
Article review by Brigitte Steinmann.

A. Höfer gives us the second sorting tray of his shamanic recitals, recorded in the seventies, among the Tamang of Dhading district. This is an important and expensive volume of 379 pages, presented in three parts: the concepts, ritual techniques and language of the bompo; the text of the recitation; and the analysis of “symbol-construction”. I shall deal here mainly with the second part of the book, i.e. the transcription and translation of the Tamang songs, although we shall see that all the book is concerned with this second part.1

Last November, while I was walking in the (Eastern) hills of the Tamang Temal area with one of my Tamang companions, Thubten Gyaleen Lama, a Tamang rmying-ma-pa monk living in Sailung, Thubten aroused my curiosity while immersing himself, at each halting-place, in a number of photocopied pages of an English book. Glancing over his shoulder, I realised that he was patiently trying to read and to understand a chapter of the last book of A. Höfer, which was not yet available in the bookshops. I knew that Thubten had a vast international net of information about westerners deeds and words, and I proposed to help him as I could in this

1 I keep A. Höfer's Pelling transcription for the Tibetan terms quoted, and in my own notes I adopt the Wylie transcription. Nepali is transcribed according to Turner's Dictionary. TG refers to Thubten Gyaleen.
reading which soon became an exegesis of the translation of these western Tamang recitations, and an interesting debate with Thubten about the many different ways of transcribing the oral Tamang language into written Tibetan. We continued this work in Temal, in the company of Wangyal Lama (rnying-ma-pa), Bahadur Singh Tamba and Shyangdan and Malla bompos. I must add that all of them understand the western Tamang language; several Eastern Tamang people from Temal are married with western Tamang.

A. Höfer’s method, since the publication of the first volume, *Tamang Ritual Texts*, has not changed. His translation still consists in the reconstruction of the meaning of unknown Tamang words by a philological derivation from supposed Tibetan roots or words found in the dictionaries. When the author does not understand a word or a verse, he proposes a Tibetan root, sometimes quite far from the pronunciation and the transcription of the corresponding Tamang word. Then he inserts commas and parentheses in the translated verse to express uncertainties, although he is able each time to propose a translation and a mythological explanation. We know that such recorded “texts” of oral languages are very difficult to understand and that the transcription itself is full of uncertainty. The lack of a recorded disk in the book does not allow the eventual Tamang speaker to check how the words have been heard by the ethnographer. Therefore, the reader must have confidence in the transcription. I am taking here firstly three examples, to illustrate how the same verse can be understood and translated in two completely different ways, both of them based on a Tibetan derivation. After, I shall give a (non-exhaustive) list of all that appeared to me and to my informants as mistranslations and misunderstandings of the whole recital. Let us start with the first Tamang song: “The state of affairs and the tasks ahead”, 8-14, p.108, § 19, v. 172. In this part, says the author, it is question of incensing the ritual dagger, the porcupine quill and other shamanic ritual implements. A. Höfer translates thus:

*sala syururu dįiba, ṇalna kuibam wągan nąri ṇalba,*

“It soars (sic) scurrying on the earth, as to sleeping, it sleeps in a hole”,

*sala kuibam dónbo chyemboi kara saḷa kuiba,*

“as to eating, it eats the syrup of the (flowers of the) great tree”,

*syai ama(i) bışiri gyālboi syorai syaldo sanhī le!*

“let us go and incense the bristliness of the wild animals (”) prickly king!”,

*ō: nām la phiri rī dįiba, sala syururu dįiba,*

“ō: it soars fluttering in the sky, soars scurrying on the earth”,

*sala kuibam pema gešere brefu sala kuiba,*

“as to eating, it eats the fruit of the *pema* gešere tree”,

*maŋc̄yi amai melon karboi syorai syaldo sanhī le Phamo!*

Let us go and incense the bristliness of the white (bright ?) melon (made of the feathers) of the mother peacock O Phamo!

The spirits) run on the earth, soaring “syururu”, born from the womb, in the matrix,

“born from the earth, born from the virile semen ("the syrup of the great tree"),

One can translate instead:

“(The spirits) run on the earth, soaring “syururu”, born from the womb, in the matrix,

“born from the earth, born from the virile semen ("the syrup of the great tree"),
“mother of the flesh, king of the noble (shri) semen, the colour of his (her) face has gone away!
the gods fly in the sky, phiriri, the spirits run on the earth, syururu”,
born from the earth, the fruit of the cotton tree,
“the bright mirror of the mother peacock, O Phamo, the colour of his (her) face has gone away”.

Notes:
The onomatopoeia “syururu” can be applied to any spirit coming, and there is no word here meaning “porcupine”. In the note, the author says that his informant simply told him that “syururu” could evoke the movement of the porcupine.
ňūnā kuibam , Tib. mngal-nas skyes-bam, “born from the womb” (and not “to sleep”, with kuiba as “an intensive form for ŋūnā”, therefore, kuiba is not translated by Höfer).
waṅā nāri ņūnā , Tib.‘og-khang nang-ri mngal-ba, “in the house of the matrix” (not “the porcupine sleeping in a hole”! According to note 26, p. 60, Macdonald would also have noticed this function of the porcupine ?)
šāla kuibam , Tib. sa-las skyes-bam, “born from the earth” (and not Tib. za-ba, “to eat”, like verse 109, p. 90, šābaa khari pho’jyi wa, where “to eat” is justified. One would have here šāba, or at least a form different from šāla, above, meaning “from the earth”. The author solves the problem by transcribing šala and šaḷa).
đōṅbo chyenboi kara , Tib. sdong-po chen-po’i ka-ra, “born from the virile semen” (the syrup of the great tree is a metaphor: kara means sa-bon or khu-ba}, biṣiri means shri {bij} or the Nepali word for semen.
syai ama, “mother of the flesh”, can be understood literally. It is not necessary to find here a metaphor for “the game”. One does not understand exactly the adding of a mark of genitive to ama by the author.
syorai syaldu saññi le , Tib. shor-ba’i zhal-mdog gsai-ni le, “the colour of the face has gone away”, which means that someone died or is no more happy!
phiriri is always linked to the gods flying in the sky; syururu to the bhut running on the earth. The alternance with phiriri here makes clear the translation.

This is one example, among many, which shows the ambiguity of what A. Höfer calls “an interpretative study translation” (p. 49), of “an unusual, manneristic and sometimes even nonsensical” Tamang language (ibid.). The nonsense could well come from the ethnographer. Let us take another example, in the same song, p. 91, v. 107 :
dam mo niña nāwai bardo jyunba - saññi , chāwai bardo jyunba - saññi
“The dear mistress is befallen by a state of illness (...) by a state of pain - let us go and heal (her)!
yarē blonbai khari pho’jyi wa , maṛa blonbai khari pho’jyi wa: ?
“Has (she) been affected by something which arises above, has (she) been affected by something which arises below ?
“Has (she) been affected by the impurity of the horse-meat, the pork, the ox-meat, (the impurity of) mating?

karda ru:ri pho:ji wa:, mara ru:ri pho:ji wa: ?,

“Has (she) been affected by the karda-impurity? “Has (she) been affected by the mara-impurity?.

sawai khari pho:ji wa:, ŋalwai khari pho:ji wa: ?,

“Has (she) been affected while eating, has (she) been affected while sleeping? (...)

yara syelne jyunjyi wa: ?,

“Has (she) been befallen by a “rinsing up”?

mara oine jyunjyi wa: ?,

“Has (she) been befallen by a “flowing-down”?

damo ŋinda thödom-ri'i, nirin-phenphet jyunjyi wa: ?

“Has (she) been befallen by thödom-ri'i,

by (all sorts of) illnesses and ailments (?)? ?

One can translate instead:

“Mistress (of the Earth), we have crossed the bardo of sickness, let us heal!

Is the pain due to a hot sickness, is it due to a cold sickness?

“Did (he or she) reincarnate in the clan of the horses, of the foxes, of the oxen,

“Did he reincarnate as one who wears a white weapon (a god) or a red weapon (a btsan)?

“Did he reincarnate as one who eats (a man), as one in the Hell (Narak), (a demon)? (...)

“Did he reincarnate up (as a god), or did he reincarnate down (like a man or an animal)?

“Mistress, our consciousness has darkened, we have lost external perception”.

Notes:

Western Tamang write ŋinda, for yinda (Nep. hāmilai); so, it is not “our mistress”, but “to us, mistress!” (Tib. gnam-sa gnyis-kyi bdag-mo), “we are sick!” Does it mean, in Höfer’s conception, that the bombo would address to the “master of the house” if it was a man who was cured?

yara-bloymba (like nawa-chawa) is the alternance between “a hot illness” (like bubbles rising up) and a cold illness (going down);

pho:ji , Tib. ‘pha-ba, “to die, to transfer”;

ru:ri, Tib. rus (and not “ritual impurity”); why, in this case, do we have a locative?); ŋengi, nangi, “inside”, (and not gnyen, “kinsmen” from which “mating”)

karda, mara , Tib. dkar-mda”, “weapon of the lha (white)”; dmar-mda”, “weapon of the btsan (red)”;

khari, or thog-la, nang-la, “on, upon”, and not “while”;

ŋalwai , Tib. dnyal-ba, or “Narak”, “Hell”, and not “to sleep”.

yara syelne, Tib. shel-nas or ‘od-nas ‘khrung-pa, “to be born from light (up); mara oine , Tib. ‘og nas (Tib. mi dud-gro skies-ba), “to be born like men and animal;

thom-thom (song-ba), “having become darkened” (nang dran-shes yal-nas); rim-rim (song-ba), “having lost external perception” (phyi
snang-ba nub-nas); in fact, it is Holmberg (see note 117) who is right by translating “fear and dark haze”.

Höfer translates by “a little-known illness” and “all kind of ailments”.

I take a third example of equivocal translations, verse 161, p. 106. A. Höfer explains us that “chen” would be “the metal vessel, the central piece of the altar” (from Tib. mchod-gnas, “the place of sacrifice”). But chen (also chyene, see A. H. p. 59), may be simply “You”, “about you” in Tamang, or Tib. khyed-ni, or Nep. timi ta, the personal pronoun given here as an address:

A. H. : Chene Nolgi Da.mo, Chene Sergi Da.mo,
“O Chene Silver Mistress, Chene Golden Mistress”

One can understand : “O You, Nolgi Damo, O You, Sergi Damo”!

Everybody understood this last sense in Temal, which leaves the reader utterly perplexed about a good part of A. Höfer’s theoretical interpretations about the chen as a “group of paraphernalia (p. 166)”. In Tibetan, anyhow, mchod-gnas refers much more to the chaplain, a person, than to “the place of sacrifice”.

I give hereafter a list of other examples of A. Höfer’s Tamang transcription and translation and my critiques, with Tibetan etymologies when they are obvious.

“The state of affairs and the tasks ahead”, 8-14, p. 88:

V. 94: A. H. : syerap salyu, sorap baryu, (from Tib. ses-rab, wisdom, and sro-rab, heat, ardour):

“make clear the alertness, make the voice of the bon expand”!

B.S.: syerap seems related here to gcen-rabs, “history of the origin of the gcen”; sorap is a contraction of Tib. 1ha gsol (rabs) : rituals of propitiation for the gods;

“make clear the origins of the gcen, let us accomplish the propitiation rituals for the gods”!

V. 95: A.H. : Yongi bhamdi kalbi chydun baryu!
“come down and make the sea-water (in the jug) put on (his) left shoulder expand”!

B.S. : In this verse, kalbi is not translated; it could come from Tib. bskal-pa’i chu-dang ‘bar-gyu, “the water expanding at the end of times”.

V. 96: A. H. : Yongi (recte: kekki) bhamdi kalbi melun baryu, “...the flame put on (his) right shoulder expand”!

B.S. : ibid, “the fire expanding at the end of times”.

By giving an “idiom”, phamo kalba, and adding a free correction of yongi by kekki, A. Höfer reconstructs here a particularly obscure meaning (melung for “burning lamp” touching the body).

V. 97: A. H. : bongi punma gulgul jedyu!
“come down and make the bon’s shoulders (?) quake”; punma is given here as meaning “shoulder” (why two different words, bhamdi and punma ?)

B.S. : Tib. dpung-dnag (gulgul) byed-rgyu,
“let us operate the army of the bompo”.


“O Chene Silver Mistress, Chene Golden Mistress”
“as the bon’s senior departed, another one has taken up (his work)”.

B.S. : geppu is not Tib. rgad-po, old man, but rgyud pa, “the master of the lineage”; syembu is not Tib. gzan-pa, but sems (bu) pa, “to think”, tshugs-pa, or sems dga’ ba, “to be cheerful”, and khyurma is ‘khyug na; then :

“the master of the bompo’s lineage came, the mind is in peace”.


“of a bon who is descended from a cawa, of a bon who is descended from a kawa, of a bon who could not help becoming a bon, of a bon who could not help performing (the rites)”.

B.S. : Tib. rtsa -ba (lha) ‘bab, bka’ ba (lha) ‘bab, “of a bon in whom the gods come, of a bon to whom the gods talk” (bka’ bab is synonym of lung, “instructions”, and rtsa-ba, “root, base”).

Tib. ma mgu-(wa), “if there is no joyfulness” (“if the gods are not happy”)

Tib. ma ‘gug-na, “if there is no enduring” (“if the patient is not enduring”), kuibi bonjye, “then, what the bompo can do!” (Nep. kohi pärne bompo !). (Höfer’s note 101 is less than explicit).

V. 102. A.H. : jyinda dgoran cuna bonda gyábna kha tañbai noocyen syonla, “when performing the ceremony (for) the client, the bon may be hurt at the back by an harmful agent which presents (its mouth)”.  

B.S. : Tib. sbiyin-bdag mdos dang tshugs-na (Nep. prārambha) bon mda’ (bon zor) rgyab-na kha gdang- ba’i gnod-sbyin bshung-la , “if the bompo makes a mdos for the client, he attacks the harmful agent opening his mouth, at the back”

A. H. : nönna chi: tanbai noocyen syonla, ...”may be hurt at the front by a harmful agent which presents (its) backbone

B. S. : Tib. sgon-na lce (and not “chigs”) gdang-pa’i gnod-sbyin bshung-la, “he attacks the harmful agent pulling out his tongue, in front”.

A. H. : gyábna tanmen syonla, nönna júkmen yónla, “may be hurt at the back by a defamation, may be hurt at the front by an accusation”,

B. S. : Tib. rgyab-na btsang-sman (chu dug) “syonla”, sgon-na byug-sman (me dug) “yónla” (Nep. halini), “at the back, he attacks (the harmful agent) with some poisoned water (from a bumpa), at the front, he pours out some poisoned fire”, (syonla and yónla are not synonyms).

In the next verse, A. H. translates jori nákpo by “ferocious enemy”, kuldap, skul-ba by “to exhort”, ñendap, ñes-pa by “wrong” + ‘debs-pa, “to hit”.

B.S. : There are three kinds of zor: Jori Nakpo’i mnan thabs (beosthabs or beos-pa), “to oppress the evilness”, Jori Nakpo’i brungan-thabs (mchod-pa), “to spoil someone with gifts”, and Jori Nakpo’i ngen-thabs (bskul-ba), “to urge someone to work”; so, there is no “magic arrow” or “harming charm” here; these are methods of subduing.
A. H. translates sanďun-praďun by “a (non initiated) specialist”+ praďun, “an echo”!

B.S.: Tib. zangs-gdung, sprang-mdung is not “a specialist” but “a magical spear made of red copper and white iron”.

V. 103.: A. H.: de-wa mächyugo, damba mächyugo thu: dambi Gurü Phamo,
“Do not perturb the action (?), do not perturb the distinction (in the mind), O Guru Phamo with the distinctive mind,
B.S.: de-wa, Tib. bde-ba’i lus, “the human body” (and not “the action”); damba, or dam-ngag or Nep. gyān (and not ‘dam-pa, “to select”); thu :, thugs-dam, “vow, oath” (and not thu: dambi phamo, “an epithet”, see note 103) : “Do not perturb the body, do not perturb the knowledge, O Venerable Guru”.

V. 104.: A. H.: bärkap tītle phamoi lāgan pheñi, nānbai tīlce phamoi lāgan pheñi !
“Let us go and get at the phamo’s divine abode in the middle of the atmosphere”...
B.S.: According to T. G., pheñi means “to offer to the mouth” (and not ‘phyed-ba, “to discern”); nānbai tīlce would be Tib. nam-mkha’i khyn, “the heavenly mansion”: “let us offer (incense) to the phamo’s of the divine abode, of the heavenly mansion”.

V. 105.: A. H.: sañsam sanbai temrul pheñi, ūensam ūembai temrul pheñi !
“If it is a good one, let us go and get at the good omen, if it is a bad one...”

B. S.: sañsam has been confounded with Tib. bzang-po, “good”; according to T. G., we have instead: sangs-sam sangs-pa’i “if gods are happy or not, let us offer the incense” (? temrul)

§ 10, p. 93.: A. H.: da:moda kha ūammu, “the mistress’s mouth”...
B. S.: the same mistranslation goes on, da:moda is a contraction of damo ūnda,
“O Mistress (of the Earth), our mouth”...

V. 118. A. H.: pūla mełun (...), “the flame in (her) knee”,
B. S.: pūla mełun means simply “the rotule”!

V. 122. A. H.: da:mo ūnda karbo thari bājyi wa; marbo thari bājyi wa: ?
“Has (the harmful agent) affected the white blood, has it affected the red blood of the dear mistress ?
B. S.: “Has the harmful agent affected our white moon, above, our red sun”?
karbo thari = Nep. seto jun māðhi (Tib. dkar-po thog-ru), “the white moon, above”; marbo thari = Nep. ráto gam māðhi (Tib. dmar-po thog-ru), “the red sun, above” !

V. 123. A. H.: khänsari bājyi wa; syński bājyi wa: ? “has it affected the homestead, has it affected the fields ?
B. S.: khänsari, Tib. gangs-sa “the snowy mountain” (and not khang-sa, “the homestead”); it is put in opposition, here, with zhis-sa, the fields.

p. 95, V. 125. A. H.: sadan.šo’i kuldap, sadan.šo’i ūندap, “let us go and find the magic arrow (made) of the sadan.šo’i”
B. S.: sa-dang-svo, Tib. lha dang klu, for the bompo, or “gods of the earth and heaven” (Tib. gnam-kyi lha = svo; klu sa-bdag btsan = sa); A. H. does not translate precisely kuldap (…) néndap; it is Tib. bskul-thabs and bngan-thabs, see above. According to Höfer, all these are “magic projectiles”, and the sadan xo, “the birch-tree”;

“Let us call to work the gods of earth and heaven, let us honour them with gifts”;

A. H.: yarlamdaí, mårlamdai, “crossroads”, “the place where evil spirits and ghosts are expelled to”;

B. S.: yarlamdaí evokes more precisely the Tib. yar lam-mdo or gnam rim-pa dgu, “the crossroad at the upper part of the nine stages of heaven, where the demons reside” and mar lam-mdo, “the lower part”;

P. 97, V. 127. A. H.: lam gyäram gyuri, “near the crossroad”;

B. S.: dgu, “nine”, and not gu: “corner”: “at the crossroad of nine ways”; (the bla-ma say that there are eight dursa, and the bompo say that there are nine ways and nine dursa).

V. 130. A. H.: cengi dase (…) mengi dase, “the daser of a cen, the daser or a men”!

B. S.: men, for the bompo of Temal, is effectively Tib. sman, “a sman-mo”, very known among the Tamang; why not to translate here? da is Tib. mda’, but ser would suggest mda’-zor, and not gzer, “nail”;

“the sharp arrow of a btsan, the sharp arrow of a sman-mo”.

V. 131. A. H.: chalam þambi noccyen salhi, bylam þambi noccyen salhi

“let us go and find the harmful agent which injures the great-grandchildren (?)!

B. S.: chalam, Tib. sha lam (bsnoms pa); bylam, Tib. dbugs lam, “the breath”, “which injures the flesh, which injures the breath” (and not “the progeny”, with an “artificial disjunction”, according to A.H., va p. 165);


“In order) to perfume, perfume with the pure laru, to purify, purify with the pure menđu,

B. S.: di:pa may be equivalent with sbor-ba, “to set fire to”; laru daýie, Tib. lha yi dag-byed, “the sacrificial grass” (kusha); thi:ba menđu daýie means probably me-tog mda’can or dga’ rab dbang phyug, “the son of Vishnu, the god of love (Kamädev).

A. H.: mrwaib luñije saña, “to incense from the lowland”

B. S.: mrwaib is most probably smra-ba’i, an epithet of rma-bya, the peacock (smra-ba’i, “the one who speaks”, qualitative of the Tamb in the East).


B. S.: Snäg-srid Lha-mo, or “Lhamo of visible appearances”; sa-’dul-ba, gnam ‘dul-ba (sa-’dul gnam-’dul gyi dgon-pa), “the dgon-pa established by the Guru Rinpoche”.

A. H.: pe:ma cya:ri syi saña, “incense the pe:ma cya:ri syi: “the four zones of carved patterns of endless knots”

B. S.: in fact, it is “Padma Spyan-ras-ge’igs”! 
V. 140, A. H. : Siṃsīn Dölmo, “the name of a tree”
B. S. : “Shing-srin sGrol-mo”
A. H. : khardai gla-pi thun-bai kṛṣṇi jāra-nāra sanba,
“incense the roots of the cane which originates in the kharda’s place”,
B. S. : jāra-nāra is the inversion of Nep. ḍāja-rāna, “king and queen of the obstacles” (bgegs-kyi rgyal-po), and certainly not “the roots of the cane”!
A. H. : cya-qi gosum kū sanba, saṃgi gosum kū sanba, “incense the nine iron gosums”... (“amulets on the bompo’s back”)
B. S. : Leags-kyi sgo srung dgu, Zangs-kyi sgo-srung dgu, “the Nine Iron Guardians, the Nine Copper Guardians”.

P. 105, § 17, V. 146. A. H. : ḏoṣṭa, is boxer (“od-spro, “light”);
B. S. : it seems much more to be ‘od + da (Nep. lāi).

V. 150, A. H. : nāṇbaid tīnle Tabu Norbu khurṇī, “let us go and carry Tabu Norbu”...
B. S. : The bompo does not carry but rides on the rlung-rta, the wind-horse on the rlung-rta.

V. 154, A. H. : phraṇḍi pharṇu syaṇī, lamdi langu syaṇī ! “let us go and remove the phran-obstacle on the path”
B. S. : ‘phraṇ-dgu, “the nine ways”, syaṇī , “to dance”, according to the bompo:
“let us go and dance on the nine ways” (lm-dgu and not lam ‘gungs-pa, “to draw back”).

V. 155, A. H. : noccyen damla taṇī, noccyen chyibda braṭṇī le Phammo.

“let us go and magically fix the harmful agent, let us go and break open the union (of) the harmful agents O Phammo”!
B. S. : dpamla taṇī, Tib. dam-la btags, “to link by oath”; braṭṇī is not braṭbā “to force open”, but bsgral-ba, “to kill” (by liberating); chyibda is not chyippa, “to join”, but gnod-sbyin (or gnod-can or chen)chi-bdag, “the masters of death”!

“let us link by oath the great harmful ones, let us liberate the masters of death O Phammo”!

§ 18, v. 159, A. H. : bōnda misal, gāṇsal thoṇjyu, hiṣye, nōsyc thoṇjyu !
“come down and have clear-sightedness, clear sensedness (...) mystical wisdom”...
B. S. : According to T. G. : “if words are not clear, everything will become clear”...

V. 163, A. H. : Brigaṇṣyi, ‘bru gan-kyi bdag-mo, “the mistress of the sacrificial vessel filled with seeds”.

A. H. : Chene Chegaṇ Saṇmo, “obscure” for A. H.
B. S. : Leags-ra bzang-mo ? which would be the only proof of chene meaning “metal vessel”.


V. 176, A. H. : Lemba GaRa Ḏuba Thaṭduṇ, “the divinity of the ritual dagger”,
B. S.: *Lemba Gara*, or rDo-rje Leg-pa; Gara alludes also to the Kami (mgar-ba). *Düba Tha'dun* or sGrub-pa khrag 'thung, (khor-bo, fearful aspect). The note 176 is very confusing. *Düba Thujyen Chyembo* is Thugs rje chen-po, or sPyan ras gzigs, (zhi-ba, peaceful aspect). Further, *Khyun Rgyu Chyembo* is Khyung rva dgu Chen po or Mahā Gārūda with nine horns (and not “the epithet of all kinds of khyung”, see note 178).


B. S.: *rtsa dang chu*, “all the roots and water”; *spra dang sprchu*, “the great and small monkeys”;

P. 113, v. 195, A. H.: *luwa-buwa*, “the bushiness of the dūbo grass”;

B. S.: *rбу-ba*, “foam”, *khu-ba rбу-ba*, “from the water and the foam”; it is a metaphor of the creation starting from the foam, which is omni-present in the songs of Eastern Tamang.

I leave aside many other examples of what could be a tedious list of mistranslations and misunderstandings, to give a brief commentary of certain arguments of the book. In the introductory chapter (p. 17), A. Höfer writes that the description he gives of the bombo “is not to mystify him”; but is it not a kind of mystification that to create new specialists (the saḥduṇ-praṇduṇ), new kind of impurities (eating of horse-meat), new places of worship (the chene - p. 60, A. Höfer admits that the shamans did not help him a lot in this interpretation -), new sickness, the thomdom riri; fantasies about the porcupine; and to ignore many basic expressions and allusions like the sadaṇ svo, the nine ways of the bon, the role of the mdoṣ in the rituals, (denoting there a strong influence of the rnying-ma-pa doctrine and of written texts among the bompos), the exact names of divinities of the Tibetan Pantheon; to confound the “sphere of the homestead” with the snowy mountains, the grand-child with the flesh, gods with trees, Padma sPyan-ras-gzigs with four knots, “our” with “us”, and so on?

P. 32, note 5, there is a note about “the recent origin of Tibetan documents in Tamang hands” which Macdonald found at Bodnath. Höfer adds that “these documents tibetanize the Tamang, i. e. treat the Tamang tradition in an essentially Tibetan and Buddhist terms”. The paradox here is that it is A. Höfer himself who started a long time ago to recreate a more logical Tamang language from Tibetan etymologies, which was a patient and useful work as long as it was based on a real ethnographic work, which does not seem anymore to be the case here (the recordings transcribed here go back to the seventies - 12th October 1971). Further, one cannot help being baffled by the affirmation of the recent origin of the Tibetan sources in the hands of the Tamang: the rituals alluded to by the western bompos are obviously borrowed from lamaist recitations of rnying-ma-pa apotropaic rituals, described in old ritual texts in the hands of Eastern Tamang: for example, the celebration of certain clan deities with mdoṣ (srid-pa spyi mdoṣ, Ma-mo'i khrag-mdoṣ, zor-mdoṣ, mkha'-gro sgrib-mdoṣ). A glance at these texts would have helped A. Höfer better to understanding the exact role of the different magic weapons, and to avoid attributing the “syururu” to the porcupine only; dakini do that also! Why, in this case write (p. 56)
that "certain terms (sgrol-ma, mkha' 'gro-ma and rnal- byor-ma) reveal the influence that Tantric Buddhism, especially the Old Sect, must have had on the Tamang bompo's tradition?
In another surprising note (ch. II, note 7), we read that "in our days at least, not even the most respected Tamang Lamas are able to understand their Tibetan ritual texts". I think that many lamas would be delighted to learn this from A. Höfer, these lamas who try patiently to make understandable to the poor illiterate ethnographers difficult allusions, rhetorical figures and metaphors. If the ethnographer refers to one or two informants only, he has little chance of understanding, or he will soon persuade his informant to tell him what he wants to understand (see the remark p. 48: "SB who had soon developed into a genuine folk-philologist, did the bulk of this work"). A. Höfer seems to doubt himself about his philological method (p. 47): "now, it is one thing to denounce the inadequateness of our own tradition of exegetic illusion developed on written materials"; why is there no recorded disk at the end of the book, to allow the reader to check the transcription of the words?
Finally, despite many affirmations about "the challenge to raise the quest for meaning", more than often, A. Höfer cuts short the debate by putting in brackets, with question-marks, the difficulties, for which he always proposes a translation and a transcription. Is it not a way of throwing the responsibility on the informants, and to let it be understood that these songs, after all, can be only a matter of western philology, being produced by illiterate Tamang?

Note from the editors : Any review may be responded to by the author. In this case, because the author of the book reviewed above is one of the editors of the Bulletin, the response appears in the same issue.

A Brief Reply to Brigitte Steinmann's Review of A Recitation of the Tamang Shaman in Nepal

András Höfer

This review is the outcome of a superficial reading and conspicuously partial interpretation of my book. Steinmann is mistaken in her approach, arbitrary in her verdicts and tendentious in her selective use of quotations and references.
(1) She falsely accuses me --and that's a bit much, indeed-- of inventing objects, creating phantom words, and adding suffixes (see in order to make the text more comfortable for interpretation), (2) It is absurd to pretend that I want "to recreate a more logic Tamang language from Tibetan etymologies" (what an idea!), (3) It is simply not true that my "translation still consists in the reconstruction of the meaning of unknown Tamang words (...) from supposed Tibetan roots or words found in the dictionaries" (my emphasis). (4) Steinmann's quite apodictic recifications of my translation are pure fancies, (5) It is hardly legitimate to denounce as erroneous what I find in my fieldwork area simply on the grounds that it does not