medicine impacts and is influenced by its socio-cultural setting and the politics surrounding its use. State pressure to designate Tibetan medicine, subsumed under the banner of Chinese indigenous medicinal practice, as authentic science, on a scientific model, gives rise to issues of identity and efficacy. The pharmaceutical market thus can be seen to have wide reaching effects on ethnic identity and the construction of syncretic medical models. However, Tibetan medicine can be viewed as syncretic in nature from the outset (Meyer 1988; Dummer 1988; Clark 1995).

A number of illnesses are said by Sowa Rigpa to be caused by a variety of non-human beings: local deities and other non-human spirits or local deities. The Buddhism that frames Sowa Rigpa has incorporated beings from autochthonous Tibetan tradition via its mythological discourse. As has been discussed, this discourse and mythological context is essential to understanding ritual importance. Father to all earth's local deities, described as greater in number than 'atoms of a mountain', is the local deity O de Gungal (T. 'O lde gung gyal), ancestor of the first Tibetan king, Natri Tsampo (T. gNya' khri btsan po).<sup>58</sup> The list of such local deity or spirit beings and their divine descendants is seemingly inexhaustible (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 [1956]). Apart from appearing in texts, they also appear in illustrations, such as in a series of prints (Bethlenfalvy 2003), and on amulets (Skorupski 1983; Douglas 2002 [1966]). With the qualification that their classification is highly problematic (cf. Blondeau 1996: viii-ix), they can be broadly grouped according to their abode in the three worlds of sky, earth and underworld:<sup>59</sup> 1) the *lha*, or gods, of the heavens; 2) the *tsen* (T. *btsan*) of the intermediate space; and 3) the serpent deities, *le* (T. *klu*), of the underworld. Lalou attempts to order them according to place, in snow mountains, in red or black rocks, on the plains and in the forests, but again she recognises that this classification is an over-

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<sup>58</sup> In the *Deyu Chöchung* (T. *lDe'u chos byung*) by Khepa Deyu (T. mKhas pa lde'u), as quoted by Karmay 1998: 387.

<sup>59</sup> In relation to this, Carla Gianotti argues that the distinction was twofold until Bön arrived and provided a third term (Gianotti 2010).

simplification of a complex project, acknowledging, for example, other dwelling places such as water, earth, sky, glaciers and at crossroads.<sup>60</sup>

In Rebgong the mountain deities, or *shidak* (T. *gzhi bdag*), are a particularly important form of spirit being, as will later become apparent in their treatment here and perceived role in the health and well-being of the region's peoples. Five chapters of the *Gyüshi*'s third *tantra*, the 'Instruction Tantra' (T. *Man ngag rgyud*), focus particularly on these spirit-caused illnesses,<sup>61</sup> although references to them appear throughout the *tantra* and their commentaries.<sup>62</sup> The *Gyüshi*'s fourth *tantra*, the 'Last Tantra' (T. *Phyi ma'i rgyud*) deals with urine and pulse diagnosis, the pacification of disease, evacuation and external therapies. The chapters on urine and pulse diagnosis prominently feature spirit-caused illnesses.<sup>63</sup> As noted by Samuel, Tibetan treatment of illnesses caused by harm inflicted by local deities or other spirits or demons can be viewed as falling in the boundary region between Sowa Rigpa and other forms of healing, such as that of the spirit mediums (Samuel 2007). Deity and spirit beings can thus be perceived from a number of frames and as existing in a multileveled sense, in intimate relation with human beings and their environment.

I will now illustrate how different the environs and presentation of Sowa Rigpa practice can be via means of a two ethnographies in Qinghai, one set in Rebgong and the other in Xining, which recount visits to *menwa*. As will be seen, similarly to the theoretical aspects of practice, the actual praxis of *menwa* reflects a wide variety of aspects and is located in an equally diverse set of possible landscapes. Yet, as will be argued, these all fall under the rubric of Sowa Rigpa and their continuity as such is

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<sup>60</sup> As an example of the exponential complexity of any classification project, Lalou also remarks that there exist numerous types of *si* (T. *sri*) and *le* (T. *klu*), the latter being reported as capable of reproduction with the *si* and *dü* (T. *bdud*), creating further diversification for a typology (Lalou 1957: 82-83). cf. section 5:2, figures 6 & 7 for ritual practice relating to local deities at the crossroads.

<sup>61</sup> Chapters 77 to 81 of the Mennak Gyü (T. *Man gnag rgyud*), which has ninety-two chapters, are those pertaining to illnesses caused by the spirits. Chapters 77 to 79 are edited versions of the Tibetan translation of Vāgbhaṭa's Sanskrit treatise on Āyurveda, the *Aṣṭāṅgaḥṛidayasamhitā* (Samuel 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Terry Clifford has translated chapters 77-79 of the *Gyüshi*'s Third Chapter into English (Clifford 2003: 171-198).

<sup>63</sup> Meyer provides analysis of pulse diagnosis as presented in this section of the *Gyüshi* (Meyer 1990: 235, 248-49).

maintained by their underlying approach, reflecting as this does a cultural matrix of healing.

In these two ethnographic vignettes recounting going to a doctor, the first describes a visit to a revered old monk doctor who practises Sowa Rigpa from his village home. To reach his home we wended our way through alleyways built of clay to a small courtyard residence at the back of a temple. As we entered, the smell of juniper branches and other offering substances burning in the *sangkun* (T. *bsang khang*) to our left filled our senses. Moving clockwise around the flowers at the centre of the courtyard we came to a few wooden benches upon which waiting patients perched attentively. To their right, the elderly monk doctor sat in a worn old chair, his monk's robes melting into its fabric as if he were part of its weathered grace. Patients crouched one by one on a small wooden stool before him to have their pulses taken. To his left the door to a medicine store was open. The small room was packed from floor to ceiling with remedies of every kind, in sacks and bottles, made by his hand and awaiting his prescription.



**the *sangkun* in the courtyard and the storeroom at the village *menwa*'s clinic**

As each patient's diagnosis was reached, he called his prescription back over his right shoulder to his assistant, a young doctor who, sitting before a *thangka* depicting the Buddha of Medicine, ladled out the powdered remedies with a silver spoon. The spoon has been in their family of healers for generations. After carefully folding paper around his medicinal powders, the old doctor unhurriedly wrote his recommended dosages in carefully crafted Tibetan script. As I approach the old doctor he placed two peaches into my hands. He did the same as I left. To one side of his seat is a huge pile of items such

as fruit and tea brought as offerings by his patients. He sees seventy to one hundred and fifty patients a day. He refuses to take money from poor patients, saying he and his family have no need of it.

My second description of going to a doctor recalls my friend Dröma's visit to a Tibetan doctor at the 'Qinghai No.1 People's Hospital' in Xining. Established in 1946, it is the destination for people of Rebgong seeking Tibetan medicine but finding local clinics cannot cater for their needs. When we arrive at the hospital it seems very busy with bodies rushing everywhere and it takes some time to figure out where we should go. Eventually we ascertain that we first have to form a queue and wait for some time at a counter selling small glossy folders of 'Patient Information' at twelve kuai each.<sup>64</sup> When we are eventually directed to the doctor's consulting room, we can hardly squeeze in through the door which is blocked by the bodies of numerous patients who crowd around his desk, some standing some sitting, all vying for attention. As we slowly edge forward towards the wooden stool in front of the doctor's desk, upon which the patient currently being diagnosed is perched, a large Tibetan man in a brown jacket pushes in front of us and slaps his glossy folder down on top of the waiting pile on the desk. He grins inanely around at the crowd. The doctor breaks off from his diagnosis, picks up the man's file and turns it in his hands.

"You should not bother buying these," he says in an Amdo Tibetan dialect, "and should just pay me the twelve quai instead." A ripple of laughter goes around the room. The Han Chinese patient on the wooden stool stands up and turns around, lifting his shirt dramatically.

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<sup>64</sup> Kuai is a colloquial Chinese term used for a measure of currency. 12 kuai = 12 yuan or Remminbi (RMB) = approx. £1.25 GBP (conversion rates as of November 2014).



**The ‘Qinghai No.1 People’s Hospital’ in Xining<sup>65</sup>**

“Sometimes my stomach is so swollen it feels as if I am pregnant,” he says in Chinese, successfully regaining the doctor’s attention. Another ripple of laughter runs through the room. As he leaves the room, Dröma edges her bag onto a corner of the wooden stool as I attempt to block brown jacket man with any part of my body I can sidle in to the space. The doctor’s assistant takes the glossy file on the top of the pile and taps away on a computer.

As the doctor took my friend’s pulse a moment of intense concentration caused the crowd to quieten. He broke his focus only momentarily to answer a question fired over Dröma’s head by one of the waiting crowd jostling to be next on the stool. Then the doctor spoke to my friend, whilst posting some strips of paper the computer had printed out into the front of her glossy folder.

“He says I am getting better,” she volunteered by way of translation. He tossed the new folder Dröma had been obliged to buy at reception unceremoniously back over the desk towards us. Inside the folder was a history of her hospital visits, with various comments in two types of Tibetan script plus an electronic print out of pictures taken during a scan of her ‘hor’, a part of her body which she thought could be the duodenum. Whatever it was, she said she had been told two of the pictures demonstrated it to be inflamed. She said she was already taking Tibetan medicine and avoiding spicy or citric foods.

We returned to the reception area and Dröma headed confidently towards a counter opposite the one we had waited at before. There was an exchange in Chinese

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<sup>65</sup> <http://med.monash.edu.au/sphc/mchi/partners/cn-h-qinghai.html> (last accessed 03/12/2015)

which I understood meant we had to pay one hundred and thirty-four quai. I dug it out of one of our bags, Dröma was handed another print out on a flimsy bit of paper and we remounted three or four flights of stairs, arriving in a long corridor. Dröma wandered hesitatingly up and down it reading the labels on its various doors. I trailed afterwards carrying the bags. A loo door suddenly swung open at one end of the corridor and an old man in police uniform came out of it still doing up his belt. Just at that moment, Dröma found the label she was looking for and knocked on the door. It said something in Tibetan script which read, if translated literally, like *nunglok* (T. *snying glog*), which literally means ‘heart light’, so presumably this space had something to do with the heart and electricity. As we entered the room the old policeman was so hot on our tail that had I not closed the door in his face I think he may well have come in to watch my topless friend get hooked up to some kind of monitor. The woman operating it wore a white coat, barely spoke to us and did not smile. At the end of the machine event she presented Dröma with a long ribbon of thin paper with squiggles on it. We headed back down all those stairs.

“She says it shows nothing,” said Dröma. She fluttered the ribbon of paper in the air and sighed with exasperation, “So what is wrong with me?”

We returned to the doctor. This time a young Tibetan woman sat on the stool surrounded by four family members and breast feeding her baby. She had a radiant smile. As she and her entourage left, Dröma handed her ribbon of electronic heart information to the doctor, who glanced at it, smiled at her, and told her she looked more beautiful than the last time he saw her. More pieces of paper exchanged hands and we descended the stairs once again. At the third and last counter in the reception area there was a scam. This was where patients handed over their prescriptions and received Tibetan medicine. I took all the bags and moved out of the way to give Dröma room to manoeuvre. It didn’t take her too long to return with a plastic bag full of small plastic canisters and packages containing different kinds of medicine. She demonstrated how the woman at that counter had chucked the medicine over it.

“It’s not good. Medicine should be treated with respect.” We climbed up the three or four staircases to the doctor’s office once again. The stench of the toilets opposite it hit us forcefully as we approached and we both involuntarily held our hands to our noses. On the stool was a woman with very white teeth that were highlighted by the white

scarf she was wearing, which was tied in nomadic fashion around her head. The doctor's assistant began firing instructions about the medicine at Dröma, who turned back to me saying, '*sumchu dangpo gogga?*' I handed her the thirty Chinese yuan and the doctor's assistant scurried off into an adjoining room, returning with a bag of 'precious pills', *ribu*, which Dröma later said she found very good for her stomach.

As the above stories illustrate, the experiences of visits to *menwa* in Amdo can vary considerably. The descriptions of the two visits, one to a Sowa Rigpa practitioner in a small village clinic and the other to a Sowa Rigpa practitioner in a large city hospital, highlight the fact that a wide spectrum of possible healing landscapes can be broadly described as Sowa Rigpa in nature or 'sensitivity' (cf Adams, Schrempf and Craig 2010). That they do all fall under the rubric of Sowa Rigpa is due to the continuity in their approach and methodology.

The type of treatment received by patients in the village clinic could be seen as reflecting more ancient times and ways of conducting oneself and running a clinic. In contrast, at the village doctor's compound the environment was that of a home, and patients sat waiting in a garden surrounded by flowers. There was no unnecessary administration and no emphasis on payment, which was by offering Patients paid by donation rather than by means of set fees, and only if they could afford to. The doctor knew and remembered most of his patients and placed great focus on each one as they came to sit and have their pulses taken. Medicines were arranged under a *thangka* of the Buddhist deity of medicine, the Medicine Buddha, and were distributed with great attention to the way in which they were handled, using a special spoon for that purpose. The doctor and his assistant took time to explain the diagnosis and give individual instruction on how to take the medicines prescribed.

The treatment received in the city hospital shows engagement with contemporary lifestyles and infrastructure; adaptation to a more 'modern' model of institutional care. This touches upon a subject recent studies on Himalayan Medicine have explored in some depth: that of the various adaptations and reconfigurations traditional medical practitioners have and are making in response to modernities such as industrialisation and the regulations of contemporary government bodies (see particularly Craig and Glover 2009; Adams et al 2011; Hofer 2011; Craig 2012; Saxer 2014). During our hospital visit there appeared to be very little explicit attention paid to

any deity presence as compared to the village clinic with its pile of offerings, *thangka* of deities adorning its medicine storehouse. Getting to see the doctor involved jostling with crowds, struggling with dense bureaucratic procedures, and the doctor's room was situated across the hall from public toilets. Specific sums of money had to exchange hands before medicines were literally flung across the counter by administrative staff. As much emphasis was placed on updating patient records in glossy folders and on keeping computer records of them as on developing doctor-patient relations. And there appeared to be no time or inclination to explain any of the processes concerned, leaving at least the patient I accompanied bemused as to what it had all been about or what the prognosis for her health might be.

Nevertheless, I would argue here that, whether wearing a monastic robe or a white coat, whether working from a clinic in temple courtyard or concrete tower, in whatever logistical landscape the *menwa* finds themselves, patients respond to the *menwa* as repositories and embodiments of Sowa Rigpa, the ancient science of healing. The various *menwa* are acting from the same frame and, I would argue, acknowledge and work from the perspective of spirited agency as integral to curing illness, however the surface presentation of themselves might appear. In the village *menwa*'s clinic there were more explicit signs of deity presence, such as the *thangka* paintings and the doctor's monk's robes. However, I would say that this does not necessarily imply that the absence of these superficial signs of deity practice, these surface elements, makes the modern city hospital devoid of their presence. I would argue here that all forms of Sowa Rigpa practice and their *menwa* can be understood as part of a layered landscape of healing, the steps of which formulate a matrix from within which no vantage point loses sight of the whole.



**layered landscapes of Rebong**

### ***Healing through the Power of Purwa***

Healing is understood in Tibetan cultural contexts as related, to varying degrees, to deity and spirit worlds. In terms of Sowa Rigpa, doctors traditionally frame their practice of medicine in tantric affiliation through meditation with the deity Medicine Buddha. Medicines themselves are traditionally collected at certain times and in certain places, made auspicious by deity worlds, and accompanied by the recitation of *mantra*, the sacred syllables of tantric deity yoga. Traditionally, the power of medical compounds to heal is further enhanced by the performance of ritual practice by which the blessings of deity are invoked upon them: *mendrup* (T. *sman bsgrub*). Practices associated with long-life deities such as White Tārā or Amitāyus are used in this regard, their particular blessing being that of conferring health and long life. Today these are primarily conducted by tantric practitioners, whether *lama* or *yogin*, who may or may not be *menwa* (Samuel 2010; Craig 2012; Samuel and Cantwell forthcoming).

The *Yuthok Nyingtik* (T. *g.Yu thog snying thig*) is important in this context because it seems to be here, rather than in the *Gyüshi*, that the tantric side of Tibetan medicine is located (Garrett 2009; Yang Ga 2010). This set of tantric teachings is from the Nyingma tradition known as Dzogchen (T. *rDzogs chen*), and attribute their lineage to the author of the *Gyüshi*, Yuthok Yönten Gonpo (T. *g.Yu thog Yon tan mGon po*) (1126–1202). Versions of twelfth century practices involving the esoteric preparation of

medical ingredients are shared by many Tibetan ritual traditions, but the *Yuthok Nyingtik* contains the most commonly used technologies. It provides ‘a complete contemplative-yogic curriculum for the Tibetan doctor’ (Garrett 2009: 223). Historically, most *menwa* would have studied the *Yuthok Nyingtik*, though increasingly its formal study is becoming marginalised in China (Ehrhard 2007; Garrett 2009). A contemporary *menwa*'s personal religious practice and connection to The Medicine Buddha, Sanjé Menla (T. Sangs rgyas sman bla; S. Bhaiśajyaguru), viewed from within the tradition of Sowa Rigpa as divine source of the *Gyüshi*, is thus considered of paramount importance in developing the ability to successfully treat illness, attesting to the fact that religious practice and ritual are considered on its own terms as essential to the effective practice of Tibetan medicine.<sup>66</sup> In this regard, it is worth pointing out that *menwa* in Rebgong tend to be tantric practitioners and so ones who practice *nuk*, *mantra*. They are thus ritualists who engage, at least on some level, in the tantric deity practices which relatively adept *nukwa*, practice intensively. Dr Chenaksang Nyida Heruka (T. lCe nag tshang nyi zla he ru ka), co-Founder of the Rebgong Ngak Mang Institute<sup>67</sup> has been preserving medical texts relating to tantric practice, in a collection called the *Nakchö Beyubum Chokdrik* (T. sNgags bChos Be'u Bum Phyogs bsGrigs).<sup>68</sup> He has also established an academy to teach healing practices from tantric traditions, involving the use of *mantra*, internationally.<sup>69</sup>

The Buddhist *nukwa* of Rebgong, and their Bön counterparts the *akawenbo* (T. *a khu bon po*),<sup>70</sup> form a prominent part of the Rebgong landscape. Indeed, Rebgong is

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<sup>66</sup> This account is founded on the rules for a doctor's conduct given in the Second Tantra of the Gyüshi, the Explanatory Tantra. However, I also base it upon personal communication with and experience of the work of an old and very experienced doctor I met in Shigatsé and with whom I travelled and assisted distributing medicines to nomad herders in Central Tibetan regions not served by a clinic. I am very grateful to Theresia Hofer for introducing me to this doctor and the opportunity to know and travel with him.

<sup>67</sup> The Ngakmang Institute was founded in Xining in 1999 for the preservation and practice of Tantric traditions in Tibetan, and is currently supported by an international branch network.

<sup>68</sup> Published by Ngak Mang Institute in conjunction with Beijing National Publishing House, 2004, ISBN 7-105-07797-2.

<sup>69</sup> The International Academy for Traditional Tibetan Medicine (<http://www.iattm.net/> - last accessed 31/07/2015)

<sup>70</sup> This term is colloquially used in Rebgong for Bön tantric practitioners. As noted by dPal mo skyid, senior Bön practitioners in Rebgong are also known colloquially as *hön* (T. *dpon*), and formally as *bon gshen*. (dPal mo skyid 2013: 34)

known for its *nukwa* lineages and the signatory dreadlocked topknots of its tantric practitioners are a highly visible feature of everyday life in the valley. They number approximately two thousand in total, practicing broadly either Nyingmapa (Mindroling or Nyingtik) Buddhist or Bön tantric traditions (Sihlé 2013a: 168). Legend has it that the eight traditions of Nyingmapa hermitages in Rebgong were founded by one of Padmasambhava's students after the legendary tantric adept had visited the region (Dhondup 2009). Nicholas Sihlé's in-depth study of the Rebgong *nukmung* (T. *sngags mang*) communities focuses in particular on their collective rituals and on notions of socio-religious organisation, collective identities, and transformations of religious practices and moral worlds over the recent generations (Sihlé 2013a). In brief, these *nukmung* are constructed and bound together by annual ritual cycles involving large communal rituals, such as the annual *shidró chötok* (T. *zhi grol chos thog*).



**A Rebgong Nukwa offers Ritual Healing accompanied by Protective Thread Crosses (T. *mdos*)**

In Rebgong, individual tantric practitioners of whatever persuasion tend to live as integrated parts of lay households. Therefore, those who consult them typically either visit them at home for assistance with pragmatic concerns, as depicted in the

photograph above where assistance was requested for fertility issues, or request them to travel to perform rituals. As discussed by Nicolas Sihlé in his article exploring the pragmatic concerns of Rebgong's tantric practitioners themselves, such travel for purposes of ritual can place economic strain upon their households. This is particularly the case in households where the lay tantric practitioner is the main breadwinner, and/or where their ritual commitments require them being out of home for a number of days or more. Such travel for ritual purposes is not only entailed at the behest of the sick or for funeral rites etc., but also by the performance of the communal rituals which provide a degree of coherence to the notion of *nukwa* 'collectivites' (Sihlé 2013a: 169), or *nukmang*. The Nyingma tantric practitioners have twelve or so large collective rituals annually, and the Bön four, rotating these to ease the burden of travel and expense of hosting upon respective local groups of *nukwa*. These ritual cycles can last 4-7 days and focus around the group recitation of *mantra* as part of deity yoga, with varying degrees of participation, dependent on ability and experience, ranging from *tsalung* (T. *rtsa rlung*) at one end of the spectrum to simple recitation at the other (Sihlé 2013a; Dhondup 2013a, 2013b).



**a group of Rebgong tantric practitioners in their local temple**

Those who practice deity yoga, from simple evocatory texts through to the high yogic techniques of *tsalung* practice, form the most significant group of non-monastic

religious specialists in Tibetan cultural regions. In Rebgong, the only other comparably important figure is that of the spirit medium; the *lawā*. The elements comprising tantric practice are many and varied, yet falling broadly within what Janet Gyatso aptly describes as a ‘tantric dramaturgy’: ‘... construction of mandalas; manufacture of ritual hats and costumes; geomantical analysis of a place for its spiritual properties (*sa dpyad*); rituals to appease the human and non-human “owners” of a place in which one intends to practice (*sa chog*); methods to ascertain the disposition of the large being that constitutes the entirety of a place (*sa bdag lto ’phye*); invocation of blessings (*byin ’bebs*); general meritorious rituals performed between more complex rituals (*chos spyod*); additional rituals to compensate for ritual transgressions (*bskang bzhangs*); techniques for eating bits of paper inscribed with therapeutic mantra letters (*za yig snagags ’bum*); construction of offering cakes (*gtor ma*); mas offering-feast liturgies (*tshogs mchod*); consecration of icons (*rab gnas*); rites for the dead; burnt juniper offerings (*bsang*); construction of thread crosses (*mdos*); uses of effigies (*glud*); crop cultivation; weather control; turning back of armies; protective devices against weapons; curing of physiological and psychological disease; extending of lifespan (*tse sgrub*).’ (Gyatso 1996: 159).

The above list of features is not exhaustive, yet for purposes here it is perhaps most pertinent to explore notions underlying the deity yoga from which this dramaturgy emerges. Essentially all tantric practice of whatever level or sectarian persuasion is founded in the idea that the presence of deity can be evoked and embodied by an adept practitioner, to the betterment of conditions for themselves and others, both on route to enlightened states of being and within mundane contexts of ordinary lives and living. The way in which this operates has to do with power and blessing; the power of the deity to empower and bless those who invoke and embody deity presence. And the power of those adepts who do so to then transmit benefit to others, in some sense becoming conduit for or transmitting deity power to restore health, to protect and to nurture. It is belief in this latter ability that leads so many in Rebgong to value and seek out the assistance of tantric practitioners recognised as adept with common everyday problems and concerns, such as that of fertility as mentioned earlier.

As Nicolas Sihlé points out, it is usual to find a type of contrast between monastic and lay tantric figures threading through the religious landscapes of Tibetan regions (Sihlé 2013b: 15ff). Interconnected notions of power and blessing are recurring

themes in the authentication of ritualists and their perceived abilities to promote health and well-being for ordinary lay people. The performance of ritual healing is perceived to spring from the depths of a yogis personal practice; the connection with and embodiment of deity. At their most advanced level, tantric practices such as the yogic *tsalung* and *trulkor* (T. 'phrul 'khor), breathing and physical movements accompanied by visualisations, are widely thought to be powerful tools for healing.<sup>71</sup> It is this belief that brings laity to the homes and temples of tantric practitioners, asking for blessing from deity to heal their ills, assist and protect them.



protection threads and offerings for tantric ritual healing

### *Deity Men of Rebgong*

Forms of oracular possession which can be broadly glossed as trance or spirit mediums are common across Himalayan regions and there is a wide range of literature relating to those of the Himalayas (Leavitt 1994; Sax 2008) which parallels traditions found on the Tibetan Plateau (Samuel 1993: 290-294). Examples include the Ladakhi village oracles described in Sophie Day's thesis (1989) or by Amelie Schenk (1993), the mediums of

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<sup>71</sup> Interesting in this regard is the work of Alejandro Chaoul which explores their possible applications in improving the condition of patients suffering very serious diseases such as cancer (Chaoul 2006).

the Changtang (T. Byang thang) depicted by Per-Arne Berglie (1976, 1982, 1992) or Antoon Geels (1992) and the female *khandroma* (T. *mkha' 'gro ma*) portrayed by Hildegard Diemberger (2005). Tibetan terms for these spirit or trance mediums are various, including *lawa* (T. *lha pa*), *pawo* (T. *dpa' bo*), *khandroma* (T. *mkha' 'gro ma*), amongst others. They perform divination, exorcise evil spirits and heal livestock or people, providing links between the seen and ordinarily unseen worlds that constitute an integral part of Tibetan cultural perspectives. They can be viewed both as embodying ancestral and territorial deities of pre-Buddhist origin, and as incorporating Buddhist deities, tantric techniques and theories in an assimilative process that can be viewed as having underlain religious life on the Tibetan Plateau for centuries (cf. Diemberger 2005). As such, the syncretic nature of the spirit medium's practices makes materials relating to their work 'a rich and unmodified juxtaposition of ritual themes derived from disparate cultural sources' (Bellezza 2005). Elements of a ceremony in which a medium goes into trance include offering substances to the fire, mostly consisting of juniper branches, *sang* (T. *bsang*), playing the drum, *nga* (T. *nga*) and, in the case of Bön practitioners, the flat bell, *shang* (T. *gshang*). They may also include making offerings and chanting praises or oral recitation of mythohistory connected to the *lawa*'s lineage and that of the deity possession, petitioning of the deity/deities and interpretation of their oracles (Bellezza 2005).

Broadly speaking, in Tibetan cultural regions, there are a variety of types of deity possession. There are the Buddhist protector deities, the *sungma* (T. *bsung pa / srung ma*) or *gönpo* (T. *mgon po*), with affiliation to major monastic establishments and evoked for divinatory purposes regarding the protection of Buddhism and its adherents. Prime amongst these are Pehar (T. dPe har / dPe dKar), whose medium is the Nechung (T. gNas chung) oracle, and Palden Lhamo (T. dPal ldan lha mo). Pehar has significance for both Bön and Buddhist traditions in Tibet, being accorded the position of prime protector of the Zhang zhung and Samyé the first Buddhist monastery respectively. Pehar is currently associated with the Nechung temple near Drepung (T. 'Bras spungs) monastery, Lhasa (cf. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956 :96ff).



**The Nechung Temple in Lhasa**

Other forms of possession, or trance, practiced in Tibetan cultural contexts include bards who tell the Ge sar epic whilst in trance state, the *babdrung* (T. 'babs sgrung); and the delok (T. 'das log), who travel to other realms of existence whilst in a death-like trance state, returning to report their experiences to the living (Pommaret 1989). Lastly there are the spirit or trance mediums, which are the most common in Rebgong; those who become possessed by mountain deities, the *shidak* (T. gzhi bdag). These will be the subject of Chapter Four of this thesis; states of trance or possession evoked by tantric deities being explored in Chapters Five and Six.

A reading of the multifaceted traditions which can be grouped loosely under such terms demonstrates the extent of local difference across regions and communities. Rebgong has its own very specific tradition of spirit or trance mediums, the *lawa* (lit.: deity man; T. *lha pa/ mo, lha babs mkhan, dpa' po/mo*). Many Rebgong villages have at least one of these resident mediums for the local mountain deities, who make public appearance annually during the harvest festival known as the Leru. The Leru festival and the role of Rebgong *lawa* will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four of this thesis. The mountain gods of Rebgong are generally warlike and militant figures who trace their lineages back to the mythological warriors who spawned the early Tibetan kings and other prominent families (Samuel in Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008). They

function as protector deities for specific Rebgong villages and areas of territory, and offerings to them are necessary for the health and well-being of the communities they serve. Iconic structures known as labtsé mark the boundaries of their territories. These sculptural offerings are formed of weapons for the gods made of wood and ‘wind-horse’ auspicious banners. They are ritually renewed annually by villagers, as will be described in Chapter Three. Villagers make daily offering of *sang* (T. *bsang*) to the mountain deities; a mix of juniper branches and other substances such as cypress branches, *tsampa* (barley flour) and highland barley. The offering of *sang*, as a purificatory fumigation rite, is particularly important to Rebgongpa in maintaining good relations with these powerful beings. Stories abound of the efficacy of their protection and the prophetic nature of their mediums visions when in trance.

Rebgong *lawa* operate alongside *lama*, Buddhist teachers from local monasteries, and these potentially conflicting types of village authority tend to negotiate spiritual territories using the notion that the *lama* of tantric, or Vajrayāna Buddhism, being the province of supramundane concerns, take precedence over the *lawa*, whose province is considered that of more mundane concerns. For example, *lawa* are often inducted or initiated into their full power as spirit or trance mediums via ritual enactments from *lama*. Correspondingly, whereas all members of a Rebgong community may participate in rituals for the mountain deities, ordinary lay people are precluded from many Buddhist monastic rites. And women are precluded both from the innermost protector temples of the Buddhist monasteries and the mountain deity temple during the time the spirit medium becomes entranced. Gender divides in terms of space and role are as central to maintaining right relations with the local deities as they are to those of the protectors, supported by stories of these deities intervening in human lives to cause illness and misfortune if displeased or to protect and heal if in good relations.

The role of the Rebgong *lawa* is primarily concerned with protection and prediction during the annual communal rite known as Leru. This distinguishes them from similar figures across the Tibetan Plateau, since these tend to hold individual healing sessions with people in their localities rather than function as leading large

communal rites.<sup>72</sup> Rebong lawa are normally part of the organising team of village elders or families who come to prominence in supervising and sponsoring the annual Leru.

The Rebong *lawa* I came into contact with during my fieldwork, in keeping with the warlike nature of the mountain gods, were all male. This seems to be in contrast to the findings of scholarship in some other regions of the Tibetan Plateau, wherein spirit-mediums are more likely to be female (eg. Diemberger 2005). Most of the Rebong *lawa* I viewed during various Leru employed some degree of cutting and piercing to either or both their own and other men's' bodies, using spikes and skewers. Those who can accept such normally painful occurrences without seeming to fear pain are considered more authentically possessed or channelling the mountain gods, making cutting an indicator of the depth or authenticity of possession. Likewise, the speed at which wounds heal is also taken to demonstrate the fullness of the mountain deity's presence and the depth of the medium's sincerity as such; in short, they are markers of authenticity.



**Rebong Leru Festival with the village *lawa* at the centre of the ritual space**

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<sup>72</sup> Although it is worth noting here that Snying bo rgyal and Rino report that *lawa* from the villages of Torjia (T. Tho kya) played a large role as healers in the past (Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008). This suggests the same could also apply elsewhere in Rebong.

Anthropological analysis of literature on spirit possession tends to employ substantially as theme the concept of possession as means of social redress. An example of this kind of discourse is given by William Sax, who comments that ritual healing is effective primarily where social relations among family and community are disturbed and need to be healed. As Sax's argument validly implies, the social pervades the individual consciousness (Sax 2008). However, the present work does not propose to contribute to literature on possession or healing understood as effective primarily in terms of healing social relationships. It hopes instead to explore how forms of healing such as those of the spirit mediums conceive of themselves as integrated and integrating the individual, the living community, the environment, and realms of spirit and/or deity. This study aims to further explore and develop understandings of healing that encompass and emerge from Tibetan cultural contexts wherein categories such as individual body, other body, environment, human/deity realms, just as the frontier regions within which I undertook fieldwork, are not discrete or closed.

### ***Blessing the Land***

Following on from the above, the ethnographic vignette to follow will illustrate how central the relationship between external and internal landscapes, visualised as intrinsically interconnected by means of deity frameworks, is to Rebgong worldviews. It tells the story of a ritual healing of land and community which illustrates the intrinsic relationship between Rebgong peoples, health practitioners such as those described in this chapter, and deities, highlighting how the rich tapestry of religious and cultural practices converge in Rebgong's communal rites pertaining to ritual healing.

What do they mean these lands, these places, for these people? Not long after starting my first fieldwork journey, a Tibetan friend told me over tea in a teahouse that his relatives had all gone to see a mountain god called Amnyé Machen and so wouldn't be back for several days. He stated this as a matter of fact, in exactly the same manner as he later stated he was thinking of going to visit some friends in Gansu Maqu. Later that same month I was walking in the Rebgong mountains with a friend when we came across a group of villagers starting out from their village temple carrying texts of the Kanjur, the Tibetan Buddhist canon, upon their backs. They intended, they informed us, to carry the texts of the Kanjur around the fields in order to bless and protect their crops and so ensure a healthy harvest. The notion underlying this practice was that, through

the power attributed to the sacred texts, thought to be imbued with the presence of deity, the fields, community and local deities and spirits would be blessed and purified. These are living texts, embodiments of spirited agencies, and the occasion felt quite joyful as we were caught up in the moment of it all. My friend and I soon found ourselves in the mountain deity temple, each getting sections of the Buddhist Kanjur, wrapped in colourful cloths, strapped to our backs. It occurred to me then that this action placed us at the interface of negotiated spaces between the local and the Buddhist deities. This theme will be discussed in Chapter Five in context of the Rebgong spirit mediums, the *lawa*, and their relations with Buddhist *lama*.

We were soon encircling the fields with a long procession of villagers similarly laden. Our march was kept to time by a man banging a drum with a symbol of the ‘three jewels’ – the three jewels of Buddhist refuge: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – painted on it. A series of mostly young women followed him in single file singing a Sanskrit mantra relating to the Buddhist deity of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, or Chenrezig (T. *spyen ras gzigs*) in Tibetan. The presence of the deity was thus invoked through these mantric chants and exhorted to bless the fields, crops and local inhabitants. The whole procession was headed by a man bearing an image of the local mountain god which was mounted on a tall pole. He was one of only two men in the procession, both of whom were leading it, all other men of eligible age having chosen to pay a fine of 3 Yuan or a bowl of barley flour, *tsampa*, rather than exert themselves in such fashion. The march around the fields continued for three days, each day the marchers trekking the same route, which encompassed the entirety of the village’s field territories. As we processed in single file along the winding mud paths around the fields, villagers lined them, bowing their heads as the image of the mountain god on a pole reached them, and then stooping as low as they could so that we could brush the leaves of the Buddhist Kanjur over the crowns of their heads, thereby blessing them with the vital *lungta*, or good fortune; the blessing of the texts as we passed.<sup>73</sup> All this to ensure that there is no hail and that the rains keep on a middle way between flowing too much and too little.

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<sup>73</sup> The phenomena of *lungta* will be expounded upon in Chapter Three.



*chikor* (T. *chos bskor*)

“What do you think the Buddha would have made of this?” commented my friend as she marched ahead of me, sweat streaming down the length of her lush braid of hair and dripping off the end of it.

“If the Buddha were not omniscient I would answer that he could never have imagined such a thing,” I laughingly replied.

At certain poignant places the procession came to a halt. These were places made powerful by the presence of deity, such as the sites of the *labtsé* offering cairns for the mountain gods. The women performed a fumigation rite known as *sang* and then danced and sang energetically, as if recharged by something in the air or ground at these locations. My companion commented that it was as if these were the acupuncture points

upon the body of land, through which the land's energy was channelled; the *tsubo* of the land.

In the case of the *chikor* ritual described above, the idea was not to empower oneself through purification from proximity and circumambulatory homage to a deity *ney*. Rather, the villagers aimed to evoke divine blessing for their crop-fields through enacting their purification and empowerment by means of circumnambulating the fields with empowered objects. In this communal ritual it was the land and the objects themselves which were the sites of deity *ney*, of presence. The *chikor* is described by Stuart, Banmadorji & Huangchojia as being to protect crops, ensure a good harvest and prevent disease in people or livestock. They also mention the ritual being performed out of season, so to speak, should a number of the village children become ill (Stuart, Banmadorji & Huangchojia 1995:225).

As described above, although in theory anyone from the village, or even it seems passing foreigners such as myself, could take part in the circumambulatory procession around the fields, in fact very clear social demarcations around who took part and how were in place. As mentioned, older people were exempt and men paid fines not to carry the texts around, indicating a presumption that such heavy physical work was for young women, whether unmarried or married. Presumably those who were married were for the most part daughters in law, since in the region it is normal for sons to stay on family land and daughters to marry out. Yet none of these women were considered qualified to lead the procession, which had to be headed by two male village leaders, each carrying representations of the major deities whose blessing was being evoked.

In the description of the *chikor* ritual given above, it is notable that the procession through the fields was led by both a banner carrying a motif of a local, pre-Buddhist mountain god, and the head of the Kanjur procession of Buddhist texts. Both had equal value in bringing blessing to the land and so protecting and enhancing the crop harvest, on the surface of things more a worldly than an eschatological concern. The realities of village practice tend to be more of a process of interaction and negotiation between a broad spectrum of elements than a discrete enactment within clearly defined parameters. Likewise, the deities so central to these processes are presented here not as phenomena dividable into compartments, according to purpose, but as parts of layered wholes, their presences all-pervasive cultural winds.

## *Divine Diagnostics*

The above ritual, the *chikor*, is framed here as a preemptive purification or ritual healing for landscape and peoples through the proper enactment of appropriate relations with deity worlds, so thus invoking their blessing. When these relations have fallen short or been, albeit inadvertently, abused, a form of diagnostics can be employed to decipher precisely which deity or spirit beings are aggrieved and rectify relations for the health of those concerned. This is the diagnostics of divination, and in this both lama or/and lawa may play a central role.

The use of divination by Tibetan peoples is evidenced in a wide variety of textual sources. Some are clearly Buddhist, with oracular visions expressed from the mouths of Buddhist *bodhisattva*, and others from pre-Buddhist traditions since lost (MacDonald 1971: 271-87). Divination through using dice to evoke predictions from deities such as mountain gods was used in the Tibetan Empire to legislate on matters such as loans and troop conscription (Dotson 2007). Any health-seeking journey might well begin with a divination performed by a Buddhist *lama* (T. *bla ma*) or a diviner, a *mowa*. It is common for people in Tibetan cultural regions to consult a *mowa* for advice on health and other important life issues. During the time that I lived in Lhasa there was one *mowa* known locally as the *khandroma*. Her residence was a constant flurry of activity. All kinds of folk, including foreign residents, queued, sometimes for hours, to see and receive her blessing and advice. Topics those waiting shared with me, apart from health issues, included advice on study or career trajectories, places of residence and travel plans. However, an overwhelming number of people I met there seemed mostly interested in requesting information about their past lives and the current reincarnate lives of deceased relatives.

The first time I met the *khandroma* she was very sick. Her title in Tibetan literally means ‘One who Goes in the Sky’, or ‘Sky Goer’ (T. *mka’ ’gro ma*; S. *ḍākinī*). As Diemberger points out, this term was taken from tantric context to apply to female oracles in preference to earlier terms which implied pre-Buddhist vernaculars (Diemberger 2005: 147). In the case of the *khandroma* I met in Lhasa, her work was very rooted in Buddhist frames and the son who attended and assisted her when people came to see her was an incarnate Buddhist lama. She was also thought to have abilities as a *delok* (T. *’das log*); someone with the ability to travel to other realms. As with spirit

possession, this inter-realm travel sometimes compromises their health. They are said only to undertake such journeys for the benefit of those for whom they can bring back advice or messages from departed ancestors reborn in other realms. Sometimes such journeys can last up to a week. Those able to travel to and then stay on in other realms for such lengthy periods of time are known as *delok* (T. 'das log), referring to someone returned from the dead. During such lengthy journeys it is said that their physical body's functions cease and they appear so dead that without attentive followers to protect the body they may well try to return to it to find that it had been buried in their absence (Pommaret 1989).

One of the common causes of illness diviners such as the *khandroma* may diagnose through divination is that of the loss of a phenomenon known in Tibetan as the *la* (T. *bla*). The loss of this is an accepted cause of illness and accounts of rituals by which a person's spiritual being, their *la*, can be retrieved are attested to widely in Tibetan cultural contexts, yet only found in academic literature in a handful of studies (eg. Norbu 1995; Karmay 1998; Schrempf 2015). This particular form of ritual healing does doubtless exist in Rebgong, as several informants mentioned having heard elder people speak of it. However, neither I nor other scholars and informants I spoke to regarding this had personal experience of Rebgong rituals for retrieving the *la*, *laguk* (T *bla 'gugs*), or textual sources for them. As yet, this area remains unexplored for Rebgong and an interesting area for future research.

As is indicated by the way in which the Lhasa *khandroma*'s residence was a constant hive of activity, diviners have a very particular social significance in Tibetan cultural regions. As Schrempf has pointed out, despite diviners not being considered healers in the medical anthropology literature, they do function as healers in the sense of their divinations being a type of diagnosis, or in the sense of alleviating possible harm through timely prevention. In the case of some diviners, they may also function as tantric healers (Schrempf 2011: 162-3). As the text given below will highlight, divination is not merely the province of spirit mediums or tantric practitioners, but can be found within Tibetan medical diagnostic practices, such as pulse and urine diagnosis.

Regarding the importance of divination in Tibetan cultural regions, within the historical practice of Sowa Rigpa it is possible to find practitioners using divination alongside or within the three standard diagnostic methods mentioned as central to the

Gyūshi. As Geoffrey Samuel points out, key elements of Sowa Rigpa such as pulse and urine diagnosis merit reflection in the anthropology of Tibetan medicine in the sense that what is going on is not straightforwardly parallel to apparently similar biomedical practices. Although both systems do take these diagnostic methods to indicate the physiological condition of the body, elements of Tibetan medical usage of these methods includes procedures such as the *ngotsar tsadūn* (T. *ngo mtshar rtsa bdun*), the ‘seven wondrous pulses’. This method of pulse diagnosis purports to understand a family’s situation through reading the pulse of an elder member within it. The same method is also used to discover how far along his or her way an expected visitor is, how their journey is going; and to diagnose the medical condition of family members.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, there are aspects of urine diagnosis which aim to reveal the harm caused by malevolent spirits through examining patterns that appear in the various sectors of the examination bowl. Similarly, in the case of children, the mother’s milk can be used, as will be described.

A textual example of this can be found in the Chipainey Rigma Lūpa Chōpai Nyam Yik (T. Byis pa'i nad rigs ma lus pa cos pa'i nyams yig), which examines children's diseases. It was composed by the personal physician to Thubten Gyatso (T. Thub bstan rgya mtsho), the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama (1876-1933), and so can be approximately dated to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>75</sup> The text expounds on the material on maternal and child healthcare found in the *Gyūshi* and commentaries.<sup>76</sup> It refers to a variety of spirits or local deities as causes of particular diseases.<sup>77</sup> The text describes a variety of

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<sup>74</sup> These comments were made in a paper he gave entitled ‘Issues in the Anthropology of Medicine and Healing in Tibetan Societies’, for the Leverhulme Trust International Workshop, ‘Contemporary Issues in the Anthropology of Tibetan Medicine,’ St Michaels College Llandaff, Cardiff, 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Jan 2011. The paper formed basis for a later collaborative paper with Colin Millard for the special journal issue ‘Introduction: Medicine and Healing in Tibetan Societies’, *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* (2013) 7(3): 335-351

<sup>75</sup> I am indebted to Resi Hofer for introducing me to this text and that of the ‘Mirror of the Moon’, a text focusing on childbirth, pre and post natal care, when she employed me to assist her doctoral research by translating them into English for her. These texts were distributed, along with medicines to assist maternal and child health, as part of a government sponsored campaign (Hofer 2011: 73 citing Janes 1995; Van Vleet 2009).

<sup>76</sup> Of particular interest here are chapters 72 and 73 of the *Gyūshi*’s third *tantra*, which deal with children's diseases.

<sup>77</sup> A copy of the first six folios in wylie, along with my translation, are included in full as Appendix II.

diagnostic techniques through which it is possible to discern whether an illness is caused by these spirit beings or local deities as opposed to, for example, cold/wind invasion or other diseases related to the elements and caused by the three *nyépa*, or whether caused by different factors. The first diagnostic technique described by the text is that of reading the pulse; the *tša* (T. *rtša*). This falls under the second of the three diagnostic methods employed by practitioners of Sowa Rigpa: examining, pulse palpating and questioning.

In folio 3a of the text, it says that where the lung, heart and liver pulses are 'mixed' (T. '*dzings pa*'), or the pulses are 'troubled' (T. *ban bun*), this indicates the king of a class of demons' (T. *gong po*) pulse. The text is prescriptive, recommending that treatment for a child suffering such diseases caused by such demons will take place not through administering material medicines, but through ritual. The curative rituals specifically mentioned here are those of long life empowerment', *tsewang* (T. *tshe dbang*), and the excellent life, *tsechok* (T. *tshe mchog*), ritual.

The second diagnostic technique employed in the text (folios 3b and 4a) is that of putting milk from the child's mother into a pot of boiling water and observing its constituency and colour. It says here that if the milk looks 'like the back of a frog', then it has been caused by harm (T. *gnod*) done by a local deity owner of place, a *sadak* (T. *sa bdag*); if it breaks into bunches, it has a 'demon face' (T. *gdon ngo*): ie. It is an illness caused by a demon. If it stands up like a stick, it is a disease caused by a *drey* demon (T. '*dre gdon*'); male if the stick leans to the right and female if it leans to the left. The third diagnostic technique outlined by the text is that of listening to the voice. Folio 4b says that if the child's voice is half large and half small, this indicates he or she is suffering from a disease caused by a demon, a *dön* (*gdon*).<sup>78</sup>

In relation to the above material, it can be seen that experiential sensitivity on the part of the healer towards those under their care is focal to Tibetan diagnostic practice and this embraces forms of medical diagnosis which consequently might be described as divination. Indeed, this type of approach towards understanding traditional

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<sup>78</sup> It is interesting to note that, according to Dominik Wujastyk, detail of demons afflicting small children in the Ayurvedic tradition are similar or identical to the corresponding list in the *Gyüshi* (Wujastyk 1997, 1999).

diagnosis and treatment across medial traditions could lend much to enriching understanding of them. I would tentatively suggest that, intuitively speaking, it is the case that the doctor who takes time to take listen in an intuitive manner, to get a sense of who is in front of them while making diagnosis, is experienced from a patient's perspective as most effective. This kind of divinatory diagnosis can, in addition to being part of a consultation, direct which type of consultation should be obtained or which method of treatment pursued. As the following case study of Domba's health seeking journey will illustrate, divination can function to form bridges between, or reference points for, types of healing on the pluralistic palette available across the Plateau.

### ***The Journey of a Homeless Wanderer***

I would like to introduce here the case history of a Tibetan nomad woman and her health-seeking journey, encompassing as it does a variety of interactions with the types of divine beings, healers and medical practitioners described in this chapter in apparently synchronistic harmony. This ethnographic vignette illustrates how divination can function both as tool for diagnostics and overarching directive for which tools to employ within a medically and ritualistic pluralist approach to health and well-being. It also highlights the fluidity of the *lama* and *lawā* roles in healing context.

A Tibetan woman in her early sixties lifts her long breasts up in both hands to air the area underneath them and smiles. You might imagine 'Homeless Wanderer', Domba (T. lDom pa) as is her nomadic nickname<sup>79</sup>, to be on the grasslands of her homeland Golok (T. mGo logs), but this was urban Xining, the People's Republic of China; known to Tibetans as the Amdo town of Ziling (T. Zi ling). Domba's daughter Dorjé, one of five children she had brought up alone, and the only one of her two girls who lived into her twenties, brought us tea, crouching down beside the black leathery sofa upon which Domba sat. Dorjé began explaining how her mother had started experiencing pains in the

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<sup>79</sup> Homeless Wanderer, Domba (T. lDom pa), is a name traditionally given to the youngest child of a Tibetan family in the case where an older sibling has died. Giving a child a name considered so inauspicious is intended to deter malevolent spirits or other causes of untimely death from stealing the lives of any more children. All names of people used in this thesis are pseudonyms to protect anonymity as far as possible, given the sensitivities in the regions concerned. Place names will not be pseudonyms excepting where stated in some ethnographic sections, again to preserve anonymity.

soles of her feet, knees and hips some years ago. Domba's lower legs were particularly affected, although she also had some pain in her back and hands. The eldest of her three sons had suggested taking Domba to see a Buddhist monk famous for being a diviner, a *mowa* (T. *mo pa*). This marked the beginning of a health seeking journey that would span substantial tracts of land, traversing a number of ethnic, cultural and translative boundaries along its way.

Health seeking practices on the Tibetan Plateau and those who practice them are as varied as its people. In choosing how to address illness, people in Tibetan cultural regions often consult a diviner, as was the case with Domba. Her family consulted a monk famed for his divination skills who performed a practice in common usage, involving counting fingers and prayer beads to divine the deity's advice. This diviner was not from Domba's country, her *lumba* (T. *lung pa*), however he divined that in the Year of the Tiger, the year her eldest son was born, Domba had cut some trees down around the source of a river in her country. This had disturbed the deities living there known as the *le* (T. *klu*) in Amdo dialect (T. A mdo *skyad*). The pronunciation of this particular word caused some hilarity during my talk with Domba, since I was pronouncing the name of these deities as *lii*, according to the central Tibetan dialect spoken in Lhasa (T. Lha sa *skyad*), which I was more familiar with. To Domba, who was raised as a nomad from Golog and speaks an Amdo dialect (T. A mdo *skyad*) known as *drokpakay* (literally: Nomad-speech), the pronunciation I was using referred not to guardian deities of land or water, but to the male member! These *le/lii* are aquatic deities and, since offence to them was divined to be the cause of Domba's illness, had to be placated. The diviner recommended that a ritual practice to appease the *le* be performed at the place where the offense to them had occurred. Accordingly, Domba set out for the river source where she had indeed cut down trees in the year of the Tiger, enlisting the help of two Buddhist ritual specialists to perform the necessary rituals. After that she reported less pain at night, but was not cured. Domba's youngest son, who at the time was undergoing training to become a Tibetan doctor, a *menwa* (T. *sman pa*) or *amchi* (T. *a mchi*), then took her to the Tibetan Hospital in Ziling (M. Xining) to consult a revered *menwa* there.

In Domba's case, despite her illness having being divined as connected to spirit harm, the *menba* she consulted at the Tibetan hospital in Ziling prescribed a course of medical compounds and treated her with acupuncture. Unfortunately, she felt little change in the course of her illness and was still in quite some pain despite this

treatment. Hence she returned to the monk known for his divination skills whom she had first consulted. He advised she go to see a tantric practitioner in Rebgong, a *nukwa* (T. *sngags pa*), renowned for his healing powers. Domba travelled to Rebgong and sought out the *nukwa*, who, now very old, tended to be somewhat reclusive. Tantric ritual specialists in Rebgong abound and are mostly married householders who come together at particular times of the year for group practice. They perform ritual healing through the use of meditation and mantra. Qinghai hosts the only Institute aiming to preserve and research tantric, *nukwa*, traditions and, within that, particularly focusing on the Rebgong communities. A complex set of Tibetan tantric practitioners of both Buddhist and Bön lineages exist in Rebgong.<sup>80</sup> Domba visited the *nukwa* every day for eight days. He performed a healing ritual which involved reciting the sacred evocations of deities known as *nuk* (T. *sngags*; S. *mantra*) and blowing on the sufferer. This relieved Domba's pain for the duration of the treatment and immediately afterwards, but sometime later the pain began reoccurring. Whilst she was staying in Rebgong to receive treatment from the *nukwa*, another sufferer told Domba about a Chinese herbal painkiller not available through normal channels but available on the black market.



Domba's 'Chinese painkiller'

She began taking that soon afterwards, believing that it was helping. However, the pain in her legs was still ongoing. Domba's brother, a respected Tibetan Buddhist teacher (a lama), then recommended that she see a consultant at the biomedical hospital in Xining.

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<sup>80</sup> The Ngakmang Institute was founded in Xining in 1999, although Rebgong tantric communities were cohesive before the formation of this institution (Silhé 2013).

Domba's health-seeking journey, having traversed the grasslands of Golog and wended its way through mountains to Rebgong's Rongwo, finally ended up at the biomedical hospital in Xining, on the advice of a *lama*. The consultation took place in Chinese, and was translated into Domba's Golog dialect for her by a younger family member. She was advised to have an operation, which would cost in the region of 40,000 RMB (China Yuan Renminbi) and so was beyond the resources of her family at that time. The family members who were privy to the consultation understood neither what the diagnosis was nor what the operation would entail. Several years later they again received the biomedical recommendation that Domba should have an operation, this time for knee replacement surgery. They decided that the best value for money was to take Domba for operations to replace both knees at a hospital in Beijing, where the replacement material imported from Germany was of a high quality and the price lower than the correspondent procedure in Xining. Domba received two operations, one for each knee, costing a total of around 100,000 RMB.

As can be gleaned from Domba's story, her consultation with biomedical doctors was something of an anathema for her. What is meant by a biomedical doctor on the Tibetan Plateau may differ considerably from what is understood by that elsewhere. The perhaps Eurocentric division between 'medicine' and 'religion' can be utilised by health practitioners to reinforce their sense of professional or ethnic identity. Yet contemporary medical practice in Amdo tends to be syncretic in that *amchi* and biomedical style practitioners incorporate techniques and theories from each other's systems, or indeed are partially trained in both. The training for students of Tibetan medicine at the department for Tibetan medicine, which was initially established at Tibet University, Lhasa in 1985, entails biomedical components, as does the training offered in Xining. The 'barefoot doctor' scheme, which offered four years' training in basic biomedical techniques coupled with some simplified traditional Chinese medicine techniques, sent the trainees out to sometimes fairly remote, rural *xiang* clinics. One Rebgong resident said he spent several years in such a remote clinic, as a 'barefoot doctor', but then resigned due to feeling unequal to the task of treating everyone for everything, having scant resources and such limited training.<sup>81</sup> A healer functioning

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<sup>81</sup> Personal communication 2009. For further information regarding traditional Chinese medicine and the 'barefoot doctor' scheme, see Hsu 2009.

within this medically plural environment may engage in practices from different healing systems, based on contrasting conceptual frames for the body, health and illness, without any sense of contradiction (cf. Schrempf 2011). In examining such syncretic models of medicinal practice, as Samuel has pointed out, it is necessary to abandon traditional disciplinary categories in preference for an exploration instead of the ‘mind-body-society-environment complex’ (Samuel 2006), a theme which will be returned to and examined in later chapters.

The success or not of Domba’s operation in biomedical terms remains to be seen, however, Domba has said she will measure the success of her operations in terms of her hope to be able to regularly visit the local monastery and chant prayers. Domba in fact said she views all her health-seeking during the process of her illness as fruitful, speculating that her condition might have been much worse at any particular stage of its development had she not undertaken the treatments she did. Despite the years of suffering, she maintained a good sense of humour about her health, jokingly telling me that it’s strange I am not called Homeless Wanderer, since that is what I am, whereas she who bears that nickname cannot walk.<sup>82</sup>

### ***Towards A Cultural Matrix of Healing***

As Mona Schrempf has suggested, the ways in which traditional methods and rituals negotiate modernities, and the resultant pluralistic health-seeking choices available in rural areas of the Tibetan Plateau, demonstrate an approach to health which views everything from ritualistic practices such as the *chikor* ritual described above, to modern scientific or biomedical treatments, as ‘equally effective on embodied individual, social and cosmological levels in which both illness and healing occurs.’ (Schrempf 2011: 158). On this model of health seeking and attendant practices, there is no sense of a contradiction in say a patient having a surgical procedure to remove an organ whilst simultaneously requesting monks at a local monastery, or tantric practitioners of the local community, to perform rituals requesting deity intervention to remove the obstacles to the patient’s health. In fact, on the contrary, such combinations of methodologies which could from a Eurocentric perspective appear diametrically

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<sup>82</sup> This summary is taken from my fieldwork notes, June 2009, and subsequent conversations with Domba and her family.

opposed are employed as complementary procedures on the road to better health and well-being.

As illustrated by Domba's story, a diviner can also be a *lama*, a term which in this context implies a specialist in tantric ritual knowledge. A *lama* can be consulted in conjunction with a *menwa*, in cases where illness is diagnosed as spirit-caused. The *lama* thus consulted may determine, often through divination, which rituals will be effective in the sufferer's case. Such rituals may then be enacted by the *lama*, the sick person or their relatives, or by monastic or lay students of the *lama*. Lineages of *lama* can be monastic, reincarnate or hereditary. In Rebgong a number of *lama* from different lineages may exist in any one village. For example, in Nyentok (T. gNyan thog), a village to the immediate north of Rongwo, five *lama*, four Tibetan and one Monguor, are attached to the main Gelugpa (T. dGe lugs pa) Buddhist temple. In Rebgong the advice of a *lama* may also be sought in conjunction with that of the mountain deities, as mediated by their spirit mediums, the *lawa* (T. *lha pa*). It can be seen from this that in Tibetan cultural regions illnesses, particularly those considered to have resulted from spirit harm, can be treated by specialists from a variety of traditions without a sense of this being contradictory or conflictual.

This is not to say that, in village life there are never conflicts between representatives of differing spiritual disciplines or practices, such as *lama* and *lawa*. Such ritual specialists form part of the spiritual hierarchy of village life, inextricably linked as this is with the daily running of things. Insight into such balances of power within a Rebgong village is given by Makley in her account of a village conflict, which concerned the authenticity of its spirit medium after the latter posed a challenge to its leaders (Makley 2011; Makley 2013a, 2013b). The Rebgong spirit mediums preside over annual village harvest rituals, which function not only to protect the crops but to maintain health and longevity and eliminate disease. This reflects the fact that such understandings view the health of an individual as inextricably connected to that of the whole community and the landscape they inhabit; an understanding which is foundational within the notion of a cultural matrix of healing.

I would like to suggest here that what the plethora of ritual approaches to health described above have as common frames is a sense that certain presences underlie quotidian human existences and the processes of illness or health. Here I am speaking

about deity presences; in short the healing taking place, whether of village community or individual, is considered as under the auspices of and underpinned by deity presences and the relationships that the humans concerned have developed with them. Such presences are evoked or implicit in the *chikor* ritual to protect and ensure the health of the village via its crops, as well as in the village doctor's treatment of patients using Sowa Rigpa. In the case of large communal rituals, such as the *chikor*, it is the relationship of the human community with deity which is central to the process. In the case of patients being treated by Sowa Rigpa doctors versed in tantric practice, it is the relationship between doctor and individual patient. However, I would suggest that all these healing events can be located in the same cultural matrix: that of deity presence.

Even at the large Tibetan hospital in central Xining, outwardly oriented as secular hospitals globally, I would suggest that, despite the absence of any explicit reference to a treatment or approach which would give credence to or acknowledge deity presences, these still pervade the ways in which spaces and treatments are understood, implemented and experienced. For example, my friend's comment about how medicines should be treated. This referred to the fact that, as she well knew from her brother, a practicing Sowa Rigpa practitioner from rural Amdo, materia medica used by Sowa Rigpa doctors traditionally would grow in certain spaces and be blessed to healing effect by particular deities. Relationship with whom could be badly affected by the way in which the hospital assistant casually threw the medicines about. This could potentially cause obstacles to health due to the karmic impact of treating the medicines thus and/or potential harm from the offended deities. As this illustrates, on my reading of it, the epistemic context for health and for what is meant by healing to the patients and other individuals involved in a health-seeking journey may be in contrast to the ethos under which the institution or organisation providing it is operating.

As discussed in the introductory section, regarding her work amongst Tibetan communities in rural Amdo, Schrempf has pertinently described the kinds of decision making processes, health-seeking journeys and treatments undertaken there as subject to a 'cultural logic of healing' (Schrempf 2010). As this indicates, research findings suggest that a particular set of understandings and structures underlies the pluralistic environment of Tibetan forms of healing on the Plateau; a sensibility in approach to health and well-being that is culturally based and pervasive across the spectrum of types of healing. The sensibility arising from this cultural logic of healing pervades a broad

spectrum of practices. These practices range from healing practiced by Tibetan doctors who are practitioners of Sowa Rigpa, such as the doctor I describe my friend Dröma visiting, to treatments which could be termed biomedical, or to healing conveyed through ritual practices, such as those of the Rebgong *nukwa* Domba visited. These treatments can be employed in conjunction with each other, as was Domba's the case in Domba's health seeking journey. I would argue that they are not really seen as complementary treatments from different systems, since on the ground, for people like Domba and her family, distinctions between systems hardly feature in health seeking choices. As presented here, they rather appear as colours chosen from a palette of healers and healing practices to form one painting of health-seeking, a painting whose execution is guided by a diviner.

### CHAPTER THREE – EMBODIED LANDSCAPES

*Supreme Mountain Deity Mukri (T. rMog ri)! Guard the land with superlative strength  
for the sake of Padmasambhava. Deity who tirelessly increases the highest [good],  
dispel all obstacles today!*

- my translation of a section of a *sangbe* text from Rebgong<sup>83</sup>

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What do they mean these lands, these places, for these people? What does it mean to spend a childhood surrounded by high mountains; living out formative years in the valleys they cradle, member of a Tibetan village community protected by local deities whose tributes adorn the high passes in multi-coloured cacophony? One thing that appears possible from the prevalence and care taken of these tributes to the mountain deities, the *labtsé* (T. *la rdzas / la btsas*), divine forces are a present part of everyday life for the Tibetan communities of Rebgong. This chapter explores how these deity presences may influence the everyday of human existence.

gives account of the evocation of mountain deities, the owners of the ground, the base; the *shidak* (T. *gs/zhi bdag*), through the *labtsé* ritual in which their presences are annually invoked via a series of propitiatory offerings made on the mountainsides overseeing village territories under their auspices. It begins firstly by situating the rite in context of the mythohistories and origin myths which inform the conception and continual renewal of spirited agencies through such rituals. It then contextualises the ethnographic section with background on the village and its longstanding relationships with spirited agencies. An ethnography of the annual renewal of the Jiangjia village *labtsé* then forms the basis for discussion of the deity presences: territorial or ancestral,

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<sup>83</sup> This is my translation of a section of the first folio in the sequence of folios from the text given in Appendix III. The text is used daily for fire offerings, *sang* (T. *bsang*), in the Rebgong village of Jiangjia (T. lCang skya). Mukri is one of two mountain deities governing Jiangjia village, as will be described in Chapter Four.

local, household or those of the mountain gods, and the ritual maintenance of right relations with them, thereby preserving good fortune, health and well-being.

Rituals invoking and involving deity presences are concerned with the maintenance of balanced and appropriate relations between them and the human beings with whom they share spaces. Therefore, such rituals are vital to the health and well-being of human communities, in terms of freedom from disease and natural disasters affecting bodies of all levels. An important aspect of how divine presences profoundly influence the everyday of human existence is that of the body and its well-being, understood as inextricably linked to the landscape; the environment and its elements. What meanings are envisioned by those who call down the gods during ritual practices is thus discussed via the notion of spirited agency central to a cultural matrix of healing.

### ***Meaningful Mountains***

During my first week on the Tibetan Plateau I was rushed to hospital with altitude sickness. My first moments in Lhasa had seen me embark upon a serious project to do everything you were advised not to do, so it was to be expected. The city was too new and full of wonder for me to do otherwise. I spent a night in hospital lying between an elderly Tibetan lady and a Chinese business man, snuffing oxygen through a face mask and attached to a drip. Apparently this was feeding me rehydration fluids, but I would have accepted almost anything at all by the time they gave it to me. Altitude sickness, even the mild type I had, truly gives a sense of the fragility of life. My friend made a film of my demise and jokingly threatened to send it to my family. He then said I needed to get well soon as he wanted to take me another two thousand metres higher, to a sacred lake amongst high peaks known as Lhamolhatso, the lake of the goddess. The tour company he worked for needed a *chijal* (T. *phyi rgyal*), a foreigner, guinea-pig to test out a new possible tour route for their Japanese tourists. If I survived the route, they would include it in the following year's itineraries. The route we were trying out involved sleeping in the kitchens of small *gompa* and hiking across mountainous terrain to reach the sacred lake. But I will never forget our first view of the snow mountain peaks flanking Lhamolhatso. It was on the day we walked for eleven hours, getting directions from nomads along the route and eating only what we carried with us. In the case of my friend this was packets of small dried fish sent to him from Japan by family and friends there; in the case of his Tibetan colleague, yak meat; and in my case, a large

bar of chocolate. As we scaled the latest of the mountainous passes along the route, my head light with the altitude and the cocoa, we were suddenly granted our first view of those high peaks. Their snowy glory burst upon us with such majesty that we all stood arrested by wonder.



**Mountain Pass on approach to Lhamo Lhatso – Lake of the Goddess**

*‘drokpa yer na kyi po shedraaa chung’*, exclaimed Lobsang: ‘Oh to be a nomad – what happiness!’ (T. *’brog pa yod na skyid po zhe drag byung*)

On the Tibetan plateau, mountains are considered the abodes, the *né* (T. *gnas*) of the gods. They are pilgrimage sites offering the healing that proper relationship and offering to their gods brings. Lhamolhatso, lake of the goddess, is the site of Palden Lhamo (T. *dPal ldan lha mo*), great protector deity of Tibetan regions and peoples, in particular the Dalai Lamas. In that moment, seeing the mountains surrounding her lake for the first time, I wondered at the ability of such places to excite the senses and inspire awe, and the part this plays in causing human beings in so many cultures to consider them sacred spaces. I also wondered, along with Lobsang, what it means to live in or

near such spaces; to be a nomad herder alone with yaks in the high passes, a meditation practitioner living in one of those *gompa* or hermitages perched on the high ledges, or to grow up in a village nestled at the feet of such mountains. villages. Could proximity to them in and of itself lend a type of empowerment or deity blessing? As Alex McKay puts it in his article discussing historical understandings of Tibetan environments, ‘The sacred landscape in Tibet is itself a healer.’ (McKay 2007).

### ***Mythohistories and Deity Landscapes***

Deity and spirit forces influencing health and well-being, such as the mountain gods to whom the *labtsé* and Leru are dedicated, or the *le* (T. *klu*) in the story of Domba’s health seeking journey, may possibly predate the seventh century introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. The fact that their perceived presence and influence on health and well-being are well documented by the *Gyüshi* (c. twelfth century)<sup>84</sup> demonstrates the continuity of narratives concerning such beings post the introduction of Buddhism and their incorporation in Buddhist discourses pertaining to health and well-being. The template for the nature of this incorporation is found in the mythohistorical accounts of the founding of Tibet’s first monasteries.

Perhaps the most well-known Buddhist mythological history demonstrating absorption of indigenous mythology is that of the outstretched demoness, *sinmo* (T. *srinmo*), embodying Tibet. This mythohistory describes the first monasteries being built there in order to suppress her and her entourage of local deities; a measure necessary for the establishment of Buddhism on Tibetan soil. It is worth giving some attention to this mythohistory in context here, since it highlights and frames the types of presences inhabiting landscapes and environments and how these presences accord lands meanings in Tibetan cultural regions. Both it and the mythohistories surrounding the Tibetan Kings and the foundation of Tibet’s first Buddhist monastery at Samyé, indicate the meanings embodied landscapes and attendant deity realms bring to the quotidian lives and ritual practices of those on the Tibetan Plateau. As will be seen, the motifs pervading such mythohistories and the ancestral deities who appear in them, pervade current ritual practices in Rebgong

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<sup>84</sup> The sections dealing with these deities are found in the Third Tantra of the *Gyüshi*.

According to written accounts, such as the Mani Kabum (Ma ni bka' 'bum) or 'The Clear Mirror', the existence of this demoness was first recognised through the geomantic divination of the Chinese Princess Wencheng 文成公主 (Kapstein 2003: 523-537; Taylor & Yuthok (trans.) 1996: 130-187). According to these Tibetan accounts,<sup>85</sup> Princess Wencheng ensured the safe passage into Tibet of the golden statue of Buddha Śākyamuni she was bringing as gift to her future husband the Tibetan King Songten Gampo (T. Srong brtsan sgam po).<sup>86</sup> When the wheels of the cart carrying this statue became stuck, she utilised a Chinese divination chart she had requested from her father as a parting gift. In this way she divined Tibet as a demoness who was lying on her back. Her heart-blood was the lake in the 'Plain of Milk', the new capital of the Yarlung Dynasty, Lhasa.<sup>87</sup> This she divined as the palace of the king of the *le/lū* (T. *klu*). The princess divined that the places where this heart-blood connected to the main artery of her life-force and her breasts, were the three peaks rising from the Plain. Situated to the west of contemporary Lhasa, is Red Hill, Marpori (T. dMar po ri) and Iron Hill, Chagpori (lCags po ri), which are the sites of her breasts. On them stand the Potala Palace and the Tibetan Medical College respectively. The temple of Gesar is found on the third peak, Bemari (T. Pa ma ri) (Barnett 2006:55). These hills are now considered symbolically analogous with the three Buddhist tutelary deities transposed from Indian traditions: Marpori with Avalokiteśvara, Chagpori with Mañjśrī, and Bemari with Vajrapāṇi, indicating the Buddhicisation of Tibetan lands subsequent years. Princess Wencheng is presented in early accounts as viewing her divination of the embodiment of Tibetan lands as a Demoness to indicate the barbarism of Tibetans and to explain the obstacles she was experiencing in bringing a holy Buddhist object to their land. She recommended employing geomancy as a technique to subdue the demoness; by situating a temple on the demoness's heart-blood, Tibet's natural good qualities would come to the fore. The Princess additionally divined that four sites needed to be established: a place for the King to hold large meetings, a temple for monks, a monastery for sages and a place of entertainment for ordinary folk. She

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<sup>85</sup> There are several other different literary versions of the story with significantly different implications (Gianotti 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Songten Gampo was the first of three great Buddhist kings acknowledged by later Tibetan Buddhist tradition: Songten Gyampo, Tritsong Detsen and Ralpa Chen (T. Srong brtsan sgam po, Khri srong lde brtsan and Ral pa can) (Snellgrove and Richardson 2003 [1968]: 73).

<sup>87</sup> When the first building took place this area was known as Rasa (T. Ra sa), literally 'place of the goat'.

further divined that five obstacles stood in the way of the establishment of the place for the ordinary people. As Michael Aris points out, all these are ‘places associated with the native deities of Tibet’s centre’: ‘the palace of the *klu*’, ‘the cairn of the *dre*’, ‘the bed of the *ma-mo*’, ‘the habitual path of the *btsan*’, and ‘the *sa-dgra* of the elements’ (Aris 1979: 13). After some feuding between the Princess and her Nepalese counterpart, and further divination elaborating on the above list, it transpired that one single site, that of the future Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, could fulfil all the criteria on the list. However, before the heart-blood of the demoness, the lake on the Plain of Milk, could be filled in and the Jokhang temple built, a whole plethora of obstacles caused by the indigenous deities had to be removed. In spite of these measures, obstructive local deities still arrived in the night to destroy everything that had been built during the day, until the King took the sweeping measure of constructing a scheme of twelve further temples. These spanned out, from the Jokhang as centre, across Tibet to its borders and beyond into Bhutan. Their purpose was to pin the rest of the demoness’s body and her flailing limbs (Aris 1979: 12-20; Stein 1972: 38-41; Sorensen 1994: 251ff., n. 455; Barnett 2006: 41-58; Blondeau & Gyatso 2003: 15-19; Miller 2003: 336-53; Gyatso 1989: 38-53).

As Aris points out, since the story of the King’s temples appears to originate in *terma* (T. *gter ma*) literature which was later adopted, a possible reading of this literature is that later historians may have been motivated to rework old material to suit the socio-political and religious purposes of their times (Aris 1979: 8-12, 291-2, n. 11). Indeed, Ramble suggests the mythohistory was used as motif for the formation of religious identity in the contemporary community of Nepal where he conducted fieldwork (Ramble 2008). A contemporary rendition of the story I witnessed formed part of a performance I took part in at Lhasa University (Xizang Daxue 西藏大學) in October 2007. The performance opened with a representation of Princess Wencheng’s arrival in Tibet, in the form of a pageant. It was staged to welcome Chinese state officials from Beijing who were in Lhasa to conduct an inspection of the university. In the version presented by the university to these officials, the arrival of the Chinese princess and her civilising influence upon King Songten Gampo, and thus the Tibetan people, was of paramount interest. Nothing of her skills in geomancy, divination or her Buddhist persuasions was included in the rendition of her arrival and influence, arguably since this might offend the communist official party line which would view

such phenomena as ‘superstitious’ (C. *min xin*) nonsense from a ‘backward’ age. Thus, stripped of aspects of the story, the Chinese princess appeared as unquestionably a civilising influence representing the political statement that a unity existed between China and Tibet in ancient times.

The way in which religious life in Tibetan regions transformed after the introduction of Buddhism, and the mythological histories surrounding its introduction to the region could very much be seen as following and reflecting themes found within the imperialist or orientalist motifs mentioned above, such as those of subjugation and conversion radiating from geo-political centres to peripheries and resulting in civilising projects on the margins. Thus these mythohistories are of intrinsic value to understanding peoples’ practices and identities within Tibetan cultural regions. Although it is not always possible to say whether myth precedes ritual, it is clear that ritual is contextualised by myth and, as such, is indispensable to it (cf. Karmay 1998). The evocation and re-telling of mythological accounts are thus intrinsic to the identities of Tibetan peoples whose ritual practices revolve around such oral traditions.

What the mythohistory regarding the body of the demoness and the system of temples created to disenable her effectively highlights is types of presences inhabiting landscapes and environments and how these presences accord lands meanings in Tibetan cultural regions. The politics of these presences are evident in the way in which the temples can be seen to map out King Songten Gampo’s territory and lend spiritual gravitas to the maintenance of it. The central temple was to become the site of the Tibetan capital. Early Tibetan chronicles describe this type of military schema, surviving for centuries in Tibet, in which concentric fortifications protect the ‘sacred sovereign’ secluded at their centre (Stein 1972: 40). As can be seen, the interrelationship between religion and state appears to be embodied in the demoness myth, in which the local deities have a central role to play. The seat of succeeding Tibetan Kings, at the centre of Tibet, appears not dissimilar to that of a deity at the centre of his palace, or *maṇḍala*, the foundation of that throne being the King vanquishing, as patriarchal overlord, the presences any deities embodied in the land who were hostile to his rule.

In much the same way as their predecessors had obstructed the arrival of Princess Wencheng's statue of the Buddha and torn down Buddhist temples until the

appropriate rituals subdued or dispelled them, enabling the demoness to be pinned down, such local forces were also held responsible for obstructing the doctrinal establishment of Buddhism by King Trisong Detsen.<sup>88</sup> The vast quantity of literature that has grown up around the person of Padmasambhava, rests upon traditional Tibetan representation of him as a great magician enlisted by the Indian pundit Śāntarakṣita to subdue or dispel the indigenous Tibetan deities. The actions of the deities in tearing down at night the Buddhist temples that had been under construction during the day was presented as an act of resistance to the pundit's attempts, sponsored by King Trisong Detsen, to introduce Buddhism to Tibet. The description of Padmasambhava's subjugation of local deities found in the *Tangyig* (T. *Than yig*) mentions many local deities, including those of the mountains and of the ancestors.<sup>89</sup> The legend of their final submission with the founding of Samyé (T. bSam yas) monastery therefore implies Buddhism's subjugation of autochthonous Tibetan traditions. However, it is possible to argue that Buddhism was only able to assimilate indigenous traditions, via a mythological discourse, because of the assumptions it shared with the traditions it was replacing. As Samuel argues, 'the effective establishment of Mahāyāna philosophy and of monastic Buddhism in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries onwards could only take place... *because* the linkage between Vajrayāna and folk religion had already taken place. Mythologically, this is what the stories of Padmasambhava's 'taming' of the local deities refer to.' (Samuel 2005: 221). Robert Mayer suggests that documents found at Dunhuang may evidence Padmasambhava rituals from the tenth century (<http://blogs.orient.ox.ac.uk/kila/2011/05/06/padmasambhava-in-early-tibetan-myth-and-ritual-part-1/> - last accessed 24 August 2014). As has been stated, whether these accounts have historical accuracy on traditional academic terms is not the focus here, but rather the role of Padmasambhava in ritual practices based on Tibetan mythohistories.

Autochthonous and Buddhist rituals can be seen to occupy common ground in terms of their intended function. As Richardson's translation of a sixteenth century text indicates,<sup>90</sup> the practice of Buddhism was prohibited before King Trisong Detsen

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<sup>88</sup> The Old Tibetan Chronicle, Pelliot Tibetan 1287, says it was King Trisong Detsen and not Songten Gampo who constructed temples 'throughout the centre and the frontiers' (Kapstein 2000: 44; 224, n. 45).

<sup>89</sup> *Than yig* No.3, p.244, cited in Tucci 1980 [1970]:168

<sup>90</sup> Chos 'byung mkhas pa'i dga' ston of Dpa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba

reached the age of twenty, when the prohibition was lifted because extant ritual practice was not bettering the ill fortune befalling the nation and its people. The main rationale for the King allowing Buddhist practice is portrayed as the efficacy it was perceived to have in combating natural disasters and diseases caused by performing inappropriate, ie. non-Buddhist, rites (Richardson 1998: 89-99). The opponents of Buddhism argued that it was incompatible with the ancient religion of Tibet, a religion in which ‘le prestige de la personne royale et sa sant,, la stabilité, du royaume et du gouvernement, l'absence de maladies pour les hommes et les animaux’, and ‘l'abondance de la nourriture’ depended directly on proper propitiation of the indigenous powers with adequate rituals lest they abandon the Tibetans to demonic forces.

The introduction of Buddhism appears, therefore, in sharp contrast to the prevailing climate of the times, in which, according to the King's first edict, Tibet was the country of the local deities, the *kullha* (T. *sku lha*) (MacDonald 1971: 309). The proponents of Buddhism countered that its success in bringing prosperity to the land and people was testament not only to the efficacy of its ritual practices, but to the truth of the Buddhist cosmology underlying them; entailing conceptions of rebirth and retribution in which human conduct was subject to natural laws of causation determining fortunes in the round of rebirths, and therefore human destinies could be shaped through the purification of misconduct (Kapstein 2000: 42-6). As scholars have indicated, the fact that the Lhasa inscriptions so far discovered do not overtly mention Buddhism indicate that it may not be the case that the new religion was as fully established in King Trisong Detsen's reign as later accounts may suggest, and that indigenous traditions were still prevalent and powerful (Snellgrove and Richardson 2003 [1968]: 92-93; Tucci 1949:4), as they continue to be today in the context of healing and wellbeing.

The identities and functions of deity presences and rituals, such as the ritual renewal of the *labtsé*, enacted for them in and upon Tibetan ritual landscapes can be framed by their oral and written mythohistories, some of which will be outlined as background to the ethnographical sections of this and the following chapter. These contain essential themes that have since infused the roles of local deities and other inhabitants of the Plateau, throughout their retelling in terms of relationship to geographical spaces, and their expression in ritual form. These rituals are located in particular socio-political settings which transform over time, infusing deity presences

with a politics that (re)creates their mythohistories and attendant identities. As can be seen from the interaction and negotiation between deity presences described, these are intimately connected with those of human worlds. As with the ritual to renew the *labtsé* described in this chapter, groups of Tibetans hold allegiance to particular mountain and local deities, themselves deified ancestors who are intimately connected with particular tracts of land, their power places, and the socio-political power structures of those inhabiting their landscapes.

The incorporation of local deities and spirits into Buddhist frames took place via a series of mythohistories based around a paradigm of subjugation through tantric practices enacted by powerful tantric practitioners such as Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoché as he is more commonly known in Tibetan cultural regions. In Rebgong, Guru Rinpoché is said to have tamed a male and female monster at one of the eight holy sites, that of Tiger Valley (T. sTag lung), tamed monsters, opened up a holy cave and meditated for three months at another, Changgi Radzé (T. sPyang gi Rwa rtse). One yogi born around 1027 in Rebgong and known as Phakpa Lutod was renowned for his control of the serpent deities (T. *klu*) and subjugation of many local deities. This yogi is said to have created healing water through the power of his practice (Wuqi Chenaktsang 2010). Aspects of practices concerning autochthonous gods and their origin myths thus infuse contemporary rituals and approaches to health and well-being in Rebgong. This begs the question as to how understandings of them can or could inform analysis of contemporary ritual practices related to health and the treatment of illness. Origin myths are most often mixtures of early traditions including Bön, Bön in its later phases, and Buddhist influences, the boundaries between these ancient traditions being understood here as fluid and demonstrating common heritage (cf. Soerensen 1994: 520; Norbu 1995: 45; Esler 2005: 49).<sup>91</sup>

For purposes here, an origin myth of particular interest is one in which the water or serpent deities, the *le* (T. *klu*) appear as connected to the beginnings of the universe. These deities are very important both for the Leru ritual of which the *labtsé* ethnography described in this chapter is precursor, but also for the mythohistory surrounding the original settlers of Lingjia, the village complex whose ritual

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<sup>91</sup> Karmay cites the Deyu Chöchung (T. lDe'u chos 'byung) by Khapa Deyu (T. mKhas pa lDe'u) as the only source giving a relatively detailed account of origin myths (Karmay 1998: 291).

performance is the subject of Chapter Five here. Three different versions of this origin myth are found in the Tsangma Lübum (T. gTsang ma klu 'bum), a Buddhist influenced Bön work in three parts, one of which is dated earlier than the other two (Tucci 1949). In one version of the myth, the egg emerges from a light born of uncreated being and contains the first man, who was known as Le/Lü (T. Klu) in the Bön language.<sup>92</sup> The serpent deities (T. *klu*) paid homage to this first man, and he 'invited gods to the protection of created beings and overcame demons' (Tucci 1949: 711). Thus various malevolent forces and the indigenous deities known as *le/lü*, with whom the first man shares his name, predate humankind. In another version of this myth, the void originates a being, emanating the universe which is then pervaded by a multi-coloured light. The elements follow on from this, the sea, a tent of foam and finally a golden tortoise<sup>93</sup> who gives birth to six eggs from which six families of serpent deity derive. In another passage recounting this myth, a blue light arises from the void, giving rise to a rainbow, vapour, splendour, and an egg. From the outside of the egg the environment is created and from the interior of it comes a *le/lü* (T. *klu*).

In another version of the myth the void originates from a god and then emanates a 'wheel of vacuum', giving rise consecutively to the elements, continents, foam and an egg. This egg breaks to reveal a nine-headed being with infinite limbs, known as the nine headed lumo (T. Klu mo) of the world (Tucci 1949: 712). As is evident in the above, most of these origin myths present the first being as a god or local deity known as a *le/lü* (T. *klu*), and the one that mentions the first man implies that the gods, local deities and *le/lü* predated him. In another section of the same text, an alternative version of the above myth is presented, in which the vacuum produces 'the queen of the klu who arrayed existence', an embodiment of the universe and its elements (Tucci 1949: 712). In relation to contemporary rituals aimed at promoting, maintaining or recovering health and well-being, this origin myth in all its manifestations shares thematic content in which the universe, deity and humankind symbiotically arise in sequences of emergence demonstrating their interdependent existence. The elements play a key role in versions of the myth and it is these elements, integral part of the fabric

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<sup>92</sup> In the Zhang zhung language he named himself Mig can bu tsha rdsu 'phrul can, in Sum pa language, bsKos mkhan and in Tibetan, Srid pa'i mkhyen (cf. Tucci 1949: 711ff.).

<sup>93</sup> The cosmic tortoise is also an important theme in Chinese cosmology; the bShad mdzod (f. 210a) relates how China was completely subdued by a giant Tortoise lying on her back (Aris 1979: 19)

of existence, which recur in later esoteric Indo-Tibetan Buddhist practices concerning longevity, divination (Gerke 2012).

In origin myths studied via the genealogies of Tibetan ethnic groups, the ancestors of these myths often become local deities, and such beings were sometimes found recorded as part of family trees (cf. Tucci 1949, Appendix II). According to the fourteenth century Tibetan chronicle, *The Clear Mirror* (T. rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long), human beings are of divine descent (Sorensen (trans.) 1994: 48-9). The theogonies found in pre-Buddhist traditions and notions of divine kingship were integrated by Buddhist assimilation of Tibetan mythological histories and attendant ritual practices. There is a certain amount of controversy over the name of the first Tibetan king (cf. Russell 1982; Macdonald 1971: 198 ff.), with it appearing as Odé Purgyal (T. 'O lde spu rgyal) in documents dated circa ninth century. However, the prevalent narratives name him as King Natri Tsampo (T. gNya' khri btsan po), founder of the Yarlang dynasty, who descended from the sky, from the mountains, lowering himself progressively down through the heavens to earth by means of a sky rope, a *mu* cord (T. *dmu/rmu thag/dag*). In the aforementioned tripartite division of worlds into underworld, intermediate earth and sky, this establishes his nature as sacred and celestial. This divine king's successors ascended the *dmu thag* at death until one of them, named Drigum (T. Dri gum), literally 'Slain by Pollution', lost connection with the sky cord due to having lost his divine purity becoming polluted. King Drigum thereby became the first king of the Yarlung dynasty to need entombing (Snellgrove and Richardson 2003 [1968]: 25).

As indicated when discussing the Rebong village *tshowa*, groups hold allegiance to certain particular mountain deities; themselves deified ancestors who are intimately connected with particular tracts of land. The origins of such deification lie in origin myths containing essential themes that have since infused the roles of local deities and other non-human inhabitants of the Plateau, throughout their retelling in terms of relationship to geographical spaces, and their expression in ritual form. Such myths are presented in Tibetan cultural regions as histories, mythohistories that are not attempting to discover an objective narrative and can thus accommodate multiple versions of a single event. The direct link between ancestors-deities and ruling elite discussed above, is not the exclusive province of secular or political leaders, but extends also to religious leaders.

Officiates of Bön traditions have maintained a close relationship with secular rulers since early times. One tradition of Bön officiates, known as the Mu (T. dMu), was responsible for maintaining the *mu* cord, and so for funerary rites. The post eleventh century Bön tradition attributes the ancestry of its founder Shenrab (T. gShen rab) to the Mu clan. Reference to this can be found in a thirteenth century *terma* text (T. Kun gsal nyi zer sgrom ma), which was ‘rediscovered’ by Drawo Gomnyak (T. Bra bo sgom nyag) (Norbu 1995: 75). Tucci cites the Zeryig (T. gZer myig) as evidencing the intimate connection between the four leading Tibetan tribes, their four classes of Bön officiates, and certain classes of local deities (Tucci 1949: 715). One account of the fourfold classification of Bön officiants says that the first class increase good fortune and prosperity through their prayers to the *la* (T. *lha*) and the *men* (T. *sman*); the second class dispel calamities through divination (throwing *mdos* and *yas*); the third class dispel doubts concerning morality and view; and the fourth dispel hindrances through elimination of the *dré* (T. *'dre*) and subduing the *si* (T. *sri*) (the Gyal rabs, quoted in Tucci 1949: 715). It was these points of contact and common grounds between traditions entailing autochthonous local deities, and the deity worlds of Buddhism which fused on mythological, and mythohistorical narrative levels, to form base for current ritual practices in Tibetan cultural regions. A ritual particular to Rebgong in which elements of origin myths, mythohistories, deity and human presences come together, is that of the Leru (T. Klu rol), practiced annually in villages across Rebgong. In this ritual the whole community joins in the propitiation of ancestral mountain gods as embodied by their spirit mediums, the *lawa* (T. *lha pa*), offerings to these, and to other local deities such as the serpent deities (T. *klu*), for the health, prosperity and protection of villagers and environments.

### ***Jiangjia Origins and Structures***

The village of Jiangjia is the location of both the *labtsé* and Leru rituals described in this and the following chapter of this thesis respectively. The village purports to trace ancestry to a certain Sejia Shenbum (T. bSe rgyal mtshan 'bum), believed to be the illegitimate son of the Chinese Princess Wencheng and the minister Gar (T. mGar), who was conceived whilst this minister was accompanying the princess to central Tibet for her marriage to its eighth century King Trisong Detsen (T. Khri srong lde brtsan). This mythohistory has it that Jiangjia village was founded four

generations later by a direct descendent of Sejia Shenbum named Pelchen Dorjé (T. dPal chan rdo rje). It was subsequently ruled patrilineally, with nephews assuming lineage lines in the absence of sons. Like other Rebgong villages, Jiangjia consists of households grouped into smaller communal units of households, known locally as *tshowa* (T. *tsho ba*). Three of these *tshowa* were known as the original householders, the *sazingizhima* (T. *sa 'dzin gyi gzhi ma*) of the village, with two of these – Nukwosang (T. Nag po tshang) and Dulayjia (T. bDud las rgyal) – alternating leadership of Jiangjia (dGe 'dun bkra shis 2012:42-44).<sup>94</sup>

Within Rebgong village communities, these *tshowa*, which are further dividable into *wakha* (T. *rva kha*), share mutual responsibility for work and ritual duties. The costs and organisation of these duties may rotate from year to year or be the responsibility of one particular household as inherited responsibility. Examples include large community rituals such as the annual Leru and rituals pertaining to one individual household, such as funerals. An example of this was the rotational *tshowa* provision of a goat for sacrifice during Leru in Sogru (T. Sog ru) village until this practice was abandoned in 1985 (mKhar rtse rgyal 2008:416). Movement between *tshowa* is possible, although not usual, and can even occur voluntarily in case of dissatisfaction with the way in which ones natal *tshowa* has handled an event (Langelaar 2014). A further two *tshowa* were later added to Jiangjia's three foundational ones. They are known locally as the Tsazhang Tsowa (T. tSha zhang tsho ba), or 'group of the cousins and maternal uncles' (dGe 'dun bkra shis 2012:122). These share a different *zhidak* to the former (bLa ma tshe ring 2002:101). The households of the different *tshowa* will tend to group together during village disputes, some of which can develop into full scale inter-*tshowa* wars. One example of this in Jiangjia was the dispute two *tshowa*, Nyenshang (T. gNyen tshang)<sup>95</sup> and Chukha (T. Chu kha), over the water supply. This resulted in the derogatory pseudonym Chukak (T. Chu bkag) being used for Chukha village; replacing 'water bank' with 'blocked water' in reference to the way in which

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<sup>94</sup> I am following dGe 'dun bkra shis here, since it is the most recent local scholarship available to me. However, it should be noted that there are differing readings of the five main groups in Rebgong. For example, another reading lists them as follows: Nyangtsang, Hadalajel, Chekha. Yegsil and Ngkatsang (Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia 1995: 235).

<sup>95</sup> The Nyenshang *tshowa* is alternatively known as Kharzhi (T. mKhar gzhis) after the fortress they once inhabited (dGe 'dun bkra shis 2012: 122)

Chukha tshowa blocked the irrigation channels of Nyenshang *tshowa* (dGe-'dun bkra shis 2012).

One such ritual, which speaks both to the origins of local deities and to their relevance in contemporary Rebgong communities, is that in which the *labtsé*, tribute to the mountain god of the region and mark of both village or *tshowa* boundary and that of the deity's protective sphere, is renewed. The *tshowa*, whilst not necessarily linked to particular tracts of land within Rebgong villages, may certainly manage particular parts of village lands and have historically had territorial demarcations (Langelaar 2014), as indicated by the dispute outlined above, wherein certain irrigation channels were associated particularly with one of the warring *tshowa*. The *labtsé* mark geographical borders recognised by groups of villagers holding allegiance to particular *zhidak*; mountain deities intimately connected with particular tracts of land. These mountain deities encompass the local deities of all levels, sky, earth and underground, connecting concepts of the body and that of the homestead (cf Stein 1972[1962]:103ff).

However, the borders of their territories are often not in evidence for other cultural groups, such as may be found in tourist groups, who are unacquainted with the regions or traditions concerned. Indeed, a uniformed person from a different ethnic group may pass by a *labtsé* perhaps having no idea it was a territorial marker designating a border crossing between both seen and unseen worlds. Crossing such a border without paying proper respect, or indeed perhaps inadvertently showing disrespect, could lead to serious consequences. At the least, a person would be considered by the groups maintaining the *labtsé* as not passing under the protection of the local deities, and at the worst as incurring their wrath, which could manifest in such forms as sickness. A ritual layer to the geographical and metaphysical frontiers marked by these *labtsé* is their requirement or demand for ritual renewal from those who live under the protection of the mountain god(s) whose territories they border; gods who both protect and define them.



a Rebong *labtsé*

### *Placing the Labtsé*

The *labtsé* can be thought of, as the *tho* (T. *tho*), markers which are dotted across the Tibetan Plateau. The Tibetan word *tho* means something in English like 'register' or 'boundary mark', however it is phonetically very close to *mtho*, which means 'high', and this second meaning is often conflated with the first in Tibetan boundary marking practices (Stein 1972: 204). Indeed, local Rebong translation of *labtsé* as 'summit mountain top' is prevalent in oral discourse (dPal ldan bkra shis & Stuart 1998: n. 23). The white stones of the *tho* and the towering *labtsé*, marking power places, are prevalent all across the Tibetan plateau; placed by the roadside or mountain track to honour the local deity or to indicate a boundary crossing. The time-honoured tradition of paying homage to and propitiating the mountain gods can be seen in the text quoted in translation at the start of this chapter.

Flags or paper bearing sacred syllables or mantras may be attached to *tho* or *labtsé* and strung across the borders they indicate, thrown to the winds in their vicinity and utilised as part of *sang* rites. These are known as *lungta* (T. *klung rta* / *rlung rta*)<sup>96</sup>, literally river / wind horses, sending out as they do the sacred syllables inscribed upon them (Karmay 2015). The sacred syllables of deity painted on them will be taken by the environmental winds that blow them.<sup>97</sup> Those who suffer illness thought to be caused by a depletion in their 'spiritual power' (Day 1989:313-314), ie. the psychophysical strength that religious practice of ethics and devotion is said to bring, can perform a flag-hanging rite, also termed *lungta* (T. *rlung rta*), as remedy. In fact, the term *lungta* can be used to refer to the flag, the rite and the phenomenon of this spiritual power (Lichter and Epstein 1983: 240; Day 1989: 314). The etymology of the word can also suggest a combination of wind or space (T. *rlung* / *klung*) with the swiftness of an excellent horse, *tachok* (T. *rta mchog*), an ancient Tibetan symbol of travelling at great speed (Norbu 1995: 68-9).<sup>98</sup> The *lungta* are papers or cotton prints covered in depictions of auspicious animals (such as the horse, eagle, dragon, tiger and yak), designs or *mantra*. These animals represent elemental forces in terms of their actual functions, the fact that the horse at the centre is adorned with a wish-fulfilling jewel denoting the possibility to transform fortunes to attune them with ones wishes by means of the elements (Norbu 1995: 669). Notions of power, empowerment govern these practices. Both hanging *lungta* and proximity to them are auspicious acts by which the blessing of deity worlds is thought to empower those engaging in the rites, creating good fortune or 'luck', which also termed *lungta*, for those who so do. *Lungta* are an important part of any ritual fumigation, *sang* (T. *bsang* / *bsangs*) offering, such as precedes important events such as the renewal of the *labtsé* to be described here, and the Leru which follows it. Whilst throwing the *lungta*, a person will explore the mountain deity, that they: “increase his fortune like the galloping of a horse and expand his prosperity like

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<sup>96</sup> These terms can be translated 'river horse' or 'wind horse' respectively. There is a certain amount of controversy over the spellings and origins of these terms (Karmay 1998c), but this is not relevant for purposes here.

<sup>97</sup> There are two primary types of such flags: *darchog* (T. *dar lcog*), which are the most important and considered beneficial for the next life; and *dargö* (T. *dar rgod*), which are thought to solve more immediate problems (Tucci 1966; Norbu 1966)

<sup>98</sup> Note that Karmay takes *klung* here to translate as 'river', whilst Norbu translates it as 'space'. However, whichever translation is taken, the same points about the term representing the elements stand.

the boiling over of milk” (*rlung rta rta rgyug rgyug / kha rje 'o ma 'phyur 'phyur!*).’ (Karmay 2015: 408).



**throwing lungta on a Rebong mountain top**

Wooden representations of weapons and the horns of animals, or even their heads, can be added to *labtsé*; an indication of the warrior-like qualities possessed by the mountain deities, embodiments of ancestral leaders, they are meant as offering. Tibetan travellers passing these points will stop to offer something - for example, a stone, a horn, juniper branches, wool, *lungta* or drink – and shout “Lha ki ki so so!!!”; a victory cry for the mountain deities, wishing them victory over their enemies. It is also an exhortation that the deities, thus properly respected, provide the traveller safe passage across their lands. The places marked by *labtsé* are strategic, sometimes difficult crossings. They are places of transition marking the territories of mountain gods, their dwelling places, the respectful observance of whose borders and offerings at whose power places is intended to result in peace for the regions concerned.

Literature on the *labtsé* does not abound, however, there are a variety of accounts, mostly contained within research focusing on mountain deities. The only ethnographic material specifically focusing on *labtsé* that I found were given by Karmay (1994a, 1998b) and dPal 'dan bkra shis & Stuart (1998), followed by Berounsky and Slobodnik (2003). After this there are fairly detailed generic overviews can be found in Davidson (2005), and Goldstein and Kapstein (2006). Some related material can also be found in Blondeau and Steinkellner (1996), Huber (1999), Karmay and Nagano (2000, 2003), Diemberger (2007) and Nietupski (2011). The latter two sources discuss *labtsé* rites in regions neighbouring Rebgong, Diemberger in Henan and Nietupski in Labrang. The '*Tsendiri latse*' Tibetan style festival of Henan Mongolian Autonomous Prefecture, like the Leru and *labtsé* renewal discussed here, had to reinstitute itself after having been banned for a number of years. As is the case in Rebgong, the reinstatement of such rituals involves local negotiations not only with party state officials but also with the challenges modernities pose to maintaining the authenticity of traditional rites (cf Diemberger 2007).

The closest ethnographic accounts to the ritual I observed in Jiangjia, and frame as a renewal of the *labtsé* here, are given by dPal 'dan bkra shis & Stuart (1998) and Karmay, although the latter frames his as a fumigatory *sang* rite rather than as a *labtsé* rite (Karmay 1998b). The offering of *sang* (T. *bsangs*) is central both to proceedings during the annual ritual renewal of the *labtsé* and the Leru festival I describe here. As has been mentioned, *sang* is a fumigation offering, the main ingredient of which is juniper branches. Other possible components used in Rebgong include cypress branches, tsampa (barley flour) and highland barley. One Rebgong household who hosted me listed the ingredients of the *sang* they offered as follows: juniper branches, butter, cheese, barley, *tsampa* (barley flour), clean water and *sangzé ribu* (T. *bsang rdzas ril bu*): pellets made by the local monastery for use in *sang* rites.<sup>99</sup> *Sang* can be offered in a household context or during large communal rituals such as the Leru. The Tibetan Rebgongpa usually make daily offerings of *sang* to the local mountain deities as part of maintaining right relations with the local deity realms who, in exchange, will protect and enhance their communities' health and prosperity.

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<sup>99</sup> From notes taken during fieldwork in 2008.

Ancient *sang* texts indicate the intent of this practice, ubiquitous across the Tibetan Plateau, is as a purification rite. This is indicated by the root of the term *sang* (T. *bsangs*) being the verb ‘to purify’: *sangwa* (T. *bsang ba*), which connotes that the purification is through fire or fumigation (Karmay 1998b: 382-3).



*sang* at Jiangjia labtsé

Norbu also places emphasis on purification as the primary aim of *sang* rites in his account of them. In a quote from one *sang* text which is part of a collection of rituals attributed to Padmasambhava, he quotes in translation:

Where did the Sang originate?

The Sang came from the sky.

The father was the thunder that rumbled in the sky,  
the mother was the lightening that flashed onto the earth,  
the offspring were the snow that piled on Mount Tago,  
the foam (*kha shag*) of turquoise Lake Maphan,  
the healing power of the six excellent medicines  
and the fragrance of perfumed incenses.

We offer *chemar* (barley flour and butter), boiled milk  
and scorched foods,  
the beech resplendent with golden leaves,

the cypress resplendent with turquoise leaves,  
the rhododendron resplendent with conch white leaves,  
the artemis, the *pökar* and the eaglewood.  
We offer the smoke of the aromatic plants  
with *chemar*, first portions of food (*phud*) and libations  
to purify all the deities and spirits.<sup>100</sup>

What the above begs to question is what precisely is to be purified here. In answer to this there are a variety of terms pointing towards a spectrum of contaminations, primordial stains, shadows or *drip* (T. *grib*). These are the results of wicked actions of the past, many committed in remote past life cycles, whose traces leave such marks upon beings' present forms in the same way that a poison alters the composition of a body. Therefore, ultimately, what is being purified in these types of rites are karmic in origin (cf Norbu 1995:107-8). In his work on the spirit mediums of upper Tibet, Bellezza reports that the *sang* rites, both in the fumigation and recitation of texts praising and invoking the possessing deities, in purifying the place also protect the deities coming into embodiment through spirit or trance mediums from malevolent influences during the possession process (Bellezza 2011: 7).

Karmay notes in the 1990s that the ritual corresponding here to the one I entitle 'renewal of the *labtsé*' was not attended either by women or by people from outside of the particular community groups to which it related, and that it takes place over a two-day period (1998b). In contrast, the rite I attended took place from the night before to the dawn offering of *sang* and wooden weapons etc. at that *labtsé* and ended in the afternoon of that day. Whilst no Tibetan women attended, several people from outside the village did, myself included. I was invited to attend several rites to renew the *labtsé* during the course of my fieldwork in Rebgong, and at no time did anyone express surprise or distrust of a non-villager attending. At one of these many women and children joined the men on the mountainside, suggesting the prohibition of their presence during the Jiangjia *labtsé* renewal was not a pan-Rebgong one.

The *sang* text quoted at the start of this chapter is from a Rebgong village called Jiangjia (T. lCang skya), which lies in the South of Rongwo town about eight

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<sup>100</sup> From the Ge khod mnol bsang, Op.29, p.79 (16a)l.1. (Norbu's translation in Norbu 1995:110)

kilometres from the centre. A full Tibetan version of this text can be found in Appendix III. It is used on a daily basis, as outlined above, when making household offerings to the mountain deities. Other times it is employed include special occasions such as at Losar (T. Lo gsar), Tibetan New Year, during occasions of social importance such as weddings, and of course at Leru. The text belongs to a genre known locally as *sangbé* (T. *bsang dpe*) and is chanted during the *sang* offering rites mentioned above. During Leru, the smoke of the *sang* offering must never die out and is maintained through the night for the full three or more days of the festival.<sup>101</sup>

dPal 'dan bkra shis & Stuart (1998), in their ethnography of the Rebgong village complex of Lingjia (T. gLing gyal), describe the *labtsé* as 'altar' for the mountain deity, built to delight them on pain of their destroying crops if displeased with such offerings. This village has three *labtsé* for different mountain gods, hierarchically arranged on appropriate surrounding mountains. The lesser of the three is lower down the mountain, and the authors make the point that there are many kinds of *labtsé*, some of which can even be located underground, within the mountain. The authors note that each household is responsible for bringing one pole or spear to add to the *labtsé* (dPal 'dan bkra shis & Stuart 1998:41), as was the case at the *labtsé* renewal rite I attended in neighbouring Jiangjia.

### ***Renewing the Jiangjia Labtsé***

As was discussed in the previous chapter, the presence of local deities, and most prominently the *shidak*, are intrinsic to the fabric of existence for the Tibetan communities of Rebgong; interacting with them through ritual is understood to be essential for health and well-being. In Rebgong the *labtsé* are offered to regularly but consecrated ritually in annual renewals. The one in Jiangjia takes place just before the annual Leru, the harvest time festival in which the mountain deities, the *shidak*, and various deities, including the *lu* deities mentioned in the story of Domba's health seeking journey, may be honoured.

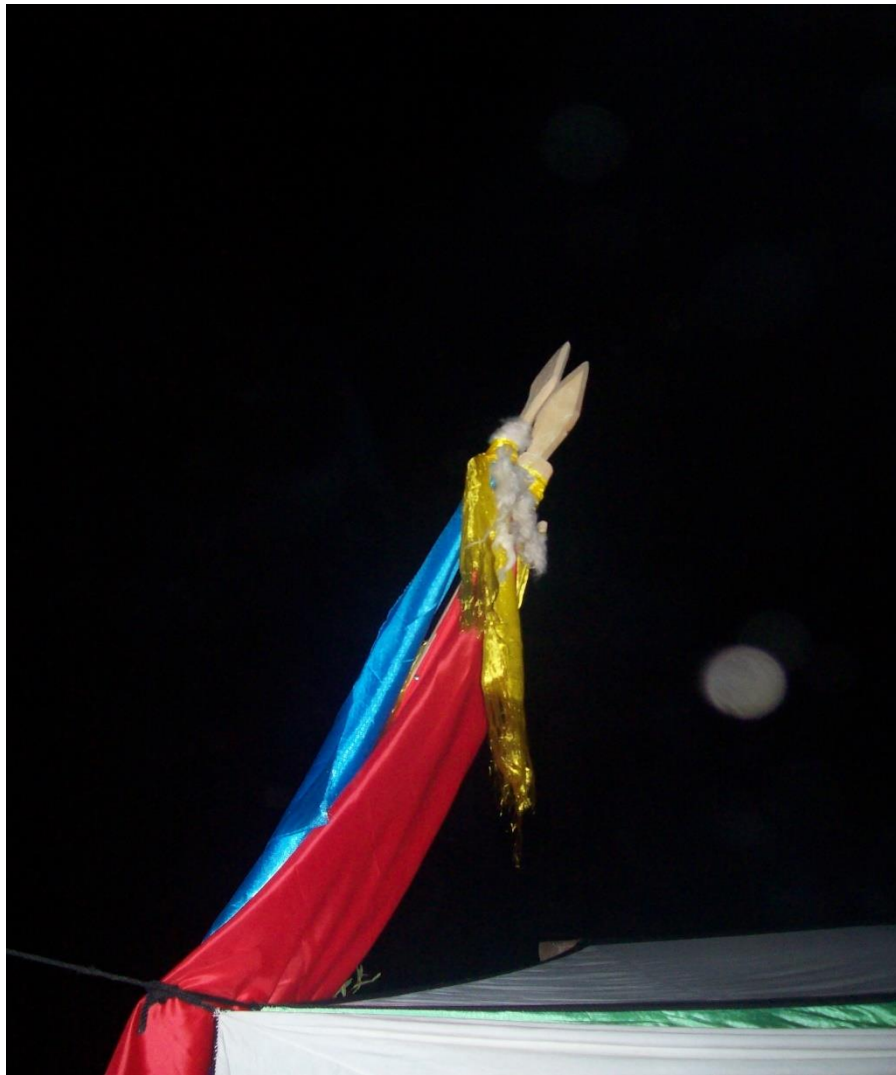
The annual rituals in Rebgong which pertain to the *labtsé* include recitation of texts in a vital performance. The men of Jiangjia go in the early morning on an

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<sup>101</sup> This introduction to the text was given during personal communication with Rebgong informants.

auspicious day to initiate the ritual renewal of the *labtsé*, which is mostly their concern, mountain gods being warlike beings requiring male propitiation. In the particular village whose ritual I will describe here, no women took part, although it should be noted women are not always completely excluded in this way. The night before the ritual, those male members who were living their familial homesteads in the village due to work commitments returned and either stayed with their families or set up camp on the hillsides around the village located at the foot of the mountain that was prime abode of the mountain god(s). Each family had a tent ready for the food preparation and partying that would take place the following day, as part of the celebrations accompanying the mountain god(s)' descent in the form of the village spirit medium, or *lawa* (T. *lha pa*), to bless and advise them.

The two men who slept in the tent where I overnighted before the *labtsé* ritual I will describe here spent most of the night drinking around an open fire. At one point, quite late in the evening, an animated mobile phone conversation heralded the arrival of some important guest at our campfire. My two friends gathered together all the finest furs and rugs at the campsite and built a makeshift throne at the head of the fire. The person who subsequently appeared turned out to be a local reincarnate *lama*; one recognised as the reincarnation of a high Buddhist teacher. The lama went through the expected protocol of refusing to sit on the 'throne' until almost physically forced down onto it by his 'inferiors', then he had a few beers with us and offered me a cigarette. He seemed bemused by my refusal. Didn't all foreigners smoke? The village lights spread out below us gradually went out one by one, the lama left for his monastery and we collapsed into bed before my friends had managed to finish off all the alcohol supplies for the following day.



offerings of weapons for the mountain gods

The men roused me before dawn, stumbling out into the half light of the full moon pulling their robes groggily around them. Other men dressed in brightly coloured robes were emerging from their houses and tents, all carrying wooden spears and arrows to offer to the mountain god(s). We all began winding our way up the mountainside, a snake of vibrant colour against the brown earth. As we reached to summit the dawn began to break, splitting the chill with warm rays of sunlight. The voiced part of the ritual began, led by the village leaders, and constituted recitation of the *sangbe* recited whilst offering *sang*, as previously described (see Appendix III for text). These elders, charged with leadership roles within the community, were thus charged here with the vital embodiment of texts in praise of the mountain gods, performed with ritual grace, evoking the blessings of the gods. The leaders sat or danced around the large offering of *sang* (T. *bsangs*) - burning juniper branches onto which each new arrival threw more juniper branches, barley flour and alcohol (a Chinese liquor called 'bi-jo'; C. *bai jium*; T.

*chang dkar*). Others let off firecrackers and threw paper *lungta* (T. *rlung rta*) into the air, crying out for the gods to be victorious. The *lungta* flew like paper birds upon the wind carrying the men's fortunes with them on the rising spreading currents of air lofting over the mountain tops. The men added weapons for the mountain god(s), wooden spears and branches, to the existent *labtsé* whilst circumnambulating it clockwise – just as they would a Buddhist *chöten* (T. *mchod rten*; S. *stūpa*). Each added something to the sculptural grace of the *labtsé*, silhouetted against a sky clouded with smoke from the burning juniper branches in the offering fires beneath us. Songs and cries rose up onto the winds and were carried by them across the mountains surrounding us. Walking along a precipitous ledge we circled around the heap of wooden weapons, colourful flags and juniper branches. Fire crackers burst into the winds like gunshots, and the men danced, their bright coloured Tibetan clothing sparkling primary colours against the clear blue skies. The dawn had fully broken and the air up there in the mountain clouds was bright with the promise of a new year under the protection of the mountain god whose exhalations rang out, accompanied by the clashing of symbols. Finally, all drew together for the final chants to summon and praise the god(s) before gradually dispersing back down to the village to await the god's appearance as translated into being by his spirit medium.



*ritual renewal of a labtsé*

### ***Rites and Elemental Processes***

In discussing politics, borders and identities in Tibetan cultural regions, deity worlds are pivotal. Therefore, study of such worlds and the relationships human beings maintain with them forms necessary part of any focus upon political boundary markers placed upon geographical spaces and ethnic groupings, and the impact of such state designated categorisations upon the identities of peoples. As has been problematised by such scholarship, the identities of the peoples studied in terms of these analyses are a fluid phenomenon making context and practice bases for analysis more appropriate than ‘ethnicity’ or ‘identity’; apparent ‘belonging’ to any particular group (cf. Merian 2012). However, such scholarly accounts as outlined above, whilst speaking of political, socially constructed and ethnic boundaries, do not generally mention or take into consideration that of deity/non-human worlds so focal to understandings of borders and belongings for many regions. For the multifarious communities of Tibetan cultural regions generally, and Amdo in particular, an extra layer can be added to this more usual academic discourse vis-à-vis identity. Worlds of deity, both sublime and local, are

believed to intersect with and mutually influence the political borders and inter-relational divides acknowledged by societies of human beings. These worlds are reflected in ritual practices particularly related to deity worlds, such as the renewal of the *labtsé* described earlier in this chapter.

In the context of notions such as those described about: divine kingship, ancestors becoming gods, and Buddhist transmutation of local deities for its own purposes, the question of distinction between gods arises. How is it possible to distinguish between Buddhist and local territorial deities, whether manifesting as divine ancestors or appearing as characters in ritual festivals such as that of the Leru? How should studies treat the relationship between the local deities, such as those propitiated during Leru, and those of the Buddhist tradition? Are these ‘separate systems’ or part of a single mode of experiencing reality? Two general orientations, ‘clerical’ and ‘shamanic’ are contrasted by Samuel as frame for analysing Tibetan religions (cf. Samuel 1993). These categories are anything but discrete, and perhaps best understood as motifs upon a spectrum of praxis across which individual communities and individuals move. Sherry Ortner demonstrated in her article questioning the value of polarised representations, that it is possible to attribute the quality qualifying for inclusion in one category to its polar opposite category. In support of this argument, she attributes the relational quality a former article of hers applied to shamanism to monasticism, and the individualist quality her former article applied to monasticism to shamanism (Ortner 1998). These general orientations and the boundary between practitioners falling clearly within the province of one or the other could be seen evidenced in the way that, in my account of a *labtsé* renewal, although the local incarnate Buddhist lama visited the venues for the *labtsé* renewal ritual and the Leru the night before, he did not participate in either ritual intended for the local mountain god and neither did any local Buddhist monks. However, for many people affiliations and alignments are not so clearly defined as they were in the case of the Buddhist reincarnate lama; for those without such positional boundaries to their expected behaviours, those not subject to rigid ideological or social constraints, the situation is far more complex.

As highlighted by Ramble in his study of religion in a highland community, Buddhism itself is hardly a discrete unit, with different schools often competing within one village setting. This situation may then be further complicated by a local non-

Buddhist tradition, or two of these in relation to one Buddhist school co-existing in one village context. Yet to view such complex configurations of religious activity as simply a ‘three way ideological standoff’ would be reductive (cf. Ramble 2008: chapter 5). One suggestion as criteria for demarcating the boundary between Buddhist and non-Buddhist ritual practices has been that of blood rites, or animal sacrifice, a boundary marker which has also been used by Bön practitioners to distinguish between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Bön, the former celebrating blood rites and the latter eschewing them. This is an interesting demarcation in the case of Rebong and brings to mind a conversation in a bar with two Rebong men from the same village about the rite of sacrificing a goat during Leru. In some villages a goat is given to the mountain god. Often villages replace a live goat with a *tsampa* (barley flour) effigy, however, in the village my friends belonged to a live goat was still used.



live goat replaced a *tsampa* (barley flour) effigy as offering for the mountain god

Their question to me was if I could help think of a good way to explain blood sacrifice to tourists; one that would enable my friends to bring their tour groups to this part of the Leru, something they had hitherto not done. These two men were devout Buddhists from practicing families, yet neither saw any conflict in attending a non-Buddhist rite in which a goat is dramatically killed. They did not view the rite as in any way conflicting with their Buddhist affiliations and neither did they view the goat's death as an act of killing they were involved in and thus contrary to Buddhist precepts, rather merely them witnessing the mountain god eating. The whole conversation exemplified for me the way in which the worlds of *lawa* and *lama* converge in the lives of lay people in the Rebgong villages, underlain by a cultural logic directing interaction with multifaceted deity worlds.

There is historical precedence in Rebgong for this way that boundaries between ritual practices and who is permitted to participate or be present at them can be fluid in village settings; relatively unbound by theoretical strictures. This is found in the biography of one of Rebgong's most famous yogis, Ngakbön Dranpa Namkha (T. sNags Bön Dran pa Nam kha). As his name suggests, he is said to have become adept in both Bön and Buddhist practices (Wuqi Chenaktsang 2010). My position as non-Tibetan was something of an anomaly in village terms. The colour of my skin created the assumption amongst locals that I was not Buddhist (at least in any substantively recognisable way), Bön, nor a subject of the village Mountain God. However, despite being female I was on occasion granted access to rituals such as *labtsé* renewals, which were usually the province solely of male Tibetans. This could perhaps be seen as evidencing fluidity in village approaches to ritual practices. However, it could equally be taken as indicating a shift in the focus of village ritual practices initiated by contact with tourists and travellers.

As with the advent of much modern technology, the formation of etiquettes and behavioural boundaries around the new tends to lag behind its advent, leaving the communal space open to misunderstandings and confrontations which, even a decade ago, were unanticipated. I saw many incidences of such cultural mishaps during village rituals. As example, on one such occasion a rather well dressed and manicured European woman with a large handbag had seen me sitting with some of the village elders of one village during a Leru. Not realising that I had been invited and placed

where I was sitting by one of the elders, after quite some lengthy protestations that no really I couldn't sit with them and drink arak (local spirits), she assumed a seat amongst them was fair game for any tourist. She and I had been introduced through a Tibetan called Tenzin who was acting as tour guide for her in Rebgong and hoping to enlist her help sponsoring NGO activities. She didn't remember my name, as I don't hers, but plonked herself down next to me exclaiming loudly that she could do with some tea. The elders looked embarrassed, one left, saying he would try to find her some, and others looked around nervously to see where the village *lawa* was. This particular spirit medium had a reputation for being very fiery when manifesting as the mountain deity. The *lawa* had been last seen piercing young men through their cheeks and one of these was presenting the mountain god white offering scarves, *katak* (T. *kha btags*), and requests for protection on my behalf, since as woman I could not approach him myself. I thought it best to move, so thanked the elders for inviting me and left the seated area to go and find my friend. I attempted to bring the European woman with me. She was not abandoning her chance of that tea. I had only just got safely over a small hillock and back into the main body of people at the Leru when I heard a commotion and, turning back, saw the *lawa* towering over the large European woman wielding a long stick. Incensed, he motioned for her to leave the area where the male elders of the village formerly seated there had all leapt up in respect and were now standing at safe distance around him bowing their heads to show deference. Remaining seated and looking the *lawa* directly in the eye, two signs of non-deference in Tibetan social norms, the European woman asked him in English what the matter was, in apparent disregard of the fact that even if he weren't in trance state as mountain god, he was highly unlikely to speak any European languages. Receiving no response, she then directed the same question to those around, and finally, as the *lawa* began prodding her off the seated area with his stick, exclaimed with outrage that she was 'with Tenzin!', as if being with a tour guide (who was, incidentally from a different village so also a guest at this Leru) entitled her to do anything she wanted. Such incidences highlight the challenges facing village ritual traditions in consequence of their increasing access to outsiders; outsiders who, for the most part, have little if any understanding of the rituals or any guidance as to how to position themselves in order to not cause offence. The improper observance or disturbance of such rituals as the Leru, for the harvest, and disrespectful behaviour towards the local deities and their sacred places, such as the sites of *labtsé*, can lead to the sense amongst local people that they are open to a wide range of ill-health and other problems caused by the affronted local deities.

## *Empowered Agency*

It is interesting to note, regarding these responses to, or interactions with, sacred space in Tibetan cultural regions, the importance of the spoken word, or words, in (re)creating it so. As discussed earlier in this chapter, *lungta* are replete with meaning. They are covered in written syllables which are thought to waft on the winds to emit blessings across the environs. The evocation of the deities by travellers crossing high mountain passes marked as sacred by *labtsé* or *lungta*, is made through speech; words are flung to the winds and, if crossing the pass in a vehicle, windows are wound down in order that the winds can best carry them. Inherent in the practice of inscribing *lungta* with mantra, sacred Buddhist syllables, alongside pre-Buddhist auspicious images and signs, is the notion that even the indication of a syllable connected to deity on cotton or paper evokes and transmits the power of that deity; creating luck, *lungta*.

This calls to mind Bakhtin's analysis, as described in the introduction to this thesis, on which the use of any word dialogically refers back to its past connotations and anticipates future response. Thus, no word is static. This is no less true of the words uttered in sacred spaces, such as on the high mountain passes considered deity abodes adorned with *labtsé* or *tho* and purified with *sang*. Response is expected from the mountain gods, whose power places these are, when they are thus evoked through words, both written and spoken. The response of the mountain gods is partly given in words, via their mediums, as will be discussed in the chapter to follow; their words a constantly evolving dialogic.

To summarise then, in the Rebong villages, rituals related to the ancestral mountain gods, such as the renewal of the *labtsé* and the Leru festival, coexist with rituals conducted by both Buddhist and Bön adepts of monastic institutions and from groups of householder tantric practitioners. The histories underlying all these practices are infused by a mythical discourse central to which is the role of these divine and spirit beings in maintaining and propagating the health of environs and their inhabitants, whilst protecting them from harm. Religious activities of most kinds require, if not the consent of local deities, their subjugation or propitiation if rituals are to succeed. Appropriate ritual relations with deity worlds, in terms of activities on the lands under their influence, have to be maintained in order for natural environments and human inhabitants to remain free from harm and to prosper. This indicates an intrinsic

relationship between the actions of people, their mental and bodily ritual activities of any kind and the natural environment. The enactment of this relationship has consequences for the well-being of internal and external worlds, the boundaries between which are envisioned as porous. The successful establishment of kingdoms, states, religions and the health of their rulers also depend upon this process, as is graphically demonstrated by the system of temples said to subdue the demoness, which also had the effect of staking out the King's land. The incorporation of indigenous systems and practices thus proved more effective than an attempt to eradicate them in the introduction of Buddhism to Tibetan cultural regions (cf. Samuel 1993, 2005). Thus the socio-political dimension of rituals evoking motifs such as expressed in the mythohistory of the demoness and subsequent pacification of local deity forces is at the fore in an ongoing negotiation between religious traditions, the local deities and those of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist pantheon; a negotiation which could be describable as a politics of presence. Human beings compete for the authentication of their voices through ritual and evocation of the deity presences with whom they consider they share and negotiate power bases. The way in which mythohistories such as that of King Songten Gampo present the establishment and continuation of a ruling power reflects notions of sacred kingship which bear comparison with the notion of divine kingship in Tantric Buddhism. The incorporation of the local deities into Buddhist schema by the tantric adept Guru Rinpoché, in conjunction with a pundit, a *lama*, and sponsored by a king provides motif for the (re)negotiation and (re)formation of ruling structures in contemporary communities.

I wish to suggest here that divine beings are voicing places as the territories of particular communities and under specific leaderships, functioning as matrix in a cultural matrix of healing. In this, I would suggest that this type of approach has much to bring to the study of Tibetan cultural regions, and in particular that taking the deity world into account in analysing the identity (re)formulations of human worlds and their other/self-boundaries, is not only necessary but essential in providing suitable frame from which to better comprehend the bounding of such spaces and the identities of their peoples and their quest for health and well-being. The territorial or ancestral deities, local, household or mountain gods, and all types of deity or spirits inhabiting Tibetan cultural landscapes, inform health and well-being through their relationship to the environment and interaction with human beings of the locality. Situating them in context of the mythohistories and origin myths which underlie their conception and

continual renewal through rites such as the *labtsé* is thus foundational in exploring their impact on health and illness in such regions. Rituals invoking and involving them are concerned with the maintenance of appropriate relations between them and the human beings with whom they share spaces and is vital to the health and well-being of such communities, in terms of both freedom from disease but also freedom from natural disasters affecting bodies of all levels. Elemental forces found in origin myths have found continuous renewal and reincorporation with the arrival of Buddhism on Tibetan grounds and the subsequent situation and development of medical ideas and practices within Buddhist frames yet retaining much predating Buddhism. Health seeking practices and treatments on this model operate on the basis that every being is a fluid process with the potential to become well in an ultimate sense and, in doing so, of healing others. In seeking health, a layered religious complex assists individuals and communities through its multifarious rituals central to which are the maintenance and renewal of right relations with deity worlds.

This thesis aims to explore rituals connected to health, well-being and the treatment of illness in terms of their meanings for the people described in its ethnographies. Just as with approaches to disease across Tibetan cultural regions, such meanings are not to be found by seeking to isolate a single entity underlying a particular practice. They are better explored through viewing the whole situation of which they are integral part: the complex, layered environment of human, non-human and deity worlds which frame and encompass rituals connected with preserving and restoring well-being. The next chapter will explore these themes through the lens of the harvest festival of Leru in one village setting.

## CHAPTER FOUR – SACRED SPHERES

*In the high lonely hills  
Long ago astray: why  
Did the great merciless winds  
Fill my heart with joy?*

- Kathleen Raine<sup>102</sup>

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In the introductory chapter to this thesis, I posed the question: What do they mean these lands, these places, for these people? This chapter is a response to that question which focuses on the Jiangjia Leru harvest festival in Rebgong, and the deity presences it invokes. It is concerned with the structures of deity and human realms, the centres and peripheries of power, models of embodiment and how these interact with and are invoked to influence human worlds. The chapter discusses the intimate connection between household rituals in Tibetan cultural regions and those involving whole communities, such as the Leru. It explores the phenomenon of becoming spirit mediums in these areas, and the import of initiation rites to ‘open’ subtle bodily systems in order to facilitate embodiment. The chapter further develops discussion of presence in terms of the sensibilities evoked by interaction with deity worlds, highlighting the pivotal role of these realms in a cultural matrix of healing.

### ***Powerful Peaks and Valley Voices***

Height and elevation has long been esteemed in Tibetan cultural regions, as is indicated by the aforementioned ancient tripartite schema under which the highest spaces are the sphere of gods, the middle spaces of *tsen* (T. *btsan*), local deities and humankind, and the lowest spaces the underworlds of the serpent deities, the *le* (T. *klu*). Accordingly, temples and hermitages are built in high places, village houses on lower ground, and

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<sup>102</sup> From her series of short poems entitled ‘Ah, Many, Many Are the Dead’

within those houses the shrine room will be in the highest place, no holy objects relating to it lower than one's waist, and seating arrangements in temples and houses likewise will reflect this – with the highest status people given the highest places (Ortner 1978; Dollfus 1989). Mountains are symbols of life and fertility, and in Tibetan cultural regions particularly of male identity and fecundity. It is from mountains that water, source of life and vitality, flows. As we have seen, particular territories may be framed by mythohistories of ancestors, both human and divine, and community foundation myths in which the local deities of particular tracts of land are subjugated by tantric practitioners and commit to protecting the territory for the benefit of its future residents. Indeed, some mountains themselves may originate in places of spiritual power elsewhere and have flown to the sites they now occupy, bringing the local deities there under their control. As such, they must be fixed by means of prayer flags or *chöten* (T. *mchod rten*) and propitiated in order that they remain to bless those amongst whom they now reside (Buffetrille 1996).

As has been discussed in previous chapters, both oral and written traditions show ancestral relations between the mountain deities and those who occupy their territories, as well as familial connections between themselves. This functions historically to unite Tibetan communities and, more recently, to (re)affirm their identities. As Rock points out, a common epithet used for mountains in Amdo is *Amyé* (T. *A myes*), which means 'grandfather' and can also be used to refer to an 'ancestor', indicating this familial, ancestral relationship (Rock 1956). The first Tibetan king was patrilineal descendant of mountain deities and a cousin to nine mountain deities, as described in the detailed genealogy of his origin myths (Karmay 1996).<sup>103</sup> Tibetan legendary kings up until the seventh, King Grigum, descended from the sky and were assimilated with mountains through rainbow cords with which their vital principle, *la* (pronounced with a short 'a'; T. *bla*) is conjoined with their mountain deity, their *kula* (T. *sku bla*). These kings then fixed the temples they built to the ground by pillars. This assimilation between mountain, pillar, cosmic axis and king (Macdonald 1971: 352-3; Stein 1985: 102; Buffetrille 1996: 85-6) can be said to encompass and find reflection in the layout of dwelling places in Tibetan cultural regions and the importance attached to their main pillar as *né* (T. *gnas*) of the main household deity and prime site for

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<sup>103</sup> Many aristocratic families were patrilineal descendants of mountain deities, including that of Sakya (T. *Sa skya*).

household rituals (Dollfus 1989; Aziz 1985; Diemberger 1997: 308; Skal Bzang Nor Bu and Kevin Stuart. 1996; Blo brtan rdo rje & Stuart 2008; Tshe dbang rdo rje & Stuart 2010). The rituals so central to the life of communities such as those found in Rebgong, mark, form and open into sacred landscapes, assimilated as these are from household to mountain level, from underworlds to deity realms, infusing the quotidian with the layered presences they evoke.



**Rebgong Mountain Skies**

The Leru festival at harvest time in Rebgong essentially reflects individual household rituals on the scale of the whole village community and is pivotal in that community's relation with the divine forces whom they view themselves as coexisting with. At the head of these forces are the mountain gods. It is unclear historically precisely when it emerged as an annual practice resembling that which is currently practiced, however this is likely to have been around the nineteenth century (Makley 2013a), its antecedents lying in pre-Buddhist spirit medium practices in the region. It takes place in a number of villages around Rebgong during the sixth lunar month, often in conjunction with the renewal of the *labtsé* described in the previous chapter. Indeed, Makley follows one local Rebgong scholar argues that Leru emerged as an extension of the annual *labtsé* offerings to the mountain god (Makley 2013b: 196). There has been some scholastic controversy over the name of the festival, in particular regarding whether or not the

Tibetan spelling *klu rol* or *glu rol*, meaning ‘music [for] serpent deities’ or ‘musical games/entertainment’ respectively, should be used (Buffetrille 2004).<sup>104</sup> I am assuming the former spelling here; that the *le* (T. *klu*) in Leru (T. *klu rol*) refers to the serpent deities mentioned at the start of Domba’s story, since nobody I met or talked with about this in Rebgong suggested otherwise when asked. If the *le* of Leru is taken as referring to the serpent deities, it can be considered as an extended offering for the mountain deities and other deities such as the *le* (T. *klu*) of its title. In this I am also following the independent Repgongpa scholar mKar tse rgyal, who prefers *klu rol* to *glu rol* as he views the latter term denies the greater religious significance of the festival and implies it merely a type of theatrical spectacle (mKar tse rgyal 2009:322).<sup>105</sup> This in itself has potential repercussions for the future of the Leru, since if it were to become merely entertainment, any value for the village beyond pure entertainment and its attendant income from tourism would be lost. Such a possible direction for the future of the Leru in Rebgong is already indicated by things such as the local administrative body advertising it alongside the annual bicycle race, i.e. as an entertaining event devoid of religious content (Punzi 2015:112-113).

In support of the understanding of the *le* in Leru as indicating the water deities, we have the origin myth of the Leru given below. It is from the village of Lingjia (T. gLing gyal), the village complex in which the case study of Chapter Five will be situated; a village in which the *le* play a central role. When Lingjia village ancestors originally came to the site they now inhabit, they were looking for somewhere with decent living conditions that was not already occupied. One very devout man settled about two kilometres away from an unoccupied area on the plain known as Thotholok (T. Tho tho log). This man, Alakyé, had tried to cultivate the area was unable to achieve success with crops due to a shortage of water. He then moved to an area in a wide valley, which was also around 2 kilometres from present day Lingjia. This valley had a

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<sup>104</sup> There are a number of linguistic and historical questions which could arise from further exploration of the festival’s name. However, for purposes here it is interesting to note that another possible explanation for the name of the festival comes from the Monguor language spoken in villages such as Nyentok (T. Gnyan thog), as described in Chapter One of this thesis. In those villages, there is a word pronounced ‘leeru’ which refers to the palanquin used to carry an image of the deity during festive occasions. (personal communication with Gerald Roche)

<sup>105</sup> mKhar tse rgyal in fact prefers the term *klu sbrul*, meaning literally ‘water deity serpents’ to either *klu rol* or *glu rol*, as more authentic to the ritual’s origins (mKhar tse rgyal. 2009)

spring called Lüdong (T kLu sdong) whose water source was much higher than the valley, so Alakyé organised others to help aid him did a channel to this spring in order to irrigate the crops. The following year his harvest was so good he made offerings of grain and food to the water deities at Lüdong, which delighted them greatly. They appeared as snakes and frogs and danced on the surrounding trees. Alakyé returned the following day, bringing some of his companions. They offered grain and conifer branches into fire to summon the water deities once more. These appeared, but only to Alakyé, and showed him a variety of dances. He subsequently taught these dances to his companions and returned every year from thereafter. Delighting the water deities was thus a way of ensuring their assistance in created a good harvest for the year ahead. Later, as the community around Lüdong expanded, Alakyé organised six working groups to tend the land and dig more irrigation channels for it. These groups all propitiated the water deities annually, delighting them through food offerings and dance, as instructed by Alakyé. These six groups are still in existence in Lingjia and annually rotate the organisation of what has now become Leru, complete with spirit medium, with the exception of Sasoma (T. Sa so ma) Village, which does not participate. It seems nobody is clear why this is, but traditionally the lawa will rebuke the people of the Bon section of Sasoma for not participating (dPal 'dan bkra shis & Stuart 1998: 34).

A more Buddhicised version of the origins of Leru calls on the paradigmatic suppression of local deities by tantric adepts, beginning with Guru Rinpoché, as expressed in the mythohistories of the Demoness and the founding of Samyé monastery discussed earlier. In this origin myth, the great Buddhist teacher and tantric adept who founded the Geluk school of Buddhism was leaving Amdo for Central Tibet escorted by Amnye Machen and Dharmaraja. The former, a mountain deity, was to become the protector of the whole of Amdo; the latter a protector of the Buddhist religion. When they arrived in Central Tibet, Amnye Machen expressed homesickness to Tsongkhapa, saying he missed the Leru so badly he could neither eat nor sleep and desperately wanted to return to Amdo to celebrate it. Tsongkhapa agreed he could return for Leru and ordered that every eleventh and fifteenth day of the twelfth lunar month, monks should perform songs to delight Amnye Machen in the monasteries. A *thangka* painting

commemorating the delight of Amnye Machen at Leru is exhibited on the second floor of the main assembly hall in Ganden monastery, Lhasa (Niangwujia 2011:5<sup>106</sup>).

### *Delighted Deities – Songs and Dances of Leru*

Since the mid-1990s, there have been a number of academic studies and articles about Leru, by both local and foreign scholars. Academic research on this festival and the mediums themselves is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning in the 1990s and picking up speed in the 2000s.<sup>107</sup> It has tended to focus on Leru in individual villages or village clusters and has been initiated by both local and non-local scholars or students and collaborations between these groups. As would be expected, given that they generally have much greater access to ethnographic data, the work of local scholars and students, from Rebgong in particular but also Amdo more generally, tends to be ethnographically very rich (eg. Ri gdengs 1994; Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia 1995; Dpal Idan bkra shis and Stuart 1998; 'Brug thar and Sangye Tshering 2005; Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008). However, this richness in descriptive content is rarely matched by depth of analysis, where any is attempted. Conversely, researchers trained in academic discourse will always include analysis as necessary and central component of their work, and such work may place more emphasis upon it rather than on ethnographic data, since access to the latter is harder to achieve (eg. Epstein and Peng 1998; Nagano 2000; Buffettrille 2004, 2008; Punzi 2015).

In relation to the above, Geoffrey Samuel makes some pertinent observations in his preface written for a collaborative work between a local student and an American English teacher who was resident in Xining at the time of the research. Local scholars are in a position to present much more detailed and precise accounts of local perceptions and behaviour than is generally possible for visiting scholars. This is necessarily so, since the latter have not the cultural background, years of life experience

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<sup>106</sup> Niangwujia quotes the passage summarised here from an abridged translation by Ma Chengjun (2003).

<sup>107</sup> Extant literature includes Ri gdengs (1994), Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia (1995), Dpal Idan bkra shis and Stuart (1998), Epstein and Peng (1998), Nagano (2000), 'Brug thar and Sangye Tshering (2005), mKhar rtse rgyal. (2005, 2006 and 2009), Snying bo rgyal and Rino (2008), Buffettrille (2004, 2008), Sherab Gyamtsho (2008), Cairang (2009), Niangwujia (2011), Makley (2013a, 2013b) and Punzi (2015).

and local access both physically and linguistically, to bring to the material. However, this fact ought not to detract from the value of the types of analysis brought to research by those versed in academic scholarship. As Samuel states, ‘people do not always understand what they do and why they are doing it, in any society, and the job of anthropological analysis is precisely to uncover what is not obvious, not stated and perhaps not even admitted.’ (Samuel in his preface written for Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008).

Some authors focusing on Leru do explicitly acknowledge their works emphasis towards prioritising description or analysis. For example, the local student scholar Niangwujia, in his MPhil thesis focusing on Leru in his native village, frames his emphasis on ethnography by making the valid point that in depth analysis is not possible without sound data to base it on (Niangwujia 2011: 5). Similarly, Valentine Punzi acknowledges her own emphasis on theoretical analysis in examining ritual encounters with modernity through the lens of Leru (Punzi 2015). I wish to qualify my comments above by saying that they are not in any way intended as critique of the authors mentioned above. I concur with Samuel in seeing great value in both aspects of research towards furthering knowledge in the field. Ideally they would work in tandem in a balanced way, the best way to achieve this perhaps being their synthesis, such as evidenced in the work on Leru published by the independent Rebgongpa scholar mKhar rtse rgyal (mKhar rtse rgyal 2005, 2006 and 2009) and the academic research of Charlene Makley (Makley 2013a, 2013b). Consequently, I hope in my own account of the Leru here to draw upon ethnographic detail given in preceding scholarship, in combination with its academic discourse. In terms of the former I draw primarily on Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia (1995), since their ethnography focused on the same village as mine here. And for the latter, I draw primarily on Makley (2013a, 2013b), since her analyses speaks to notions of presence and power explored in my research.

The Leru I will focus on in this account took place in the village of Jiangjia, and follows on from the ritual *labtsè* renewal described in Chapter Three of this thesis. In Jinagjia it takes place from the seventeenth to the nineteenth days of the sixth lunar month. I participated in Jiangjia’s Leru during the summer of 2009. Jiangjia’s *lawa*,

Wangbo, is one of many years' experience.<sup>108</sup> As is often the case in biographies of spirit mediums, Wangbo first had indication of his potential as a spirit medium when he suffered a mystery illness.<sup>109</sup> Episodes of illness, often quite severe and even life threatening, are often precursors to possession and initiation into becoming medium, not only in Tibetan traditions but beyond this in wider cultural context. Once those close to him realised that Wangbo's illness indicated the first stages on route to becoming a medium, local village elders took him to a Buddhist *lama* for 'opening'. By this it was meant opening of the body, speech and mind in order that the mountain deity could take over Wangbo's body. This 'opening' ritual, performed by a Buddhist officiate, may well represent a Buddhicisation of a pre-Buddhist phenomenon. In Hehuang, a rural region of northeast Qinghai and western Gansu Provinces, there is an opening ritual used by spirit mediums, the *huala*, which is not connected with a Buddhist *lama*, and could speculatively, therefore, be representative of such rituals pre-Buddhicisation. The ritual is known as *kaigwang* (C. *kaiguang*); *kai* meaning 'open', and is an initiatory rite for *huala*.<sup>110</sup> This opening is usually performed by one *huala*, in trance, pierce with a skewer the cheek of the medium to be initiated with a skewer (Roche 2011). The 'opening' conducted by the Buddhist *lama* was considered by Wangbo to act via the channels of the subtle body, the *tsa* (T. *rtsa*), which are focus of yogic practice for tantric practitioners. During this 'opening' process with the *lama*, the *lama* instructed the mountain god in Wangbo's body as to Buddhist principles. Wangbo commented that he personally has no memory of this since during the time the mountain god takes over his body he remembers nothing and the essence of his own being and vital life principle, his *la* (T. *bla*), is relegated to the tip of his little finger. The *lama* who 'opened' Wangbo gave him a recitation to perform when he felt the initial signs of possession coming over him, instructing him to pray to the *lama* and for the villagers to exhort the mountain god to come. Thus Wangbo began to be able to control and direct the possession process as it occurred, such that instead of becoming ill he became medium for mountain god.

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<sup>108</sup> My account of the Leru in this village is based upon fieldwork conducted there in 2009.

<sup>109</sup> All information regarding Wangbo's life and experiences given here are from interview and personal communications with him during 2009.

<sup>110</sup> In Hehuang they also have rituals which 'open', in the sense of initiate, deity statues or *thangka* by pricking their sense organs with a pin (Roche 2011).

The process of illness as indicator of deity possession is in keeping with the substantial literature on becoming medium for a deity, how this occurs in Tibetan cultural regions, and why (for example, Berglie 1976; Ellingson 1998; Diemberger 2005). In her research on female spirit mediums in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Diemberger examines the ‘god sickness’ which typically strikes these mediums during the process of becoming so, and both the ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ rituals undertaken by other mediums, oracles or lamas in order to prepare and fledgling mediums as conduits for the gods. She describes how this ‘god sickness’, such as that the *lawa* Wangbo in Rebgong experienced, tends to arise during a period of crisis for the individual,<sup>111</sup> such crises being important not only as harbingers of a medium’s destiny to become so, but also as opening that individual, through overcoming their own crises, to the possibility of aiding those who will come to them in future to overcome theirs. Diemberger describes the distress of the experience of shaman sickness in the case of one budding spirit medium in Phuntsoling, as being alleviated by attending rituals for the deity. When a Buddhist lama finally expiated the sickness by an ‘opening’ initiation, this enabled the medium to heal through ‘sucking’ the causes of sickness from sufferers (Diemberger 2005: 122-123). The experience of profound crisis in the medium’s own life could be considered here then as an enabler of the wisdom and capacity to be of benefit in bringing others to healing the crises in their lives. However, it is not necessary for the spirit medium’s authenticity.<sup>112</sup> The ‘opening’ ceremony is a type of initiation for the medium, and one intended to channel and harness the spiritual agency of the deity.

The above raises some questions regarding the relationship of Buddhist *lama* and Rebgong’s spirit mediums and how they feature in the frame of one complex of practice in Rebgong. As has been mentioned, there is an extensive literature arising from the motifs of ‘clerical’ and ‘shamanic’ as generalised orientations in Tibetan religions. The interface of these is at once complex and layered, as this layered complexity is evidenced as much in rituals relating to the mountains as it is in Buddhist

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<sup>111</sup> In the case of female spirit mediums such crises typically occur during puberty, just after marriage when leaving their natal home, just after child birth, or at menopause (Diemberger 2005)

<sup>112</sup> As Roche has pointed out in relation to his extensive study of the spirit mediums, the *huala* of Hehuang, only half of the ones he and Wen Xiangcheng interviewed, perhaps not even that, experienced this kind of shaman sickness (personal communication).

spheres. Diemberger describes the relationship of ‘Buddhist institutions and popular religiosity’ as one in which antagonism and complementarity are mixed. She discusses how the process of a spirit medium being recognised as such by a lama, through the ritual ‘opening’ or ‘closing’ of his or her ‘energy-channels’ (T. *rtsa*) such as was the case for the Rebgong *lawā* Wangbo, can both lend a medium a form of religious authentication in the eyes of the local community, whilst demonstrating complementarity in the practices of *lamas* and spirit mediums (Diemberger 2005).

The all-pervasive presence of mountains, as the abode of gods, divine ancestors or/and protector deities in Rebgong village life point to their importance as cultural and spiritual mainstays for the populace of the region. The characters of the mountain gods vary enormously, some being considered Bön or pre-Buddhist deities who may have undergone subjugation by Buddhist tantric adepts and enlisted to the protection of Buddhism; others represent deified ancestors.<sup>113</sup> This mix again reflects the broad spectrum of syntheses possible on the scale between institutional/state/clerical and local/folk/shamanic/popular religious practices. As has been discussed by Buffetrille (2002), the identity of the mountain gods, like the terrain surrounding them, may span a variety of nationalities and incorporate a number of cultural relevancies. The subject of her article, an historical figure of the Rebgong Leru in Sogru (T. *Sog ru*), the *yullha* of Trika (T. *Khri ka’i yul lha*), appears in written sources as having Chinese origins in Sichuan, as the deity Wenchang, and in oral traditions is identified with the Chinese deity Guan Yu, himself identified with the Buddhist protector Gesar (Roche 2011: 244). Notably, amongst contemporary Rebgong Leru spirit mediums there is at least one who, although knowing no Chinese dialects in ordinary life, reportedly speaks in Chinese whilst in trance as medium for a mountain god, suggesting this god’s origins.<sup>114</sup> As Diemberger points out, this ability of spirit medium practices to adapt and reformulate in response to a wide variety of social conditions over time in a spontaneous fashion makes them extremely resilient. Such qualities have enabled these practices to continually rise from the ashes of socio-cultural changes or oppression, whether religious or state oriented, in phoenix-like splendour (Diemberger 2005: 168)

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<sup>113</sup> In conversation with Rebgong villagers I was told the latter group are distinguishable by their hats, 2008

<sup>114</sup> Personal communication with Kevin Stuart 2008 and Rebgong villagers during subsequent years.

The Rebgong lawa Wangbo described the practice of spirit mediumship, in particular the relationship of the *lawa* with Buddhism as having changed dramatically over the course of his lifetime. Certainly the practice in general across the seventeen or so Rebgong villages who hold Leru has seen great transformation due to its interruption by the Cultural Revolution. In Jiangjia Leru was banned in 1958, did not resume until the revival of 1989 and then had to do so with a newly recognised *lawa* who had not been able to participate fully in Leru for thirty years (Stuart, Banmadorji & Huangchojia 1995:224). It is difficult to know what the practice of Leru consisted of prior to the Cultural Revolution, during which time its performance was banned, since there are no written records so we have to rely on oral histories. Wangbo, who was in his sixties, remembered as a boy that the ‘la’ of *lawa* (T. *lha pa*) used to be pronounced with a short ‘a’, T. *bla*), due to the mountain god being perceived as a threat by the local *lama* and monastery. This he identified as being because the *lha*, understood as god or deity (T. *lha*) rather than life principle (T. *bla*), was able to know everything that was happening in the village, and the villagers had more faith in the *lha* than the local *lama*. He described this situation as changing over time into one in which *lha* and *lama* grew to respect each other, even call on one other for assistance, becoming friends. An example he gave of collaborative interaction between them, for the benefit of the village, was that the *lama* advised that the usual goat to be given as offering to the wrathful of the village’s two mountain gods should be substituted with a ‘goat’ made of *tsampa*, as depicted in the previous chapter.

Wangbo generally understood the distinction between the purpose of Buddhism and that of the Mountain Gods for villagers as being the former giving help and advice on the path to Enlightenment spanning many lives, and the latter giving assistance with the mundane needs of this life.<sup>115</sup> For this reason, as Wangbo pointed out, monks and nuns do not generally attend Leru, since their search for Enlightenment is not oriented

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<sup>115</sup> Interestingly in this context, Resi Hofer recounted to me that a Shigatse *menwa*, or *amchi* as more commonly known in Central Tibet, expressed similar opinions to the *lawa* here. This highly respected *amchi*, whom I also met, was from an educated family. His family’s medical lineage traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. When asked about the local spirit medium, Hofer reported him and his family having little faith in her. They considered the healing of a spirit medium could only address suffering temporarily, precisely because it was by means of local rather than Buddhist deities. The healing performed by a skilled physician and tantric practitioner (as they assumed Sowa Rigpa practitioners to be), would be more efficacious and on a profounder spiritual level. (personal communication 2007).

towards protection or gain in this present life. Therefore, he said, they do not prostrate to a Mountain God unless perceived as a Buddhist Protector, or *chikchung* (T. *chos skyong*). According to Wangbo then, the *lama* who ‘open’ the *law*a to possession by mountain gods are helping facilitate a more immediate kind of help and healing for the villagers which is not in competition with their own role in village life, this being to offer assistance in a more ultimate sense. Interestingly, Wangbo placed Nyingma and Bön practitioners in a separate category to other Buddhists or Bön peoples on paths to Enlightenment, saying that these, in contrast to other schools of Buddhism, do respect and complement the mountain gods. He attributed this to their being in existence prior to the other Buddhist schools. The Buddhist lama who ‘open’ spirit mediums and understand this process thus tend to come from the Nyingma tradition, although he said he had heard of some rare cases of *sarma*, or new, (Gelug) lama also undertaking this specialist process.

### ***Heights and Households***

As is the case with all large public rituals in the Rebgong villages, preparation for the Leru starts indoors at the household level. In fact, the ground for veneration and propitiation of the mountain gods is laid in the quotidian life of villagers with their household offerings. It can be said, therefore, that the ritual begins on the level of individual households with household ritual. On one level they function as an everyday preparation for rituals like the Leru which expand out from the household level into the communal public spaces of village life, (re)producing relations between individual households and their communities. The construction and structure of houses can be considered as expressions of particular perceptions of the world and, in Tibetan cultural regions, the notion of home as microcosm of a universe is often envisioned upon a cosmological view of it as tripartite, as is evoked by Tibetan wedding songs (Tucci 1980: 187, 1968; Tucci and Norbu 1966; Aziz 1978). On this model, the tripartite universe reflected in the house rises from profane to sacred in a vertical direction. For example, in the Tibetan cultural regions of Ladakh, the ground floor of the house is the domain of animals, also providing space for heavy labour and storage for ‘polluting’ substances such as manure. The first floor is the family’s living space, cooking area and reception area for guests. The upper floor contains the family shrine and is used for ritual practices pertaining to the highest deities of the Buddhist pantheon. As can be seen from this, the physical movement upwards is associated with greater levels of

status. This is also the case for the physical body: the 'unclean' feet must never be pointed at another person, and certainly not pass over their head; viewed as the purest point of the body, where the life force should exit if rebirth in higher realms is to take place at death. The house could be considered as a macrocosm of the human body, as well as a microcosm of the universe (Phylactou 1989: 65ff). Household rituals connect complex worlds of beings, human and deity, to maintain relations reflecting an ancient cosmological order. Deities evoked in the household rituals of Himalayan communities typically may simultaneously include those of the house, the kin, the land and the Buddhist pantheon. They renew human relations with deity worlds, both blessing and protecting house and its inhabitants in doing so (Diemberger 1997: 308).

The organisation of the space within such houses demonstrates not only the position and social status of persons, but that of deities connected to that particular household. Guests should enter the intermediate level of the house by an outside stair, to avoid the impurity of the ground floor, only certain members of the household and religious specialists are permitted entry to the shrine room. Even the middle level of the house is at times forbidden to those made temporarily impure through contact with birth or death. On this tripartite hierarchical structure, the ground floor is the place of the *klu*, or underworld deities, the first floor that of the *tsen* (T. *btsan*), deities of the intermediary spaces, and the top floor reserved for practices devoted to the enlightened deities of the Buddhist pantheon, the gods, *la* (T. *lha*) of the higher realms whose abode can also be the mountains. The rituals that household members engage in, establish the house as focus of a continuous manifestation of ritual – from the daily offerings of the first tea and food of the household, and/or burning juniper branches, *sang* (T. *bsangs*), to larger more communal rites, such as at marriage, during funeral rites or at New Year, marking important events. Food offerings are specifically directed to the deities of the three realms on the tripartite division upon which the architecture of the house is designed: on the floor for the *le* (T. *klu*), in front of oneself for the *tsen* and above for the higher *la* (T. *lha*). The numerous household deities receiving these offerings appear under a variety of names. Examples given by Dollfus from the collected works of Longdol Lama (Klong rdol bla ma: vol. ya, f. 15b-16a), include the *tabla* (T. *thab lha*), the hearth deity presiding over nourishment and well-being, the *üangla* (T. *bang lha*) (tasty meals, good fortune, health and well-being), the *gela* (T. *dge lha*) (providing grain), the *gola* (T. *sgo lha*) (keeping the doors of the house free of obstacles to good fortune), and the *kala* (T. *ka lha*) (the deity of the pillar who presides over the

household's fertility). The *kala* is comparable to the deities of the central pillar in Amdo houses (Dollfus 1989: 141ff). The construction of houses, at every stage, is created with these in mind, punctuated by a collection of rituals propitiating the local deities and spirits, requesting protection for its future human inhabitants.



**a typical Rebong village household**

The houses in Rebong villages are low and flat, rather than tall with several levels like the ones described above, however the same principles apply. Rebong village residences are structured as a series of rooms set around a courtyard. Common symbols found in, on and around the houses relate to the hierarchies of this non-human environment of gods and spirits; one that co-exists with the human one and upon which it depends for its health and well-being. The outer walls can be decorated, near a window or door, with symbols that close entrances to the house, via a sky door, a *namgo* (T. *gnam sgo*) or earth door, *sago* (T. *sa sgo*), that could otherwise be used by malevolent spirits. Such symbols include the use of thread crosses (T. *mdos*) traditionally used as protective amulets. The five-coloured prayer flags inscribed with sacred syllables and mantras adorning the roof of the house, attract auspiciousness and assure good fortune. Inside the house, apart from the shrine room, which is usually at the highest point of the house possible, there are offering spaces for burning juniper

branches etc. (making *bsangs* offerings) and offering substances to the deities of the household and its localities.



*sang* (T. *bsang*) urn for offering to the mountain deity

It is women who mostly regulate and maintain household rituals, since they are the ones who tend to remain when there is need to travel for trade and livelihood purposes. However, the boundaries between households can never be completely crossed and a person who marries in can never really be an insider, a *nangmi* (T. *nang mi*), in the same way as someone living in their natal household. In Tibetan cultural regions it is traditionally women who ‘marry in’ and the status of daughter-in-law is very low on the social strata, a condition which entails hardship, as is evidenced in the numerous lamentations accompanying the transit of a new bride from her natal to her husband’s family home. She will never belong there in the full sense that he and any children they have will. Roche aptly describes the condition of an in-married woman as existing in the household in a similar way to that in which a prosthetic limb or

transplanted organ does in a host body (Roche 2011: 141-2). This gives woman, the ones who usually leave their natal households once married, an ambiguous status regarding household boundaries and in ritual relation via household rites pertaining to the local deities. A woman may no longer be permitted to make daily offerings at her natal household's shrine, having left the boundaries of that village or territory, but must do so in that of her adopted household. She becomes host in the host-guest, insider-outsider divide that exists both on a household level, and on the macrocosmic level of the spiritual universe that encompasses the house. The principal house deity, the *kimla* (T. *khyim lha*), residing at the pillar of Amdo houses, represents the fertility of the household and will be central to these daily rituals. It is thus to the deity residing in this pillar, that a new bride will first pay homage on entering a house at marriage. The pillar connects the grounds of the house with the sky, just as the pillar of a temple connects its foundations with the gods and was the first thing created and blessed by the legendary Tibetan kings when building one; symbol of the sky rope from which they descended from the sky to the mountains and then returned at death. The fixation of a pillar to the ground thus traditionally symbolised the king's mastery over the ground and the stability of temple and realm, successful propitiation and relation with deity worlds being essential to the kingdom's health and well-being.

In most Rebgong villages, daily household offerings to the mountain god and other local deities are a necessary rite ensuring the god's continued presence and protection. As has been mentioned, a typical house in a Rebgong village is set around a courtyard. The offerings for local deities take place within this courtyard, on the roof or above the gate. In the case of one Rebgong village, its mountain god Amyé Gurkung (T. A mye Gur khang) is considered to abide very specifically in a small copse of trees on the mountain behind the village. Daily offering rites of a household include those to this mountain god and to ghosts or demonic spirits, the *dri* (T. *'dre*), potentially harmful spirits who can, in particular, cause illness to the household's children and animals if left unappeased. In the household which I visited, offerings to the *dri* were placed on a brick to the left of the main door to the house, in the courtyard, and those for the mountain god were placed in the urn for burning *sang* (T. *bsang*) to its right, as depicted above. The *dri* were thus dissuaded from eating the life, health and vitality of the children and animals by being offered barley flour, *tsampa*, as substitute. The mountain god received daily offerings of *sang*, as described in the previous chapter – a mix which included some of the following: juniper branches, butter, cheese, barley, *tsampa*, clean

water and ‘fire pellets’. The latter were created by the local Gelug monastery, once again indicating the close relationship between monastic Buddhism and village practices such as these honouring the local deities. The *sang* offerings took place in the evenings and were accompanied by lengthy recitals of offering ‘chants’ which had been orally transmitted, including offerings of *sur* (T. *gsur*) to the ancestors.<sup>116</sup>

Within any Rebgong village community, such ritual structures appear to create a strong sense of belonging: to the household, the neighbourhood, the village community, the ethnic community, and the spiritual realm beyond that; the realm of deity. The purpose of household ritual, organisation and structure in Tibetan societies is propitiation, both to prevent misfortune and to incur fortune. The ritual relationship sustaining households is one of reciprocity, the order of households and the deities intimately connected to them being ritually maintained for mutual benefit. The mode in which Himalayan societies exist is defensive in part, however, it seems to me that this part is but one aspect of a whole process of being and relating that involves finding and re-creating one’s place in the order of things. The way in which the social world of humans turns upon such ritual and symbolic structures, as embedded in the design of houses and their layout, is described by Dollfus, who describes the arrangement of space in the house and its inhabitants as facilitating rituals, pertaining as they do to the cosmology they reflect and symbolise, in order to create and maintain communication between human beings and the realms of spirits and deities (Dollfus 1989). Her work explores the way in which the prime houses of any one family are spatially arranged as focus for their off-shoot houses (accommodating subsidiary units to the main reproductive one), and then placed within wider groupings of around ten similar households, each governed by human governance and the particular deity of that group. These regional and cultural groupings collectively comprise the whole village. Thus she analyses the house in terms of village and social structure. The picture she paints shows that each widening sphere of residence, from house, to communal group to village, can be conceived of as a series of sacred spaces, each one encompassing the others; built to accommodate the beings of the tripartite worlds (Dollfus 1989). It is this perspective on sacred spaces I wish to draw out here, showing how they support and overlap with each other in integrated whole to form structures of inhabitation wherein deity presences are central, a theme that will be returned to later.

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<sup>116</sup> All information regarding this village comes from personal communications with villagers in 2009

Just as the positioning of rooms and special layout of a house is structured in relation to local deities and one's ability to move through its structures is in accordance with one's status within the household, so the position of any particular household in a village can reflect its familial relationship to the mountain deity, or *yullha*, and thus the household's status within the village. Inhabitants of the Rebgong village mentioned above described the position of one particular household in relation to the mountain as indicative of their close relation to their mountain god Amyé Gurkung, thereby denoting and according them a certain status in village life.

### *Jiangjia Leru*

Jiangjia's structure in terms of its households and *tshowa* of have already been described in Chapter Two. However, here I would like to add that Jiangjia, as is common in Rebgong villages, has a foundational household, a *shikhyim* (T. *gzhi khyim*), which is the seat of the *lawa* and administrative centre for the Leru preparations organisationally. This household belongs to a subdivision of a Jiangjia *tshowa*, a *wakha* (T. *rva kha*) called Lhawatsang (T. *lha ba tshang*) (dGe 'dun bkra shis 2012: 123). It appears (marked no.2) on the illustration of Jiangjia below.<sup>117</sup> This illustration depicts the ritual grounds of the village of Jiangjia upon which the Leru takes place. As can be seen, these grounds can be subdivided into various sections through which the ritual progresses, the arrows around the mountain deity temple depicting the pathway of ritualists during Leru. For the duration of the Leru, the villagers temporarily inhabit tents constructed around the ritual ground. Wangbo's house, as can be seen from the illustration, the house of the *lawa* (2) is situated just to the west of the mountain god's temple (3), on the road beneath it. Its proximity to the temple thus makes it the only house appearing on the illustration. It was from his household that Wangbo would undertake his final preparations to become medium for the mountain god, and he would then process from home to the temple along this mountain road.

Jiangjia's Leru takes place on the fifteenth day of the sixth Tibetan month and, the year I attended, followed on immediately from the renewal of the labtsé described in the previous chapter. Interestingly, in relation to the *chikor* ritual described in Chapter Two, by which the fields and crops are blessed, this same ritual reportedly used to

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<sup>117</sup> I am very grateful to Denise Flower for her graphic design expertise in creating this illustration.

precede the Leru in Jiangjia twenty years ago (Stuart, Banmadorji & Huangchojia 1995:225). Thus, carrying Buddhist texts around the fields to bless them through evoking the presence of Buddhist powers was precursor to the Leru in honour of and evoking the mountain gods to rain blessings.



The *lawa*'s preparation for procession to the temple and subsequent possession by the mountain god, began with a change of clothes. These clothes were kept especially for times of trance and possession as mountain god at his home; the *shikhyim*. They included special boots, a blessed thread and amulet, and a Tibetan style picture, a *tangka* (T. *thang ka*) depicting the mountain deity, which he wore strapped across his back. Along with the clothes, he donned particular behavioural prescriptions. During his time as mountain god, the *lawa* does not eat so-called unclean, 'black' foods, such as onions, garlic and meat, or wear other people's clothes. For the duration of the Leru, which is generally several days long, he is also not permitted to have sexual relations with anyone.

The prohibition concerning black foods for mediums/shamans finds parallels in the Buddhist tantric indictment for *kriya* or white tantric practices relating to peaceful deities intended to purify the channels and the drops of the subtle body.<sup>118</sup> The mountain gods are in nature warlike local deities rather than peaceful Buddha or Bodhisattva figures. As such, a prohibition against black foods seems inappropriate. Also, black foods include any kind of intoxicant or flesh, and yet the *lawa* are expected to accept offerings of alcohol during Leru and, in those villages where the traditional offering of a goat's heart has not been superseded by a mock up goat made of barley flour, goat meat.

Conversely enough, Wangbo had a rather ambivalent relationship with alcohol. Like many Amdo men, he had once been quite a heavy drinker. There are no half measures for men in Amdo and so, for those who find this oppressive, or who develop health problems as result, the only way to avoid the general cultural pressure to drink heavily on every social occasion is to become teetotal. This was indeed the case with Wangbo, who did not drink a drop ordinarily but would start drinking once in possession as mountain god and so no longer his ordinary self, that ordinary vital life principle, *la* (T. *bla*), being relegated to the tip of his little finger.

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<sup>118</sup> The *huala*, mediums in Hehuang also observe this prohibition on foods such as garlic, citing not wanting to displease or anger the deity as reason for doing so (personal communication with Gerald Roche).

The subject of alcohol consumption and its role in various rituals for local deities in relation to its function generally could form subject for future research. In the one case I witnessed of a *lawa* preparing for Leru, Wangbo's case, which should not be taken as typical, he did not drink a drop during preparations for going into trance. I was with him at the house as he donned his special *lawa* clothes and began chanting as instructed by the lama who had 'opened' his channels when he first became *lawa*. I understood this to be because his going into trance was something he voluntarily undertook for the purpose of the Leru, in quite a controlled ritual way, according to the prior instructions he had received from the lama who 'opened' him. Once in trance as mountain god he did begin to drink. He hadn't always been teetotal. In fact, I was told that one of the reasons he became so was because of his tendency to fall involuntarily into trance when drinking, to become mountain god, and then to start chastising whichever other men in the village he was drinking with. This was reportedly because the drink 'opened' the channels of his subtle body, the yogic body, so the mountain god could easily entrance him. Alcohol is a prominent feature of all rites pertaining to the mountain deities and local spirits, even used as libation during the *labtsé* rite described in Chapter Three.

### ***Fractal Dances***

In the days leading up to the official start of Leru, as described above, alcohol continued to play a role in other village preparations for it, such as the renewal of the *labtsé* and creation of the offerings for the mountain god, which were described in the previous chapter. One aspect of the preparations which particularly interested me, as someone with a background in dance, was the rehearsals for the Leru dances. In Jiangjia no women dance but the men perform warlike moves in circular formations, enacted carrying symbolic wooden weapons. Elsewhere in Rebong there are dances for women and they do participate in the performative aspect of Leru. However, as Makley has noted, their role is subsidiary to that of the men, as is in keeping with a ritual the province of exclusively male mountain gods, the antecedents of which include territorial battles of the valley (Makley 2013). Rehearsals for these took place in the mountain god's temple courtyard during the days immediately preceding Leru. During the dances the men circulate around the sang urn at the temple's centre, as shown below. The *lawa* dances within their circle. These dances are so central to the Leru that the number of men who will be present for the dance is one of the questions regarding possible

obstacles to Leru that is posed during the divination before it starts, the other questions being how many villagers will come to participate and whether there will be enough people for the main offering, the ‘po’.



**men dance in circular formation around the *sang* urn in the temple**

There is a delineated gender divide which is observed by onlookers and participants during Leru, as with other community rituals such as tantric ones entailing ritual dance, as will also be described in the next chapter. During the men’s rehearsals for their ritual dances in homage to the local deities, they followed the same protocol as they would do during the actual ritual: sitting or standing to the right of the front entrance of the mountain god’s temple in the inner courtyard when not performing, as is shown in the picture below.



**Men sit and stand in their area - to the right of the mountain god shrine**

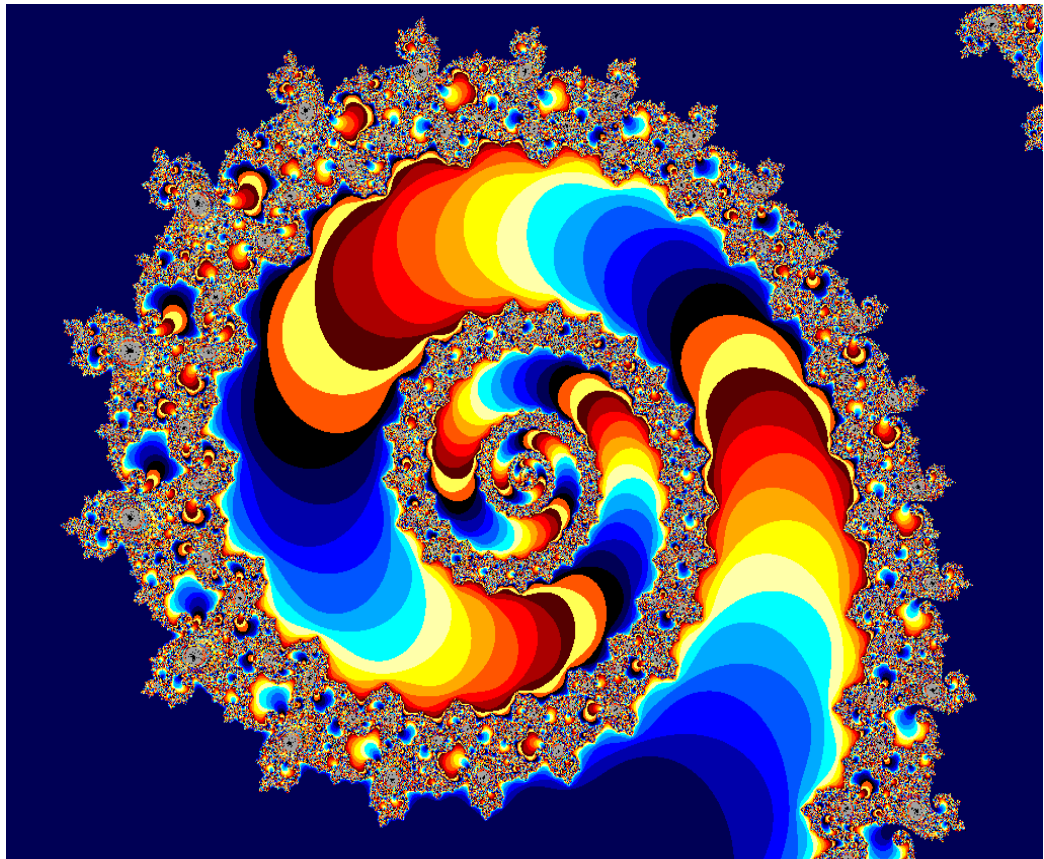
This is the male area of the space within the mountain god temple. During the rehearsals, the village elders sat in rows along the area under cover behind the pillars to the right of the main shrine room, those of the highest status at the head of the rows nearest to the mountain god shrine which can be seen to the left of the men in the photograph above. Conversely, women and children stood to the back and left of the temple grounds, i.e. in the places furthest away from the shrine and mountain god; furthest from the centre of the blessing conferred by deity presence. This points to the question as to whether such gender divisions indicate the presence of women as potentially compromising the purity of the deity and the possession. Interestingly Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia report that at Jiangjia Leru in the 1990s the same division of men and women occurred, but add that non-participatory men join the women in their positioning (Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia 1995: 221). Additionally, Niangwujia recounts that it is compulsory for some women of his native village Harapathur to perform in the Leru alongside the men. Specifically, unmarried women over fifteen years old are subject to being fined for not performing (Niangwujia 2011:14-15).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Interestingly there doesn't seem to be an upper age limit on this designation, unlike for men, where the upper age limit for compulsory performance is forty-five (Niangwujia 2011:14-15).

These two accounts, conjoined with the fact that in the present day Jiangjia Leru I was invited to join the men on their side of the temple, amongst the peripherally participatory group, would suggest to me perhaps it is more a question of participation than purity. However, this is pure speculation on my part and exploring local perceptions on the subject would be an interesting topic for future research.

To my surprise, I was invited to some of the rehearsals for the Leru dances by several of the elder men, the village elders and leaders. Due to their position in the village, my presence there was tolerated by others who later turned out, at least in one case, not to be comfortable with the presence of a female in these traditionally male proceedings. I never found out whether this irritation on the part of one village elder was due to him considering my presence as outsider or as female as inappropriate, or whether it was because I joined in with the dance when invited to by some of the other men. The rehearsals generally consisted of afternoons spent talking and drinking, interspersed with sporadic attempts at the various dances to be performed during Leru, the more experienced performers correcting those less so. The dances were composed by men repeating sequences of identical movements which moved around circular formations in clockwise direction. The choreography was a series of hops and spins, interjected with pauses within which dancers twisted down to the ground, coiling in upon themselves and then uncoiling back to standing. These circular movements, performed within circles, would create, if envisioned from above, a fractal kind of imagery such as might be the mirror image of the one shown below.



**circular movements create - if envisioned from above –  
a fractal kind of imagery such as might be the mirror image of this one**

Wangbo described the process of becoming spirit medium for the mountain god at Leru as follows. After he enters the mountain god's shrine room within the temple, he chants the chant given to him by the local Buddhist lama for the intermediary stage of possession, praying to the lama as he does so. This takes place within the temple's shrine room and only some elder village men, leaders of the community, are permitted to be present. The other villagers wait outside the shrine room, in the temple grounds, and exhort the mountain god to appear. During the transition to becoming the god, the *lawa* said he sees red and feels himself getting bigger whilst others diminish in size. The last thing he remembers of the process is blacking out, and he doesn't then remember anything more until coming out of trance hours later. He does not know ahead of the trance state which deity will manifest. There are two mountain deities of Jiangjia who possess Wangbo at different times; one wrathful and one peaceful.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> It should be noted that Stuart, Banmadorji and Huangchojia (1995: 221) report a third mountain deity, called Nyenchin, who doesn't live in the village but is venerated there, and a separate shrine room for a pan-Rebgong deity called Shamba. Unfortunately, since they don't provide Tibetan spellings of these or



**Jiangjia's Mountain Deities - wrathful 'Mukri' on the left and peaceful 'Taasi' on the right**

Wangbo reported that whether the wrathful or the peaceful mountain deity manifested or appeared through him depended on the matter at hand. The wrathful 'Mukri' (T. rMog ri) dances and makes predictions about the future, admonishing villagers strongly wherever their conduct had been incorrect and resolving issues arising from bad behaviour. According to one legend, Mukri first came to Jiangjia from Khamse (Red Mountain) following a Jiangjia household who had relocated to an area about 50km southeast of Jiangjia, called Ndowa, near Khamsa (red mountain). Hence Mukri's red colouring and horse (Stuart, Banmadorji & Huangchojia 1995:223). Mukri is governed by a wrathful aspect of Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoché as he is generally known by Tibetans, as is referred to in the text quoted at the beginning of Chapter Three.<sup>121</sup> This wrathful aspect of Guru Rinpoché is known as Gudrak (T. Gu drag, sLob dpon Padma drag po'i skur bzhengs pa'i rnam pa). Mukri knows which villagers are drinking too much, which are playing too much *mahjong* (a Chinese gambling game) and

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the names of the other two deities appearing in my ethnography, it is difficult to make any definite correlations between them and those discussed here.

<sup>121</sup> Reference to Gudrak (T. Gu drag) is found in the first folio given of the Tibetan *sang* text in Appendix III.

squandering their family's income through such trivial pursuits. He reprimands the villagers, beating those who have offended through such behaviour and exhorting from them promises to change their ways in front of the whole village. Those who are found guilty of theft are required to return the stolen property and to rectify their behaviour due to their shame and their fear of the consequences of falling out of favour with the mountain god. 'Taasi', the more peaceful of the two mountain gods does not dance and appears when there is a need to calm village quarrels. Another example Wangbo gave of the mountain gods' activities during Leru was that of the wrathful one forbidding the villagers to cut the trees of the local forest. This protected the forest and has meant its survival where many other forests on the Plateau were harvested to extinction. Once the *lawa* has arisen as one of these gods, the men of the village commence the thirteen dances performed as offering for thirteen different protector mountain deities known as *drala*. Wangbo described the Leru as an offering by the people for the gods in which the people emulate the gods as an offering to them.

Referring back to the illustration of the village given on page 149 above, it is possible to trace the Leru spaces unfolding as they do throughout the ritual, and to see how these together form the pattern of the sacred space into which the village is transformed by them. After preparations for the ritual have been made, and the renewal of the *labtsé* performed at (1), the *lawa* dresses and sets out from his house (2) towards the temple (3). Here he goes into trance and becomes mountain god, the dances and offerings for the god begin in the temple. They then spill out of the temple and the village men dance behind the *lawa*, circumnambulating the temple complex in the direction of the arrows on the diagram. They then proceed up a small path to the main Leru grounds (4), ordinarily the village basket court. There more offerings of sang and other substances, including alcohol are made at (5). Once the Leru for the day is finished, the elders retire to the village green (6) where they sing and drink together. They discuss village issues and the status and contribution of several of its leaders or potential leaders. Other villagers retire to their tents to eat and drink together. The main tent for the elders is positioned just by the green (7), in front of the other villagers' tents. The tent reserved for foreigners, mainly paying guests or sponsors of villagers is situated some distance away from the village tents and slightly above them (8).

## *Contested Presences*

The study by sNying bo rgyal and Solomon Rino which focuses on Rebgong's spirit, or 'trance' mediums discusses how they are perceived within their society and changes in attitudes towards them. The work focuses on the village of Harapathur (T. Ha ra pa thur) and two other villages in Tho kya, northern Rebgong. The *lawa* of Rebgong are possessed by fierce mountain deities and often engage in military practices reflective of the deities, such as piercing themselves or even, on one occasion, the removal of intestines under trance. These apparently macho and masochistic practices are said to deepen the possession experience through fear. They are also taken in some sense to evidence its validity, since surely such physical endurances could not be borne unless trance states are genuine, making these feats prime indicators of a medium's authenticity and so authority as deity (sNying bo rgyal & Rino 2008; Roche 2011: 82, 2013). In Jiangjia piercings through the cheeks took place, with participation being something of a badge of honour, particularly for those men who hoped to gain a place amongst village leaders in the coming years. Indeed, this reflects a central function of the Leru, which, as highlighted by Makley in her analysis of it, is to provide a forum within which factions of leaders and those who aspire to become leaders reaffirm, claim and compete for their authentic rights, with support of local deities, to local autonomies and their attendant fortunes.

The success or not of these social (re)negotiations of status and role depend entirely on the perceived power of the spirit mediums as authentic voices of the mountain gods. In contemporary Rebgong, as Makley demonstrates, attitudes towards these kinds of practices related to the fierce local deities, to the Leru and the spirit mediums can be mixed (Makley 2013b). This is reflected in the concluding section of an article written by a Rebgong scholar for an academic collection, which expresses the opinion that those fellow Tibetans who perceived the *lawa* as effective and capable of miraculous powers were the victims of 'old thoughts'. The article, therefore, argues for the continuation of the Leru as merely an exercise in cultural preservation; as a resource for 'social welfare' rather than as a means of 'guidance for society (Cairang 2009). Of course, the question arises in relation to the opinions expressed in this article, and on occasion by other inhabitants of Rebgong, as to their motivations. In saying that such practices as spirit mediumship or Leru should be preserved and related to only as cultural relics, are they truly expressing what they think, or what they think they ought

to think in order to be accepted by their perceived audience, including party-state cadres?

I once had an interpreter who it was clear to me was omitting to communicate a number of my questions and was being highly selective in how he interpreted their replies. After a half day in his company I asked him why he appeared to be steering away from any topic relating to ritual traditions or healing practices. He responded that it was because we, as more enlightened people from a scientific, modern age, do not accord any credibility to such things. It later transpired, after some time and a meal together, that this was not at all what he thought. It was, rather, what he thought I, as an educated foreigner from a developed country, thought. He did not want either himself or other Tibetans he was interpreting for, to appear to me as, to use Chinese state rhetoric about such so-called superstitious or backward things. There is a variety of literature elucidating changing attitudes towards Himalayan spirit-mediums, for example Ortner (1995) on the Sherpas of Nepal, Diemberger (2005) on Southern Tibet, and Bellezza (2005), Per-Arne Berglie (1976, 1982, 1992) and Antoon Geels (1992) on the Changtang (T. Byang thang). For purposes here the salient point seems, as mentioned earlier, that these practices respond well to change in that they are extraordinarily adaptable, as is particularly evidenced by Diemberger's account of their historical evolutions in response to Chinese state attitudes and interventions (Diemberger 2005: 155ff.)

Issues surrounding how to present their cultural heritage to foreigners, both from other ethnic groups within China and from outside, take on greater importance for Rebgong residents and scholars, with the growth of state fuelled tourism in the region and the economic opportunities it provides for many of them and their family members. In his work on the industrialisation of Tibetan medicine in China, Martin Saxer (2013) refers to a phenomenon he terms 'the moral economy of Tibetanness' in discussing the market value attributable to an essentialisation of a constructed Tibetan ethnic identity whose salient feature is of moral fibre. Saxer (2013) charts the creation of a pharmaceutical industry in the space of less than a decade on the Tibetan Plateau and the attendant marketing of 'Tibetanness' for global consumption. He explores how the increasingly industrialised manufacture of Tibetan medicine impacts it as a traditional knowledge system, in terms of its theory and practice. Two main themes within this are those of modernisation and of cultural preservation, and Saxer explores how these

apparently contradictory trajectories are negotiated by actors in the field. Common to them both is what he describes as ‘Tibetanness’; a notion of commoditised ethnicity as a form of moral economy. This recourse to ethnic identity and how the Chinese party-state sanctions and appropriates an economy of ethnicity in the name of cultural preservation is as relevant to the study of other traditional ritual practices as it is to the study of Tibetan medicine.

To return to the Leru and the *lawā*, it is notable that Cairang suggests a notion of cultural preservation as the only justifiable reason to maintain rituals like the Leru (Cairang 2009), and that other people from Rebgong, such as the interpreter mentioned above, expressed the view that modernisation had superseded ‘non-scientific’ and ‘superstitious’ views and practices such as the Leru, so such rituals would be consigned eventually, once ‘backward’ minds had been converted, to the annals of history. The idea of cultural preservation, supported by the party-state and by foreign NGO’s alike, on the surface of things could appear a laudable endeavour. However, if such traditional practices and rituals are to continue only as cultural relics of a bygone age, preserved cynically for the tourist gaze, this begs the question as to what it is which is being preserved and whether in the end it, or at least the ‘it’ on display for tourist consumption, will bear any real resemblance to that which it purports to preserve. I would argue that it is this latter fear which lies at the heart of why I encountered some resistance to my being part of certain aspects of the Leru preparations and enactment. This indicates something of note about how local people regard Leru and has implications for the future of the ritual and the spirit mediums, as will be discussed.

I overheard one particular village leader in Jiangjia l expressing concern at my presence during the preparations of the *tsampa* offerings for the mountain god in the courtyard of his household prior to Leru. Another man retorted that they needed to include foreigners as this would be good for the village; it would generate a sense of value for Leru outside of Rebgong and consequently bring money into the village. The same leader who had expressed concern during the preparation for Leru later attempted to get me to buy a ticket to attend the Leru. It seemed to me that in doing so he was doing two things: the first was to make sure, as one of the village leaders, that all those there had contributed to the Leru, according to their status within the village. The second thing he was doing was to draw a line clearly under the *nang* of *nangmi* (T. *nang mi*; insider of a house - householder) or *nangpaychö* (T. *nang pa’i chos*; insider of the

*buddhadharma* – Buddhist); he wanted a piece of paper around my neck that designated me as outsider, other, and consumer. To wear one would have been to label myself as consumer of Tibetanness at Leru. I had a similar reaction to the one Makley describes having in the concluding section to her article ‘Gendered Practices and the Inner Sanctum’, at the point where she is refused entrance to a temple a Tibetan friend is entering because she is without ticket and outside tourist hours (Makley 1999). I wondered why this particular village leader was trying to place me in a category I did not, from my perspective, belong. After all, I had been living in Tibetan areas of the PRC on and off for a few years, knew people from the village, and had actively participated in preparations for the Leru, so wasn’t I a special case? He had asked me to buy the ticket via someone else, so I replied, also via someone else, that I had already contributed to the Leru by making an offering for the mountain god via the household with whom I had been staying, as part of their offering, so should I also buy a ticket? He never answered and the whole business was soon forgotten in the after-Leru party.

However, the incident does highlight, as Makley (1999) points out in her article on sacred spaces, the reason or need for ‘the line in the sand’. Makley’s essay discusses gendered politics vis-à-vis the spaces of Labrang monastery and the Tibetan renegotiation of identity and gender roles due to the effects of state driven tourism and regulations on sacred spaces. Again here the economic aspect of this identity (re)negotiation is highlighted. She cites the example of one monk at Labrang who works a seven-day week guiding tourists around the monastery. Quite apart from the fact that many of those he guides are women and as a celibate monk it is inappropriate for him to have so much contact with women, he says he finds the amount of time he spends oiling the wheels of the state driven tourist industry as tour guide leaves him insufficient time for his monastic studies (Makley 1999: 344). It seems to me that, even if the line between *who* is outsider, tourist and paying guest at ritual and within sacred spaces is fairly clearly delineated through the use of guides and tickets, the line between *what* is a substantive ritual expression within a sacred space and what is a facsimile of one, presented as cultural relic to tourist gaze for economic gain, is not so clearly drawn.

The implications that these identity (re)negotiations and the commodification of ‘Tibetanness’ have for rituals such as Leru and practices like those of the Rebgong *lawā*, in general and as they specifically apply to healing, are pervasive. As indicated by the conclusion drawn by a Tibetan author as to the value of Leru who, in attempting to

frame it in what the author considered to be academic terms indicating rigorous analysis, presented it as of historical value, ‘as a century old and social custom’ or as of social value ‘in accordance with social welfare’ (Cairang 2009: 165). The difference it makes to view Leru in terms of either the former above: in an ‘irreducibly historical’ frame; or the latter: as a means of ‘creating village unity and prosperity’, are explored by Makley in her article on Leru and the ‘politics of presence’ (Makley 2013: 187). As described in the introductory section to the thesis, by ‘the politics of presence’, Makley refers to what Boddy describes as an ‘individualized yet also generalized resistance to domination on a number of levels at once’, reflecting a view of possession as an ‘embodied critique of... hegemonies’ most keenly felt by women (Boddy 1994: 418-9). This follows on from Makley’s presentation of sacred spaces in terms of their gendered politics, in which she discusses how Tibetans renegotiate identities in response to state driven tourism and its effects upon the sacred spaces of Labrang Monastery, a monastery in a region of Amdo a day trip from Rebgong. She focuses particularly on the way in which women’s identities are in a process of reformulation in regards to these sacred spaces, which revolves around the impact tourism at the monastery has had on their traditional interdictions from entering certain of them (Makley 1999). Makley’s analysis of Leru continues this analysis of sacred space and ritual in relation to identity by developing an understanding of the region and the role of Leru in which ritualists such as the *lawa* are ‘commensurate actors with state officials’, in contrast to being portrayed or perceived as superstitious, backward ‘folk’ (Makley 2013b: 200); as voicing the presences of authorities of equal earthly weight to those of the state. If mountain deities and other local deities are understood thus, it is arguable that their voices operate as authoritative on a number of levels in their localities, including that of health and longevity. The notion of ‘presence’ could be said to thread through practices relating to both spirit mediums and tantric practitioners in Tibetan cultural regions. All such practices are aiming, in one way or another, to invoke the authentic presence of deity and to thereby consult and relate to deity presences; to embody them for the purpose of healing in the widest sense.

The Rebgong *lawa* Wangbo said that people regularly came to him outside of Leru to receive the mountain god’s advice on behaviour and, specifically in relation to healing, he said people particularly consulted him when suffering types of paralysis, a condition traditionally ascribed to spirit harm. This typical diagnosis is described by Samuel, in which such illness is attributed to pollution of the channels by a ‘shadow’, a

‘*drip*’, ie. a malevolent spirit (Samuel 2001). Other times Wangmo mentioned being called upon outside of Leru include when there has been a theft or a serious altercation between villagers. At such times, the family requesting help would surround the *lawa* and chant until he fell into trance and advises them, usually through the divine language of the god. The benefit of the spirit medium felt by members of the community is illustrated by the fact that in Jiangjia when Wangbo wanted to retire due to the physical difficulties he was experiencing following a motor bike accident, the villagers resisted this emphatically. Wangbo had gone to a lama and asked for assistance to block the *lha* entering him. Once in trance as *lawa*, the mountain god told the other villagers what Wangbo had done and, once Wangbo was out of trance, the village elders chastised him for having attempted to shirk his duties as *lawa* to the mountain god and exhorted him to continue in this role. This incident raises the interesting question of whether, just as a lama is considered to have the power to ‘open’ a *lawa*’s channels (T. *rtsa*) through ritual, is it equally possible to close them? In her research into female spirit possession in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Diemberger reports such rituals for closing ‘energy-channels’ as being conducted in cases where the person manifesting ‘god sickness’, an illness caused by attempted possession by a deity or spirit, is suffering from attack by a malevolent spirit or local deity who needs to be repelled (Diemberger 2005). Roche speaks about ‘hardness’ as a concept used in Hehuang to describe those who are not ‘open’ to possession. Here he refers not to spirit mediums but to lay people who are sometimes required to become possessed during particular rituals. If someone who has been chosen to become possessed is too ‘hard’, the attempt is abandoned.<sup>122</sup>

### ***Power Centres***

Makley’s ‘politics of presence’ in relation to Leru is founded on the idea that ritual demands for presence are a common thread linking Tibetan ritual traditions of various types (Makley 2013a; 2013b). What is the nature of the ‘presence’ that is sought when calling down a deity through spirit medium or envisioning a deity as oneself in tantric practice? I wish to suggest here that the practices of the Rebgong spirit mediums, the *lawa*, are enacted in a sphere of empowerment that has been evoked and created through ritual intended to invoke the presence of mountain deities. The invocations of Leru, from the preparatory rituals such as the divination to discern potential obstacles, making

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<sup>122</sup> Personal communication regarding Gerald’s conversations with informants in Hehuang.

the offerings for the mountain deity, generating fortune with *lungta*, *sang* purification rites, and rehearsing the dances, to the days of ritual and its dissolution, are designed to invoke and authenticate presence, on levels from the realms of village politics to those of deity. To illustrate this via the sequence of events in Leru, as depicted on the diagram showing the Leru spaces of Jiangjia village given on page 149, the ritual starts by an invocation of the mountain god through offerings made at the *labtsé* (1). This is the province of men and undertaken at dawn on a mountain top. Here the link between ancestor deities and legendary kings is re-enacted as village elders lead the procession down from the mountain skies to the village grounds where divine presences are fixed by the pillars of temples and houses, and other holy objects. Preparations for the Leru proper then continue at the household level, where daily rituals for the local deities ensure their continual invocation and presence. These household rituals reflect and prepare for those of Leru, culminating at the *lawa*'s house (2) where he invokes the presence of deity by chanting, donning particular clothes and taking on particular behavioural restrictions to facilitate 'becoming' mountain god. When the *lawa* has processed to the temple (3), and gone into trance in the main shrine room, the gendered spaces of the temple courtyard erupt into dances to invoke the deity and the *lawa* dances out of the main shrine room as mountain god. The men begin performing feats of endurance, the mountain god running spikes through their cheeks. This shows the authenticity of the mountain god's presence and their connection to him. These continue in circumambulation around the temple and up onto the basket court, site now of sacred space for Leru dances (4) and offering *sang* (5). The mountain god in full flight begins to speak, charging at the men, spitting alcohol and speaking in high pitched divine speech. Everyone is transfixed, focused on the *lawa* with a pure presence in which the concentration is palpable. Once this energy dissipates and the *lawa* returns home, the village elders, the men who lead in official affairs, sit in a semi-circle on the ground above the Leru performance space (6). They take turns to sing and recite; they discuss the village affairs. Those who have shown knowledge of the ritual and confidence in ordering and organising the others may be on their way to becoming leaders. This is the politicised space in which ritual and social roles converge. Roles taken during the ritual both reflect and play a part in determining village organisation and leadership, its sacred space also being a socialised space. Villagers not eating and drinking outside retire to their tents (7) to do so, buzzing with the extraordinary that lives beneath the veil of the everyday. The foreigners too, including Chinese, in their larger and higher tent, overlook the other tents from the mountainside (8). They have

their place in the order of things too: as guests, potential cultural ambassadors and sponsors. They sing and drink in their tent till dawn the day after the Leru ends – singing love songs and the like., This sense of delighting the deities through pleasurable activities and the state of mind created by doing so, could be seen as a healing one; one in which joy and other healthy states of the heart-mind, *sem* (T. *sems*), are engendered and the whole community empowered through the invocation of embodied presence.

In summary then, rituals such as Leru and the healing enacted through spirit mediumship of the *lawā* operates on a number of levels which could be described in the frame of empowered embodiment. Large communal rituals such as Leru bring their communities together and reconnect them to ethnic identities and familial and community belongings, including those with ancestral and deity worlds, which they (re)enact and reconstitute through ritual that affirms and (re)creates social structures and statuses in face of disruption and Entzambelung by the party-state. Authoritative presence and local power bases are negotiated and reinforced through a politics of presence in which divine agency has pivotal role to play. The leisure spaces of the Leru ritual bring health and well-being through countering the mundanity of participants' working lives, often spent variously negotiating modernities mediated and regulated by the party-state quite some distance away from their birthplaces, families and native communities. The Rebong spirit mediums can be viewed as part of the glue holding and enabling this (re)empowerment within a cultural matrix of healing whereby the presence of spirited agencies blesses and empowers the communities in exponential ritual renewals.

## CHAPTER FIVE – THE ART OF DANCING THE GODS

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

- T. S. Eliot 1963:191

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This chapter continues to explore themes of agency and presence in spirited landscapes through the lens of ritual dance performance, *cham* (T. 'cham). It relates the above to ritual dance performance, exploring themes of authenticity and transformation, contested authorities and identity (re)formation. These themes are discussed in connection to modes of possession/trance and mediumship. This chapter continues exploring the themes of embodiment, empowerment and blessing begun in previous chapters. It discusses the descent of blessings from deity to ritualists wherein the centre bears closest proximity to deity is presented as frame for understanding notions of blessing.

The chapter discusses how, within a Rebgong Bönpo village *cham*, the descent of blessings from deity to ritual participants is thought to occur and the consequences of it for those on whom it descends. In doing so the chapter contrasts the way in which in the shamanic idiom of the Leru's spirit medium the gods are called down to manifest themselves through possession, whereas in the idiom of the religious specialist, such as in tantric rituals such as the Rebgong *cham* described here, the gods are evoked and manifested through a different kind of embodiment. However, the chapter problematises making a clear divide between the shamanic idiom and that of the religious specialist, attempting instead to view the danced ritual practice described from point of view of the

politics of presence and thus to acknowledge voices from deity and spirit worlds as authoritative on their own terms.

### ***Invoking Divine Agency***

In Tibetan cultural contexts it does not make sense to talk of body or flesh, of matter, in separation from heart-mind and environment. This has underpinned much of scholarship in this area and is in keeping with tantric notions of the universe. Samuel described this orientation as ‘mind-body-world’ (Samuel 2001). Craig uses a common anthropological model in referring to it as ‘biopsychosocial’ (Craig 2012), reflecting that ‘environment’ in this context includes beings. These beings, as seen in the previous chapters, include a range of deity and spirit forces who animate the landscape to form distinct ecologies. Tibetan healing systems based upon this model, such as the medicine termed Sowa Rigpa discussed earlier, are grounded in an understanding of health which takes account not only of individuals and their social settings but of the distinct ecologies in which they are placed, including here non-human forces such as deities and the elements. As has been discussed in previous chapters, this can be described as a cultural matrix of healing, and is one in which deity worlds have no less authority than the humans of, say, biomedical spheres.

A world of deities and other spirit beings have inhabited Tibetan landscapes since as far back as it is possible historically to trace peoples self-designating with Tibetan identities (cf. van Schaik 2013 [2011]). The last chapter explored their role in rituals connected to health and well-being in terms of the meanings such rituals hold for people through the lens of the Leru, a ritual particular to Rebgong and oriented to the mountain gods and other local deities such as the *le* (T. *klu*), serpent deities of the underworlds. The Leru could be described as a ritual based upon a shamanic idiom in which the deity is called down into the person of the spirit medium through possession. Such shamanic paradigms are often presented in anthropological literature as contrasted with an idiom of specialist rituals in which deity is evoked rather than called down through possession. Prime examples of the latter type of ritual in Tibetan contexts are those of tantric traditions, an aspect of which is that of *cham* (T. *'cham*) – ritual dance. It is through the lens of a Rebgong *cham* that this chapter will continue exploring the meanings that rituals connected with preserving and restoring well-being bear for their communities. As with the Leru discussed in the previous chapter, large rituals involving

tantric practices have a curative aspect which encompasses and pertains to the health of the community and its environment, perceived of as facets of a whole that is inextricably interdependent and in which no external versus internal dichotomy is understood to exist. Thus, and as with the Leru and its shamanic idiom, the participation in group tantric rituals is thought to enhance wellbeing. Benefits such as the promotion of health and longevity, healing illness and protection from harm are thought to accrue not only to those directly facilitating the ritual but to its spectators. Such benefits are referred to in Tibetan as descending from the gods, literally ‘blessings descend’, *chinbab* (T. *chin babs*). This chapter will focus on one such Rebgong ritual in which the art of ritual dance (T. *'cham*) is practiced as an aspect of tantric practice which continues to develop new expressions of ancient forms amongst communities on the Tibetan Plateau.

The performance of ritual dances, *cham*, has been practiced within the Indic tantric traditions from which many Tibetan tantric practices derive, at least in terms of influence. As has been seen, an assortment of parallel innovations in *Śaivite* and *Mahāyāna* Buddhist traditions from the seventh century onwards gradually became labelled ‘*tantra*’ and formed the basis for the *vajrayāna* as received and now practiced amongst Tibetan communities. This emergent *vajrayāna* drew on the deity visualisation practices of the Mahāyāna Buddhism already established by the sixth century (Samuel 2008: 291), underpinned as these were by the philosophical thought attributed to Indian philosophers such as Nāgārjuna whose salient legacy was his deconstructionist *śūnyatā*, ‘emptiness’; the realisation of how things and events truly exist. Contemporary traditions of ritual dances that can be located in tantric traditions, include those found in the Newar cities of the Kathmandu valley, in which masked dancers in trance annually represent wrathful goddesses, the Navadurgā. Embodying these wrathful Aṣṭamāṭṛka deities, dancers may drink the blood of sacrificed animals and wield real swords. Other examples of masked dances are found in the *teyyam* rituals of Kerala (Freeman 1993, 1994, 1999 and Flood 1997), and the *bhutam* rituals of Southern Kannada (Claus 1973, 1979, 1984, 1993; Nichter 1977) in which low caste dancers are said to be possessed by wrathful deities, such as *Bhairava*, *Kālī* and *Cāmuṇḍā* (Samuel 2008:319ff). As can be seen, there is an antinomian aspect to these practices, reflecting that found in early tantric traditions such as the *Śaivite* and the *siddha*, in which practitioners deliberately engage in behaviour signifying a radical rejection of the norms of behaviour in society, thereby becoming free to live outside of its constraints. The antinomian character of the lifestyle of the Indian

*siddha* practitioners from whom the *vajrayāna* tantric practice found in Tibetan regions can be said to originate (cf. Samuel 2005: 57), underlies a meditative practice involving the transformation of individuals and their environs into that of deity and deity abode (*S. maṇḍala*) respectively. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ritual assumption of such divine powers and the embodiment of their presences entail dangers for unqualified practitioners. Tantric ritual practice is thus characterised by such dangerous elements; powerful forces encountered by ritual specialists qualified to embody them for the good of communities.

### ***Divine Dances***

Communities in Tibetan cultural regions, both Buddhist and Bön, perform a variety of dances known as *cham* as part of Tantric ritual practices. Such *cham* are said to originate in the dreams of great lamas or treasure revealers, *tertön* (T. *gter ston*).<sup>123</sup> Thus *cham* dances evoke deities, including both enlightened Buddha and local protector deities, mythical heroes and mythohistorical figures. The latter recall origins for such dances as found in Tibetan mythohistories, like the tale of the eighth century Indian tantric master Padmasambhava's dancing to subdue malevolent spirits creating obstacles to the foundation of Samyé (T. bSam yas), discussed in Chapter Two. Another example is that of the Tibetan monk Palgyi Dorji (T. dPal gyi rdo rje) ritually killing the anti-Buddhist king Langdarma (T. gLang dar ma) in 842 whilst dancing (Berg 2008: 77-78). Significant elemental prototypes of ritual dance termed *cham*, whether on the Tibetan Plateau or in other Tibetan cultural regions such as Bhutan (monastic Dzong *cham* or village *cham*), are to be found in the masked dances of Indo-Tibetan *vajrayāna* Buddhism. In the seventeenth century, the Bhutanese transposed Tibetan *cham* into a new Bhutanese festival context known as Tséchu (T. tshes bcu), 10th day of the month festival. In the first Bhutanese Tséchu, monastic *cham*, described in manuscripts of the time as *gar cham*, were combined with feasting, drinking, folk dances and sporting events, to form a state ritual in which the head of state himself took the central role of Padmasambhava (Ardussi 2008). The Tséchu thus derives from the use of *cham* for state ritual and seems to have subsumed traditional Bhutanese harvest celebrations within the Tibetan Buddhist

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<sup>123</sup> One example is that of the great historical figure and *gter ston*, Padma gling pa (Gayley 2007:114, n.72; Schrempf 1999: 200), and many other examples are evident in the stories about 17th century lamas found in the bKa' brgyud.

Nyingma tradition of the Gongdü cycle of *terma* (T. *gter ma*) teachings, which are the inspirational underlay for the Tséchu as ritual performance.<sup>124</sup> The Bhutanese use of *cham* in combination with other dance and sporting events for Tséchu, has given rise to the form of monastic or Dzong *cham* found in present day Bhutan in which folk and/or traditional dances play a significant part.

The tantric rituals of which *cham* form part are formulated around the model of a *maṇḍala*; the concentric abode of deity, the deity central to the particular practice in question abiding at its centre. It is worth noting that, according to Davidson, the Buddhist Tantric model of *maṇḍala* was consciously founded on the sixth to eighth century small feudal Indic states known by the same name (Davidson 2002:71-2). This can be seen as illustrating the existence of a direct correlation between societal forms and their ritual practices, as such demonstrating the extent of their mutual influence. This highlights once again the politics of presence inherent in ritual performance, as discussed in previous chapters. Charlene Makley notes, during the 1990s, the growing use of the Tibetan notion of fatherland, *payul* (T. *pha yul*), in countering state discourse proposing its own authorities as paternally caring for the *minzu*, the Chinese ethnic minorities, Tibetans amongst them. Such Tibetan recourse to *payul* in ‘repositioning of selves to home regions’ (Makley 2007: 33), no matter how far afield the search for work in an increasingly industrialised China has taken them, gives traditions such as Leru or *cham*, which bring communities together in connection to their homelands, a pivotal role.

Many people I came to meet, in Central Tibet and well as in rural Amdo, spent what brief holiday periods were available to them in the working year travelling long distances to return to their *payul*. Rituals focal to these holiday periods, such as the Leru of the previous chapter, or tantric rituals involving the performative *cham* and related to particularly important annual events, provide meeting points for ordinarily dispersed communities. These meeting points are junctures for a re-inhabitation of lands and the deity worlds they embody and, in doing so, a reconfiguration of the balances of power in human worlds as enacted via the communal rituals. Increasing urbanisation means that many villages are mostly inhabited by non-working people, so the old and the very

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<sup>124</sup> See Ardussi 2008, whose sources are the biographies (*rnam thar*) of Tibetan monks and pilgrims to Bhutan.

young. One would think that, in a society structured by the modern state ethos which emphasises a move away from ‘backward’ practices, that issues such as the problematic positioning of daughters-in-law vis-à-vis their separation from natal homesteads and disembodied status throughout adult life, would to some extent be remedied. However, although the status of many women as daughters-in-law in their husbands’ households, subject to low status in a large extended family of ‘others’, may no longer be a living reality for many urbanised women, they are not free from the disembodiment caused by Tibetan societies being *payul* oriented. When that much-awaited holiday period arrives, many I knew had only time to rush to one rural household home-base, and this could not be that of their *payul*. In the case of one friend, she always had to return to her husband’s village and meet him there during such times, this meant that she could not see her two-year-old child unless the holiday period allowed enough time to first visit her husband’s *payul*, fulfil her ritual duties there, and then travel to her mother’s house a two-day journey away, where her son was living. She saw her child maybe once a year, if that. She still attached great importance to returning to the land where her natal family and deities still lived, expressing happiness her son at least was able to experience growing up there.

In relation to this deep connection to land and the effect of this on identity formation, David Germano gives an account of the late twentieth century Tibetan revival of the treasure revelation tradition (*gter*) as, in its ‘revivifying the sacred landscape and pilgrimage sites’, being “fundamental to the re-formulation of Tibetan identity” (Germano 1998: 91). As an art form emergent from the dreams and visions of revered masters, *cham* could be considered as a visionary tradition playing its part in that revivification. In (re)enacting ‘the process of creating a civilisation out of spirits and people from the beginnings of time till the present day’ (Day 1989:19), *cham* recalls historical processes. Mona Schrempf comments that: ‘Instead of thinking about traditions as mere “survivals” from or “revivals” of the past – even though they might be locally understood as such – it makes more sense to analyse them through their present contexts as localized and multi-vocal reproductions and inscriptions of historical imagination.’ (Schrempf 2006:1). Since the fifth Dalai Lama’s seventeenth century introduction of large festivals to which the Tibetan public had unrestricted access, such public performances have functioned to unite, consolidate and demonstrate worldly and spiritual powers. In doing so, they evoke historical themes and become method by which communities strengthen and reaffirm cultural and ethnic identities (cf. Berg

2008). Performance references to events of a mythohistorical nature, or representations of them, can be seen as imaginary tropes which re-conjure present communities into being. To add to this, performance traditions like that of *cham*, could be understood on a model of performance which is fluid and laden with the potential to either reiterate or critique, and thus possibly destabilise, established orders (Ahmed 2008). *Cham* texts and practices differ widely (Cantwell 1985), yet most are associated with Tantric ritual. These tantric *cham* are mostly performed by male dancers (monks or lay practitioners), who appear in costumes visually representative of the deities, often after ritually invoking and identifying with them through meditative practices. These dancers embody the deities of the *maṇḍala* and, structurally reflecting the *tsok* (T. *tshogs*) ritual, destroy or nullify malevolent forces in the form of effigies during the course of the *cham* (Kohn 2001:185ff; Samuel 1993: 265ff; Beyer 1978: 312-318). Notable benefits claimed in *cham* texts<sup>125</sup> to accrue from these ritual dances include the destruction or subjugation of forces counter to health and wellbeing, the preparation for the intermediary state after death, and the receipt of blessing from the deities represented or embodied by the masked dancers during the course of a *cham*.

### ***A Rebgong Village Cham***

In Rebgong *cham* is performed in a wide range of settings, from large to small monasteries to lay or tantric practitioner (T. *sngags pa*) temples in villages. I attended a variety of *cham* in Rebgong and what will follow describes a Bönpo village *cham* at which I witnessed a contemporary phenomenon whereby various people attending the *cham* as observers fall into trance states; states of ecstasy during which they spontaneously transform into performers.<sup>126</sup> This phenomenon is associated with the biannual Chitok Chenmo (T. Chos thog chen mo) ritual. People not explicitly engaged

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<sup>125</sup> Such as the *chamyik* (T. 'cham yig) translated by Nebesky Wojkowitz, who dates this text at 1647 and says the fifth Dalai Lama intended it for the use of the abbot of the Potala's monastery (Nebesky Wojkowitz 1976: 85).

<sup>126</sup> I am indebted to dPal mo skyid, a native of the neighbouring village of Chungwo (T. Khyung po) for her assistance during my attendance at this *cham*, and afterwards in compiling the notes upon which I base the ethnographic section in this chapter. In August 2013 I published details of this *cham* as part of a collection on monastic and lay traditions in North-Eastern Tibet, and details of it can also be found in dPal mo skyid's MA thesis, published as a paper by Asian Highlands Perspectives in December of the same year (Collins 2013: 205-213; dPal mo skyid 2013: 44).

to perform or enact communal rituals falling into ecstatic states during such rituals is generally interpreted as indicative of the blessing of deity. Although there is evidence for the phenomena existing prior to 1958, it disappeared after this point and has only started reoccurring since 1999, becoming more common since 2008 (dPal mo skyid 2013).

I attended the village *cham* described in this chapter in November 2009. It was held in one of the subsections of Torjia township's village of Lingjia (T. gLing gyal).<sup>127</sup> According to local oral histories, Lingjia villagers heralded originally from Golok (T. Mgo-log) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the south-eastern part of contemporary Qinghai Province several centuries ago. They first settled at a location approximately eight kilometres southeast of the present Lingjia Village. The village community of Lingjia sub-divided into 'upper' and 'lower' portions, referring to groups living in its eastern and western sections respectively. The various subgroupings within the village complex, or the complex of villages which comprise Lingjia, contain Geluk and Nyingma Buddhist groups as well as Bön, the subject of this enquiry.

This Bönpo *cham* was organised by a community of Bönpo lay tantric practitioners at the Bönpo village temple, the *sékhang* (T. *gsas khang*), and took place in Torjia (T. Tho rgya) township, about seventeen kilometres north of Rongwo. The Bönpo traditions in Rebgong are long-standing and, according to Tsering Thar, those of the area known as Kokonor, within which he includes Rebgong, are chief in Amdo (Thar 2008). As has been mentioned, the Bönpo monastic community is based south of Rongwo in the Rebgong valley, where they have a large monastery known as Wönjia (T. Bon brgya). Alongside this monastic community exist Bönpo tantric practitioners from family lineages, the *hön* (T. *dpon*), of Rebgong. These lay and often married tantric practitioners are spread throughout the Rebgong valley. Their fifteen *sékhang* are individually placed in villages known to be mainly Bönpo, and these are broadly grouped regionally into four Bönpo communities or *mang* (T. *mang*): The Yarnang (T. Yar nang), the Töchok (T. sTod phyogs), the Méchok (T. sMad phyogs) and the Nyönzang (T. sNyon bzang) (Tsering Thar 2008:541ff; Millard 2013). The *cham* took

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<sup>127</sup> Paldan Trashi, a native of Lingjia, says the 'tribe' of Lingjia are subdividable into 'seven distinct groups: Sa so ma, Ru zhol ma, Ru gong ma, Ya ru, Ma ru ma 'go, Ma ru ya 'go, Ja mo thang.' (dPal Idan bkra shis and Stuart 1998: 32)

place inside and in the courtyard of Lingjia village *sékhang*, and was performed by a mixture of Bönpo tantric practitioners and local villagers.

The morning that I left the centre of Rongbo town to head up to the village for the *cham* was very bright, the skies promising to light the *cham* dancers' outdoor theatre without obstruction. I arrived at the village around eight thirty in the morning on the 10th day of the 10th lunar month, accompanied by a local scholar whose main research interest is *cham*. When we arrived, the Bönpo tantric practitioners known colloquially as *akawenbo* (T. *a khu bon pa*) were already chanting refuge prayers in the temple, which were followed by other preliminary practices. There were two papers posted up on the window of the temple. The first was a list describing the order in which the ensuing procession would take place (T. *ser phreng gi rim pa*), followed by a list of rules to be observed by the *akawenbo* who were responsible for the enactment of the *cham*.<sup>128</sup> The enforcement of these rules and so proper conduct of the *cham* was entrusted to two *géké* (T. *dge bskos*). These *akawenbo* responsible for discipline, the

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<sup>128</sup> The *ser phreng gi rim pa* ran as follows: *dge bskos kyis spos 'dren pa, dung chen gnyis, dung dkar gnyis, rgya gling gnyis, gdugs, phyag rgya, rgyal mtshan, ka 'phan, dar bzhi, dom ra tsan rnams, zhwa nag tsan rnams and tshogs mar*. A rough translation and description of the contents of this *ser phreng gi rim pa* is as follows: *discipline masters (géké)* offer incense, two large conch, two white conch, two double reed oboes, umbrella/parasol, banner (black), victory banner (small and long), a banner with a tree shaped design, four flags, horns of bears (referring to elderly *akawenbo* wearing pointed hats, black (fringed) hats (again referring to a group of *akawenbo*) and a group (referring to the rest of the *akawenbo*). The *shanak* (T. *zhwa nag*) are a group of practitioners commonly found in *cham*.

The list of rules ran as follows: *zhwa nag dang dkar mo rtse rgyal tsan rnams kyis ril ba shigs nas rgyab tu sham dgos / dbu mdzad kyi nag mo'i bskul ba bton pa dang zhwa nag tsan rnams kyis gar 'cham byas nas sgrub gang phyi la 'bud dgos / zhwa nag tsan rnams phyi la ma bud gong la tshogs mang gcig kyang sgrub khang khyams la bud na chad pa nan mo gcod gnes yin / 'grig lam dang go rim med par zir zir yong yong gis ser phreng mi byed pa gal che / dge bskos gnyis kyis ser phreng la go rim yod pa'i bkod sgrig byed dgos /*

A loose translation of the above list of rules: The black and white hat *akawenbo* must let their hair hang freely down their backs. The chant master must chant *bskul ba bton pa* and the black hat *akawenbo* perform *cham*, coming out of the inner temple (lit: house of accomplishment). The black hat *akawenbo* are the first of the group to come out of the inner temple. If the correct order in coming out, according to the order of events, is not observed, there will be severe punishment. The two *dge bskos (géké)* must strictly keep the order of events to order.

discipline masters, wore distinctive leopard print ruffs around their heavy coats and carried sticks, as can be seen in the picture below.



*discipline masters - géké*

The discipline masters are elders who achieved their current positions of power by virtue of having sponsored a previous *cham*. The chanting, which lasted the best part of two hours, concluded with a short *cham* in which all the *cham* dancers, mostly masked and wearing hats, processed out of the temple and circled around several senior *akawenbo* who placed effigies representing harmful forces in the centre of the temple courtyard. The *akawenbo* pointed their ritual daggers (T. *phur bu*) at these effigies, which were laid on the ground. Some of the *cham* dancers flung themselves onto the floor with sweeping gestures of suppression, *dulwa* (T. 'dul ba), directed towards the effigies. The purpose of this short morning *cham* was to subdue harmful influences; the effigies representing these were then discarded. The *cham* dancers then re-entered the temple, once more processing in order of importance, and danced, whilst the *akawenbo* completed the concluding rites of the morning session. The most important figure in this village's *cham* was the one named 'Planet', Za (T. Gza'), whose dances are unique to this village. This deity was followed by other characters, including Chöjal (T. Chos rgyal), Dralijemmo (T. sGra bla'i rgyal mo), Nukmo (T. Nag mo), Lamo (T. Lha mo),

Tsen (T. bTsan), Gyalwo (T. rGyal bo), Jarok (T. Bya rog), Ganri (T. Gangs re), and Chöwulamo (T. mChod 'bul lha mo).<sup>129</sup>



processing the banners

After a break of around two or three hours in which we all retired for lunch in village houses, people gradually began to reassemble in the temple courtyard. We spoke with one of the smallest *cham* dancers. He said he had practiced for two days and that, yes, he probably would get into trouble with his teacher for missing school. Those Bönpo *cham* dancers who were not *akawenbo* had been selected from amongst ordinary villagers, according to whether they were physically suitable for their parts. People began amassing around us, a greater turn out than for the morning's more preparatory rites. As with the Leru mentioned earlier, women and men stood for the most part in separate areas of the temple. In this case women were at the back, near the temple doors.

At about two thirty in the afternoon, the conch blower summoned the *akawenbo* who were not already present to reassemble and begin chanting in the temple. As they chanted, a variety of preparations for the afternoon *cham* took place in the courtyard.

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<sup>129</sup> This list is according to our collective notes made from memory of the day, as previously described (Collins 2013:209ff; dPa' mo skyid 2013: 43ff). Tsering Thar lists the following characters as those generally found in Rebong *cham*: Zhwa-nag, A bse rgyal ba, Srid pa'i rgyal mo, Ma chen bom ra, sTag ri rong, gShin rje, dMu bdud, dMag dpon and mChod 'bub gyi lha mo (Tsering Thar 2008:546). Srid pa'i rgyal mo is the leader of the nine protector deities usually represented in Bönpo ritual dances (Karmay 1983; Schrempf 2000:332; dPa' mo skyid 2013).

These included chalking out the space, placing carpeted wooden planks as seats for the *akawenbo*, and a tractor setting up shop for snacks and offerings. Eventually the *akawenbo* and other *cham* dancers again emerged in order from the temple, processing and making offerings as per the list on the temple door given earlier, each of the *cham* dancers performing. The *cham* continued on throughout the afternoon and until dusk fell.



*cham* procession

Towards the latter part of the *cham*, several of the villagers who were not performing as masked dancers in the *cham* but were spectators situated outside of the *cham* grounds' chalk circle, went into what appeared to be states of trance. The word 'trance' is used here, as opposed to 'possession', in order not to suggest that these people were possessed in the sense of being medium for a spirit or deity, since this is not how their state is culturally defined. The term used locally for this state of trance is *chinlabbab* (T. *byin brlabs babs*) or *chinbeb* (T. *byin 'bebs*), which literally means 'the descent of blessings'. These trance states were precipitated by the appearance of the fearsome black masked figure representing Dralijemmo (T. *sGra bla'i rgyal mo*). This deity is prime amongst the protector deities venerated by the Rebong Bönpo communities, as a protector deity; an emanation of the female deity Chutsamjemmo (T. *Chu lcam rgyal mo*). The latter holds the dominant position in Bön rituals, being the female deity who originated humanity and who is queen ruling the cosmic order of the universe (Karmay 1986: 195ff), this once again highlighting the importance of myth and

mythohistories in understanding ritual contexts. The appearance of this deity was greeted by offerings: a flurry of white scarves (T. *kha btags*), wind horses, fire crackers and showers of beer and *arak*, the local alcoholic spirits.

The first person to fall into trance was a young woman of about thirty who emerged from a group of women standing to the left of the temple courtyard's main gate. Her body started shaking and then, after a few minutes, she started making gestures with her hands that were akin to those performed during tantric practice, i.e. *mudra*. Then, her hair braided in two long plaits tied together at the bottom and her thick Amdo *chubba* (T. *phyu pa*) flowing out around her, she danced into the inner spaces of the *cham* grounds, seeming to request Dralijemmo to dance with her. She danced several times in anti-clockwise direction, circling around (performing *skor ba*) the *torma* (T. *gtor ma*) at the centre of the chalk circle within which the masked dances were taking place. About six or seven women spectators reacted by shaking, prostrating and crying things like 'Tsawey Lama' (T. *rtsa ba 'i bla ma*: root lama), 'Lama Rinpoché' (T. *bla ma rin po che*: precious lama) and 'Dralijemmo' (T. *sGra bla 'i rgyal mo*). Some elderly women near where we were standing began prostrating, proclaiming in an Amdo dialect, a phrase whose meaning in English is translatable as 'Truly Dralijemmo has come to this place!'.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Interesting to note here is that dPa' mo skyid reports observing the same woman falling into trance during another *cham* in a neighbouring village two months later and the *akawenbo* who were present saying they felt her really to be the deity (dPa' mo skyid 2013: 45)



**Truly Dralijemmo has come to this place!**

A man in his late thirties then also began to shake. He was standing to the front of the crowd and to the left of the temple's main gate, between the large group of woman towards the back and the deity seat situated half way along the side of the temple courtyard. As his trance became more pronounced he started making wailing sounds and moving some way into the chalk circle but not turning around the *torma* in as if performing circumambulation (*skor ba*). One *géké* made sure the man did not approach the *cham* deity too closely, and guided him back to the edge of the *cham* grounds' chalk circle. The men there supported him under his armpits and he swayed from side to side as the woman in trance continued to dance with Dralijemmo. His trance subsided soon after the woman's did. She returned to her mother and sister. Her mother fixed her dishevelled clothing and the scholar who was with me heard her scolding her daughter, asking why she had behaved like that in public. The woman cried, replying that it was out of her control, so she couldn't do otherwise. Throughout the whole sequence of trance dancing, the *akawenbo* sitting in rows in front of the temple were showing signs of trance such as shaking. Events ended with the large ritual weapon (T. *gtor bzlog*) being carried out through the main gate of the temple, as people made a corridor for those wanting blessing to file underneath it. Events ended at around four thirty in the afternoon. We were told that this ritual weapon for the protectors that had been positioned at the centre of the *cham* grounds would now be placed at an intersection.

As can be seen from this account, the whole morning of the day's *cham* was devoted to preparing the ground for the *cham*. Central to this preparatory process, and in common with all Tantric rituals, is the notion of preparing through purification and transforming the space, the environment including beings, into that of deity. Just as Padmasambhava's Tantric powers were enlisted to subjugate malevolent forces and dispel their divisive influence before Tibet's first Buddhist monastery could be built, so precursor to all rituals of a Tantric nature are parallel sets of practices to create the space within which the main body of the ritual is to occur as sacred. In relation to this, an intent central to the practice of Tantra in general and of *cham* in particular is that of subjugating malevolent or negative forces, including as this does driving out 'demonic' spirits, eliminating pollution of all sorts accumulated during a year and also annihilating 'enemies of religion' and self-centred obstructions hindering the practice (Schrempf 1994, 1999, 2000; Day 1989). As a necessary prerequisite, purifying the grounds upon which the dancers will perform and their audiences gather is the first important task of the ritual. In doing so, the environment becomes that of deity. This is reflected in the tantric notion of *maṇḍala*, the palatial abode of the presiding tantric deity into which those empowered by tantric ritual are invited by the tantric officiate or *lama* during initiation rites. Tibetan ritual dances reflect "the essence regarding ritual space: the general creation of a purified and protected realm for a temple, a *stūpa* or a *maṇḍala* to be built upon" (Schrempf 1999:198). The environment, as extension of rather than separate to its inhabitants, is revealed during *cham* in its primordial nature as pure terrain presided over by deity.

The idea of the environment being purified both before *cham* during preparatory rites and during *cham* by the sacrificial slaughter of malevolent forces opposing the practice of religion, is extended to include those who participate in *cham* as performers or onlookers. As such, *cham* can be considered a ritual act of purification, precipitating well-being for communities and their environs. In fact, Tibetan philosophic perspectives allow no dichotomy ultimately to exist between persons and environments, all of which arise interdependently in *maṇḍala*-like formations. On a Buddhist Tantric model, such dualities are transformed 'through their unification and transcendence.' (Schrempf 1999: 199). Thus, on these understandings, *cham*, can be viewed as profoundly benefiting its observers (Schrempf 1994, 1995). Indeed, according to the aforementioned '*cham yig* translated by Nebesky Wojkowitz and attributed primarily to the fifth Dalai Lama, *cham* has the power to completely transform the mind of those

who watch it (1976: 227).<sup>131</sup> Motivations for attending and participating in *cham* found amongst various sections of the communities within which it is practiced are multi-layered, from educated religious specialists to uneducated lay villagers. Motivations include, for example, Ladakhi audiences at *cham* attending in preparation for the *bardo* (T. *bar do*), the intermediary realms after death and before rebirth, and hence as means to attain a better rebirth (Day 1989: 391,407). Other common lay perspectives include focus on the experience of certainty or faith (T. *dad pa*), the generation of merit through virtue (T. *dge ba*)<sup>132</sup> and the receipt of blessing (T. *byin babs*) through the encounter with and presence of the gods.

### ***Trance Dancing to the Heart of Things***

In seeking any precedent for trance phenomena relating to Tibetan *cham* similar to that described in the ethnography presented here, a search for any record prior to dPa' mo skyid's and my own publications speaking to this material (dPa' mo skyid 2013; Collins 2013) threw up only one brief mention by Sophie Day in her thesis 'Embodying Spirits: Village Oracles and Possession Rituals in Ladakh, North India' (1989). She quotes an informant as having had several people describe Buddhist monks at the *cham* at Hemis dressing as 'witches' and this causing some female onlookers to faint with 'possession' (a translation of *zhug shes* here). She says Kaplanian describes this as these women having been 'victims of jealousy'; unknowingly possessed by witches, their possession only coming to light through the 'power of the dancers' (Kaplanian 1981: 297 in Day 1989: 433). As can be seen from this interpretation, the possession, or '*zhug shes*', or, if not 'possession', the embodiment of monk performers is viewed as an expression of the power of the gods, in contrast to female onlookers' states of *zhug shes*, which are viewed as possessions by malevolent forces brought to light by the purifying monk (male) gods, who then presumably put paid to such demonic influences during the exorcistic course of the *cham*. Although there is this brief account of something similar

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<sup>131</sup> Nebesky Wojkowitz dates this text at 1647 and says the fifth Dalai Lama intended it for the use of the abbot of the Potala's monastery (1976: 85). It is hence a text written by a religious specialist and intended for the use of one. The section of the text translated as mentioned above is as follows: *legs pa'i phyag rgya'i rigs kun nyen bsdu pa'i / 'chams yig snang ba kun nas 'gyur nus pa / ngo mtshar bkod pa'i dga' ston 'di na'o* // (Nebesky Wojkowitz 1976:226); see also Schrempf 1999).

<sup>132</sup> Such as giving donations to the monastery through sponsorship of the ritual (Schrempf 2000).

to the phenomenon observed in the Rebgong Bönpo village *cham* appearing in a pre-1980s Buddhist *cham*, and cases of people falling into trance states during rituals are also found elsewhere, there are some salient differences in what is described in the ethnography above. For example, and importantly for purposes here, no mention was made in the Ladakhi *cham* of such possessed members of the audience entering the *cham* grounds and dancing with the *cham* dancers. Certainly in contemporaneous *cham* elsewhere, such as that described in Bhutan, anyone appearing to be in something like a trance state and attempting to enter the *cham* grounds would have been more likely to be swiftly evicted as behaving disruptively rather than viewed as blessed by deity.

As Schrempf's title (1995) 'From Devil Dance to World Healing' implies, early scholarship on *cham* tended to interpret even the deity dancers themselves as 'devils', perhaps due to the fierce expressions on the masks of the wrathful deities. Sophie Day reports a personal communication with C. Cech,<sup>133</sup> in which it is reported that female members of the audience at *cham* became possessed during the section wherein monks portray the 'troublesome female demons' who were subjugated 'long ago at *Sa-skyä* monastery in Tibet', and that these women, by virtue of their having fallen into states of possession, are 'indicating their propensity for witchcraft' (Day 1989: 590, n. 48). It does not seem possible to interpret non-performers falling into trance during the *cham* I witnessed in Rebgong in the above manner: as being exorcised through viewing *cham* and thus freed of a condition incurred due to the predilection of evil spirits for entering weak minded women. Firstly, although most of the trance dancers we witnessed generally in various Rebgong Bönpo *cham* were women, we also witnessed men, such as the one described in the ethnography above, going into trance, and at one village it is only men who do so. Also, as the ethnography attests, a number of the senior *akawenbo* present went into trance. It is not possible to interpret non-performers in trance as being an exorcism of hitherto hidden devils with a predilection for weak minded people, such as women may be classed, when some of those non-performers are long standing and revered male tantric practitioners. In relation to the question of gender in this analysis, in the absence of a systematic study focusing on the issue, it is not possible to give supported comment here. However, for the purposes of future research, it is notable that

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<sup>133</sup> I believe referring here to Crystyna Cech, although Day does not reference any of her work. Crystyna Cech worked with Bonpo in the 1970s and 1980s and did a PhD on Bonpo sacred geography but then dropped out of Tibetan studies (personal communication with Geoffrey Samuel).

a significant proportion of trance dancers during Bönpo *cham* in Rebgong do appear to be women, and if this superficial observation were borne out by future data, as appears to be supported by research thus far (cf dPa' mo skyid 2013), a possible question for further research might be whether this relates to Diemberger's observations concerning her findings that an increasing number of Tibetan spirit mediums are women and suggestions as to why this may be (Diemberger 2005). In the context of *cham* as aspect of a Tantric ritual, it could make sense to refer back to the antinomian aspect of the *vajrayāna* and the role of women in that.

### ***The Descent of Dancing Gods***

According to those in the village described in the ethnography of the Rebgong *cham*, this phenomena of spectators falling into trance states during ritual events such as *cham* has only been taking place in their village since around 2005, although in a neighbouring village it has been happening since about 2008.<sup>134</sup> It was viewed in this village as a more recent development or transformation of ritual practices or, perhaps more precisely, of spectator reactions to them. As we witnessed in the *cham* above, reactions from family members to those exhibiting signs of trance are not necessarily positive. In the case of the woman trance dancer whose mother scolded her, she was not from the village where the *cham* was held, but had married into it. She was thereby acting quite out of the usually subservient, modest and retiring role of a traditional daughter in law.<sup>135</sup> The reason she gave for this was her actions being beyond her control, which may indeed be the case, or it may be a convenient explanation for acting with at least some degree of volition outside of prescribed female role models. As can be seen from the above, such trance dancing is especially socially stigmatised for women.

However, in another Rebgong Bönpo village where only men fall into trance during *cham*, villagers attribute this gender divide to local custom, which could suggest that trance states either can be consciously voluntarily avoided in order to accord with

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<sup>134</sup> Personal communication with villager, Nov 2009

<sup>135</sup> Behaviour outside of these norms would be highly embarrassing for the family concerned and could result in ostricisation for the woman, as Bassini, a European who married into a Tibetan family describes in detail in her ethnography (Bassini 2007).

custom, or that deities take account of gender when causing trance, or that in the liminal spaces of trance there is some degree of volition. Whether there is some degree of volition in trance is an issue central to the notion commented on quite extensively by scholars that persons, such as the in-married daughter-in-law in the ethnographic account given above, by falling into trance attain a voice where otherwise would be denied them due to their marginalised social status. Lewis describes this theoretically as a ‘deprivation hypothesis’, in which states of trance or possession are linked to subordination or marginality (Lewis 1971). Samuel describes an episode interpretable as such which appears in the documentary film *Eyes of Stone* (1989), directed by Vachani. In the scene described one woman gives voice to her discontent with her husband’s behaviour during trance (Samuel 2005: 241-2); Graham Dwyer problematises the ‘deprivation hypothesis’ convincingly, preferring a phenomenological approach to understandings of illness attributable to trance or possession which aims to adopt a viewing of it from the cultural standpoint of those involved (Dwyer 2003). I would follow Dwyer here in not apply this type of theory to the Rebong trance dancers since they do not give voice to any particular social concerns during trance, and I would prefer in any case an approach attempting to understand such a phenomenon in the context of the local discourse that underpins it.

Wönjia Rinpoché (T. Bon brgya Rin po che) or ‘Alak Wönjia’, the head of Rebong’s Bönpo monastery, Wönjia, about 30km south-west of Rongbo volunteered that such non-performers falling into trance should not be considered as deity-possession but rather as examples of *byin babs*; being blessed by the deities.<sup>136</sup> This raises the question as to how precisely such blessing occurs and what it entails. Additionally, the view of Wönjia Rinpoché can be taken at face value as the opinion of a qualified lama who is privy to conventionally unseen realms. However, it is also possible that this reaction from a person in the highest position of authority at the largest Bönpo religious institution in the area might be concerned to preserve such authority, and so interpreting the lay trance dancers, particularly the women, as possessed or profoundly blessed by deities could be to admit them as a challenge to existent religious hierarchies as currently expressed in the *cham*.

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<sup>136</sup> Personal communication with Geoffrey Samuel, to whom I am indebted for posing questions regarding my topic to Wönjia Rinpoché during his 2010 visit to Rebong.

Having said this, categorising these trance dancers as receiving *chinbab* (T. *byin babs*) is by no means a negative.<sup>137</sup> Indeed, the fact that Wönjia monastery displayed a picture of a lay woman in trance in a glass frame upon its wall would possibly suggest a certain pride in the occurrence or wish to advertise it as having lent some sort of authenticity to the monastery's rituals. The proximity of the deity could be enough, in local perceptions, to provoke reactions such as these trance states, especially where the persons in trance have strong faith.<sup>138</sup> Whatever the case, the notion of *chinbab* (T. *byin babs*) certainly entails some direct contact from deity and, as such, marks the occasion, if not the individual in receipt of it, as special. Indeed, the etymology of the term *chinbab* suggests a notion of blessing descending (root: 'bab, p. *babs*) from the gods. It is clear from the types of comments observers made when witnessing the trance dancers - for example, 'Truly Dralijemmo has come to this place' - that they did appear to perceive these lay village trance dancers as blessed and so authenticating the *cham* in the sense of being an indication or marker of the deity's presence.

The phenomenon of spectators falling into trance at *cham* has achieved some notoriety on the internet. For example, footage of *cham* in the village described above can be found at <http://www.rgbm123.com/music/301/>, and of one held at Wönjia monastery can be found at <http://www.rgbm123.com/music/302/>.<sup>139</sup> It is notable that during the latter *cham*, held at the largest Bönpo institution in Rebgong, the spectators who fell into trance did not enter the space of the *cham* grounds where the masked ritual dance performance was taking place, nor dance with the masked dancers there. However, in the case of the *cham* at one of the fifteen Rebgong Bönpo *sékhang* described in the ethnography above, they do both these things. Internet searches on the phrase *byin babs pa'i gar 'cham* throws up additional links, and the use of *byin babs pa* in this phrase itself can be taken to indicate that blessing is an important aspect of how this phenomenon is perceived by local people from Rebgong. In interview, a Bönpo

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<sup>137</sup> I am indebted to Nichlas Silhé for his input here when discussing the topic of my paper during the workshop 'Unity and Diversity- Monastic and Non-monastic Traditions in Amdo', Cardiff, Sept 2011.

<sup>138</sup> A young Bönpo schoolteacher from Ngo mo, called Sonam Gyatso, has researched the phenomenon and suggests a spectrum of phenomena classified according to the *lus ngag yid gsum* model as possible explanations of it (personal communication with Nicholas Silhé 2011).

<sup>139</sup> Last accessed 27th June 2012.

monk<sup>140</sup> expressed the view that the trance states are a result of the deity blessing those who have great faith (T. *dad pa zhi ge yod ge*), and that this faith means that the *lama* can allow the deity to ‘possess’ such a person, which somehow cleanses them.

Centres of power, both secular and spiritual, are reaffirmed and renegotiated in public festivals (cf. Berg 2008). Events such as the *cham* performances taking place as part of Tantric ritual are a manifestation of human and non-human realms. As such, there are various degrees of spatial separation between performers who tend to be ritual specialists presenting the deities, lay performers engaging in more narrative or folk dance events, and spectators. In *cham* performed in monasteries, adepts, or those enlisted by these ritual specialists as assistants and/or performers, mark out a purified and ritualised performance space and, within this sacred area, manifest deities for the continuation of their (most often monastic) religious lineage, and for the benefit of themselves and the non-specialist laity. The latter receive blessing, *chinbab* (T. *byin babs*) from watching the *cham*, and those amongst them who sponsor the ritual thereby maintain the reciprocal relations between monasteries and laity via which they accumulate merit. Berg describes lay audiences at monastic *cham* as ‘mere spectators’, demonstrating the lesser role that these are held to perform compared to those monastics performing the *cham* (Berg 2008:82). It is possible to suggest that, at least for Rebgong, it is on the borders of this spectator-performer divide that sufficient fluidity is found within the fairly formal and hierarchical structures of *cham* to enable socio-cultural shifts in power to occur and communities to (re)construct their identities.

The spiritual separation between specialist-performers and non-specialist spectators is reflected in the way in which the sacred space of monastic *cham* grounds are designated for the monk performers, lay sponsors having privileged seating as audience around the grounds and ordinary laity spreading out from this concentrically arranged spiritual hierarchy. Cathy Cantwell describes offerings being made to the head Lama at the end of Kalimpong’s Jangsa monastery’s *cham* in strict order: the chief sponsors first, followed by other practitioners and ending with non-practitioner laity (Samuel and Cantwell, forthcoming). Indeed, as Mona Schrempf notes regarding *cham* in Amdo Sher khog, prestigious sponsors can be privileged not only by being given

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<sup>140</sup> Personal communication with dPa’ mo skyid and Gerald Roche regarding an interview they conducted in Nov 2011.

special seating and gifts such as victory banners, but by being permitted to enter the *cham* dance grounds in order to make direct offering to the performing deities (Schrempf 2000: 331-2).

In terms of the ritual itself, the non-specialist or lay community expresses these degrees of separation between themselves and the ritual specialists, as Marko notes in her ethnography of a *cham* in Zanskar, by pulling back ‘in fear’ from the ‘dangerous forces *commanded* by the monastery.’ (Marko 1994: 137 [my emphasis]).<sup>141</sup> If lay people do take on performance roles in *cham*, they may be obliged to observe prescriptive limitations on their ordinary behaviour in preparation for and during the *cham*, such as those prohibitions on ‘black’ foods mentioned in the previous chapter.<sup>142</sup> Physical separation of non-specialists from the inner *cham* grounds has, in larger *cham*, been enforced by either monastic or secular police (Schrempf 2002; Marko 1994). Such concentrically arranged spatial hierarchies are not limited to ritual dances termed *cham* held by monasteries. In their description of one *cham* performed during Leru in a Rebgong village (the ‘*lha mo gar ’cham*’), Pelden Trashi (T. dPal ldan bkra shis) and Stuart observe that lay men dance on an inner ring, women form a ring around them, and children dance on the outermost ring of the performance space (dPal ldan bkra shis and Stuart 1998). The Bhutanese *cham* I observed at the Dochula pass had a very strict hierarchical structure for seating arrangements, albeit on a mountainside, involving a tent for royalty and carpeted seating for some, nothing for others. The *cham* is, in short, simultaneously ‘...a socio-cultural event and collective ritual.’ (Schrempf 2000: 337).

### ***Performing Presence***

This concentric reflection of a hierarchical relation between human beings, the deities and other non-human beings, can be viewed as maintaining and reaffirming the social

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<sup>141</sup> There scant scholarship on the role of the *atsara* (T. *a tsa ra*), comic figures who move between the crowds and the deity dancers during *cham* (Cantwell 1987; Pommaret 2006). It could be an interesting topic for future research to explore the role of the *atsara* as inhabiting the borderlands between the ritual specialists and non-practitioner laity, as negotiating these intermediary spaces and closing the spaces between them through humour; as is arguably the case with truth-tellers in the theatre joker/jester tradition.

<sup>142</sup> Examples include sexual abstinence, refraining from eating garlic or walking under drainpipes, all of which are considered polluting activities in certain religious contexts.

status quo and celebrating the ‘interconnectedness’ of human and divine beings (Berg 2008: 76). The way in which tantric forces descend and lend presence during the *cham* has potential, through empowering blessing, to either subvert or re-create and re-establish the precedence of those in religious authority in symbiotic relationship to their non-specialist patrons. The latter can then reinforce their own high social status as individuals wealthy enough to earn the merit of sponsoring the *cham* which is seen to benefit the whole community. All the community rely on the ritual, and therefore its ritual specialists and sponsors, for the maintenance of their health and well-being, a health and well-being inseparable from that of the natural environment surrounding the *cham* grounds. Thus, the *cham* functions to reinforce the non-specialist community’s commitment to a symbiotic relationship with the religious institution at its heart, through its re-enactment of both lay hierarchies and those of ritual specialists.

Performance offers a space within which established orders can be contested. During the performance of *cham*, insofar as the borderlands between humans and deities or/and between spectators and performers retains a degree of fluidity, shifts in relationships may occur. In the ethnography given here, it was the *atsara* (T. *a tsa ra*) and the trance dancers whose presence was most situated on the *cham* grounds’ borderlands between ‘performers’ and ‘spectators’. The *atsara* are figures who interact with both crowd of onlookers and *cham* performers, adapting to whatever arises on the day and softening the interface between them through comic interaction. As such, they could be said to be moving between the hierarchical spaces of the *cham* grounds’ centre and the more impure worlds at its peripheries. The trance dancers, on the other hand, might appear to be elements of those mundane worlds who become transformed through the power of their faith and the deity’s blessing to traverse into ever more sacred realms. Hence they could be said to exist in the liminal spaces between realms: spiritual and worldly; sacred and social.

In summary then, the practice of *cham* as part of tantric ritual, such as that described in Rebgong, reinforces both social hierarchies and those of religious institutions, and revitalises religious and social identities through reinforcing connection to homelands and to an enacted visionary tradition. As previously discussed, the evocation of deity into embodied presence happens in tantric practice within a sacred space known as a *maṇḍala*. In the case of *cham*, the sacred space is physically delineated, usually by chalk, as the *cham* grounds. Levels at which the deity’s

empowering presence can be experienced or absorbed could be understood as increasing in intensity the closer to the centre of this space one gets (cf. Schrempf 1999: 202-3; cf. Makley 2007). Therefore, the closeness that participants in *cham* are permitted to come to the centre of the *cham* grounds' mandallic space, mandallic understood in a generic rather than literal way here, might be taken to indicate something about their status, level of purity and/or temporal roles within this ritual context. Within these sacred spaces, as is generally the case with the practice of religions in Tibetan cultural regions, both supra-mundane and worldly concerns are embodied (cf. Samuel 1993).

The observance of the sacred space of the *cham* grounds, and the institutionally and socially constructed hierarchies of what is permitted to enter them and how, has traditionally been enforced by religious authorities and/or state police.<sup>143</sup> In the case of the Bönpo village's *cham* described above, *geké* (T. *dge bskos*) were there to keep the discipline of the ritual space. They did not evict the trance dancers who reached the very centre of the mandallic *cham* grounds. I tentatively suggest this indicates that, however their experience is interpreted, the profundity of their perceived connection to deity was not in doubt. Arguably, the way in which the trance dancers entered the inner grounds spontaneously and without formal invite from those in positions of religious authority, can be considered equivalent in a generic sense to entering the inner grounds of a tantric *maṇḍala*. This occurrence reflects that which takes place during an initiatory or empowering tantric rite. Indeed, the term *chinbab* (T. *byin babs*) can be translated as 'empowerment' (Huber quoted in Schrempf 1999: 198, 214, n.1). The fact that the *geké* in charge of disciplining the event did not obstruct them doing so, could be considered as reinforcing the communal perception that their trance states testify to divine presence. Just as initiates during tantric empowerment ritual are invited by deity via the lama to enter such inner sanctums, so these trance dancers can be seen as dancing themselves into the heart of the *cham* grounds, by implication with the authorisation of the deities who have blessed them. The *chinbab* the trance dancers receive operates on both mundane and supramundane levels: as both social and ritual empowerment, dancing as they do: to the heart of things and empowered through spirited agency.

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<sup>143</sup> One example of the latter is that of the Indian police policing an exile community's *cham* (Schrempf 2002).

Hence, the trance dancers simultaneously reaffirm religious hierarchies through attesting to the presence of deity and yet undergo a transformation from ‘mere’ spectators whose contact with the deities is mitigated by ritual specialists to that of directly empowered ritual participants whose benefit in receiving such blessing/empowerment (T. *byin babs*) is unmitigated by those specialists and thought to come directly from deity realms due to their faith, their *dépa* (T. *dad pa*). The phenomena of lay non-performers at *cham* becoming possessed or falling spontaneously into trance has received scant attention from scholars and the interpretation placed upon it by the past scholarship outlined above, is different from that offered here. The interpretation tentatively suggested here is that, rather than reinforcing existing institutional and social hierarchies, the phenomenon of non-performers moving across the boundaries between spaces designated for mere spectators and those reserved for the performance of deity, functions to transcend normal spatial boundaries, moving from impure peripheries closer to the empowerment found at the centre of the *maṇḍala*; at the focal point of the deity’s *né* (T. *gnas*). Both non tantric specialist laity, particularly women, move outside of their normative social and gender roles, as in the example of the daughter-in-law falling into trance and dancing with Dralijemmo (T. *sGra bla’i rgyal mo*) in her in-law’s village.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Makley, in her work on gender and revival, talks about circumambulation as part of a process by which benefit is accrued by proximity to the deity’s place (*gnas*), the most powerful and empowering focus of which is found at the centre of the sacred space. This centre is the most purified space of the whole *né*, and those human and non-human beings who wish to absorb its power by gaining access to as much proximity as possible to it, must be thought to display corresponding levels of purity. Thus, she argues, Tibetans construct social spaces along similar lines upon which the purified centre of the space stands in juxtaposition to its relatively impure peripheries (cf. Makley 2007, in particular chap.3). In light of this analysis, I would like to tentatively suggest that the trance dancers of Rebgong’s Bönpo *cham* may, in the act of spontaneously entering the central spaces of the deity’s *gnas* be, consciously or otherwise, self-designating as of sufficient purity to receive the ultimate empowerment and blessing possible from or through their connection with deity. Hence they are known as *chinpababpa* (T. *byin brlabs babs pa*), or ones upon whom empowerment/blessing descends, in acceptance that it is upon the authority of the central deity that they transgress normal spatial boundaries, moving from impure

peripheries closer to the purified, empowered and empowering centre of the *cham* grounds; the focal *né* of the deity. The presence of the deities thus empowers them to take full part in the ritual healing of the dance.

If the purpose of *cham* is to evoke or demand the presence of deity within a ritual context, by expressing deity on whatever level these non-performers in trance do, through their faith as evidenced in receipt of the blessing or/and empowerment of *chinbab* from deity, by spontaneously entering the inner space of the *cham* grounds they could be viewed as circumventing religious and (in the case of female trance dancers) institutionally male dominated authorities, thereby claiming an authenticity as practitioner-devotees which could be seen as coming directly from the gods. Whatever the case, by dancing the gods, those attending *cham* validate the ritual both as a blessing and as cleansing and empowering its spectators, not as passive recipients, but by transforming their role into that of ritual participants in the fullest sense of the term. Thus, on a model of performance that is fluid and laden with the potential to change established orders, these transformations of *cham* have repercussions for the identities and relationships that they play out and also, in terms of the transgressive nature of the trance dancing, could be viewed as, at least in this respect, congruent with and a continuation of transgressive elements found in ancient *vajrayāna*.

The presence of these trance dancers in contemporary Rebgong Bönpo *cham* problematises the shamanic versus religious specialist divide mentioned at the start of this chapter at least for Rebgong, but arguably in the context of Tibetan cultural regions generally. The approach adopted here in developing understandings of such rituals, and their perceived effects on the health and well-being of the communities who enact them, is one which attempts to view them ‘from the standpoint of their social world’ (Dwyer 2003: 30), acknowledging the voices from those worlds as authoritative on their own terms. There is a distinction can be made between the Leru’s spirit medium of the shamanic idiom calls the gods down to manifest them through possession and the way in which the idiom of the religious specialist evokes and manifests the gods in Tantric rituals such as the Rebgong *cham* described here. However, I would suggest that the distinction between these modalities cannot be rigidly made, at least for Rebgong but possibly for other culturally similar regions. tantric ritual specialists do in some sense ‘become the gods’ by a process of embodiment. Even non-specialist performers in some sense become divine through the act of dancing divine dances, by invoking deity

presences. The Spirit mediums of Rebgong's Leru are conducting and enacting complex ritual for the benefit of their communities. And in the Rebgong valley there is at least one case of someone who practices healing both as a spirit medium and as a highly revered tantric practitioner, as will be discussed in Chapter Five. It is, therefore, perhaps more useful, in understanding the types of rituals discussed here and idioms framing them, such as the shamanic or that of the tantric specialist, working as part of a cultural matrix of healing in which psychophysical transformations are entailed in creating and maintaining wellness. This structure forms part of a cultural matrix in which the landscape is constituted by spirited agencies who interact with human worlds interact to (re)formulate their social spheres, their ritual practices dancing and voicing deity and spirit worlds as authoritative on their own terms.

For the tantric ritual specialist, the transformation of the environment through chalking out the space for the ritual and all the material elements of it, the prayers and evocations, is ritual basis for and expression of an inner shift or transformation relating to the subtle body and communal transformation. The inner transition enabled by or aimed at through tantric ritual is from mundane, ordinary worlds and beings to those of deity. This isn't to say that all participants or any of those present at such rituals will experience deity realms through profound shifts of consciousness brought about through the practice. In fact, many might, as the young village boy performing expressed to us, spend much of the ritual in mundane states of consciousness such as anxiously worrying about the repercussions of missing school. However, the belief is generally held amongst those who organise and maintain such rituals as ongoing traditions, that there is nonetheless benefit to all those by whom and for whom the ritual is performed; that the blessings of the gods will fall upon those who participate and the environs and communities which are integral to their embodiment. In the case of those dancing the gods at the Bönpo *cham* in Rebgong described above, their trance states were perceived, as indicated by the spectators crying 'truly Dralijemmo has come to this place', as denoting the success of the ritual in a tantric sense. The gods had been evoked and descended to dance in the most sacred spaces of their manifested *maṇḍala*. The philosophical point of departure for this profound shift of being the *vajrayāna* aims to evoke, founded as it is in Nāgārjuna's deconstructionist *śūnyatā*, 'emptiness'; the single-pointed fixation on the still point in a turning world without which, to use the words of T. S. Eliot, '[t]here would be no dance'.

## CHAPTER SIX – THE BLESSING IN BREATH

*“... gods are like the wind; indeed, they may exist simultaneously in many places, freed from a body that anchors them to just one spot.”*

- Sophie Day 1989

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This chapter looks at how the ritual healing enacted by *nukwa* and *lawa*, operating within tantric and shamanic idioms respectively, works in practice. In examining ritual healing enacted by the Rebgong *nukwa*, it takes as starting point the Tibetan tantric practices these *nukwa* engage in, since it is the empowerment as and embodiment of deity these confer which are perceived as source of *nukwa* healing powers by those who seek them out for treatment. This chapter aims to better understand what happens when *nukwa* and *lawa* heal through their different types of deity embodiment, and how this could be framed within a cultural matrix of healing. It approaches this through an analysis of what the people of these regions understand by blessing, and how this may be transmitted. In short, it assumes on the basis of the research thus far, that forms of healing using *mantra*, breath, spittle or deity possession, suppose it is through the blessing of deity worlds that healing occurs. The chapter proposes that subtle energies are thought to be transmitted through the evocation of deity for empowerment and blessing, carried by winds, water or possession, by means of embodiment characterised as *nukwa* and/or *lawa*. It explores how this may occur according to the logic of the cultural matrix within which these healing rituals are performed.

As previous chapters discussed, healing in Tibetan cultural regions encompasses a whole body of elements which interdependently and inextricably operate in conjunction with an environment for which no internal versus external dichotomy is understood to exist. The chapter examines the technologies of embodiment within the shamanic and tantric idioms, exploring modes of possession and evocation and how these may operate in healing practices. Notions of empowerment and blessing, *chinlab*, as were discussed in Chapter Four, are explored in examining how aspects of the body or its emissions might support or bear such invisible agents of blessing or

empowerment. This chapter raises questions regarding what is empowered or blessed, how that empowerment is transmitted and explores frameworks for furthering understanding of these phenomena. This chapter looks at types of healing emerging from tantric and shamanic idioms, broadly characterised by embodiment and possession respectively – those of *nukwa* and *lawa* – via the embodiment of the two motifs, the tantric ritual specialist and the shaman, in the person of one Rebgong *nukwa* who is both tantric adept and spirit medium.

## Ritual Spectrums

The kind of deity yoga practiced by this *nukwa* adept, in direct contrast to the type of shamanic idiom of a *lawa*, is a highly structured and controlled affair. Daily tantric practice usually involves the recitation of texts. Texts in contemporary Tibetan cultural regions are vital, they are embodied in the way in which they are chanted out loud; voiced into being by the practitioners who seek to evoke deity and spirit worlds in doing so. Texts thus form part of living traditions designed to (re)create the presence of deity worlds and the embodied landscapes they (re)create as sacred. The tantric *sādhana* from all the differing Tibetan Buddhist traditions require having received initiation from a qualified teacher, a *lama*. Indeed, the initiation ritual itself may be considered a *sādhana* in that the *lama* concerned performs self-initiation as deity, following the format of *sādhana*, as preparation for bestowing this on others.<sup>144</sup> Hence, an outline of *sādhana* format will provide insight into the elements designating it as *tantric*. The main visualisation processes involving the evocation of deity are preceded by preliminaries purifying or establishing the place for the ritual, and followed by the dissolution of visualisations and other concluding rites. The ‘one who practices the *sādhana*’ (S. *sādhaka*), may begin by generating self as a wrathful deity who dispels all obstacles to the successful completion of the ritual, thereby purifying the place. S/he then protects that ritual arena with a visualised *vajra*<sup>145</sup> tent. Preliminaries may also include the generation of motivational intent accompanied by activities to prepare the

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<sup>144</sup> The *lama* performs multiple roles within this ritual as guide, even taking into account what dreams occur as part of his ritual role (Lamb 1994: 23).

<sup>145</sup> The *vajra*, as the ritual implement that has come to symbolise Tantric Buddhism, is the embodiment of its power and represents ‘means’ (the bell, with which it is usually held in practice, represents its counterpart: ‘wisdom’ (S. *prajñā*).

*sādhaka*, such as recitation of the refuge formula and prostrations. They may also entail the setting of the philosophical scene in terms of recollection of the ‘four abidings’ and ‘emptiness’ (S. *śūnyatā*), which are the basis for the realisation of means and wisdom respectively. Preliminary offerings may be made to the teachers of the lineage, emphasising the importance of devotion to the *lama* who gave initiation into the *tantra*, and to the host of deities to be invoked. The deities are visualised as emerging from within their envisaged palace, or *maṇḍala*. They are created firstly as pledge-beings (S. *samayasattva*), which are then consecrated by the evocation of their respective knowledge-beings (S. *jñānasattva*) from out of ‘emptiness’, utilising light from their seed syllables (S. *bīja*), which are invited to become inseparable from them. At this point the deity, whether seen as before the *sādhaka*, or seen as the *sādhaka*, is considered to be actually present. Praises, offerings and requests are then made to the deity, accompanied by ritual hand gestures (S. *mudrā*). This second phase can be viewed, in some *sādhana*, as the ‘completion stage’, the stages prior to this being termed the ‘generation stage’ of the practice. The recitation of *mantra* may be accompanied by various practices of breath control designed to harness the energy winds flowing along the channels and *cakra* of the subtle body. It is, therefore, on the basis of the corporal body, that the subtle is activated, and on the basis of this that the practitioner will become a Buddha. In completion stage *sādhana* these breath control yoga practices are subdivided into those ‘with sign’ and those without, the ‘sign’ being the *maṇḍala* of the deity and its inhabitants. The concluding rites include dispelling the wisdom-beings and absorption of the pledge-being by the *sādhaka*, before specific requests and aspirations are laid before the deities on the premise that, should the ritual have been successfully accomplished, they are obliged to grant these. In conclusion of completion stage *sādhana*, the *sādhaka* arises as deity from a ‘signless’ yoga (Skorupski 2002).

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, some aspects of traditions surrounding spirit mediumship may be Buddhicisations arising from on these Tibetan Buddhist structures related to *tantra*. For example, the ‘opening’ ritual for *lawa* described in Chapter Four, arguably transposes aspects of Buddhist tantric practice such as receiving initiation from a *lama* and its consequent effects on the subtle body, the opening of its channels to receive deity blessings. Elements of ritual practices which can be termed tantric in nature thus have mutual influence on ritual practices of other types across the Tibetan Plateau, such as the Leru or other rituals thought potentially to have

pre-Buddhist origins. Conversely, and as has been discussed, the forms of Buddhist practice which came to Tibet assimilated and incorporated much of what they found there, and this syncretic mix is found in the rituals practiced across Tibetan cultural regions today. The Bön tantric ritual involving ritual dance, *cham*, to be discussed here, does contain some of the diverse number of elements found within the pan-Indo-Tibetan genre of practices denoted by the term *tantra*. Accordingly, it will be useful for purposes here, in situating the tantric *cham* to be discussed and in forming foundation for discussion of the subtle body in Chapter Five, to outline of what precisely such elements of tantric practice might comprise. As Donald Lopez has proposed, as it is not possible to discover one feature held unequivocally in common by all material in the genre, a better methodology for definition of any given practice as tantra must be to discover if it contains a sizable proportion of these elements (Lopez 1996: 83 ff.). On the basis of this brief survey of some of the prolific textual material considered tantric, it is possible to identify some primary features, a substantial number of which, on Lopez's definition, a text for ritual practice should possess in order to be called tantric. It must be (1) an esoteric ritual, in that permission or power to bring its desired result is possible only through initiation by a qualified teacher, so; (2) devotion to this *lama* is essential, and differing levels of this qualify the practitioner to practice higher forms of *tantra*; (3) Secrecy must be maintained as to the practices, and; (4) observances are kept, functioning in the same way as monastic initiation requires secrecy<sup>146</sup> and observance of vows in order to underpin and lend power to the ritual practices; (5) the accomplishments (S. *siddhā*) that are a product of these rituals are of an occult or magical nature, in that they provide the one attaining them with supernatural abilities; (6) these may be used towards soteriological or worldly aims, the later often involving aiding local communities with rites of passage, consecrating buildings or objects etc. The rituals generate these powers through the (7) use of special substances, objects and; (8) sacred seed syllables (S. *bīja*) or words as *mantra* or recitation (in variant forms). These practices are underpinned by understanding of (9) psycho-physical correspondences between the practitioner, the material world, and the cosmos. Accomplishment is achieved through (10) *yoga* techniques utilising the breath to control subtle energies and winds in channels and the *cakra* of the subtle body, as; (11) visualisations of deities and their (12) abodes (S. *maṇḍala*), such that this subtle body

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<sup>146</sup> Monastic ordinations and rites, such as the *uposatha* (fortnightly recitation of monastic rules and confession of transgressions), were traditionally held in secrecy, no laity being admitted.

either becomes, unifies with, or realises true nature as deity. All this may be done by means of a *sādhana*. In the ethnography to follow below, the *nukwa* would evoke the presence of the deity Palden Lhamo, yet in this rite not as tutelary deity but as the ruler of his channels; his *tsedak*.

### ***Palden Lhamo – Goddess of Divination***

In the ethnography below this Rebgong adept, famous for his ability to heal, would become possessed not by a mountain deity but by a deity of the entourage of the powerful Buddhist protector deity Palden Lhamo (T. dPal ldan lha mo). This deity is important in various ways throughout Tibetan regions in different contexts. She is a major focus of national identity in being the wrathful protector deity of the Tibetans and the Dalai Lama, Gelukpa rulers of Tibetan regions in a reincarnation lineage since the mid seventeenth century. Veneration of her is not limited to Buddhists, since she is a straight adaptation of the Bön deity Sipéjelmo (T. Srid pa'i gyal mo), one of the major Bön deities, and one who featured in the *cham* described in Chapter Four. To the Bön, Sipéjelmo is known as the Queen of the World, having birthed twenty-seven daughters from eggs, nine of them central in her entourage. She is consort to a variety of tantric deities and a protector deity with nine-hundred heads, one thousand arms and aameleon-like complexion said to change six times in every twenty-four hours. It is said that 'half the sky is her canopy and half the earth is her mate.'<sup>147</sup> (Karmay 2013: 21).

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<sup>147</sup> 'gnam phyed bla yi khebs / sa phyed 'od gi gdam' (translation Karmay 2013: 20)



Sipéjelmo – Queen of the World<sup>148</sup> dancing at a Rebong *cham*<sup>149</sup>



Palden Lhamo statue in a Rebong *shidak* temple

<sup>148</sup> [http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-CwLzguUepYY/U2OGiHs8UDI/AAAAAAAAAClw/PXLJ3iFNpKw/s1600/Sidpai.jpg)

[CwLzguUepYY/U2OGiHs8UDI/AAAAAAAAAClw/PXLJ3iFNpKw/s1600/Sidpai.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-CwLzguUepYY/U2OGiHs8UDI/AAAAAAAAAClw/PXLJ3iFNpKw/s1600/Sidpai.jpg) (last accessed 13/01/2016)

<sup>149</sup> I am indebted to Gerald Roche for the use of this photo, taken at Sasoma Village, Rebong in Jan 2012

In one of their most commonly known aspects, both Sipéjelmo and Palden Lhamo ride a mule, as shown in the images above. Palden Lhamo is accorded a high status within Buddhism as supreme protector, and her power is considered much greater than that of the local deities and spirits. She is venerated by a large number of people in Tibetan cultural regions as attested to by the proliferation of her images and communal observances such as Lhasa's Pel Lhamo Duchen (T. dPal lhamo dus chen). This annual festival is held on the fifteenth day of the tenth month in honour of Palden Lhamo, known affectionately there as 'Pel Lhamo', in which her statue at the Jokhang Temple is redressed and people queue all day to make offerings to it. On this day it is held that women can ask for money from any man they meet and refusal to pay up may result in the man being cursed by Pel Lhamo.<sup>150</sup>

Interestingly there are instances of Palden Lhamo migrating back into the Bön liturgies in her new Buddhist form, but relegated to the status of one of the local deities. For example, she appears in this role in a *sang* text attributed to Karma rig-'dzin, a twentieth century Tibetan healer and spirit medium from the Changtang (T. Byang Thang) (Bellezza 2011:18). Palden Lhamo, apart from being Buddhism's most important protector, is also known for her clairvoyant powers and ability in divination. It was traditionally through recourse to her divinatory powers that successive reincarnations of the Dalai Lama were determined. Lhamolhatso, the sacred lake depicted at the beginning of Chapter Two, is her lake and it was in its waters these visionary divinations of future Dalai Lama were sought by those seeking to maintain the line of reincarnatory succession (Goldstein 1989:310ff). The lake is a major pilgrimage site and many travel there hoping to receive a blessing or vision from its waters.

Those who have the blessing of Palden Lhamo are considered to be able to practice divination, usually through the use of dice empowered by the deity's blessing. Uses for this skill include predictions useful in day to day affairs, such as the prospects for a marriage, judging a complex court case (Henderson 1964), determining land and water distribution (Bauer 2004:55-7), and in retrieval of the life principal, the *la* (T. *bla*) from demonic possession (Ramble 2009). People with good connection to Palden Lhamo are considered to be exceptionally lucky in the popular game of *sho*, involving dice. Therefore, women, who are thought to have stronger connection with Palden

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<sup>150</sup> This information is from my own experience of the festival in both 2006 and 2007.

Lhamo than men, are considered particularly formidable *sho* opponents, especially in Lhasa since they are closest there to the centre of the deity's power. As Daisuke Murakami speculates in his research on *sho*, this fact may be the reason for the taboo on women playing *sho* in Lhasa, in the sense that they have unfair advantage there (Murakami 2014:21).

However, Palden Lhamo's power in divination extends beyond mundane affairs in that she is said to be able to predict karmic outcomes for an individual; something ordinarily only considered possible for an enlightened being in the context of Buddhism (Beer 2003:158). Her mythohistory has her taking the life of her son in order to protect the Buddhism, after clairvoyantly perceiving the threat he would pose to it should she not do so. This ability in clairvoyance makes her practice particularly useful in the divinatory treatment of disease for those, such as the Khandroma featured in Chapter Two, who can invoke her blessing on their divination dice. As discussed in Chapter Two, divination can function both in diagnosis and as directive for overall treatment process (as was the case in Domba's story). Interestingly for purposes here, Murakami posits more significant religious factors might underpin the taboo on women in Lhasa playing *sho*, connecting this with the practice of excluding women from proximity to power places of Palden Lhamo such as her *gonpa*. This is that women, it is thought, could be easily affected by the goddess and fall uncontrollably into trance states, with danger of uncontrollable behaviour and mental instability. Citing the work of historian Róna Tas, Murakami notes that dice divination was intimately connected with healing practices conducted by 'female shamans' using dice and empowered by Palden Lhamo (Murakami 2014:22 citing Tas 1956:171-6).

Given the above background to Palden Lhamo, it is hardly surprising that an adept *nukwa*, a tantric practitioner who embodies such deities during yogic practice and then in addition is able to become possessed by Palden Lhamo or her retinue during ritual for healing the sick would be much in demand amongst Tibetan communities, as was the case with the *nukwa lawa* here. This *nukwa* was reputedly a very powerful healer, known for his healing powers not only as a *nukwa* but as a *lawa*, and because of

this known locally as the Pelden Lawa.<sup>151</sup> Rebgong residents told me everyone they knew somebody who had been assisted by this healer and that he had a special reputation for curing illness. I was told that his ‘cures’, in the style of the *lawa* described in context of Leru in Chapter Five, involved performing physical feats under possession which would not be possible under normal conditions. In this case, piercing his tongue with a metal spike or stirring boiling oil with his bare hands. I was not privy to any such dramatic events with this lawa, who was quite reticent initially about talking to me at all. However, I will recount a brief ethnography describing one ritual healing performed by the Pelden Lawa, with assistance from several *nukwa*, that he permitted me to attend during the course of my last fieldwork trip. This ritual was hosted in a sponsor’s house, borrowed for the occasion, since a good deal of space was needed to accommodate all the parties involved. My account begins in that household’s large walled courtyard in Torjia (T. Tho gyal) county.<sup>152</sup>

### ***The Three Donkeys and Chötsen Donchen***

The sick man entered the dusty courtyard supported on both sides by two men. He attempted to place one foot in front of the other but his legs kept buckling underneath him. His clothes were dirty and dishevelled. He and his companions had travelled far to see the Pelden Lawa, who would perform a ritual hoped to be of powerful benefit for the sick man’s health. It had been more than a year that Tenzin could hardly walk. He was not yet even forty years old, yet he was semi-paralysed and crippled with pain. His brothers had taken him to their nearest biomedical hospital, where the doctors had been unable to help. His relatives had even taken him to Lhasa, to the Mensikhang (T. sMan rtsis khang); the Tibetan hospital there, but also to no avail.

After they had deposited Tenzin inside the house on a bed in the room where the ritual would take place, they joined me on wooden benches in the courtyard where

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<sup>151</sup> As with all other names in the thesis, this is a pseudonym. The *nukwa* was particularly concerned to preserve his anonymity here and I promised to do so as far as possible, hence have not included details of his native village etc.

<sup>152</sup> All the information contained in these was through unstructured interviews in my limited Amdo dialect with those involved in the rites. Separate interviews with the Pelden Lawa were conducted both before and after the ritual. One of these was conducted via an interpreter translating to Lhasa dialect. I am indebted to Nicholas Silhé for joining me at this latter interview and kindly sharing his transcripts.

butter tea was being served for the various people peripheral to the ritual. The brothers started to talk about their hopes for the ritual healing.<sup>153</sup> Three donkeys arrived with provisions and the *nukwa*'s trusted assistants rushed in and out offloading the donkeys and galvanising others into action preparing the space. After the donkeys had been unloaded and the courtyard was peaceful again, I forced down another mouthful of butter tea and waited for the brothers to resume. They began recounting an oral history demonstrating the reputed power of Pelden Lawa which had drawn them to this place. In the early 1980s, 'Wenchen Rinpoché', the tenth in the line of incarnations of the Panchen Lama, and second only in lamaic status to the Dalai Lama, had visited the area. Many of the local *lawa* had gone into possession, channelling the local mountain deities to greet this high Buddhist *lama*. However, since these deities were local deities, they could not approach the Panchen Lama because of his Buddhist refuge and the power of his practice. In contrast, when the Pelden Lawa came towards the Panchen Lama in full possession, he offered an offering scarf in full view of everyone. This story was proof concrete for Tenzin's brothers of the Pelden Lawa's powers. As they began reminiscing in their dialect, I escaped to the preparation room before another butter tea was offered me.

The room in which the preparations for the Jelwa ritual (T. *bsGral ba*) were almost complete was wall papered with paper depicting toy rabbits carrying balloons. They smiled down on all the flags depicting the lords of sickness in eerie dissonance. The Jelwa can be a family or village ritual, but in the case of Tenzin, since his sickness was too strong, it needed to be the large Jelwa by a practitioner as powerful as the Pelden Lawa to stand a chance of any effect. It was a purification ritual to clear the sick man's channels (T. *rtsa*) of the malevolent spirits possessing him. This type of ritual was the forté of the Pelden Lawa, who travelled far and wide on demand to help the sick afflicted with various types of illnesses believed to have been caused by spirit harm. He made a living from this practice, both for himself and the entourage of younger *nukwa* who assisted him. He gave a portion of the money donated to him by the families of those he healed to the community of *nukwa* to which he belonged, and was also using a portion to assist in rebuilding a local *nukwa* temple.

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<sup>153</sup> All information about the case of this man, given the pseudonym Tenzin, and the ritual performed for his health is taken from notes made during fieldwork conducted in Rebong during 2009, unless otherwise stated.

As later explained in interview with the Pelden Lawa, via a translator, the particular Jelwa ritual to be performed for Tenzin's benefit was entitled the *Shurwu Tongdok* (T. *Phur pu gtong 'dogs*). In it the Pelden Lawa would become possessed, not by a mountain deity but by a deity of the entourage of the powerful Buddhist protector deity Palden Lhamo (T. dPal ldan lha mo). This deity, the ruler of the Pelden Lawa's channels, the *tsadak* (T. *rtsa bdag*), is known as Chötsen Donchen (T. Chu srin gdong can), the Crocodile Faced One. She and the rather better-known Sengé Donchen (T. Seng ge gdong) regularly accompany Palden Lhamo and are also found in Buddhist *cham*. Both these female attendants of Palden Lhamo are animal-headed. Chötsen Donchen, who has the head of a 'Makara' is the *ḍākinī* on Palden Lhamo's right. She wears a human skin, holds a noose or snare in her right hand and the reins of Palden Lhamo's mule in her left, as can be seen in the illustration below. The more well-known *ḍākinī* Sengé Donchen has a lion's head, sits to Palden Lhamo's left. She is red in colour and holds a noose and a skull cup.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> <http://huntingtonarchive.osu.edu/Exhibitions/sama/Essays/NM91.001.018PldLham.html> (last accessed 30th Nov 2014)



**Palden Lhamo with Retinue – Chötsen Donchen to her right<sup>155</sup>**

The history of the Pelden Lawa's transition to being both *nukwa* and *lawa*, separately and individually, is atypical in the sense that he was in his mid-seventies when I met him, yet had become both *nukwa* and a *lawa* from an early age without having come from a lineage of either. His early possession experiences did not manifest as an illness, however, he said he was originally possessed by the spirit of a deceased nomad, as was evident from the dialect he spoke when possessed. A *lama* diagnosed

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<sup>155</sup> <http://www.casotac.com/CASonline%20Articles/IMG-20120619-0028221.jpg> (last accessed 30th Nov 2014)

that he was possessed by a *shidrak*. Later the possession experience changed and it was a revered tantric practitioner who identified the new *tsadak* as from Palden Lhamo's entourage.



**Shurwu Tongdok ritual offerings**

In the Shurwu Tongdok ritual, and typically for healing rituals conducted by the Pelden Lawa, he creates drawn effigies of all the harmful agents, the spirit beings, lords of sickness (T. *nad bdag*) attacking the patient. Once the Pelden Lawa has been entered by Chötsen Donchen and so filled with the power of this deity, with the other deities of Palden Lhamo's entourage lending their support, each drawn effigy is burnt and the ash thrown into boiling oil which the Pelden Lawa reportedly stirs with his bare hands. In accordance with a characteristic description of *dulwa*, the Pelden Lawa's own description of this ritual process made the distinction that it was the harm that was ritualistically being destroyed, not the harmful deities themselves. He said he would visualise the harm dissolving and that the fact that it did was due to the blessing, the *chinlab*, of the lama-yidam, the deity of his root tantric practice. At the end of the Shurwu Tongdok, one of the *nukwa* who had been assisting the Pelden Lawa came to

tell Tenzin's brothers that the dream signs were good and so the ritual had been effective.

The case of the Pelden Lawa is the only case I have come across in Rebgong in which one individual performs the function of both a tantric practitioner, a *nukwa*, and a *lawa*, a spirit medium. One explanation or frame for why this is possible in his particular case could lie in the fact that the deity he embodies as spirit medium is from the entourage of a high Buddhist protector deity, and so not in precisely the same order of beings as the mountain deities who are *tsadak* of most, if not all, other spirit mediums in Rebgong. To return to the division of worldly, as opposed to other-worldly, goals and means, the Buddhist protector deities, are considered as being of the latter variety in that, if not enlightened, they are at least upholding that as goal and protecting practitioners towards that end, rather than being primarily concerned with things of this life, such as protecting crops and so forth.

It is not unknown for a single deity to figure as focus for tantric practice and as *tsadak* for spirit medium, as is illustrated by the case of one on the Northern Tibetan Plateau, the Changtang (T. Byang thang). Amongst studies of the spirit mediums on the Changtang, which include Per-Arne Berglie (1976, 1982, 1992) and Antoon Geels (1992), John Bellezza produced a compilation of interviews with a spirit medium called Lawa Tsenwa (T. Lha pa bTsan pa) (Bellezza 2005: 102ff).<sup>156</sup> Bellezza describes an exorcism ritual evoking the power of the deity Jakpa Mellen (T. Jag pa me len). Jakpa Mellen is portrayed as a mountain deity of the class of beings known as the *tsen* (T. *btsan*) and is unusual in that he does not have the mountain dwelling normally typifying this classification of local deity. Jakpa Mellen is Lawa Tsenwa's *tsadak* (T. *rtsa bdag*) whilst possessed. Bellezza quotes a Bön text known as the *Mennag Shen gi Lung Drup* (T. *Man ngag gshen gyi rlung bsgrub*), in saying that in order to banish malicious influences such as those previously mentioned as causes of disease, the tantric practitioner can ritually slay them in the form of an effigy, using an arrow, whilst visualising himself as the same deity, Jakpa Mellen. In the text the Bön tantric practitioner evokes the deity Jakpa Mellen through visualising himself as the deity. Thus, for the spirit medium Lawa Tsenwa, the possessing deity, lord of his *tsa*, Jakpa

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<sup>156</sup> He interviewed Lhapa Tsenpa in Shungpama, Gergyé (T. gZhung pa ma mtshan, dGe rgyas), during 2001 and 2002 (Bellezza 2005: 102ff).

Mellen, descends and works through him whilst he is in trance and unable afterwards to remember events. The spirit medium is open to receiving the possessing deity Jakpa Mellen, inviting him to descend. However, the Bön tantric practitioner is consciously evoking Jakpa Mellen through identifying with him via visualisation. The deity Jakpa Mellen empowers the process of the spirit medium's ritual healing or exorcism of malevolent influences on his patients, but here this is done through Jakpa Mellen protecting the *tsa* of the medium's subtle body (Bellezza 2005: 102ff). In both cases though, the *tsen* deity Jakpa Mellen is supposed to be acting on the subtle body, whether of tantric practitioner or of spirit medium, in order to empower an exorcistic healing process. In contrast to this, where two practitioners are involved, in the case of the Pelden Lawa, one deity is perceived to work through him, one individual, as both Buddhist tantric practitioner, *nukwa*, and as spirit medium, *lawa*.

As has been seen in Chapter Five, the kinds of rituals *nukwa* enact for purposes of healing environments and maintaining right relations with deity worlds can take place collectively, during or after large communal rituals such as the annual *shidrö chötök* (T. *zhi grol chos thog*) mentioned in Chapter Two. Collective ritual healings also can include groups of people wishing to be healed kneeling whilst a chain of *nukwa* file by them, blowing or even spitting on them as they pass. The healing is believed to be transmitted through the breath or the spittle, which is considered as blessed with the *chinlab* of the deities whom these tantric practitioners embody. It could be said that the deities work through the tantric practitioners whose practice has brought them to a state in which they embody the deities they invoke. This transmitted healing derives from an empowerment from deity, a notion that, as has been discussed, also underlies healing through possession or trance states.

This begs the question as to how healing properties are transmitted via breath or spittle, if we assume that they are as *nukwa* healing activities would indicate. A possible insight into this could be proffered by connections with tantric practice, linking the idea of blessing and purification being conferred upon the practitioner from deity realms, as will be discussed. In considering these questions, it may well be useful to take as starting point the notion of 'opening'. As has been discussed in previous chapters, the tantric adept undergoes initiation, or empowerment, in order that the yogic practices involving their subtle body structures can be successfully performed. In the case of spirit mediums, in the sense that they undergo forms of initiation to open and cleanse their

channels, their *tsa*, and the fact that the Tibetan term referring to the deity who primarily possesses them is *tsadak* (T. *rtsa bdag*), strongly suggests that the channels of a subtle body, however that is construed, could be central to this process.

### ***Touch of Subtle Winds***

Evidently, in terms of *nukwa* healing, for there to be interaction between external and internal breath, subtle body winds, whatever is meant by spirits or deities in this context, and the bodies of those to be healed, even transformation of external/internal winds/spirits one into another, there has to be a way of traversing the body-environment, self-other interface. How this is understood to occur is likely to be very different in the minds of a yogic practitioner, a Sowa Rigpa practitioner who may or may not be practicing tantric practices at that level, or the ordinary lay patient seeking healing. In short, what precisely the method of transmission might be is a matter open to broad speculation, yet it is at the same time fundamental to the question not only of how external pathogens, whether personalised or arising from the natural world, could cause illness within such medical systems, but also of how the breath of one being could be conceived of as influencing the health of another. Zysk details how early Chinese philosophers and those of Vedic India posited a continuum between the inner body and environmental winds (Zysk 1993, 2007). One suggestion is that, as Lewis proposes, of some kind of 'shared substrate' between environmental and internal winds, airs or breaths; a mutually accessible medium facilitating interaction and mutual influence (Lewis 1990).

As has been discussed, according to this type of cultural matrix of healing the categories of 'internal and external', such as body and environment, are porous. Sowa Rigpa has from its inception until the present day been presented textually and practiced as integrally threaded through with the tantric deity practice of the Buddhist meditational yidam, the Medicine Buddha. As has been mentioned, the classic collection of medical texts forming the textual foundation for Tibetan medical practice is the twelfth century *Gyüshi* (T. *rGyud bzhi*), which comprises a synthesis of Indian, Chinese and Greco-Arab concepts (Yoeli-Tlalim 2010), is predicated on three agents or dynamics, the *nyépa* (T. *nyes pa*), which, in similar fashion to the *doṣa* of Āyurvedic medicine, cause illness when not in appropriate relationship. Wind, or lung (T. *rlung*), is one of these three *nyépa*, the others being bile (T. *mkhris pa*) and phlegm (T. *bad kan*).

These terms can refer both to the cause of an illness and to the illness itself. It is perhaps relevant for purposes here to highlight that the Tibetan term translated here as wind, *lung* (T. *rlung*), is probably closer to *qi* than any European linguistic equivalent, and that it can refer both to inner bodily winds and also to environmental wind.<sup>157</sup> This potentially implies a notion of an unbroken continuum between the English concepts of breath and wind exists. Broadly, according to the Gyüshi, *lung* is responsible for respiration, bodily movement and substances, and also for mental and verbal activities. It has a particularly important role amongst the three *nyépa*, due to its function of acting upon the other *nyépa* to intensify their imbalances where these exist. As in the Chinese and Indian medical systems, bodily *lung* resides in channels, an idea which characterises the tantric motifs integral to Sowa Rigpa (Yoeli-Tlalim 2010: n. 14).

As mentioned earlier, the Tibetan medical system or ‘science’ of Sowa Rigpa has preserved its practices of deity yoga as integral to its texts, training and practice. It contains within its framework of diagnostic techniques, elements such as diagnosis via the Tibetan doctor, the *amchi* or *menwa*, taking the patient's pulse, again termed *tsa*, as well as categorisations of and prescriptions for the treatment of diseases caused by a variety of demons and local deities (such as the *sa bdag*, *gong po*, *'dre gdon* and *gdon*). As has been discussed, treatments recommended for the treatment of such illnesses include Buddhist rituals, amongst these are the 'Long Life Empowerment', a tantric ritual involving complex visualisation techniques to evoke the deity. As is the case with all rituals discussed in this thesis, they are layered occurrences which take place on many levels for those participating or observing them. The visualisations and self-generation as deity may be both on the part of the healer-*lama* or ritual specialist leading the ritual and also on the part of educated participants. However, in the case of those participants unfamiliar with these practices, they receive blessing, *chinlab* (T. *byin rlabs*), in the form of ingesting substances empowered to increase their health and longevity by the ritual specialist.

As adeptly outlined by Frances Garrett and Vincenne Adams (2008), there is an ancient debate historically on the subject of the differing accounts of subtle bodily systems found in medical and tantric material and the findability of the energetic channels etc. described there. The late 20<sup>th</sup> Century religious scholar and medical

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<sup>157</sup> Indeed, Eric Jacobson suggests environmental wind was the original referent of *rlung* (2007: 228).

practitioner Tsultrin Gyaltzen (T. Tshul khrim rGyal mtshan), in his erudite account reviewing the literature to date and addressing controversies over the correlation or apparent contradictions in medical and tantric theories of the subtle body, concludes that the two projects have different intents and descriptive capacities. Medical theorists are interested primarily in solving problems of health not the minutia of how subtle bodily systems might be constituted, whereas tantric practitioners are working with yogic transformation of the subtle body so are interested in a much more detailed explication of its pathways. However, he argues convincingly that these differing projects are referring to the same general thing in their discourses, both referring to a central channel and two side ones etc., and that this thing does exist, since there are many things not visible to the naked human eye which do (cf Garrett and Adams 2008).

In tantric deity yoga, meditational practice focused on deity worlds aims to transform these inner winds and their attendant drops through yogic breath control, *tsalung*, and the recitation of *mantra*, enjoined with embodied visualisations. These visualisations are grounded in the practitioner's experiential knowledge of self and the environment, inclusive of spirit and deity worlds, as profoundly interconnected. The deity practices are preluded with and supported by purificatory rites, such as the *sang* offerings mentioned earlier, which serve dual purpose of eliminating obstructive *drip* pollutions to the practice and providing a protective sphere in which it can be enacted.



purifying through *sang* rites

Within this protective sphere, the deities are invoked and their presence absorbed through the power of their blessing, *chinlab*, descending to the practitioner. This normally takes place firstly as a visualisation in front of the practitioner or on top of their head, followed by an absorption process in which the practitioner becomes the visualised deity. This is what I meant by the phrase ‘embodied visualisations’. According to oral instruction I have received on this process,<sup>158</sup> to become adept in deity yoga practice the aim is to reach a point where you embody these visualisations to such an extent that no part of your being is at any level thinking ‘this is a visualisation’, but rather believing in the total embodiment. In short, to become deity.



**a thangka painting of the Medicine Buddha maṇḍala used in tantric practice**

According to the philosophical basis of Buddhist *tantra*, there is no corporal body in separation from mental aspects of being; no form without name or vice versa,

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<sup>158</sup> I wish to express my gratitude to Geshé Lobsang Tengyé for these instructions, which I received from him in the mid 1990s. This venerable Gelukpa *lama* is originally from Lhatsé Monastery in Central Tibet

and there is no permanently enduring self. Whilst in the development stage of Buddhist tantric practice, the practitioner imagines himself as his tutelary deity at the centre of the world as sacred circle (S. *maṇḍala*; T. *dkyil 'khor*). Through visualisation, s/he perfects this perception of his psycho-physical self as deity by identification with or indeed personification of its enlightened principle. This may be underpinned by a philosophic understanding such as, in the Buddhist case, maintaining a view of self and deity as not existent in any intrinsic or permanently fixed way. As can be seen from this, yogic techniques found in tantric practice and aiming to direct the inner winds, *lung*, along the channels, the *tsa*, are related to the tantric practitioner's quest for spiritual attainment, to health and also to a sense of self. For it is through the control and direction of the *lung*, the winds, that the practitioner transforms his or her identity into that of deity, or enlightened principle, a principle entailing health in a perfected sense. This attainment, through realisation, can be described as an embodied realisation; the practitioner becomes deity through the blessing and power of deity and thus imbues that power and ability to bless. This is fundamentally why those highly realised tantric adepts such as the Pelden Lawa are viewed as having the power to heal. They can transmit blessing through breath or spittle or the power of their prayer, since they are on some subtle level inseparable from the deity. In the Pelden Lawa's case an extra layer is added through his *lawa* ability to access this power and deity blessing through becoming entranced, thus combining both *nukwa* and *lawa* technologies of embodiment to empower his healing rites.

As outlined earlier, the healing enacted by the Rebgong *nukwa* takes place through their tantric practice, empowered by their *nuk* (T. *sngags*), their *mantra* or sacred recitations. It is the presence of deity which empowers tantric practitioner such that their breath can convey or transfer blessing to recipients of healing ritual. Such healing can take place through empowered recitations of mantra or the simple act of blowing. Substances such as air or water can be transformed into medicine through the deity's power, received as blessing by practitioners and transmitted to others for the purpose of healing in a broad sense. These latter techniques are perhaps the most commonly found, as is also the case throughout South Asia in Hindu and Muslim contexts. It is perhaps worth pointing out here that it is unclear in contemporary settings how much tantric or medical theory any practitioner, whether household or attached to a monastery, whether Buddhist or Bön, would actually have access to or apply in their ritual work. For household traditions particularly, the rituals they enact for and on behalf of their local communities originate

from ritual traditions learnt from their forbears. Whereas there may well be theoretical, textual components to these, this does not necessarily equate with those textual monastic tantric traditions more commonly referred to by scholars of the academic community.

In this research I have been attempting to make sense of how the healing practice of the *nukwa* and *lawa* function and form part of a coherent cultural healing matrix. As indicated in the introductory section of this thesis, I had initially thought this would be possible through examining connections between tantric subtle body and Sowa Rigpa theories of the *tsa*. With the failure of this inquiry, I had returned in my research to the landscape and how the body and environment function interactively on a subtle level. As we have seen, the Rebgong Leru festival in which the mountain and other deities such as the *le* are honoured annually via offerings to the local spirit medium as mountain god, appears to be predicated on similar world view to that of tantric practices, in the sense that the village environment becomes visualised and ritually danced and sung into being as the realm of deity; a deified space within which the villagers themselves function outside of their normal capacities - as servers and entertainers of the local deities. It could be said here that this sacred space is no less an ontologically accurate description of the village grounds than that of 'normal' operation outside of the festival. These different spaces and states of being can be described as non-conflictive, coexisting dimensions. During Leru, the physical spaces of the village grounds are marked out by the dancers and the emblems of the deities – explicitly designated as the sacred spaces they are. In this space, normative visions of the so-called external world and its functions are suspended. In relation to healing, it is said that the *lawa* can call forth those who are sick and heal them through blood or other types of offerings, performed upon his own body or by those around. He, as deity, 'knows' who is individually sick, but also 'knows' what within the community needs to be healed and frequently enjoins the villagers to better behaviour. The *la* (T. *lha*), the local deity, protects the health and well-being of the whole community in terms of both their psychophysical health and that of the natural environment upon which they depend. These different spirited agencies interact with and affect human worlds by means of embodied presence and the blessing it transfers.

As has been noted, the onset of a spirit medium's possession is recognised cross-culturally to often be accompanied by sickness and acute symptoms of illness. Although

the onset of possession is by no means standardised and nor does its inception immediately incur recognition of the deity concerned or the individual as spirit medium. This is exemplified by cases such as the one described by Schenk (1993), in which a Ladakhi spirit medium had been sick for a decade before her diagnosis as being a budding medium was made by a ritual specialist. Such symptoms are alleviated by the full embodiment of the possession, or through the tantric adept, the lama, opening the budding medium to knowledge of the possession and to the deity's speech. As noted by Schenk's account of a spirit medium's training in Ladakh, this opening, whether initiated by a ritual specialist in a trainee or whether the trance state is voluntarily entered into by one trained to do so, is accompanied by marked changes in breath (Schenk 1993).

### ***Processes of Opening and Blessing***

An example showing local understandings of possession as such an opening of *tsa* can be found in the case of the drunken Tibetan spirit medium Wangbo, described in Chapter Three, who went through a phase of drinking during which he would fall involuntarily into trance, becoming possessed by the more wrathful of the two local mountain deities. This was most uncomfortable for him, since it led to exhaustion and amnesia, but also for the villagers who were happy to go drinking with each other, but not so happy to find themselves unexpectedly confronted by their (in this case wrathful) mountain deity, in the local bar. These unplanned drunken possessions were said to be precipitated by alcohol opening the *tsa* - suggesting that the mountain deity was better able to enter when subtle bodily channels (I take *tsa* in this context to be used as a general term for channels) are open. Healing enacted through spirit mediums depends on the medium's subtle bodily channels being open to the deity entering; to the embodied presence of spirited agency. It is this process that causes disease, sometimes quite severe, to surround the first attempts of deity to enter the medium; before the medium is fully aware of what is happening and becomes open to it. The evolution of possession or embodiment of deity is a gradual one within which the spirit medium practices moving from involuntary semi-possession to reaching the position where s/he is able to voluntarily invoke embodiment of deity, as a type of ritual specialist.

As has been pointed out by anthropologists who undertook fieldwork in Tibetan exile communities based in India (Beyer 1973; Samuel 1993; Gerke 2010; Samuel and Cantwell forthcoming), local perceptions and levels of participation in ritual practices

vary considerably. Ethnographic work allows exploration of the multi-layered engagement of participants with these practices and rituals. This fleshes out what can be gleaned from textual or historical analysis to furnish research with as multidimensional a picture as possible. As Samuel comments in his seminal work on Tibetan religions, regarding ritual process: Employing the word 'multivocality', as famously used by Turner (1967) and others, describes this observation (Samuel 1993) Barbara Gerke in her work on longevity rituals in the Darjeeling Hills, emphasises "...how a wide range of individuals come to relate to the same ritual in a variety of ways and to document the diversity in their ritual involvement." (Gerke 2010: 440). The longevity ritual she surveyed is a type of practice originating in Indian tantric practice and found across contemporary Tibetan communities worldwide. Broadly speaking, this type of ritual confers blessing on substances empowered through the deity presences invoked through the ritual. The substances which have been ritually blessed in this manner can be imbued by participants or taken away to be given for longevity or simply to convey the blessings of the spirited agencies who blessed them.

The rite bears a particular relationship to wind as one of the dynamics in Sowa Rigpa, since the Tibetan medical tradition holds that with age comes a greater predominance of wind as a harmful agent, requiring special exercises, diet and taking special substances known as *chülen* (T. *bcud len*) in order to avert signs of aging and extend life. This medicine, taken internally, can be used periodically for periods of two to six months within a ritual context enacted by the person in conjunction with ingesting the medicine (Donden 1986: 210-213). It, therefore, requires a degree of knowledge and engagement in tantric practice on the part of the person wishing to engage in this process. However, the practice could be considered part of the larger group of longevity practices mentioned above, which, broadly speaking, fall under the titles *tsedrup* (T. *tshe grub*), life-attainment, and *tsewang* (T. *tshe dbang*), life-power/empowerment.

As has been indicated, the *tsewang* can be translated into English as life-power or life-empowerment, which reflects the wide spectrum of levels of participation possible in the ritual. There are those individuals, suitably initiated and trained in tantric practice who are considered qualified, as in the example of taking the *chülen* given above, to empower themselves as deity, through a visualisation process aimed to transform identity or state of consciousness into one suitably receptive to the beneficial effects of the precious medicinal substances ingested during the ritual. There are also

those individuals, such as the *lama* presiding over a group ritual such as the *tsewang*, whose level of ability in practice is considered high enough to be able to empower themselves to act as deity, thereby giving out the power of the deity in the form of blessing through touch and empowered substances, such as the *tsechu* (life-water) and *tseril* (life pills), which are distributed during the course of the ritual. Then there are monks and lay tantric practitioners, the *nukwa*, who participate in various regards to various degrees in the ritual. And finally, there are the hundreds of people who attend these gatherings, with are often quite large.

As Barbara Gerke demonstrates in her ethnographical study in the Darjeeling Hills, for this latter group, often illiterate and many with no knowledge even of spoken Tibetan, they understand little or nothing of what is going on, do not participate in any way with the tantric practices such as the visualisations and recitations, and rely solely on their faith in the power of the presiding lama's tantric attainments, who, in some cases, is the only one in possession of a ritual text (Gerke 2010). This power is transmitted via the substances mentioned above. Crowds at such *tsewang* may indeed be so large that the closest many participants get to seeing or even hearing the ritual master is ingesting the liquid and food substances blessed by him (or her, although it is almost invariably a him!). The local perspective on the efficacy of such rituals therefore rests, as expressed by Gerke, on a combination of faith in the authenticity and power of the ritual master's lineage and tantric attainments manifesting in the power of the initiation s/he gives and communicated via the substances he has blessed (Gerke 2010). In short, on the power of the officiating *lama* and ritual assistants to invoke deity presence and then transmit the blessing of it through embodied realisation.

### ***Embodiment, Power and Presence***

Returning now to the question of how the breath of one being could be conceived of as influencing the health of another, the above lends answer to the question as to what is considered to be transmitted by such breath or spittle. This is, as alluded to above in the context of the *tsewang* or 'Life power/empowerment' ritual, dependent on an individual's level of engagement with the deity yoga of *tantra*. Having said this, I propose an operative term in addressing the question is that of *wang*, glossed here in English as 'power' or 'empowerment'. It is this *wang*, this power, which the ritual specialist in the case both of the *nukwa* and the *lama* presiding over large ritual

gatherings such as the *tsewang* transmits. And this takes place via the breath. The blessed substances of the *tsewang*, (life-power/empowerment), the *tshe chu* (life-water) and *tshe ril* (life-pills) are blessed by the deity's breath.<sup>159</sup> The breath of a high level tantric practitioner is considered able to transmit such blessing, *chinlab* (*byin rlabs*), to another being, since their breath is empowered, blessed by deity.<sup>160</sup> Signs of these blessed deity winds and their pathways across embodied landscapes are the brightly coloured flags with mantric syllables which adorn the high mountain passes, the *lungta* described in Chapter Two. These *lungta* reflect the idea that the sacred syllables of the deity painted on them, *mantra* or *nuk*, will be transmitted by the environmental winds that blow them. In the same manner the *nukwa*, through spitting or blowing sends blessing and healing out upon winds driven by the presence of deity worlds embodied through the power of tantric practice or possession rites. I would suggest that contingent upon the ability of this notion of power, *wang* or *lungta*, to traverse spaces and transmit effect in the form of empowerment or blessing, *wang* or *chinlab*, is the idea of opening as it is understood in healing and in tantric practice; opening to the presence of spirited agency and its action upon and through oneself.

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<sup>159</sup> Notably the Mongol community, who refer to what is transmitted in the form of blessing as *adis*, from the Sanskrit *adhisthana* (Mair 2009).

<sup>160</sup> An attendant issue that could be raised here in terms of the question of local perceptions on efficacy is whether or not faith in the minds of those receiving healing via breath or blessed substances is necessary for them to have effect (cf. Samuel 2009).



***lungta* flying next to Brixton Prison in London, England**

As has been discussed, Tibetan tantric rituals and medical practices, whether Buddhist or Bön, share with those performed by spirit mediums in healing, interactions with deities or spirits that indicate particular cosmological frameworks for and views of the body. These are predicated on the idea of a cultural matrix of healing within which no separation between mental and physical phenomena relating to personhood or environment is understood to exist, and the boundaries between so-called internal and external worlds are porous. In particular, visualisation techniques underpinned by concepts of the subtle body are employed in ritual, bearing a transformative power which can be applied in healing within ritual context or in private healing sessions. Through *tantra* and through the rituals performed by spirit mediums there occurs a psychophysical transformation that is considered to heal the body-mind complex in service of the ultimate goal of achieving enlightenment, health and longevity being necessary attainments along the lifetimes' long path towards this. These

processes involve open conduits between elements: the environment and the body; identities constructed in the human domain and deity or spirit worlds. In the case of both *nukwa* and *lawa*, purification in order to achieve this openness to spirited agency can be enacted through initiation. For the former this is prerequisite to their tantric practice. For the latter, this can be an opening performed by another medium or *lama* in order to cleanse the medium and environs to create a suitable vessel for deity. As terms used for spirit mediums, like *kuten* (T. *sku rten*), would seem to indicate, the medium is providing a body (T. *sku*) as a base (T. *rtan*) for the deity to be present; the god thereby speaks through the *lawa* (Diemberger 2005: 127-9) to advise those who come seeking healing. It appears on the basis of the above that frames within which to formulate and develop better understandings of these processes, particularly in terms of what they mean to those actively engaged in practices related to them, need necessarily to be interpretive frames. Such narratives as those which underpin the healing enacted by *nukwa* and *lawa* are embedded in a cultural matrix of healing which turns upon the presence of deity as experientially present.

Types of healing enacted by *nukwa* and *lawa* appear to me to emerge from similar frames in which the presence of deity is invoked through opening, enabling spirited agencies to operate through the practitioner. The realised tantric practitioner or experienced spirit medium purifies themselves and environs through the use of rites such as the sang offering, thus removing obstacles to that agency. The presence of deity becomes embodied such that the *nukwa* or *lawa* becomes deity; their very breath or spittle replete with blessing, carrying the *chinlab* to benefit their communities and those seeking healing. The deity thus gives living presence to those seeking assistance, the tantric practitioner as a vessel for the healing which comes from the deity's *chinlab* and can be conveyed through breath, spittle, blessed substances such as those used during the *tsedrup* or *tsewang*, or even through the air.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I began this research with a question about healing and the power of touch and what this means for those who live in Tibetan cultural regions. Could it truly be possible to heal someone by rituals, by becoming possessed by a deity, by the blessing of those deities; in short, through prayer? This led to an exploration of the notion of touch, bodies and the ways in which they dance with the environments, and within the cultural complexes, in which they are embedded. This research attempts to make sense of how the healing practice of the *nukwa* and *lawa* function – tantric and shamanic idioms respectively – form part of a coherent cultural healing matrix. I initially thought this would be possible through examining connections subtle body theories relating to tantric practice and Sowa Rigpa theories of the *tsa*. With the failure of this inquiry, I returned in my research to the landscape and how the body and environment function interactively on a subtle level. Thus the quest to better understand processes of healing quickly became an exploration of lands; bodily landscapes and their ritual expressions as integral aspects of an environment understood on a cultural matrix of healing to which spirited agencies are central. I became not so much interested in what rituals connected to healing do or are thought to do, but in how they are situated in embodied landscapes, the presences they express and evoke, and how their topologies transform as they dance with a world in constant flux.

Ritual healing in Tibetan cultural regions is predicated on the power of deity worlds to bless, empower and to transform. Therefore, healing in a broad sense involves relations with these spirited agencies, whose presences underlie individual and communal health and fortune, *lungta*. As has been described, in the Rebgong villages, rituals related to the ancestral mountain gods, such as the renewal of the *labtsé* and the Leru festival, coexist with rituals conducted by both Buddhist and Bön adepts of monastic institutions and from groups of householder tantric practitioners. The histories underlying all these practices are infused by a mythical discourse central to which is the role of divine and spirit beings in maintaining and propagating the health of environs and their inhabitants, whilst protecting them from harm. Religious activities of most kinds require, if not the consent of local deities, their subjugation or propitiation if rituals are to succeed. Appropriate ritual relations with deity worlds, in terms of activities on the lands under their influence, have to be maintained in order for natural environments and human inhabitants to remain free from harm and to prosper. This

indicates an intrinsic relationship between the actions of people, their mental and bodily ritual activities of any kind and the natural environment. I argue that the understanding of healing according to this sensibility gives as much voice or presence to deity worlds and ritual practices and divination as it does to *Materia medica* and healing technologies, such as acupuncture or moxibustion. I argue that healing here is a process by which beings are brought into right relations, both mutually and in connection with other beings, both human and deity. I suggest here that all practices, whether ritual or medical, pertaining to health and well-being in Tibetan cultural regions are predicated upon this type of epistemology; a cultural matrix of healing. This matrix is one in which healing is by definition is about humans maintaining right relationship with environmental and deity landscapes. I explored what this sensibility means for those who live in the Rebgong valleys primarily through ethnographic accounts of three particular ritual practices in Rebgong villages: the renewal of the *labtsé* tributes to the mountain gods, the Leru harvest ritual, and the performance of a Bönpo tantric *cham*, ritual dance.

The central themes of the thesis are drawn out through a number of ethnographic vignettes. The first, recounting two different experiences of going to see medical practitioners trained in the Tibetan Science of Healing, Sowa Rigpa, highlights how traditional and contemporary enactments of one type of diagnostic pathway can both exist within the same cultural matrix of healing. The second ethnographic vignette describes a ritual which incorporates the practice of circumambulation endemic to Tibetan regions and gives example of ritual demands for the presence of spirited agencies. The purpose of this rite is to exhort them to purify and bless the crops and village community through empowerment via deity presence embodied in sacred texts. This also begins a motif which continues throughout the thesis: that of the negotiation and sometimes contested authorities of *lama* and *lawa*, and how these manifest through the social structures around ritual healing, sometimes transforming them in so doing. This illustrates the intrinsic relationship between Rebgong peoples, health practitioners such as those described in this thesis and deities, highlighting how the rich tapestry of religious and cultural practices converge in Rebgong's communal rites pertaining to ritual healing. I also include an ethnographic vignette recounting one nomad woman's health seeking journey in order to explore how the health seeking practices found in Rebgong and indeed across neighbouring Amdo, bring together a broad spectrum of healing arts, medical treatments and rites, with apparent syncretic harmony. This

narrative demonstrates how any one health seeking journey can be framed by divination functioning both as tool for diagnostics and overarching directive for which tools to employ within a medically and ritualistic pluralist approach to health and well-being, and again highlights the fluidity of the *lama* and *lawa* roles in healing context.

Forms of ritual healing I discuss in the thesis thus includes circumambulation, medical and tantric practices, those of the trance or spirit mediums, dance and divination. I argue that all these rites and practices connected to health and well-being in a broad sense can be understood under one cultural matrix of healing in which spirited agency is focal. The cultural matrix of healing here is one in which healing is understood to include concerns relating to deity realms and spirited agencies who interact with human realms through processes of embodiment. I suggest here that all practices, whether ritual or medical, pertaining to health and well-being in Tibetan cultural regions are predicated upon this type of epistemology; a cultural matrix of healing. I argue that inherent to understanding this matrix is a focus on how deities, as embodied landscapes, appear within it, how they are understood to exist and interact with human affairs, particularly those relating to health and well-being. In this regard, themes that I explore throughout the thesis are those of empowerment, embodiment and blessing.

The enactment of the constantly (re)negotiated relationship between spirited agencies and human realms has consequences for the well-being of internal and external worlds, the boundaries between which are envisioned as porous. The socio-political dimension of rituals evoking motifs such as expressed in the mythohistory of the demoness and subsequent pacification of local deity forces is at the fore in an ongoing negotiation describable as a politics of presence. Human beings compete for the authentication of their voices through ritual and the deity presences with whom they consider they share and negotiate power bases. These negotiations take place through the evocation of deity presence via means of different types of embodiment. The thesis explores these in relation to the shamanic idiom of the *lawa* and the tantric idiom of the *nukwa*, noting that these categories are not discrete and highlighting this through a brief ethnographic section describing rites during which both types of embodiment manifest through one body.

The thesis argues that, for at least Rebgong, it is not appropriate to attempt organisation of subject areas into discrete research units, but rather to embrace a multidisciplinary approach which enables and facilitates acknowledging the importance and relevance of deity worlds so focal to these regions. This work aligns with scholarship which situates divine beings as voicing places as the territories of particular communities and under specific leaderships, under the rubric of a cultural matrix of healing. In particular, I argue here that taking deity worlds into account in analysing the identity (re)formulations of human worlds and their other/self-boundaries, is not only necessary but essential in providing suitable frame from which to better comprehend the bounding of such spaces and the identities of their peoples and their quest for health and well-being.

Large communal rituals such as Leru bring their communities together and reconnect them to ethnic identities and familial and community belongings, including those with ancestral and deity worlds, which they (re)enact and reconstitute through ritual that affirms and (re)creates social structures and statuses. Authoritative presences and local power bases are negotiated and reinforced through a politics of presence in which divine agency has pivotal role to play. These rituals and their attendant healing aspects, operate on a number of levels which could be described in the frame of embodied deity presence. The spaces of the Leru ritual bring health and well-being through countering the mundanity of participants' working lives, often spent variously negotiating modernities mediated and regulated by the party-state quite some distance away from their birthplaces, families and native communities and returning them to a blessed experience of proximity to deity realms. The Rebgong spirit mediums are thus presented here as part of the glue holding and enabling this (re) empowerment by their embodied presence in ritual, thereby enabling healing to take place for individuals and communities. Those in Tibetan regions who are health seekers and participants in Leru, are empowered and blessed through a ritual the purpose of which is to engender health and well-being in a broad sense and to reformulate community power bases.

The thesis moves from discussion of the labtsé and Leru, which could be viewed as of shamanic idiom, to the presentation of a communal tantric ritual involving ritual dance, *cham*. The approach adopted here in developing understandings of such rituals, and their perceived effects on the health and well-being of the communities who enact them, is one which acknowledges the voices from their deity realms as authoritative on

their own social terms. This includes the deity voices embodied in the human and natural landscapes of Tibetan cultural regions or within the tantric practitioner. There is a distinction can be made between the way in which the Leru's spirit medium of the shamanic idiom calls the gods down to manifest them through possession and the way in which the idiom of the religious specialist evokes and manifests the gods in Tantric rituals such as the Rebgong *cham*. However, I suggest that the distinction between these modalities cannot be rigidly made. Even non-specialist performers become blessed and are thus transformed. In a sense they become divine through the act of dancing divine dances, by invoking deity presences.

The Spirit mediums of Rebgong's Leru are conducting and enacting complex ritual for the benefit of their communities. They evoke and embody deity through their offering of dances and other things pleasing to the mountain gods. They work as part of a cultural matrix of healing in which psychophysical transformations are invoked through spirited agency to creating and maintaining wellness. This structure forms part of a cultural landscape in which deity and human worlds interact to (re)formulate social worlds, their ritual practices dancing and voicing contested authorities, such as state and *lama* or *lama* and *lawa*.

The practice of *cham* as part of tantric ritual, as with the *labtsé* renewal or Leru rituals, reinforces both social hierarchies and those of religious institutions, and revitalises religious and social identities through reinforcing connection to homelands, *payul*, and to an enacted visionary tradition. The interpretation suggested in this thesis is that, rather than reinforcing existing institutional and social hierarchies, the phenomenon of non-performers moving across the boundaries between spaces designated for mere spectators and those reserved for the performance of deity, functions to transcend normal spatial boundaries, moving from impure peripheries closer to the empowerment found at the centre of the *cham* grounds; at the focal point of the deity's *né* (T. *gnas*). Both non tantric specialist laity, particularly women, move outside of their normative social and gender roles, as in the example of the daughter-in-law falling into trance and dancing with Dralijemmo (T. *sGra bla'i rgyal mo*) in her in-law's village. The embodied presence of spirited agencies directly affects conventionally lived-in worlds and their communities.

I suggest here that levels at which the deity's empowering presence can be experienced or absorbed can be understood as increasing in intensity the closer to the centre of this space, the heart of the deity's *né* (T. *gnas*) one gets. Therefore, these trance dancers, at the points where they are seen dancing themselves into the heart of the *cham* grounds, by implication are doing so with the authorisation of the deities who have blessed them. The blessing of the deity, the *chinbab* (T. *byin babs*), the trance dancers receive operates on both mundane and supramundane levels: as both social and ritual empowerment. Hence they are known as *chinpababpa* (T. *byin brlabs babs pa*), or ones upon whom empowerment/blessing descends, in acceptance that it is upon the authority of the central deity that they transgress normal spatial boundaries, moving from spectator status, through impure peripheries closer to the purified, empowered and empowering centre of the *cham*; the focal *né* of the deity. I argue that by dancing the gods, those attending *cham* validate the ritual both as a blessing and as cleansing and empowering its spectators, not as passive recipients, but by transforming their role into that of ritual participants in the fullest sense of the term.

I examined the technologies of embodiment within shamanic and tantric idioms, exploring modes of possession and evocation and how these relate to healing practices. What I suggest here, as tentative frame for better understanding these processes, is a close connection between notions underlying the enactment of the Leru ritual, the healing enacted by the *lawa*, and tantric notions of the spirited universe. The tantric practices of Tibetan cultural regions are predicated on deity worlds whose presences infuse bodily landscapes and those of natural environs. These landscapes exist in a frame within which the boundaries between them are fluid and open for spirited winds to blow pervasively through them. Ritual healing takes place through the variety of rites described in this thesis, whether on individual or communal level, by power spirited agencies manifesting through embodied presence. Forms of embodiment such as the possession embodiment of the *lawa* idiom or the imbued and envisioned embodiment of the *nukwa* idiom give access to communication channels across which blessing and healing can be transmitted.

I have aimed here to explore understandings of how environmental and bodily landscapes are inhabited and experienced as embodiments of spirited agencies. The evocation of these deity presences is presented here as catalyst for socio-political (re)configurations and processes of transformation. The realities of village ritual

practices are viewed as processes of interaction and negotiation between a broad spectrum of elements, rather than discrete enactments within clearly defined structural parameters. I understand ritual and religious categories here as motifs upon a spectrum of praxis across which particular communities and individuals move. Likewise, the deities so central to these processes are presented here not as phenomena dividable into compartments, according to purpose, but as parts of layered wholes, their presences all-pervasive cultural winds. This study is intended, in a Bakhtinian sense, as a body of words which do not bring closure but rather seek to engage in a dialogical conversation that simultaneously responds to past scholarship and anticipates response.

## APPENDIX I

ལྷ་བསང་གཏོང་རོགས། ཚེས་དྲུང་འབྲུད་རོགས།  
ཁྱེད་རང་མ་གཞི་ནས་བསང་ཁྱི་ཚུན་པོ་ཞིག  
ཁྱེད་རང་གཏོང་མ་ནས་ལྷ་སྤྱང་ནག་པོ་ཞིག

རེབ་གོང་ལྷ། བ་ཡི་ཕུས་ཟད་ཅིང་མ་ཡི་བྱངས་འཛོར་བའི།  
ལོ་རྒྱུས་ཀྱི་སྒྲ་མཁར་སྤྱུག་པོ་ཨང་།

ཁྱེད་ནི། མཚམས་ལན་རེ་རེ།  
མཐེན་པོའི་སྤང་ན་རྒྱ་བའི་བསལ་མ་རྒྱང་དང་འདྲ་ཞིང་།  
ཁྱེད་ནི། མཚམས་ལན་རེ།  
དམའ་མོའི་གཞོངས་ན་འབབ་པའི་དྲངས་མོ་རྒྱ་དང་མཚུངས་ཏེ།  
བཅན་པོའི་སྤང་ན་ཁྱེད་དྲོན་སྤྱོད་ལོལ་ཅིང་།  
ཟེར་འོད་ལམ་ལམ་འཛོར་བའི་རིང་པོ་དགོན་ཆེན་ཉིད་ནི།  
ཚོན་མོའི་སྤང་ན་འབྱིང་བའི་སྤྱོད་ཁེར་རྒྱང་ངམ།  
སྤྱུག་པོ་རྩ་ན་གཤར་བའི་འཛོང་གློད་དར་མ་ཨང་།

རེབ་གོང་ལྷ། བ་ཡུལ།  
ས་རྩལ་ལ་འཇགས་པ་མེད་ཅིང་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ལ་ཉམ་ང་འཛོར་བའི་རེབ་གོང་།  
ཁྱེད་ནི། སྤངས་ན་གཞས་དང་འདྲ་ཞིང་མེད་ན་སྤྱོད་མཚུངས་ཨང་།

དབུལ་བོ་ཚེས་མཐེང་མདོག་གི་མི་ལམ་མྱིས་སའམ།  
ལྷུག་པོ་ཚེས་ཚན་མདོག་གི་གཡུ་བྱར་ངོམ་ས་སྒེ།  
མི་རྒྱང་ཚེས་ཆང་ཐོར་ལ་འབས་དག་རྒྱག་ས་ཉིད།

ཞོགས་པ་དང་ས་སྤོད་རེ་རེ།  
སྤྱུག་ལོང་གི་དྲུང་ཞགས་བསྐྱེལ་བའི་ལྷང་གཞུང་དམར་པོ་འདི།  
བཤས་མ་ཐག་པའི་གཡག་ནན་ཞིག་གི་ལོག་པ་ཉར།  
ཆངས་པ་བྱ་ལུ་ལུ། དྲག་ཆར་གར་ར།

རྒྱ་རྒྱུ་ཡོད་མེད་ཀྱི་མཚམས་ནས།  
དུས་ཚོགས་དང་ཉེན་མཚན་ལ་ངས་པ་མེད་དེ།  
ནམ་རྒྱུ། སྤང་བ་སེམས་སུ་བསྐྱེལ་ནས་བཞུགས་ཆོ།  
ཁྱེད་ཉིད། སྐབས་སྐབས་སུ།  
གློད་པོ་བཞིན་ནམ་འཕང་སྤྱོད་ཅིང་།  
ཁྱེད་ཉིད། སྐབས་སྐབས་སུ།  
སྤོན་ལོ་བཞིན་རྒྱ་མོར་ཟགས་ཀྱིན་འདུག

དེ་ནི། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི།  
ལས་ཉན་གྱི་སྤྱོད་པ་མ་དག་པའི་ཐྱིག་འབྲས་ཡིན་ཡང་སྤོད་ལ།  
དེ་ནི། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི།  
སྒྲ་གནས་ཀྱི་འོར་བུ་ཆང་ནས་འབྱེལ་བའི་ཐུགས་ཡིན་ཡང་རུང་།

གང་ལྟར། རེབ་གོང་ལྷ།  
དཔྱིད་ཆར་ཟམ་ཟམ་གྱི་དྲངས་གཙང་བར་ནས།  
རྩ་ལྗང་ལྷུ་གུ་ཡི་མེས་ཤེས་འོད་ནས།  
ལོ་མ་དེ། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་འཛུམ་རྒྱུང་བཞིན།  
ལོ་མ་དེ། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་དྲངས་བཅོའོ།

རེབ་གོང་། རྒྱུད་སྤྱོད་མེད་པའི་བི་མང་འབྲུག་མགོ་མ་དེ།  
ཁྱེད་རང་ཡིན་མི་སྤྱོད།  
བསལ་གྱི་བཅོད་པའི་ཆ་བ་སྤོར་སྤོར་དེའང་།  
ཁྱེད་རང་ཡིན་མི་འོས།

ཁྱེད་རང་། མི་རྩེ་སུ་ལ་ཆམ་པ་ཕོག་ན།  
ཐོག་མར་སྤྱོད་རྒྱག་མཁན་དེ་ཡིན།

ཁྱེད་རང་། ཐབ་ཚད་གང་ལ་མེ་བྱས་ན།  
ཐོག་མར་དུ་བ་འཕྱར་ས་དེ་ཡིན།

རེབ་གོང་། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་ལོ་རྒྱུས་ཀྱི་སྒྲིང་ཀ་བཤམས་ནས།  
ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་ཐུན་ཆབ་ཏུ་འབབ་པ་དེ་དག་ཆུ་ཡིན་ནམ།  
ད་ལྟ་ དག་ཆུ་ལ་རྒྱབས་ཐོང་མི་འདུག དྲངས་གཙང་མི་འདུག

དག་ཆུའི་མགོ་ཁྲུངས་ན་རང་གིས་འཁྱལ་བའི་མེ་ལོང་ཞིག  
ཞེས་ཞེས་བསྐྱེལ་ནས་འདུག  
ཡུལ་མེ་ཚོའི་སྒྲིང་ལ་ཟུག་པའི་མེ་ལོང་ཞིག  
ཞེས་ཞེས། ཞེས་ཞེས་བསྐྱེལ་ནས་འདུག

ང་ཡི་ཡུམ་ཚེན་ལྷ་བུའི་རེབ་གོང་ཨ།  
ནམ་ཞིག ཞེས་ཞེས་བསྐྱེལ་བའི་མེ་ལོང་ལས་རང་གིས་མི་འཆར་ཚོ།  
ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་སྒྲིང་ལ། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་རིག་པ། ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་མེས་པོ་དག  
ཡོད་ཚད་ལ་བདག་པོ་སུ་ཡིས་རྒྱག རྒྱང་ཏུ་ཡིས་སྤྱར།

རེབ་གོང་། ལོ་རྒྱུས་སྒྲིང་གི་སོ་བར་ནས།  
དཔྱིད་ཀ་མ་ནས་བསྐྱེལ་བའི་ན་ཡང་།  
ཁྱེད་རང་ད་དུང་དག་ཆུ་ཉལ་ལ་རོལ་དོན་ཅི།

ཡུལ་མེ་ཚོས། ལོ་སར་མཇུག་བསྐྱེལ་མ་ཐག་གི་གོ་གྲོང་རྒྱག་རྒྱག་ཏུ་བཅགས་ཤིང་།  
འབྲུ་རྒྱ་ལ་ལམ་ཆས་རྒྱག་གིན་འདུག་གམ  
ནམ་རྒྱུའི་འགྱུར་བག་ལ་དྲགས་སྒྲིང་མེད་པར།  
པས་བྱ་ཁྱེད་དཀར་བའི་ཕང་བ་ན།  
ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་སྒྲིང་དང་སྒྲིང་གི་རུས་རྒྱུ་མ་ལུས་པར།  
ཟུངས་ཤུགས་ལྟོག་ལྟོག་བསྐྱེལ་བྱེད་དེ་དབྱར་རྩ་དག་ཆུ་འབྱུང་ཡིན་ཨང་།

ཚོ་བའི་གནའ་གཏམ་གྱིས་ཁྱེད་ཀྱི་ནང་རོལ་ལ་མཚོད་མེ་སྤར་ཞིང་།  
སྒྲིང་ཚོན་དོར་གྱིས་ཁྱེད་ལ་སྒྲིང་བས་བསྐྱེལ་ནའང་།  
ད་ནི་ཁྱེད་རང་།  
ཕྱི་ཤུན་མེད་པའི་རྩ་རི་སྒྲིང་པོ་དེ་ཡིན་ཚོད་མི་འདུག  
ཉི་རྒྱུའི་གཟི་བྱེད་འདེགས་པའི་ཁྱེད་མི་དེའང་གཞར་ནས་མ་ཡིན།

ང་མོང་བཞིན་མི་ཚོའི་དཀའ་སྤྱད་དང་འགྲུལ་བཞུད་ལ།  
རྒྱུ་ཤུལ་ཚམ་ཡང་མེད་པའི་ཡུལ་གྱར་བ་དག  
ཆུང་དུས་ཀྱིས་འདོད་ཅིང་ནས་དུས་ལོག་འདོད་པའི་པ་ཡུལ།

ལྷ་བསང་གཏོང་རོགས། ཚོས་དྲུང་འཁྱུང་རོགས།  
ཁྱེད་རང་མ་གཞི་ནས་བསང་བྱ་སྒྲིང་པོ་ཞིག  
ཁྱེད་རང་གཏོང་མ་ནས་ལྷ་སྤྱང་ནག་པོ་ཞིག

## APPENDIX II

### *Byis pa'i Nad Rigs ma lus pa bCos pa'i Nyams Yig bShugs so*<sup>161</sup> An Examination of the Treatment of all Children's Diseases<sup>162</sup>

By 'Dra Kya Mani', personal physician to the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama  
(translation of folios 1 to 6b of 24 folios by Dawn Collins<sup>163</sup>)

#### Folio 1

*/byis nad bcos pa'i nyams yig 'di'i/ / nad rigs brtag thabs spyi dang ni/ /bye brag rtags bcos sman spyor bcas/ /ang tho'i go rim bstar ba la/ /thog mar rna rtsha nu zhi skad/ /'tshe 'chi dbyibs sogs brtag pa'o// gnyis pa tsha grang spyi bcos dang bye brag glo nad tsha gser dang tsha gser dang/ /tsha sub rlung glo stong pa dang mchin pa tsha bab grang bab dang/ /mcher nad phe long*

This examination of the treatment of children's diseases is concerned with (*ni*) types of disease (*nad rigs*) and [their] general diagnosis (*brtag thabs spyi*), including (*bcas*) specific (*bye brag*) symptoms, treatment and medication (*sman sbyor*). To continue in number with the series, firstly one must examine the ear pulse, breast-milk, voice (*rna rtsha nu zhi skad*) [and] the form of the life-death (*'tshe 'chi dbyibs*) etc. Secondly, [this text will discuss] the general treatment for hot and cold [diseases]; specific lung diseases (*glo nad*): *tsha gser* and *tsha sub rlung glo stong pa*; liver (*mchin pa*) diseases: *tsha bab* [and] *grang bab*; spleen (*mcher*) diseases, stomach and abdomen (*long*) [diseases];

#### Folio 2a

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<sup>161</sup> In the transliteration, I have capitalised the root letters of Tibetan texts and proper names, and italicised all Tibetan terms except proper names. Some Tibetan terms are bracketed in the translation, in order to make it easy to relate to the text. Wherever English equivalents are ambivalent or not found, the Tibetan is kept, with English suggestions and explanations bracketed alongside the Tibetan terms, or footnoted. In addition to any suggested English equivalents, the Tibetan names of specific diseases and medicines have always been kept. I tried to keep the translation as literal as possible and to indicate wherever it is not so. I placed any English interpolations needed to maintain the flow of the translation in square brackets.

<sup>162</sup> Literally: The Written Experience/Manifestation {for *nyams* we used 'examination' here} of Treating Complete Children's Diseases Dwells [Here] {*bcos* = perf./fut. of '*chos*: to treat (illness)}.

<sup>163</sup> I wish to acknowledge the valuable assistance in this of a Tibetan doctor in training who shall remain anonymous.

*/tshad 'khrū dang//grang 'khrū tshad grang skyug pa dang//mkhris pa mgo po mig rna nad//gre nad lte mkhrang 'jing po dang//lto 'khor lte mkhregs brang rgod gyung//byis rims glo rkun rdel nad ni//phugs rde zub rde lam rde dang//kha nad btsa' thor kha tsha dang/ /sa zos zho ras rlung mkhris bad/ /rmen srod srin sha phol nad de/ /byis nad nyer bshi nang gses bcas// gsum pa sman sbyor ang rim bshin//sbyar chog yod do blo gsal tshogs//yang yang gzigs dang rang gzhan la//phan pa bla med 'byung nges so/*

hot and cold diarrhoea; hot and cold vomit (*skyug pa*); *mkhris pa* (one of the three harmful agents) [diseases]; head, eye and ear diseases; throat (*gre*) diseases; *lte mkhrang 'jing po* (swelling of the navel), *lto 'khor* (disease of the navel) and *lte mkhregs* (hardening of the navel); *brang rgod* (chest disease); *gyung* (chest disease); *byis rims* (epidemic children's disease); *glo rkun* (a lung disease); *rdel nad* (small stone disease): *phugs rde*, *zub rde*, *lam rde* (three types of small stone disease); mouth diseases: *btsa' thor*, *kha tsha* and *sa zos*; *zho ras*: *rlung*, *mkhris*, *bad* (three types of *zho ras*); *rmen* (moles); *srog*; <sup>164</sup> *srin* (insect/silkworm); *sha* (meat); <sup>165</sup> *phol nad* (boil or abscess) and (*de*) including (*bcas*) twenty four categories (*nang gses*) of children's diseases. Thirdly, students (*blo gsal tshogs*), here is (*yod do*) medication, [listed] numerically (*bshin ang rim*), and ready (*chog*) to compound (*sbyar*). [If you] examine [this] repeatedly, the highest (*bla med*) benefit will certainly come [both] for (*la*) yourself and others.

## Folio 2b

*/sman bla drang srong rig 'dzin la//mi phed snying nas rad btud nas//byis pa'i nad rigs gso 'dad 'gar//nyams kyi yig chung 'di na spro//de la rtags dang bcas thabs gnyis spyi dang bye brag sgo nas bstan//thog mar rna rtsa brtag pa ni//rna mdun nyi ma la bstad nas//rgyab nas bltas te byis pa yi//rna ba gyon la rtsa gsum ste//dang po bar dang tha ma gsum/ /rim pas snying mcher mkhal gyon no//rna ba gyas la rtsa gsum ste//glo mchin mkhal*

[Homage] to the Medicine Buddha, the sage (*drang srong*), the knowledge holder, constantly paying the highest respect from [the depths of my] heart, for some (*'gar*) [people] wanting to heal types of children's diseases, [my] experience is here (*'di na*) [in] this little text (*yig*). *It* contains both symptoms and treatments, showing general and specific methods (*sgo*). In this regard (*ni*), firstly examining the ear pulse after [the patient] has shown the front of the ear to the sun, [the doctor] looks at the back [of the ear]. The child's left ear has three pulses: first,

<sup>164</sup> Here not translated as 'life', but taken to refer to a type of disease.

<sup>165</sup> Here again taken not as referring to meat itself, but to a type of disease found in meat.

middle and last, [these] three. [This is done] gradually [by checking the] heart, spleen and left kidney [pulses]. The right ear has three pulses: lung, liver and right kidney.

### Folio 3a

*gyas gong bzhin sbyar//mo la glo snying gnyis po bzdog// glo snying mchin gsum 'dzings pa ni//rgyal po dang ni 'gong po'i rtsa//rtsa gsum skam nas mi gsal na//'chi rtsa yin bas tshe dbang dang//bla bslu tshe chog sbyin gtod bya// gzhan yang rna ba lag pa yi//rtsa ni dmar la bshan pa dang//mdog dmar shing lo rgyas pa na//nad med pa yi rtags su 'dod//dmar nag rgyas na tsha ba dang//ser skya stong na grang bar nges//ban bun 'dzings na*

[Check them] as previously [explained]. In girls, both the lung and the heart [pulses are on the] opposite (*bzlog*) [side to boys]. Concerning (*ni*) the lung, heart and liver, [when these] three [pulses] are mixed (*'dzings pa*), this (*ni*) is the [demon] king and class of demons' (*'gong po*) pulses. If the three pulses are dried and unclear, [this] is the death pulse. Therefore, [undertake] (*yin pas*) long life empowerment (*tshe dbang*) and obtain (*bslu*)<sup>166</sup> the very best (*bla*) [of religious practice, such as] *tshe chog*,<sup>167</sup> [also you] should (*bya*) give charity (*sbyin gtod*). Also, as for (*ni*) others' ear and hand pulses, if red and (*la*) *bshan*,<sup>168</sup> red colour [and like] tree leaves, [this] demonstrates (*'dod*) the sign (*rtags*) of being without disease. If red-black increases (*rgyas*), [this indicates] a hot [disease]; and if yellow-white empty, [the disease is] certainly a cold [disease]. If [the pulse is] troubled (*ban bun*) [and] mixed (*'dzings*),

### Folio 3b

*gdon rtsa yin//rna ba lag rtsa dang po dang//bar pa mtha' ma gnyis rim bzhin//gug na 'chi dang gso dka' zhing//nad gzhi yod pa'i rtags su 'dod//rtsa chad 'chi zhing khyad par du/snying rtsa dga la nges pa yin/ 2. mkhar gzhang chu yis bkang ba'i khar//ma yi nu zho bzhos pa la//smug po khrag yin ser po mkhris//dkar po lbu ba rlung du shes//sngo zhing snal na bda kan yin//sbal sgong 'dra na sa bdag gdod//steng du byung na bcos mi dgos//gting du song na 'chi bar nges//bar du chags na bcos su btub// ka btshugs na mi 'chi tsam//tshom bur chad na gdon ngo yin// gzhan yang*

<sup>166</sup> *bslu* is the honorific form of *nyos*, 'to buy', but money is not the meaning intended here

<sup>167</sup> A type of religious ritual that monks can be commissioned to perform

<sup>168</sup> This can be translated into English as 'butcher', but neither I nor my assistant knew what that signified in this context.

[this] is a type of evil spirit/demon (*gdon*) pulse.<sup>169</sup> If the first ear-hand pulse is bent (*gug*), [the child will] die. Similarly (*bzhin*), in the case of both the middle and last [ear-hand pulses, the child will either be] hard to treat or (*shing*) the symptom demonstrates (*'dod*) [that the child] is diseased (*nad gzhi*), respectively (*rim*). A broken pulse (*rtsa chad*) [indicates that the child] will die and (*shing*), especially (*khyad par du*) [in the case of] the heart pulses, [death] is certain. 2. [If, when put] into (*la*) a cooking pot (*mkhar gzhang*) filled with water, the mother's milked (*bzhos*) milk (*ma yi nu zho*) is purple (*smug po*) [coloured, you will] know (*shes*) [this indicates] a blood [disease]; [if it is] yellow [coloured, you will know it is a disease of the] *mkhris pa*;<sup>170</sup> [if it is] white [coloured and] frothy (*lbu ba*), [you will know it is] a *rlung* [disease];<sup>171</sup> if [it is] blue (*sngo*) [coloured] and [like] yarn (*snal*), [you will know it] is *bad kan* [disease]; if [it looks like] the back of a frog (*sbal sgong*), [you will know the disease is due to] *sa bdag*<sup>172</sup> harm (*gnod*); if [the milk] floats on top of (*steng du*) [the water, there is] no need for treatment; if [the milk] sinks (*gting du*), death is certain; if [the milk] stays (*chags*) in the middle [of the water], treatment will cure (*btub*) [the disease]; if [the milk] stays (*tshugs*) [like] a stick (*ka ba*), [the child] won't quite die; if [the milk] is broken into bunches (*tshom bur chad*), [it is] a [disease that has a] demon face (*gdon ngo*).<sup>173</sup> Also [there is] another [diagnostic method, as follows:]

#### Folio 4a

*bus ma nus pa yi//sngon du snod gtsang gnyis su ni//chu blugs nu zho nyung du re//bzhos pas kha la lding ba'am//chu dang o' ma 'dres na 'tsho//ma 'dres phrom phrom 'dug na 'chi//gting du hril gyis song na na// ka ba btsugs na 'dre gdon yin//de yang gyas la pho gdon dang//gyon la mo gdon ngos bzung bya//gnyis ka ma 'dres gting song na//byis pa mi 'tsho spang bar bya//gcig 'dres gcig ma 'dres pa'am//gcig kha gcig zhams song na'ang//byis pa de ni gso dka' zhing//nu zho kha gting bar gsum du//lding nas song na rim pa bzhin//rlung dang*

before (*sngon du*) a child is able [to take the mother's milk], put water into (*ni*) two clear pots (*snod*) and, by milking, [add] some breast-milk. If the milk hovers [on the water] or the water and milk coagulate (*'dres*), [the child] will live; if [they do] not coagulate [and] are shining (*phrom phrom*), [the child] will die; if [the milk] sinks (*gting*) entirely (*hril*), [the child] will be

<sup>169</sup> Meaning the disease is caused by an evil spirit

<sup>170</sup> One of the three harmful agents of *gso ba rig pa*

<sup>171</sup> Another of the harmful agents

<sup>172</sup> A local deity or spirit who governs the locality

<sup>173</sup> ie. The disease is caused by demons

sick; if [the milk is] standing [up] like a stick, [it] is a 'dre gdon<sup>174</sup> [disease].<sup>175</sup> In addition (*de yang*), [if the stick leans] to the right, [the disease is caused by] a male demon and [if the stick leans] to the left [it is caused by] a female demon. [You] should recognise (*ngos bzung*) [the diseases using this method]. If both [the water and the milk] sink without mixing, the child will not live [and the treatment] should be abandoned. If one mixes and the other does not mix, or one floats<sup>176</sup> and one sinks<sup>177</sup> but (*na'ang*) the child will be hard to treat and the breast milk, after hovering (*lding nas*) [at the] top, [in the] middle [or at the] foot, [these] three, accordingly [the disease] is *rlung*,

#### Folio 4b

*tsa ba grang ba yin//mig mang ris su byung ba na//shi gson phyed ma chu mdog tu// 'gyur na mi 'tsho 'dres na 'tsho// 3. skad la brtag pa 'di lta ste//phra la ring ba mchin pa'i skad//sbom la ring ba grang ba'i skad//'gags la 'dzer ba glo ba'i skad//che chung byed pa gdon gyi skad//ngang skad 'khru skyug mchin pa'i skad/ zhib brtag rang rang skabs su 'chad// 4. pags pa sbos dang gser mdog dang//rna ba skam dang sna bug zhom//lce ni thung dang skam pa dang//lce gzhung nag por song ba dang//mig gi mdangs shor khung du 'bros// gyen la blta zhi bzlog pa dang//gnyid du song yang had de 'dug//de rnams byung na 'chi ba*

hot or cold [diseases] respectively. If [the milk] becomes like *mig mang*,<sup>178</sup> there is a fifty percent chance of life (*shi gson phyed ma*); if changes take place in the colour of the water, [the child] won't live (*'tsho*) and if [the milk and water] mix, [the child] will live. 3. The voice is examined [as follows:] A thin (*phra*) and long [voice] is the voice of a liver [disease]; a deep (*sbom*) and long [voice] is the voice of a cold [disease]; a blocked (*'gags*) and hoarse (*'dzer ba*) [voice] is the voice of a lung [disease]; a half large [and half] small [voice] is the voice of a demon.<sup>179</sup> A *ngang* (wild duck, swan or goose) voice is the voice of diarrhoea (*'khru*), vomit (*skyug*) and liver [diseases]. [In order to] clearly check (*zhib brtag*) [the voices of diseases], when (*skabs su*) [other texts are] talking about this subject (*rang rang*) [you should refer to them].<sup>180</sup> 4. If the skin is swollen (*sbos*) and [like] gold [in] colour, [there are] dry ears and a

<sup>174</sup> A type of demon, spirit or ghost

<sup>175</sup> i.e. A disease caused by such a being

<sup>176</sup> Literally 'goes to the mouth'

<sup>177</sup> Literally 'goes to the honorific feet'

<sup>178</sup> The game of 'go'

<sup>179</sup> i.e. This indicates a disease caused by such

<sup>180</sup> Since this text is a brief explanation and not meant to be a comprehensive guide

constricted nose (*sna bug zhom*), a short and dry tongue (*lce ni thung dang skam pa dang*),<sup>181</sup> the middle section of the tongue (*lce gzhung*) is becoming black, the brightness (*mdangs*) of the eyes is lost (*shor*), [the eyes are] sunken (*khung du 'bros*), looking up (*gyen la blta zhi*) and the opposite (looking down) and [the child] sleeps in [a] stupefied (*had*) [manner], [then the child] having those [symptoms] will die.

### Folio 5a

*yin// pho ba rdo ltar sra ba dang//stong na sog ching ngar ba dang//'khry nad chu ltar 'brub pa dang//stod du zos chad skyugs pa dang//sna bug rngul chags de rnams 'chi//lag pa mgo dang sna khud du//yul yul byed na 'chi ba yin//mthol bzhi dung ltar dkar na 'chi// 5. nu ma zas la rgnams pa dang// sha mdangs ma shor dbang po gsal//dbugs bde 'phral la dal ba dang// mtshan mo mi ngu bcos pas bde//mthil bzhi le brgan dmar po 'dra//de rnams 'tsho ba nus pa yin// gnyis pa bye brag so so'i rtags bcos ni//dang po tsa ba spyi la gtso*

[When] the stomach is as hard (*sra ba*) as a stone and, if empty (*stong*), accumulates (*sog/gsog*) vigour (*gnar ba*); diarrhoea floods (*'brub pa*) like water and whatever is eaten comes straight back up (*stod*)<sup>182</sup> as vomit and the nose sweats - those (previously mentioned symptoms) [indicate that the child] will die. If, [there is] embarrassment (*yul yul*) at the hand, head and nose, [the child] will die. If the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet (*mthil bzhi*)<sup>183</sup> are as white as a conch (*dung*), [the child] will die. 5. [If the child is] greedy (*rgnams pa*) for food and breast milk, doesn't lose [his or her] glowing complexion (*sha mdangs*); [his or her] senses are clear; the respiration [is] healthy (*bde*) and temporarily (*'phral*) slow (*dal ba*) and [the child does] not cry at night, treatment will improve [the condition] (*bcos pas bde*). [If] the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet<sup>184</sup> are extremely red (*le brgan dmar po*),<sup>185</sup> those [symptoms indicate that the child] will be able to survive (*'tsho ba*)<sup>186</sup>. Secondly, regarding those specific symptoms and treatments themselves, firstly for general hot [conditions],

### Folio 5b

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<sup>181</sup> The *ni* here is not translated because we took it to have a nominal joining function

<sup>182</sup> ie. Doesn't reach the stomach – *stod* expresses the upper part of the body

<sup>183</sup> Literally 'the four unders'

<sup>184</sup> As previous note

<sup>185</sup> Literally 'red red'

<sup>186</sup> Literally 'life'

*brgyad 'jam por bsdeb pa dang//yang na phyi rgyud gur kum bdun pa kha bsgyur gang dgos dang bstun pa btang/ gling stod chos rje'i blon po bzhi sbyor ka ra sbyar ba zab/de yang glo la rgun 'prum dang sha ser la skyu ru'i thang//gla dom zhad tsam bsnan te gung gnyis bsten pas tsha 'khru gcod// gnyis pa grang ba spyi tsam la/ gling stod chos rje'i dwa lis brgyad pa/ dwangs gnas/go thal bdun pa//se 'bru bzhi sbyor rnams zab/ gsum pa bye brag las glo nad tsha gzer ni/ lci 'thibs gting nas 'khun zhing rtsa la phra grims//kha sna'i dbugs thung/ glo kha mig 'tshubs nas lu/ lud pa 'gog la bskyur mi shes shing//*

either softly mixing (*bsdeb pa*) *gtso bgyad*,<sup>187</sup> or (*yang na*) *gur kum bdun pa*<sup>188</sup> [as advised in the] *phyi rgyud*,<sup>189</sup> act in accordance with (*bstun pa btang*) whatever changes of direction (*kha bsgyur gang*) [the circumstances] require. It's better to use *gLing sTod Chos rJe's blon po bzhi sbyor*<sup>190</sup> mixed with sugar (*ka ra*). In addition to that (*de yang*), [use *blon po bzhi sbyor*] mixed with grapes (*rgun 'prum*) for coughing [diseases], and for yellow skin (jaundice?) [use] hawthorn (*skyu ru*) soup (*thang*). After (*te*) adding (*bsnan*) a little bit of *bla*<sup>191</sup> and *dom*,<sup>192</sup> taking [this medicine] at midday and midnight<sup>193</sup> will stop (*cod*) hot diarrhoea. Secondly, for general cold [diseases], it is better to take (*zab*) *gLing sTod Chos rJe's dwa lis brgyad pa*, *dwangs gnas*, *go thal bdun pa* [and] *se 'bru bzhi sbyor*.<sup>194</sup> Thirdly, concerning specific [diseases], in *glo nad tsha gzer*<sup>195</sup> [the body] becomes sluggish (*lci 'thibs*); [the child] groans deeply (*gting nas 'khun*); the pulse is thin (*phra*) [and] quick (*grims*); the breath of the mouth and nose is short; [when] coughing (*lu*), the mouth and eyes swirl around (*'tshubs*) from the cough (*blo*); the phlegm (*lud pa*) is congested (*'gog*) and [the child] cannot get rid of it (*bskyur mi shes*);<sup>196</sup>

## Folio 6a

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<sup>187</sup> A type of medicine

<sup>188</sup> A type of medical compound made from different materials in different texts. Here it is indicated that the advice written in the *phyi ma rgyud* should be followed.

<sup>189</sup> One of the four medical treatises comprising the *rgyud bzhi*

<sup>190</sup> A type of medicine

<sup>191</sup> *bla rtsi*: musk

<sup>192</sup> *dom mkhris*: bear's gallbladder

<sup>193</sup> Literally 'the two noons' - *nyin kung* and *tsen kung*: midday and midnight

<sup>194</sup> These are four medicines

<sup>195</sup> A lung disease mentioned previously in this text

<sup>196</sup> Literally 'does not know throw out'

*snying brdung bzhin mdangs nyams/de la/hong len brgyad pa dang/ dur byid lnga thang btang pas khrag tu 'khru na 'tsho/ bzhi pa glo nad tsha sub ni glo 'gog tu mi 'dod drag tu lu/ lus tshe/ rtsa 'phar sgo drag/ glo bstud nas byung tsa na/ ma la 'brad cing skra nas 'then/ rang gi skra dang brang la 'brad/ rjes su lus rngul du 'gro/ ding nas 'khun nas skyug tshul ston/de la gur kum gsum pa ka ra sbyar la btang/ shing sngon sro lo'i chu'i skom ma bu gnyis la gtong/ stod 'khrug nad la phan pa'i ghi wam bdun pa/ 'khrugs tshad sel ba'i ga bur rgyal blon lnga ba zab/ drug 'go snod kha ru thung*

the heart beats quickly (*brdung*) and the brightness of the complexion deteriorates (*mdangs nyams*). For it (*de la*),<sup>197</sup> [use the following medicines:] *hong len brgyad pa* and *dur byid lnga thang*.<sup>198</sup> If there is blood in the diarrhoea after using [these two medicines, the child] will live. Fourthly, regarding *glo nad tsha sub*,<sup>199</sup> the cough becomes severe (*drag po*) and [the child] does not want to stop coughing; the body is hot; the pulse becomes severe (*rtsa 'phar sgo drag*<sup>200</sup>); if the coughing continues, [the child] scratches the mother (*ma la 'brad*) and pulls [her] hair, scratches his or her own hair and chest (*brang*) [and] afterwards, [the child] becomes sweaty (*rngul*); groans deeply (*ding nas 'khun nas*) [and] seems [as if he or she is] almost vomiting;<sup>201</sup> For it (*de la*),<sup>202</sup> use *gur kum gsum pa*<sup>203</sup> mixed with sugar [and administer] the water (*chu'i skom*) of *shing sngon sro lo*<sup>204</sup> to both mother and child. [The medicine] *ghi wam bdun pa* is [also]<sup>205</sup> helpful for *stod 'khrug*<sup>206</sup> disease. It's better to use (*zab*)<sup>207</sup> *kha bur rgyal blon lnga pa*, which can also treat (*sel*) *'khrugs tshad*<sup>208</sup>. [From the] *drug 'go, snod kha* [and] *ru thung*,<sup>209</sup>

## Folio 6b

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<sup>197</sup> Referring back to the *glo nad tsha gzer* disease

<sup>198</sup> Again here *thang* refers to the fact that a soup is made of the medicine

<sup>199</sup> Also a lung disease

<sup>200</sup> This expression is difficult to translate because the words are used in a way specific to pulse diagnosis

<sup>201</sup> i.e. Gagging

<sup>202</sup> Referring back to *glo nad tsha sub*

<sup>203</sup> A medicinal compound made of three ingredients

<sup>204</sup> A blue tree called *sro lo*

<sup>205</sup> Meaning as well as being helpful for the disease under discussion, *glo nad tsha sub*

<sup>206</sup> A disease described here as one in which the upper part of the body is disturbed

<sup>207</sup> In the treatment of *glo nad tsha sub*

<sup>208</sup> A type of hot disease

<sup>209</sup> Names of three types of pulses

*khraḡ mdog bltas la ci ran dbyung/ lṅa pa rlung glo stong pa zhes bya glo nad yun ring gzhug  
la 'byung zhing/ drag tu lu/ 'gog tu med/ lce rnyil skyal mig mchu skrangs/ de la sman da trig  
gsum pa mar gсар dang sbrang la sbyar ba gtong/ yang na cu gang bzhi pa ka ra dang/dwa lis  
bzhi pa bu ram sbyar ba ltag sprod/ dbyad du tshigs pa bzhi lṅa bsreg/*

[examine] (*bltas*) the blood colour to see (*bltas*) how much (*ci*) blood can [be drawn] (*ran*)  
[and] draw (*dbyung*) [it].<sup>210</sup> Fifthly, [the disease] called *rlung glo stong pa*<sup>211</sup> comes after [the  
child has suffered] a lung disease for a lengthy period of time (*yun ring*) and [its symptoms are]  
a severe cough [which] won't stop, a white tongue and gums (*rnyil*) and (*la*) the eyelids (*mig  
mchu*) are swollen (*skrang*s). The medicines to use (*gtong*) for it [are] *da trig gsum pa* mixed  
with new butter and honey (*brang*), or (*yang na*), *cu gang bzhi pa* [mixed with] sugar and *dwa  
lis bzhi pa* mixed with congealed brown sugar (*bu ram*) [used] alternately (*ltag sprod*).<sup>212</sup>  
According to the *dbyad*,<sup>213</sup> [perform] moxibustion (*bsreg*) [on the] fourth and fifth vertebrae.

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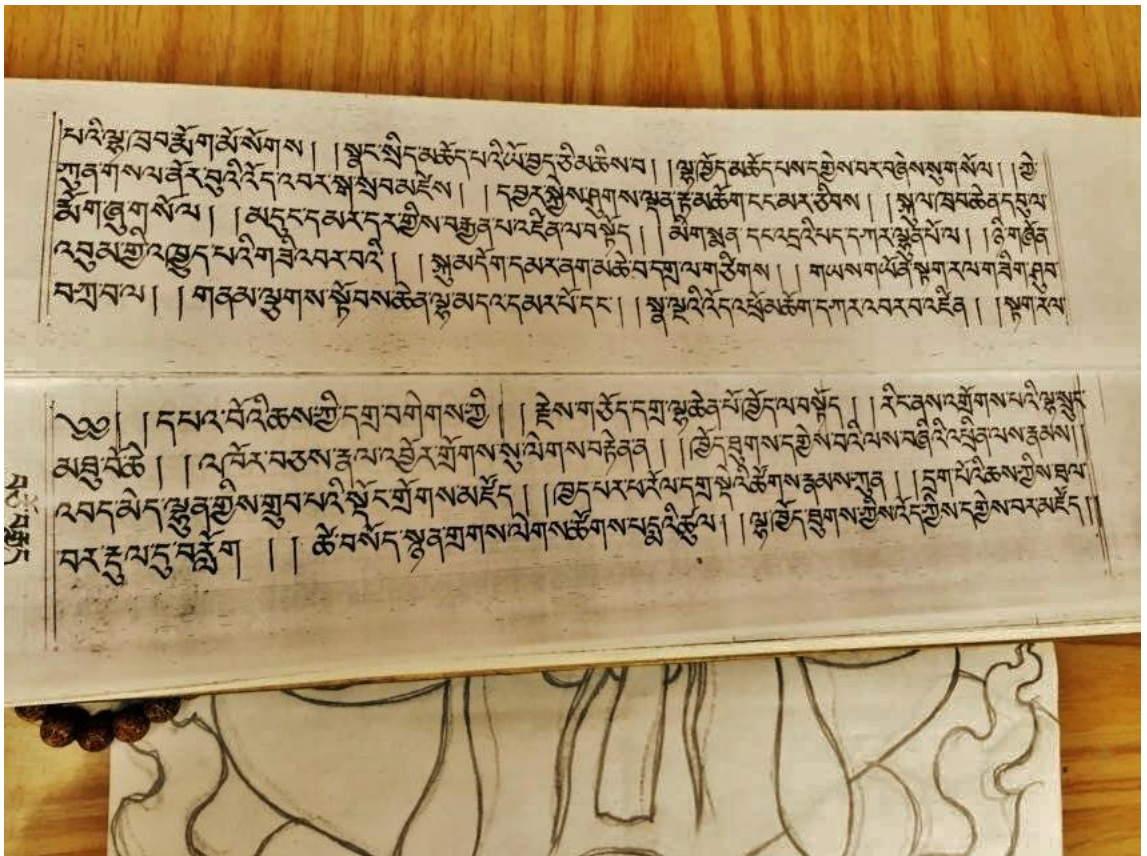
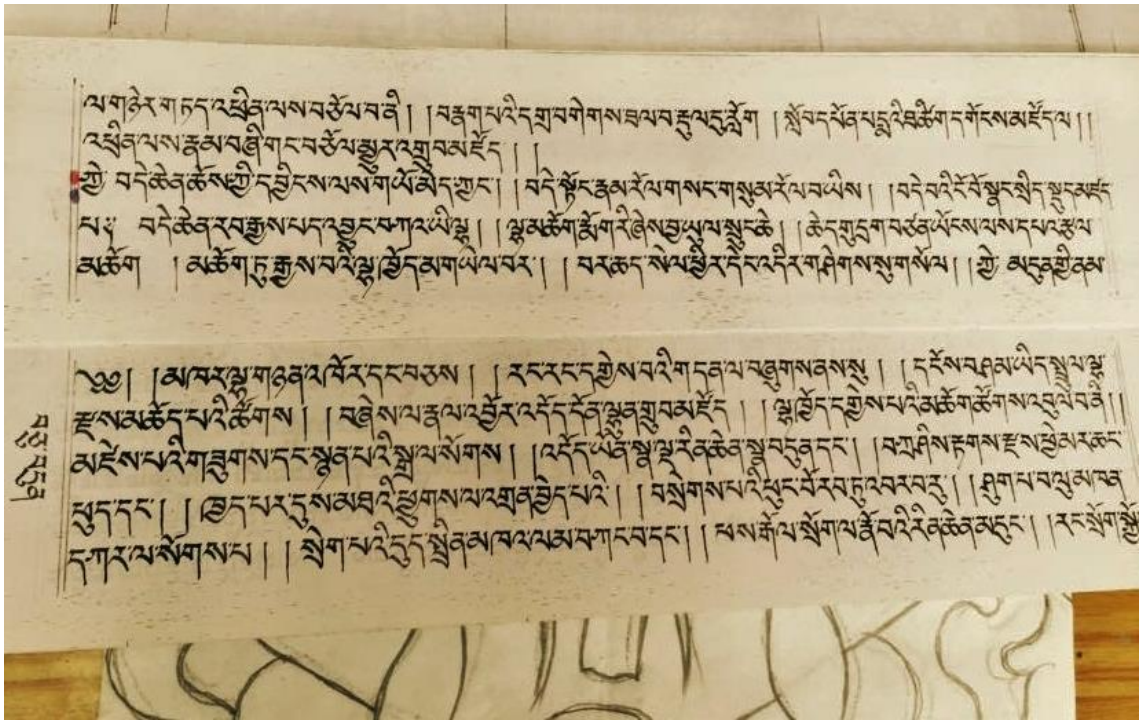
<sup>210</sup> This refers to the practice of blood letting as a medical treatment

<sup>211</sup> Literally 'Lung disease of empty cough'

<sup>212</sup> Here it is only the latter two medicines, *cu gang bzhi pa* and *dwa lis bzhi pa* that are used alternately.

<sup>213</sup> One of the four major categories of treatment in *gso ba rig pa*, the others being food, environment and medicine. The category of *dbyad* contains treatments such as blood letting and moxibustion.

### APPENDIX III – Rebong *sangbé* text



[illegible]

ཡུལ་མཉམས་པའི་དག་པོའི་ལམ་མཐོང་བདུན་ཅུ་  
རྟེན་པོའི་སྒྲིཛེལ་ལཱར་པོའི་གསལ་མཐུས་དགེ་།



[illegible][illegible]

ཡག་མེད་གཏད་པ་ལྟ་བུ་ལས་བཅོམ་བཞི། །བརྒྱུད་པ་འདི་དག་བཞེགས་ཐམས་ཅད་ལྟ་བུ་ལྟོག་། །སྟོབ་དེ་བཞུགས་པ་ལྟོག་དགོངས་མཛོད་ལ། །  
 འཕྲིན་པས་རྒྱལ་བཞི་གང་བཅོམ་ལྟར་འགྲུབ་པ་མཛོད་། །  
 །ཨི་བདེ་ཆེན་ཆོས་ཨི་བདེ་ཆེན་པས་གཡོ་མེད་ཨི་བདེ་། །བདེ་སྟོང་རྒྱལ་པོ་ལས་གསང་གསུམ་པོ་ལས་ཡིས། །བདེ་བའི་དོ་བོ་སྒྲུང་གི་དྲུང་མཛོད་།  
 བདེ་ཆེན་པོ་བརྒྱུད་པ་ལྟར་ལ་ཡིས། །སྒྲུབ་ཆོག་མེད་པེ་ཞེས་བུ་ལྟ་བུ་ལྟོག་། །ཆེད་གྲུང་ག་བཅོམ་པོ་ལས་པས་དཔལ་ལྟ་བུ་ལ་  
 མཛོད་། །མཛོད་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་བའི་སྒྲུབ་ཆོད་མག་ཡིས་བཟ། །བར་ཆད་སེམས་ལྟོ་རྟོ་དེ་བའི་དེ་རྟོ་གཞིགས་སྒྲུག་སེམ། །ཨི་མཐུན་ཨི་མཐུན་

༢༠། །ཨི་ སྒྲུབ་ཆོག་སའདྲོད་ཡོན་ལྟ་བུ་ལྟོག་པའི། །བདུད་ཅི་རྒྱུ་མཛོད་པས་མཛོད་པའི། །སའལྟོ་ལྟོ་བསྒྲུབ་པ་དང་། །སྟོང་  
 གསུམ་གཞི་བདག་ཐམས་ཅད་དང་། །ཆེ་དེ་མཛོད་ལྟ་བུ་བསྒྲུབ་པའི་བཅུས། །གངས་ཅན་གཞི་བཞུགས་པའི་བཅུས་ཅད་བསང་། །སྒྲུབ་  
 རྒྱུ་ལ་སྒྲུབ་པས་དང་། །ལྟོ་མཛོད་གོང་སྒྲུབ་ལྟོ་དེ་བསང་། །ཕྱོགས་བཞི་དེ་གཞི་མཛོད་ལྟོ་བཞི། །སྒྲུབ་དང་སྒྲུབ་པོ་དྲུང་དྲུང་།  
 སྒྲུབ་བརྒྱུད་ཀྱི་ལྟོ་དེ་ལོ་མཛོད་པས། །ཡང་ལོ་ལོ་སྒྲུབ་ཀྱི་གཞི་བཟུང་མཐུང་། །གཞི་མཛོད་ལོ་གྲུབ་ལྟོ་དང་། །གསང་ལྟོ་མཛོད་ལྟོ་མཛོད་པས།  
 རྟོ་མཛོད་པས་ལོ་མཛོད་པས་ཅུས། །གཞི་བཟུང་གསུམ་ལྟོ་དང་ལྟོ་དང་གསུམ་པས། །ཡང་ཕྱོ་ཆེ་དེ་སྒྲུབ་ཀྱི་སྒྲུབ་། །ཐག་དཀར་སྒྲུབ་ཀྱི་སྒྲུབ་

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