



SPIRIT-MEDIUMSHIP IN UPPER TIBET

The vocation of one expert practitioner¹

JOHN VINCENT BELLEZZA

*Senior Research Fellow, Tibet Center,
University of Virginia*

INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a prominent shaman or spirit-medium from Upper Tibet named Lha-pa bSam-gtan (Lhapa Samten).² The standing he enjoys among his peers signals that he is among the most highly respected spirit-mediums in sTod and Byang-thang. Despite facing formidable administrative and legal obstacles, the spirit-mediums of the Tibetan upland are still active today. Known in Tibetan as *lha-pa*, *lha-mo*, *dpa'-bo*, *dpa'-mo*, *klu-mo*, etc., these indomitable men and women are believed to embody various divinities for the benefit of their communities. Many of the deities purported to participate in the trance ceremonies also have their abodes in the vast Tibetan upland, while others are of Indic origin. Spirit-mediumship (*lha-'babs*) constitutes one of the most intriguing and least studied religious phenomena in Tibet. It is predicated on the perceived possession of human beings by spirits as a special method of healing and prognostication, with resonance the world over.³

- 1 The fieldwork upon which this paper is based was generously supported by financial contributions from the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation (New York). The transcription of Lhapa Samten's utterances and its translation into English was made with the assistance of Yungdrung Tenzin, a Tibetan literato from sTeng-chen with whom I have worked for many years.
- 2 To protect the identity of this individual he appears in this paper under an assumed name. The tradition of spirit-mediumship is considered very sensitive and is officially discouraged in the Tibet Autonomous Region.
- 3 In *Calling Down the Gods* (2005: 37), I announce that important spirit-mediums hailing from Upper Tibet not appearing in this work would be given due attention in subsequent publications. In the mid-2000s, I did indeed interview several more eminent practitioners, making audio records of their utterances during trance ceremonies. This paper and one delivered at the International Association of Tibetan Studies conference in Bonn, in 2006 (see Bellezza 2011), initiate the process of presenting this ethnographic and linguistic material. Studies of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet have also been made by Berglie 1980; 1978; 1976; Diemberger 2005.



The tradition of spirit-mediumship flourished in the Tibetan highlands for untold centuries. It is widely reported that spirit-mediums were active in virtually every corner of this vast region; its pastoral and agrarian settlements supporting many of these esoteric practitioners in the pre-modern period. My fieldwork indicates that nowadays there are only around two dozen senior spirit-mediums left in the entire region, representing a precipitous decline in their numbers over the last fifty years.

Spirit-mediumship in Upper Tibet is characterized by a system of healing and augury heavily dependent on Buddhist philosophy and praxis. Traditionally, the channeling of the gods relied on the sanction and patronage of Lamaist authorities. The most important function attributed to these religious figures was the ability to discern authentic practitioners from charlatans and those considered demonically possessed. This was accomplished through the use of various methods of divination and special powers of insight. Despite coming under the auspices of lamas, in the very sparsely populated Byang-thang, spirit-mediums were able to maintain a high degree of socio-cultural autonomy due to the paucity of major Buddhist and g. Yung-drung (Eternal) Bon monastic centers in the region.

While the doctrinal basis and ritual cast of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship is largely Lamaist in nature, non-Buddhist customs and traditions are also quite well conserved.⁴ The role of native mountain and lake deities (*lha-ri*, *lhamtsho*) in possession, the protective cult of warrior gods (*dgra-lha*), the striking zoomorphism of healing spirits, and the use of ritual instruments such as the draped arrow and flat-bell remain conspicuous elements of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship that all appear to be of indigenous cultural inspiration. Nevertheless, the native cultural traits in Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship are difficult to historicize with any certainty. The origins of some of these non-Buddhist features, as part of an archaic cultural substrate, are likely to predate the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. Although certain older cultural elements may have survived intact as unchanged relics, others were subject to assimilative processes, whereby

For studies of household spirit-mediums from various other Tibetan regions see, for instance, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Havnevik, 2002; Nagano 2000; Tucci 1980; Stein 1972; Balikci 2008.

- 4 The Buddhist tradition has had much more influence in the constitution of a higher status class of spirit-mediums known as *sku-rten*. The ritual paraphernalia and practices of the *sku-rten* oracles exhibit fewer indigenous cultural traits than do the household spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. Unlike the folk practitioners of upland Tibet, the *sku-rten* tradition developed in an ecclesiastic environment with many of its functionaries being monks. For information on the *sku-rten*, see, for example, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956; Rock 1935; Kevil 1964; Tibetan Bulletin 1992; Waddell 1895; Prince Peter 1973.



they were revamped or reinvented within the compass of Lamaist thought and endeavor.

Spirit possession is alluded to in Old Tibetan language texts composed during the early historic period (circa 650–1000 CE). While this religious phenomenon does not appear to be explicitly depicted, the non-Buddhist cultural structures that came to surround spirit-mediumship are given much expression in these writings. The utterances or directives of a deity (*lha-bka'*) are noted in the Dunhuang text Pt 126.⁵ Direct communications between the archaic *bon* and *gshen* priests and deities are recorded in Old Tibetan literature as well, presupposing intimate exchanges, which in certain cases may have included actual spirit possession or some other mediumistic activity. In one Old Tibetan manuscript of the dGa'-thang 'bum-pa collection, there is a dialogue between priests and the divine royal progenitor of the sPu-rgyal dynasty Yab-bla bdal-drug. In another ritual narrative of the same manuscript, a *gshen* priest is in direct contact with Lha-bo lha-sras, a god of the afterlife.⁶ These episodes are presented as actual physical encounters between humans and gods, and serve to illustrate the powerful link thought to exist between these two categories of beings a millennium or more ago.

The Dunhuang and dGa'-thang bum-pa texts also document a number of ritual objects and practices still used by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. Mention of the flat-bell, draped arrow and turban are particularly noteworthy because they have a very important part to play in the ritual proceedings of today's spirit-mediums. Likewise, spirit-mediums, as well as monks and lay religious practitioners (*sngags-pa*), still carry out ransom rites (*glud*) and rites of propitiation (*gsol-kha*) of the kind first noted in Old Tibetan literature. These ritual performances are decidedly Tibetan in composition and non-Buddhist in orientation. A mountain god exploited by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, Thang-lha ya-bzhur, as well as generic classes of environment-bound spirits (*yul-lha*, *sman*, *bdud*, *klu*, *gnyan*, *btsan*, etc.) are also documented in Old Tibetan texts in non-Buddhist or archaic contexts.

While Old Tibetan texts merely hint at spirit-mediums being part of the early historic Tibetan religious arena as part of an indigenous tradition, Eternal Bon literature is unequivocal in this regard. *mDo dri med gzi brjid*, a biography of sTon-pa gshen-rab composed in the 14th century CE, classifies spirit-mediumship in the first vehicle of Eternal Bon teachings known as Phya-gshen. Referred to as

5 See Bellezza 2005, pp.11, 12. For *lha-bka'*, also see Stein 1972, p.232. For references to priestesses (*bon-mo*) that may possibly have been spirit-mediums in Pt 1047, see Macdonald 1971, pp.274, 275, 294, 295. On the *bon-mo*, also see Bellezza forthcoming.

6 For a translation and explication of this dGa'-thang 'bum-pa text, see Bellezza 2010.





Ye-dbang lha yi bka'-babs (Mantic Directives of the Gods of Primordial Power), it is one of four main methods of conducting divinations found in the *Phya-gshen* vehicle.⁷ These teachings are thought to have been introduced into Tibet in remote antiquity by the Eternal Bon founder sTon-pa gshen-rab. Although this *mDo dri med gzi brjid* account is patently mythical in nature, like Old Tibetan literature, it does suggest that spirit-mediumship in an elementary configuration arose in Tibet prior to the spread of Buddhism.

Many elements of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship that appear to be non-Buddhist in origin and character have cognate forms in the spirit-mediumship or shamanism of Inner Asia and the Himalayan rimland. This cross-cultural evidence buttresses Tibetan textual sources, which indicate that Buddhist influences on Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship comprise a superstructure built upon an older cultural foundation.

THE PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF LHAPA SAMTEN,

I interviewed Lhapa Samten on September 23–25, 2005. Lhapa Samten is an affable and prudent family man. He was born in the Rabbit Year (1951) and resides in what is now the southern part of sGer-rtse rdzong (this area is traditionally known as bSe-'khor). His mother belonged to the Hor clan and his father was a member of the Dus-ngas clan, one of the oldest genealogical groupings in bSe-'khor.⁸ Lhapa Samten's mother's sister, a nun named 'Bum-rdzi (sp.?), was also a spirit-medium, as well as a disciple of the celebrated rNying-ma lama Padma bDe-rgyal. Circa 1890, bDe-rgyal rin-po-che was responsible for founding Nam-kha' khyung-rdzong, a monastery in sPu-rang. Lhapa Samten was a student of Khams-pa'i dpa'-chung (1912–2005), a highly renowned spirit-medium who resided in gZhung-pa ma-tshan.⁹ It was from him, that the much younger *lha-pa* learned how to become a vehicle fit for the gods.

Lhapa Samten first went into trance at the relatively late age of twenty-five, that is, after the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. During the extremely trying times of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, many traditional Tibetan practices were proscribed. Spirit-mediums were forced to stop practicing; some never to call upon the gods again even during the period of liberalization in the 1980s. Lhapa Samten states that the primary reason for summoning the deities into his body is to heal diseases afflicting human beings. He does not demand any set payment from those who seek him out, as I observed during one of his trance ceremonies.

7 For further information on spirit-mediumship in the *Phya-gshen* vehicle, see Bellezza 2005, pp.344–355.

8 For a review of the clans of bSe-'khor, see Bellezza 2008, p.268.

9 For an account of this distinguished individual, see Bellezza 2005, pp.85–87.





Lhapa Samten is a medium for the rGya-gar gods, gNyan-chen thang-lha's retinue of spirits, *nor-lha* (wealth gods), and A-stag-klu-mo / dPa'-mo A-stag. His family protective deities (*phugs-lha*) Klu-mtsho sngon-mo and Thang-lha dkar-po also participate in the trance ceremony as personal guardians. Spirit possession is regarded as very serious and potentially dangerous work, which requires divine patrons and defenders of various kinds. The higher gods of Buddhism, which are always invoked at the beginning of the trance ceremony and in whom spiritual refuge is taken, act as the overall guarantors and regulators of the proceedings. The *phugs-lha* Klu-mtsho sngon-mo and Thang-lha dkar-po are prototypic deities of females and males respectively. They belong to an indigenous tradition assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon. Thang-lha dkar-po is the mountain god gNyan-chen thang-lha in his white or pacific form, a very popular household protector and patrilineal god (*pho-lha*) among the shepherds (*'brog-pa*) of Upper Tibet. Klu-mtsho sngon-mo is the goddess of the sparkling blue lakes of the Tibetan upland, the counterpart and consort of mountain gods such as Thang-lha dkar-po.

The rGya-gar (India) group of Lhapa Samten contains a diverse collection of spirits of both Indic and native origins. It includes rGya-gar g.yu-bkra, Lha-chen yab-yum, Lha-chen blon-po 'gros-mthun (sp.?), and Lha yar-rgan tshangs-pa dkar-po. Also known as Lha-rgan dkar-po, this latter figure is the Tibetan form of the god Brahma.¹⁰ According to Lhapa Samten, Lha-rgan dkar-po resides in the *gsum-bcu rtsigs-pa'i zhal-yas* (numinous palace of the walls of thirty). This appears to be a reference to the *sum-bcu rtsa-gsum*, the thirty-three realms of the spirit world, as found in ancient Iranian, Indic and Bodic traditions. It is customary in the Upper Tibetan world of spirit-mediumship for each main god of possession to supervise a circle of healing spirits. It is these helping spirits that actually carry out the hard work of curing the afflicted. This often entails removing gross impurities from the bodies of patients. Lhapa Samten reports that the helping spirits of the rGya-gar gods includes Dung-khyi spun-gsum (Three Conch Dogs Siblings), Gling dkar-po skya-bo mig-bzhi (Light-colored Dog with Four Eyes), Thang-dkar (Lammergeyer), 'U-lu mchu-ring (Long-Beaked Owl), and Glag-mo rked-dkar (Eagle White Medial [Feathers]).

Lhapa Samten is also a medium for the *nor-lha* group of wealth bestowing deities. These figures are of two major kinds: those of native sources and those of Indic persuasion. Arya dzam-bha-la is the famous Indian god of wealth, which became entrenched in Lamaist religions as well. For Tibetans, he is the guardian of all forms of prosperity, a deity serving both individuals and the state. The indigenous *nor-lha* of Lhapa Samten are primarily represented by

10 For a detailed description of this deity, see Nebesky-Wojtkowitz 1956, pp.145–153.





a group known as rGya-gar nor-lha bcu-gsum, but there are other examples as well. According to the spirit-medium, his thirteen rGya-gar nor-lha originated in India with Arya dzam-bha-la. However, this assignment of cultural origins is largely fictive, the unspoken aim of which is to draw native divinities into the fold of Buddhism.

The *nor-lha* controlled or owned (*lha-bdag*) by Lhapa Samten are a big and colorful group of spirits. He explains that a significant number of them are in the form of livestock. The *nor-lha* that appear in the trance ceremony serve as *g.yang-'gugs* (good-fortune summoning) instruments for humans, livestock and the countryside. They are attributed with curing diseases and removing obstacles to well-being. They not only bestow wealth but bring other kinds of good fortune such as good health and long life. Lhapa Samten avers that the *nor-lha* do not appear as individual animals but rather participate in the trance as great herds of zoomorphic spirits overwhelming disease and misfortune. According to him, these *nor-lha* first appeared with the emergence of existence (*srid-pa chags-pa*), a popular cosmogonic theme in Tibet. Two *nor-lha* that typify this focus on the primordial are Srid-pa chags-pa'i lha-lug (Divine Sheep of the Emergence of Existence) and bsKal-pa chags-pa'i lha-lug (Divine Sheep of the Emergence of the [First] Epoch).

Among the *nor-lha* are those connected to Gling ge-sar, Tibet's epic hero. They include rGya-gar lu-gu spun-gsum (Three Indian Lamb Siblings), Dung-dkar-po lu-gu spun-gsum (Three White Conch Lamb Siblings) and Gling ge-sar lha-lug spun-gsum (Three Divine Sheep Siblings of Gling Ge-sar). These three triads of spirits are said to have Lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po (the Tibetan form of Brahma) as their father. Another *nor-lha* in King Ge-sar's entourage is rGya-gar nor-lha sngon-bkra (Bright Blue Indian Wealth God), the wealth-summoning spirit of A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo, the aunt of the epic hero. This zoomorphic spirit is said to have three spots (*thig-ma*) on its back, which function to attract good fortune and long life. Ra yi lha ni tshed-tshed is the divine goat spirit of rGan A-khu, an epic figure who is said to have reared it in the pasturelands of Tibet. This caprine *nor-lha* is specifically used in the trance ceremony for bestowing long life.

Other notable members of Lhapa Samten's *nor-lha* are Dung dkar-po rwa-co 'khyil-rtse (White Conch Spiraling Tips of the Horns), Dung dkar-po 'dra-lug zhis (sp.?) (a conch white sheep with a smooth coat of wool) and Dung gi rnga-ma shang-tse-shang (a sheep with a spreading white tail). The Klu yi lu-gu spun-gsum (Three Lambs of the Water Spirit Siblings) are blue colored except for their legs and bellies, which are white from swimming in a lake of milk. The Srid-pa chags-pa'i btsan-lug are sheep of the *btsan* spirits with a reddish undercoat,





orange wool and the horns of the argali (*gnyan*). The bTsan dmar-po lu-gu spunsum are in the form of red lambs. Lhapa Samten traces the origin of these three supernatural lambs to the mGur-lha, the thirteen royal mountain divinities of the Central Tibetan sPu-rgyal dynasty of ancient times.

gNyan-chen thang-lha is the most powerful mountain god of the eastern third of the Byang-thang, but his spiritual influence is also very much felt in Central Tibet.¹¹ Given his wide geographic purview he is often referred to as a *spyi-lha* (universal god), a distinction bestowed on only the most important divine mountains (*lha-ri*) of Tibet. gNyan-chen thang-lha is a special protector of the Dalai Lamas and there is a chapel dedicated to him in the upper level of the Potala. Besides his household protector, the most important member of gNyan-chen thang-lha's retinue for Lhapa Samten appears to be Lha-g.yag dkar-po, a divine white yak. Lhapa Samten states that Lha-g.yag dkar-po is also found in the circle of Lha-chen tshangs-pa dkar-po. This *nor-lha* is very popular with other spirit-mediums in Upper Tibet as well.¹²

A-stag klu-mo is a major personality in the Gling ge-sar epic and goddess of the trance for Lhapa Samten. She is also a popular possessing goddess among other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. A keen huntress and warrior, A-stag klu-mo was befriended by Ge-sar during his campaign against dDud klu-btsan, the ruler of Yar-khams in the eastern Byang-thang. This goddess is particularly active in trance ceremonies as a wrathful figure in charge of exorcistic rites. According to Lhapa Samten, the *nor-lha* helper of A-stag klu mo is in the form of a wild yak (*'brong*) with a white snout, tawny body and the white and brownish horns of the mythical horned eagle of Tibet known as *khyung*.

Lhapa Samten uses a copper alloy circular mirror (*gling*) to direct and shelter the deities during possession. It is thought that the consciousnesses (*rnam-shes*) of the presiding deities cluster around this mirror and are reflected in various directions as per their ritual activities. The *gling* used by Lhapa Samten is divided into three concentric circles, each of which enshrines the consciousness of different types of deities. These three circles symbolize the *srid-pa'i gsum*, the three vertical tiers of existence: upper or celestial (*steng*), middle or terrestrial (*bar*) and lower or telluric (*'og*). The outer circle of the mirror is called *phyi-gling pad-ma dab-brgyad* (eight-petaled lotus of the outer world), the assembly

11 For an in-depth survey of this god, see Bellezza 1997; 2005.

12 According to an Eternal Bon text for summoning good fortune, Lha-g.yag dkar-po is the emblem and protector of the 'Bru / 'Gru Tibetan proto-lineage. Considered a *srid-pa'i sgra-bla*, this ancestral figure appears with three other divine animals as the defining symbols of four main lineages of ancient Tibet. See Bellezza 2005, pp.403, 404.





point of the army of the *lha* (*lha-dmag*). The *lha* are white-colored deities of the heavens and lofty mountains. The *phyi-gling* is also reserved for the higher or otherworldly deities of Buddhism, which are believed to nominally occupy it in the same manner that the Buddha is believed to be present in properly consecrated images. Strictly speaking, the consciousness of the high gods of Buddhism and Eternal Bon is all-pervading and cannot be wholly contained in any object. The *bar-gling* (middle world) is the assembly point for the *btsan* armies. The *btsan* are a common class of fierce warrior gods, typically red in color, which are characteristic of the intermediate world. They are said to inhabit rocky mountains, gorges and boulders, especially those red in color. The *nang-gling* (inner world) is the assembly point of the *klu* and *mkha'-'gro*. The *klu* are water spirits analogous to the *nāga* of Indic tradition, while the *mkha'-'gro* are the sky-treading wisdom goddesses of Vajrayāna Buddhism.

Lhapa Samten states that he offers his heart, lungs and other organs to the mountain gods and other divine protectors before being possessed. This is done to express his absolute devotion and trust in the officiating deities of Buddhism. The radical practice of offering one's body parts is derived from the esoteric *gcod* tradition, which purportedly permits adherents to quickly cut through mental obscurations and other obstacles to higher spiritual realization. In preparation for being overtaken by the gods, Lhapa Samten also invokes the mistress of the subtle energy channels of the body (*rtsa-bdag*). It is through these nerve-like conduits that the consciousness of the deities must pass in order to take hold of the spirit-medium. The *rtsa-bdag* of Lhapa Samten is *dMag-zor rgyal-mo*, a form of the great Buddhist protectress *dPal-ldan lha-mo*. She is said to take up residence at the threshold of his subtle channels at the beginning of the trance ceremony. Lhapa Samten believes that *dMag-zor rgyal-mo* enables the divinities to descend and enter his body. Lhapa Samten holds that at the moment of possession, his consciousness is conveyed into space (*nam-mkha'*), where it comes under the care of the *lha*.

Lhapa Samten, like other spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet, reports that while the deities are present in his body, he as an individual ceases to inhabit that body. When disassociated from his body, Lhapa Samten exists in a state of suspended animation of which nothing is known or recollected. The spirit-medium states that knowledge of what is said and done in trance comes from querying observers. The loss of self in such a pronounced way is a daunting prospect, thus the trance ceremony is not resorted to lightly. There must be real need warns Lhapa Samten, lest he incurs the wrath of the gods and even the prospect of the permanent annihilation of his psyche.



THE LITURGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE TRANCE CEREMONY

The trance ceremony I observed was convened at night in Lhapa Samten's black yak-hair tent. The tent was full of family members and neighbors who had come out of curiosity or to be healed by the power of the gods. An improvised altar for the ceremony was erected in front of the family altar. It was covered copiously in barleycorn upon which a butter lamp, bowl of tea and a few other offering objects were placed. A photograph of the young Karma-pa also graced the altar ad hoc. The *gling* used in trance ceremonies was inserted upright into a bowl of barleycorn.

The preliminary invocations to the deities and other prayers began at 21:35. During these first recitals, Lhapa Samten wore a white cotton kerchief on his head. Called a *ras-thod*, this piece of cloth is said to represent a turban. More elaborate turbans are still used occasionally by Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. The turban is often considered to be the original headgear of the spirit-mediums of the region, and its use appears to have been widespread in ancient Tibet. This style of head covering is noted in Old Tibetan documents of the early historic period. As regards spirit-mediumship, the turban appears to have been gradually replaced by the five-lobed crown of Vajrayāna known as the *rigs-lnga*. To begin his invocations, Lhapa Samten also wore a brocade mantle over his shoulders, the *stod-khebs*.

The ritual instruments of choice during the ceremony were the hourglass-shaped hand-drum (*da-ma-ru*) and the flat-bell (*gshang*), standard articles used by the spirit-mediums. The *gshang* is mentioned in Old Tibetan documents as one of the archetypal ritual instruments of the legendary priest gShen-rab myi-bo.¹³ As the name indicates, the *da-ma-ru* is of Indic origins. In addition to the *da-ma-ru*, large hanging drums (*rnga-chen*) are also popular in the liturgies of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. The *rnga-chen* is cited in Old Tibetan sources describing archaic ritual performances. During the initial prayers, Lhapa Samten also briefly used the Buddhist-style bell (*dril-bu*).

The observed trance ceremony of Lhapa Samten can be divided into three major parts: 1) the pre-possession-state liturgy, 2) the possession-state liturgy and 3) the post-possession-state liturgy.

1. Pre-possession-state liturgy

The pre-possession portion of the trance ceremony was conducted with only a little playing of the drum and Buddhist bell. Usually, most of the preliminary prayers are recited while spirit-mediums sound drums and bells. In this particular case, I had requested Lhapa Samten to limit the initial playing of ritual instruments

¹³ See Pt 1289 (Stein 2003: 599), and the dGa'-thang 'bum-pa *byol-rabs* text (Bellezza 2010).



as much as was possible, in order to obtain a clear audio recording of his words. The cadence of the pre-possession state recitations was rapid and decisive, as is common in these types of liturgies. The words were articulately enunciated, facilitating the production of a reliable transcription. The pre-possession state consisted of the recitative elements as outlined below:

sKyabs-'gro (refuge prayer), duration: 1 minute, 2 seconds

Lhapa Samten began the trance ceremony by taking refuge in the Triple Gems (dKon-mchog gsum) of Buddhism (Sang-rgyas, Chos and dGe-'dun).

gSol-'debs (devotional prayers), duration: 31 seconds

The chanting of prayers primarily to O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas (Gu-ru rin-po-che). This recitation was slow, deliberate and lyrical, and was accompanied by the playing of the *ḍa-ma-ru* and *dril-bu*.

sPyan-'dren (invitational prayers), duration: 19 seconds

The precious lamas and deities were invited to participate in the trance ceremony. In addition to the lamas with which Lhapa Samten has a bond, the high tutelary gods (*yi-dam*), sky-goers (*mkha'-'gro*), religion protectors (*chos-skyong*), territorial deities (*yul-lha*), and masters and mistresses of places (*gzhi-bdag*), in that order, were invited to the ritual venue.

bSang cho-rabs (origins of incense narrative), duration: 13 seconds

The myth of origins of incense was recited, a prefatory liturgy derived from ancient sources that has been integrated into Lhapa Samten's trance proceedings.

bSangs-gsol (propitiation with incense), duration: 4 minutes, 45 seconds

A large variety of deities were propitiated through the use of incense as a fumigant. This served to call the various participating divinities to the ritual venue, where they were offered purifying aromatic substances and appealing words. The first deities invoked were divine lamas and higher Buddhist gods, as is customary in the Lamaist *bsangs-gsol*. Next, many members of the native pantheon of Tibet, the *yul-lha* and *gzhi-bdag*, were entreated. As part of the fumigation activities, Lhapa Samten requested the deities to provide him with assistance. They were specifically asked to avert the misfortune of the demons and summon the divine qualities of well-being.

Gling ge-sar *sgrung* (ballad of Gling ge-sar) followed by another *gsol-'debs*, duration: 1 minute, 21 seconds





Various figures of the Gling ge-sar epic are invoked and described using richly imaginative language. The warrior spirits known as *dgra-lha* / *dgra-bla* / *sgra-bla* also figure in the invocations.

Slob-bstan (advice) and *smon-'dun* (aspirations), duration: 47 seconds
The advice and aspirations expressed pertained to the Tibetan hearth and home.

Lung-bstan (prophecies) and other enigmatic utterances, duration: 1 minute, 34 seconds

At the beginning of this interval Lhapa Samten picked up his *rigs-lnga* crown. The prophecies were highly allegorical and difficult to understand. That Lhapa Samten made them in a transitional state of consciousness illustrates that he enjoys a considerable degree of moral authority among his peers. In the recitations were lines such as, "You know where both the vulture and I go. The vulture goes into space." This signaled the imminent departure of Lhapa Samten's consciousness from his body and its transport to the heavens.

Bla-ma mchod-pa (litany of lamas and Buddhist prayers), 1 minute, 28 seconds
Lhapa Samten recites the names of many prominent contemporary Tibetan religious figures.

bSangs-mchod (incense offerings), duration: 1 minute, 13 seconds
Incense is offered to indigenous deities, figures in the Gling ge-sar epic, higher Buddhist deities, and the lamas.

2. Possession-state liturgy

The possession state consisted of the following recitative elements:

Announcement of the advent of the deities (*lha-zhal*), duration: 7 minutes, 57 seconds

The various deities of the trance ceremony began to be seen by Lhapa Samten as they took up their customary positions in the *gling* and on his body. At the beginning of this interval Lhapa Samten placed the *rigs-lnga* on his head and tied it firmly. The five diadems of the *rigs-lnga* each contain a different image of the Directional Buddhas (rGyal-ba rigs-lnga). Affixed to each side of the *rigs-lnga* is a rainbow-colored fan-like wing (*gshog-pa*). These large and showy accouterments simulate the consciousnesses of the deities descending upon the spirit-medium. The divine consciousnesses are envisaged as colored light, each color of the rainbow representing a different class of spirit. To begin with, the





chants had a slow and deliberate rhythm and were accompanied by the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. The enunciation of the words had a solemn and evocative quality, as befitted a watershed in the mental state of the spirit-medium. The tempo of playing gradually intensified as more and more deities made their appearance known to Lhapa Samten.

The prayers and aspirations of the deities, duration: 2 minutes 10 seconds
The deities make their obeisance to the Buddha and high lamas and through Lhapa Samten announce their willingness to be of service to the proceedings. This interval of the trance ceremony was recited in a more lively fashion and without ritual instruments.

Resumption of the advent of the deities interspersed with their saying Buddhist prayers, duration: 11 minutes, 30 seconds
These recitations were made with the *da-ma-ru* and *gshang* in a tempo that gradually grew in speed and intensity. Lhapa Samten came to his knees from a sitting position. Sometimes he played his ritual instruments in a very vigorous manner with outstretched arms. After three minutes Lhapa Samten jumped to his feet and began dancing around wildly, while he continued to sound his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. He returned to his knees before the end of this interval of the trance ceremony. The words of the liturgy were uttered with much gusto as Lhapa Samten's breathing became heavier and his manner more excited. Many lines of the recitations opened with *yā ah ha*, words that poetically express elation and triumph. It is believed that during this interval the spirit-medium is being overwhelmed by the possessing deities and helping spirits that appear before his mind's eye.

Lha-'babs (consciousness of the spirit-medium fully displaced by those of the deities), duration: approximately 20 minutes

Lhapa Samten sprang to his feet again and began making grunting noises, while playing his ritual instruments. This is believed to mark the definitive possession of the spirit-medium by the deities. The speech of Lhapa Samten was forceful and agitated. Lhapa Samten first announced the identity of the god he had become. We learned that the patronizing god belongs to the rGya-gar group. Lha-bSamtan then turned to those in attendance and solicited a response from them. The interlocutor (*bka'-lung*), a neighbor of Lhapa Samten, approached the spirit-medium on behalf of members of my Tibet Upland Expedition, which was then underway. A *bka'-lung* participates in nearly all Upper Tibetan trance ceremonies as an intermediary between spirit-mediums and patients. Due to the unusual





forms of diction employed, the speech of the spirit-mediums can be very difficult to understand, requiring a person who has long acquaintance with his or her utterances to translate them. In some cases, spirit-mediums speak in non-Tibetan languages such as *lha-skad* (language of the gods), requiring the *bka'-lung* to learn a new tongue. The *bka'-lung* is typically also the ritual assistant, conveying *tshogs* (sacred cakes), *khros* (lustral agents) and other offerings to the deities. He or she helps manage the ceremonial affairs as well, indicating when patients may approach the spirit-medium and what they should do.

'Jibs-sbyangs (sucking out of contamination), duration: approximately 7 minutes
'Jibs-sbyangs is a method of healing popularly used by the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. It entails the drawing out of disease-causing impurities from the bodies of patients. Typically, as in this case, the spirit-medium places one end of a white scarf (*kha-btags*) on the afflicted part of a patient's body and the other end against his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*. The spirit-medium then sucks on his ritual instruments, making a deep gurgling sound in the process. In the *'jibs-sbyangs* of Lhapa Samten there were four patients all of which were local *drokpas*. The first patient was a man. Lhapa Samten worked on his back several times for a total of three minutes. After each procedure, the spirit-medium displayed a blackish substance on his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang* for all to see. This is understood to be the disease-causing contamination or *grib* that had been removed from the body of patient. These impurities are sometimes envisioned as being in the form of worms. Tibetans believe in many types of *grib*, each causing different kinds of sickness. The second and third patients were children. *'Jibs-sbyangs* was performed on each of them only once and for short duration. The fourth and final patient was a woman clutching a baby. Her procedure was also performed quickly. Perceived as a highly potent treatment, *'jibs-sbyangs* is used judiciously as befits a highly effective tool of healing. The length of time that an individual *'jibs-sbyangs* lasts is a function of the seriousness of the illness and the age of the patient. It is commonly thought that children cannot tolerate this curative technique as well adults can.

The withdrawal of the deities back to their abodes and *lha-gsol* (deity propitiation), duration: approximately 4 minutes

This is the period in which it is believed that the deities return to their own residences, leaving Lhapa Samten's body, *gling* and other ritual objects. During this interval, the spirit-medium resumed chanting and playing his *da-ma-ru* and *gshang*, while the *bka'-lung* tossed spoonfuls of water towards the altar, as part of the *khros*, the propitiation and purification of deities using water. The cadence of





the spirit-medium's playing and speech continued to intensify, culminating in the *rigs-lnga* falling from his head. This marked the decisive end of the possession, the final withdrawal of the patronizing deities to their respective divine abodes.

3. Post-possession-state liturgy

Lhapa Samten went on to intone prayers of thanksgiving for a successful trance ceremony. This transpired as he removed his ceremonial dress and stowed away the ritual paraphernalia of the night. The descent of the deities and their taking possession of Lhapa Samten is viewed as a highly consequential and mysterious event, welcomed only in that it is required to assist those in need. The trance carries no small hazard as the capability of the gods is perceived as being immeasurably beyond that of human beings. The deities are also unpredictable and can direct their ire on patients and spectators in an instant. For these reasons, Lhapa Samten regularly expresses gratitude to his Buddhist protectors and the other deities for keeping him safe and sound, particularly just after being released from the possession state.

SELECTED READINGS FROM THE TRANCE CEREMONY

Lhapa Samten is a speaker of the sTod dialect, as the readings below demonstrate. At the beginning of the trance ceremony, just after taking refuge in the Triple Gems, devotional prayers (*gsol-'debs*) are said to call upon the master of all the worldly deities, O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas. This great Vajrayāna master of the 8th century CE is beseeched to grant his support to Lhapa Samten, that he may be protected and his work as a vessel of the gods successful:

Please be aware of us precious lamas (*bla-ma rin-po-che mkhyen-no* /)
(2 times).

I pray to O-rgyan rin-po-che (*O-rgyan rin-po-che la gsol-ba 'debs* /).

May negativities, defects and obstacles not appear (*'gal rkyen bar-chad mi tshogs 'byung shog* /).

May I realize my wishes and the things of happiness (*mthun-rkyen bsam-pa 'grub-pa par shog* /).

Please confer special and ordinary attainments (*mchog thun-mong dngos-grub stsal du gsol* /) (2 times).

When you reside in the borrowed body [may] the obstacles of the earth, water, fire and wind elements [not appear] (*sa chu me rlung 'byung-ba'i bar-chad ni / khyod lus g.yar-po khyod ni sdod-pa'i dus* /).

I pray without ambivalence or hesitation (*yid-gnyis the-tshom med par gsol-ba 'debs* /).

Please be aware of me goddesses of the four elements of O-rgyan (*O-rgyan 'byung-ba bzhi yi lha-mo mkhyen* /).





There is no doubt that the elements are pacified (*'byung-ba rang-sar zhi bar the-tshom med /*).

I pray to O-rgyan padma 'byung-gnas.

Please bless me that my wishes are miraculously realized (*bsam-pa lhun gyis 'grub-par byin gyis rlobs /*) (2 times).

After the *gsol-'debs* the next sequence in the trance ceremony is the incense origins tale. This is a kind of *smrang*, a narrative which proclaims the source of an important ritual tradition before its actual execution. Traditionally, the *smrang* were spoken to add weight and legitimacy to both the ritual performances and performers.¹⁴ The *smrang* comprise a crucial component of archaic rituals in Old Tibetan literature. The incense origins tale of Lhapa Samten is a type of *smrang* that came to be known as *cho-rabs* (ritual origins myth) in Eternal Bon and Buddhism.¹⁵

Cho-rabs do not ordinarily occupy as important a position in Lamaist rituals as do the *smrang* in archaic rituals. Broadly speaking, deities of an Indic pedigree supplanted indigenous Tibetan historical accounts as the primary legitimizing instrument of Lamaist rituals. The authenticating function of the *smrang* was derived from them being construed as the historic precedent and ancestral prototype of rituals. In Lamaism, this sanctioning mechanism was largely replaced by the interposition of the so-called otherworldly (*'jig-rten las 'das-pa*) deities. Lamaist ritual performances are said to be carried out under the auspices of the Buddha and other higher gods; those having passed beyond the sphere of worldly existence.

Despite the different doctrinal positions origins myths occupy in the archaic and Lamaist religious traditions, certain grammatical and narrative elements are common to both, having been retained to the present day. In the incense *cho-rabs* of Lhapa Samten, the question and answer format belongs to the corpus of indigenous *smrang*. The most conspicuous ancient etiologic theme in his *chos-rabs* is that of the sky as the ultimate source of sacred phenomena.¹⁶ Another

14 For an explication of the *smrang* and various ritual precedents, see Norbu 1995; Karmay 1998, Bellezza 2005; 2008; 2010; forthcoming.

15 The incense origins myth of Lhapa Samten is reminiscent of *cho-rabs* for incense in Eternal Bon literature. For these *cho-rabs*, see Norbu 1995, pp.109–112; Bellezza 2005, pp.446–450.

16 The cosmogonic aspects of the sky or heavens can be found in various Dunhuang documents. For example, in Pt 1038 the origin of the Tibetan kings (*btsan-po*) is directly connected to the apex of the sky. A similar theme is found in Pt 1134, where the genealogical source of important funerary priests (*dur-gshen*) and other prominent figures is traced to the heavens (*gnam, dgung*). Similarly, the sky as the nexus of origination in Eternal Bon etiologic accounts permeates many vestigial archaic





cosmogonic theme of considerable antiquity found in Lhapa Samten's incense origins myth is that of the sky and earth as the dyadic source of existence and its various aspects.¹⁷ The essential form of his *cho-rabs* appears to have been propagated by successive generations of spirit-mediums over a substantial period of time as an oral tradition, not something borrowed from textual sources. Nonetheless, such longstanding continuity in the absence of independent documentary evidence is extremely difficult to substantiate.

The *cho-rabs* begins with the word *kye*, an exclamation used in the oral and textual traditions to gain the attention of the deities:

Kye, Kye! From where does the substance of incense originate (*bsang gyi rgyu de gang nas byung /*)?

The substance of incense originates in the sky (*bsang gyi rgyu de gnam nas byung /*).

From the sky comes the thunderous sound of the father (*gnam nas yab kyi 'brug cig ldir /*).

From the mother the lightning of the earth strikes (*yum nas sa yi glog cig 'gyu /*).

At the land of rTa-rgo'i gangs-thig it is the bubble of the ocean water (*sa-yul rta-rgo'i gangs thig la / rgya-mtsho chu yi lbu-ba yin /*).¹⁸

It is the potency of the *bzang-drug*¹⁹ medicines (*bzang-drug sman gyi nus-pa yin /*).

I fumigate you with the smoke of fragrant incense (*dri-zhim spos kyi dud-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing golden leaves of birch (*gser-lo 'bar-ba'i stag-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing turquoise leaves of juniper (*g.yu-lo 'bar-ba'i shug-pas bsang /*).

I fumigate you with the blazing conch leaves of Artemisia (*dung-lo 'bar-ba'i mkhan-pas bsang /*).

traditions. A cosmogony centered upon the Queen of the Klu in the text *Klu 'bum khra bo* is among the earliest Eternal Bon sources describing the generative function of the heavens. See Bellezza 2008, pp.278, 344, 346, 384, 511.

17 For numerous examples of this fundamental cosmogonic theme in the oral tradition, Eternal Bon and Old Tibetan documents, see Bellezza 1997; 2005; 2008; forthcoming.

18 rTa-rgo'i gangs-thig refers to the rTa-rgo / rTa-sgo range in the central Byang-thang. Ocean appears to be an allusion to the sacred lake that lies at the foot of the rTa-rgo Range, Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho. According to Eternal Bon sources, Dang-ra is the Zhang Zhung word for ocean.

19 The six superlative medicines: *cu-gang* (bamboo concretion), *gur-gum* (saffron), *dza-ti* (nutmeg), *sug-smel* (cardamom), *li-shi* (clove), *ka-ko-la* (*Amomum subulatum*).



I fumigate you with the blazing copper leaves of rhododendron (*zangs-lo bar-ba'i ba-lus bsang l*).

I fumigate you with the blazing tree leaves (*shing-lo*) of *phur-mong*.²⁰

I fumigate you with the fragrant smoke of *spos-dkar*.²¹

Subsequent to the incense *cho-rabs*, a great many deities are invoked by Lhapa Samten in an incense ritual (*bsangs-gsol*). The trance ceremony had been underway for more than eleven minutes when Lhapa Samten picked up his hand-drum to continue his recitations. The quality of his voice had changed dramatically as had the rhythm of the words spoken. This marked a distinctly different phase of the trance ceremony. Later when analyzing the recording of the proceedings, I realized that this heralded the advent of the deities, a transitional stage on the way to full-blown possession. In a visionary sequence, Lhapa Samten described the various gods that were entering his consciousness. The changes in the spirit-medium's outward behavior were quite subtle at that time, and it was not very apparent that his consciousness was in the process of being displaced by that of the divine, as Tibetans would perceive this ontological transition. In situ, the recitations are hard to hear and understand.

Once Lhapa Samten was fully possessed he first described the three concentric circles of the *gling* or ritual mirror, a ritual representation of the three realms of existence (*srid-pa gsum*). The chief possessing god then disclosed his residence, name and appearance. The god announced that he is sKu-lha dkar-po yangger, a member of the rGya-gar group. This deity also made known that he was accompanied by his divine armies of *lha*, *klu* and *btsan*. During the period of possession, Lhapa Samten began many lines with the word *yā* and/or *nga*, exclamations used in Upper Tibetan dialects, which are roughly equivalent to the English 'ah', 'oh' or 'well'. In some instances, it is very difficult to distinguish *yā* from *nga* in the utterances of Lhapa Samten:

Yā, the mandala of the *lha* army of myself (*yā, rang-rang lha-dmag dkyil-'khor red l*).

Nga, [these are] the three realms, the outer realm, inner realm and middle realm (*nga gling phyi gling nang gling bar gling gsum l*).

The realm, the outer realm has an eight-petaled lotus mandala (*gling phyi gling la dkyil-'khor padma 'dab-brgyad yod l*).

The realm, the inner {...}²² mandala.

The *lha* army and *klu* army [and other] assembled armies are the *lha*

20 *Micromeri tarosma?*

21 *Shorea robusta*.

22 This set of brackets designates that one or more words spoken by the *lha-pa* are inaudible in the recording.



and *klu* doctrine protectors of myself (*lha-dmag klu-dmag dmag-tshogs rang-rang la lha klu bstan-srung red /*).

Nga, from the resplendent domain of the mind and joyous *lha* is the uppermost white divine valley in the west (*nga lha dge dang 'o de sems dbyings nas / nup lha lung dkar-po 'i yang gong yin /*).²³

I am the *lha* sKu-*lha* dkar-po yang-ger (*lha sku lha dkar-po 'i yang-ger yin /*),

The white *lha* on the divine horse (*nga lha-rta gong nas lha dkar red /*), *Nga*, the white *lha* with many multi-colored fluttering cloths (*nga lha dkar-po dar-tshon shig-ge red /*).²⁴

There are thronging divine horses with white muzzles (*lha-rta kha-dkar nyig-se red /*).²⁵

{//}

{//}

From the apex of space, the blue *klu* valley in the west (*nup klu-lung sngon-po 'i gong-dbyings nas /*),

Nga, also from the peak of the multicolored *klu* castle (*nga klu-mkhar*

23 The signification of the first clause of this sentence is ambiguous. The reading presented here is only possible if 'o = 'od (resplendent).

24 That the god's cloths are many and in a dynamic state of movement are conveyed by the verb *shig-ge*. *Shig-ge* appears to be an archaic word retained in the sTod dialect, particularly by the spirit-mediums and bards (*sgrung-pa*). The non-lexical form *shigs se shig* appears in Tibetan prosody as a trisyllabic conveyor of movement at the termination of a line of verse. As a kind of *sgra-rgyan* (literally: 'sound ornament'), trisyllabic conveyors are employed as an embellishment, greatly enhancing the vibrancy and impact of verses in a variety of Tibetan literature. For examples of *shigs se shig* in *gsol-kha* texts dedicated to mountain gods, see Bellezza 2005, pp.230, 267, 271. Other examples of what appear to be archaic verbs in the recitations of Lhapa Samten (*nyig-se, nyi-le, kyi-le, dir-re, rong-se, thag-se*) are noted below. The use of such words as predicates is virtually unknown in Classical Tibetan, while the trisyllabic conveyors of color, sound and movement can be traced to Old Tibetan literature where they primarily appear in non-Buddhist ritual contexts. Historically speaking, the use of related verbified forms in sTod ritual speech readily admits of two hypotheses: these predicates either gave rise to the trisyllabic conveyors or were derived from them. A comparative linguistic study of trisyllabic conveyors in song and poetry and related predicates in the oral tradition of Upper Tibet may contribute to a better understanding of the historical development of Bodic verb morphology.

25 *Nyigs-se* is ostensibly an archaic verb conveying that objects are pressing or jostling against one another.

26 This set of brackets designates that an entire line of the recitation is largely inaudible in the recording. This line has something to do with summoning of a type of *lha*.

27 This line has something to do with a division of the *lha*.





khra-mo 'i yang rtse nas /),

Nga, there is a blue *klu* on a blue horse (*rta-sngon gong la klu-sngon zhig /*).

The blue *klu* has many fluttering {shoulder cloths}²⁸ (*klu sngon-mo {dpung-dar} shig-ge yod /*).

Nga, the horses of the *klu* are thronging.²⁹

{A gathering mass of multicolored sparks} ({*me-stag khra yi dpung-tshogs /*}).

Nga, from the apex of space, the red *btsan* valley in the west,

Nga, also from the summit of the multicolored *btsan* house (*nga btsan-khang khra-mo 'i yang steng nas*),

There is a red *btsan* on a red horse (*rta-dmar gong gi btsan-dmar zhig /*).

Nga, a red *btsan* with sparks spreading forth (*nga btsan dmar-po me-stag 'phro-le zhig /*),

His *btsan* horse with a rippling *btsan* banner (*btsan-rta la btsan-dar nyil-le zhig /*).³⁰

Nga, when the *btsan* army of India enters [me], a conflagration of the red *btsan* whirls around (*nga rgya-gar btsan-dmag zhugs yong dus / btsan-dmar-po 'i me-dpung kyi-le zhig /*).³¹

Nga, the *bstan* army with sparks spreading forth.

Nga, the warriors consolidate {the lineage of birth} (*nga rgod-po 'i {skye-rgyud} 'dzoms yong red /*).

Nga, these *lha* {are as much as that} (*nga lha de dag {de tsam yin}*).

Lhapa Samten continued to divulge the identities of the various deities that had possessed him, a colorful procession of mainly indigenous figures. The language employed was direct and lyrical, a vibrant form of poesy largely derived from the native tradition of composition interlarded with materials of Buddhist doctrinal and iconographic inspiration.

After various prophecies were proclaimed by the presiding god sKu-lha dkar-po yang-ger, the spirit-medium prepared for the removal of illness-causing contamination from the bodies of the patients. Before he began the '*jibs-sbyangs*', he announced the arrival of special deities that oversee this ritual technique. By

28 Bracketed words designate uncertain readings.

29 This is the incomplete translation of the line: *nga klu-rta kha {dar} nyig-se zhig /*.

30 The verb *nyi-le* conveys the movement of the banner slapping against itself in a strong wind. This verb is represented in the trisyllabic conveyor *nyi li li*. For the use of *nyi li li* in an Eternal Bon invocation to the *srid-pa 'i sgra-bla*, see Bellezza 2005, p.385.

31 What appears to be another archaic verb, *kyi-le*, is found in the trisyllabic conveyor of circular movement *kyi li li / khyi li li*. For the use of these three syllables in ritual prosody, see Bellezza 2005, pp.266, 320, 459; 2008, pp.333, 432.



the end of this recitation Lhapa Samten was barking like a dog:

Ngā, know (*mkhyan*) the sucker cleanser (*'jib-sbyang*) Pho-gdong ro-gpo (a black wolf).

Come sucker army with the gathering mantle of resplendence (*'jib-dmag 'od-snang thib-se shog /*).³²

I will not do many sucking procedures (*nga mang-po'i 'jib-sbyang las ni min /*).

Ngā, come sucking conduit with the attending *lha* (*ngā 'jib-rkang lha la brten nas shog /*).

Ngā, come sucking conduit with the attending *klu*.

Nga, klu {...}.

Ngā, come *klu* army with a thundering thunderous sound (*ngā klu-dmag 'ur-sgra dir-re shog /*).³³

Ngā, come sucker cleanser red wolf (two times).

Yā, come sucker cleanser red wolf.

The last part of the possession-state was the withdrawal of the deities from Lhapa Samten's mind and body. This occurred right after the *'jibs-sbyangs* was completed. As in other sequences of the trance ceremony, Lhapa Samten, as the mouthpiece of the deities, declaimed precisely what activities were taking place in a divine world invisible to humans. Here he advertised the retreat of the various *lha*, *klu* and *btsan* as they left his body. During these recitations the interlocutor (*bka'-lung*) thanked the deities for their participation. Lhapa Samten's voice trailed off until it was completely inaudible. Presumably, this shift from the articulated to complete silence corresponded to the very last deities of the trance ceremony returning to their divine abodes. The last spirits to leave the ritual venue were the *btsan* army of India. Once all the spirits were gone from his body, it could once again become the vessel of Lhapa Samten's personal consciousness:

Yā, know the *lha* army with the gathering masses of chiefs and retainues (*yā lha-dmag gtso-'khor thib-se mkhyen /*).

{*Yā*}, the *lha* army {of the divine queen snow lion}.

Yā, nga, when the *lha* army of India is moving (*yā nga rgya-gar lha-dmag bskyod dus de /*),

Yā, the superior *lha* are standing erect in rows in the sky (*yā lha gong-*

32 The verb *thib-se* (amassing, thickly gathering; as in clouds or fog) is represented in the trisyllabic conveyer *thibs se thib*. For instances of this non-lexical ornament in Tibetan literature pertaining to deities, see Bellezza 2005, pp.184, 189, 245, 359.

33 *Dir-re* (thundering) is a verb represented in the trisyllabic conveyer *di ri ri*. For examples of this trisyllabic conveyer, see Bellezza 2005, pp.266, 290, 320.



ma gnam la rong-se yod /).³⁴

Yā, nga, there are blue rainbows meandering along the earth (*yā nga 'ja'-tshon sngon-mo sa la 'khyugs /*).

Yā, nga, the *klu* army of India is going (*yā nga rgya-gar klu-dmag phebs-le red /*).

Yā, between both {...} rainbows.

Yā, nga, the *btsan* army of India is going.

Yā, there is a {white *lha*} on a white horse (*yā rta-dkar gong la {lha-dkar} zhig /*).

Yā, the superior *lha* with the rippling banner (*yā lha gong-ma dar-tshon shig-ge red /*).

Yā, there is a blue *klu* on a blue horse.

Yā, the blue *klu* with the shoulder cloth *thibs se thib* (*yā klu sngon-mo dpung-dar thibs se thib /*).³⁵

Yā, nga, there is a red *btsan* on a red horse,

Yā, the red *btsan* with sparks spreading forth (*yā btsan dmar-po me-stag 'phro-le de /*).

{///}

{///}

Yā, the eighty adepts of India (*yā rgya-gar grub-chen brgyad-cu de /*).

Yā, nga, there is the *lha* army with clicking smacks [of the lips] (*yā nga lha-dmag rkan-sgra thags-se yod /*).³⁶

Yā, nga, I call upon the thousands of *lha* armies of India (*yā nga rgya-gar lha-dmag stong la 'bod /*).

{///}

{There are} thousands of divisions of *btsan* armies of India.

CONCLUSION

The spirit-mediumship of Lhapa Samten is a syncretistic affair where traditions of Tibetan and Indic pedigrees mingle freely with one another. Historically speaking, it appears that a body of archaic cultural lore interpenetrated by Buddhist practices and beliefs led to the composite phenomenon of spirit-mediumship we know today in Upper Tibet. The timeline involved in this is mixing and matching of disparate cultural traditions, however, is still hazy. We might hypothesize

34 The verb *rong-se* (placing erect in rows) is represented in *rongs se rong*. For an example of this trisyllabic conveyor, see Bellezza 2008, p.336.

35 *Thibs se thib* conveys that the cloth is a thick fluttering mass.

36 The verb *thag-se* (clicking, snapping, chattering) is represented in the trisyllabic indicator *thags se thag*. For this poetic embellishment, see Bellezza 2005, p.267.



that ancient Tibetan traditions were progressively eroded in favor of those of a Buddhist persuasion, but this is not likely to have been a simple linear process. The give and take of assimilation and retrenchment are liable to have been complex cultural historical themes in the constitution of spirit-mediumship. Sectarian and geographic factors may also have played a part in the loss of Bodic concepts and customs and the adoption of Indic variants over the course of the last millennium.

Whatever its precise origins and development, the spirit-mediumship of Upper Tibet, despite being threatened by a host of legal and social forces, has proven very resilient. The spirit-mediums continue to channel the gods for compelling reasons, for the health and well-being of individuals and communities are thought to hang in the balance. Cultural pride and faith in traditional methods of doing things certainly play a part in the continued existence of spirit-mediums as well. In this regard, they are a bridge between the sureties of the past and the ecological and cultural tumult of the present. As with many other traditions passed on orally from generation to generation in Upper Tibet, be it clan lore, territorial deity cults or local historical accounts, the survival of spirit-mediumship in the region is not assured. Nevertheless, as long as there are brave and able men and women such as Lhapa Samten, we have good reason to be optimistic about the fate of this hoary tradition.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balikci, A. 2008. *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim*, vol. 17, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. Leiden: Brill.
- Bellezza, J. V. Forthcoming. *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Praxis in a Thousand-year-old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- _____. 2011. "The Liturgies and Oracular Utterances of the Spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet. An Introduction to their *bSang* Rituals", in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 20, pp.5–31. Paris: CNRS.
http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_20_01.pdf
- _____. 2010. "gShen-rab Myi-bo: His life and times according to Tibet's earliest literary sources" in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 19, pp.31–118. Paris: CNRS.
http://www.himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_19_03.pdf
- _____. 2008. *Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Tibet. A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland*. Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften, vol. 368. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- _____. 2005. *Calling Down the Gods: Spirit-mediums, Sacred Mountains and Related Bon Textual Traditions in Upper Tibet*, vol. 8, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library. Leiden: Brill.

- _____. 1997. *Divine Dyads: Ancient Civilization in Tibet*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.
- Berglie, P. A. 1980. "Mount Targo and Lake Dangra" in *A Contribution to the Religious Geography of Tibet* in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson. Proceedings of the International Seminar of Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 1979* (eds. M. Aris, Aung San Suu Kyi), pp.39–43. Warminster: Aris & Phillips Ltd.
- _____. 1978. "On the Question of Tibetan Shamanism" in *Tibetan studies presented at the Seminar of Young Tibetologists* (eds. M. Brauen and P. Kvaerne), pp.39–51. Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich.
- _____. 1976. "Preliminary remarks on some Tibetan "spirit-mediums" in Nepal" in *Kailash: A Journal of Himalayan Studies*, vol. iv, no. 1, pp.85–108. Kathmandu: Ratna Pustak Bhandar.
- Diemberger, H. 2005. "Female Oracles in Modern Tibet" in *Women in Tibet* (eds. J. Gyatso and H. Havnevik), pp.113–168. London: Hurst & Company.
- Ekvall, R. B. 1964. *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Functions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Havnevik, H. 2002. "A Tibetan Female State Oracle" in *Religion and Secular Culture in Tibet, Tibet Studies II* (ed. H. Blezer), pp.259–288. Leiden: Brill.
- Norbu, Namkhai. 1995. *Drung, Deu and Bön. Narrations, Symbolic languages and the Bön tradition in Ancient Tibet* (trans. A. Clemente and A. Lukianowicz). Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.
- Macdonald, A. 1971. "Une Lecture des Pelliot Tibétain 1286, 1287, 1038, 1047, et 1290. Essai sur la formation et l'emploi des mythes politiques dans la religion royale de Sron-bcan sgam-po" in *Études Tibétaines dédiées à la mémoire de Marcelle Lalou* (ed. A. Macdonald), pp.190–391. Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve.
- Nagano, S. 2000. "Sacrifice and lha.pa in the glu.rol festival of Reb-skong" in *New Horizons in Bon Studies. Bon Studies 2. Senri Ethnological Reports 15* (eds. S. G. Karmay and Y. Nagano), pp.567–651. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. D. 1956. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet. The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Reprint, Kathmandu: Tiwari's Pilgrims Book House, 1993.
- Norbu, Namkhai. 1995. *Drung, Deu and Bön. Narrations, Symbolic languages and the Bön tradition in Ancient Tibet* (trans. A. Clemente and A. Lukianowicz). Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.
- Prince Peter of Greece and Denmark. 1978. "Tibetan Oracles in Dharamsala" in *Proceedings of the Csoma De Kőrös Memorial Symposium* (ed. L. Ligeti), pp.327–334. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.
- Rock, J. F. 1935. "Sungmas, the Living Oracles of the Tibetan Church" in *The National Geographic Magazine*, October, 1935, pp.475–486. Washington D.C.: National Geographic Society.
- Stein, R. A. 2003. "The indigenous religion and the *Bon-po* in the Dunhuang Manuscripts" in *The History of Tibet. The Early Period to c. CE 850. The Yarlung Dynasty* (ed. A. McKay), vol. 1, pp.584–618. London: Routledge Curzon.



- _____. 1972. *Tibetan Civilization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- _____. *Tibetan Bulletin: The Official Journal of the Tibetan Administration*, July/August, 1992, pp.18–29 (*Nechung Marks Padmasambhava's Birth Anniversary, Ne-chung – "The State Oracle", History of Nechung Monastery and Mediums of Nechung*). Dharamsala: Department of Information and International Relations.
- Tucci, G. 1980. *The Religions of Tibet* (trans. G. Samuel). London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
- Waddell, L. A. 1895. *Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet. With its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology, and its Relation to Indian Buddhism*. Reprint, Darjeeling: Oxford Book & Stationery Company, 1992.





Lhapa Samten as the chief possessing god sKu-lha dkar-po yang-ger





Lhapa Samten as the red wolf helping spirit of the *'jibs-sbyangs* curative procedure

