

Brief Communications

DGRA-LHA: A RE-EXAMINATION

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Fathoming the inner life of a pre-literate culture is a risky undertaking. Since the advent of reading and writing itself cannot but change the way a people regards itself and the world around it, relying wholly on a culture's literary sources can become a little like searching for an article lost in darkness under a streetlamp because there is more light there. The investigator also carries his own load of cultural baggage that may be difficult to shed. This note will nevertheless discuss a very old Tibetan term, and try to show how its significance may have altered over time.

Dgra-lha is a term used to designate one of the many classes of divinities found in Tibetan religion. Broken down into parts meaning "enemy" and "god", it refers to deities whose main function is said to be the destruction of the enemies of their worshippers. Conversation with modern Tibetans of religious education often elicits this understanding of the term, which Western scholarship in the main has accepted.¹ Most scholars have not found grounds for any differentiation between the present concept of the *dgra-lha* and possible earlier meanings; Tucci, in fact, sees the "enemy god" as part of the "heritage of the primeval traditions of a hunter and warrior society".²

There are, however, two elements of this view that suggest a closer examination is in order. First there is the obvious, but almost universally overlooked³ anomaly of calling a deity that is alleged to protect against enemies an "enemy god", instead of employing for example *skyong-lha* or *srung-lha* (protector god or guardian god), either of which would be more in keeping with Tibetan usage. The second point is that some sources⁴ suggest that *dgra-lha* or *srung-lha* is, in the colloquial language, commonly if not always pronounced "dabla". This might indicate that the second component of the term was originally *bla* rather than *lha*. While the latter is a term which can, if sometimes inadequately, be translated as "god" or "deity", the former is not nearly so simple. Probably no definition of such a basic but nebulous word is valid in all cases, but such dictionary meanings as "soul", "vitality", and "spirit" can be kept in mind.

A casual observer might suppose that the iconography of the *dgra-lha* bears out the "enemy (defeating) god" interpretation of the term, since these entities are usually portrayed as being extremely martial, even ferocious. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, however, has described⁵ several female

deities, peaceful in both representation and ascribed function, that are classified with the *dgra-lha*, so evidently at the time of their inclusion in the pantheon ferocity was not a prerequisite. Tucci has noted⁶ how the iconographic representation of Jambhala, the god of wealth, altered as his cult spread from India through Central Asia where, under what Tucci interprets as Chinese-Turkic influence, he gained increasingly martial characteristics.⁷ There is no reason to suppose that an early Tibetan conception of the *dgra-lha* might not have undergone a similar metamorphosis.

The increasing amount of material from the Bon tradition that is becoming available has in many instances been able to provide an alternative viewpoint to the commonplaces of Tibetan scholarship. Relevant to this investigation, too, one point of interest is immediately apparent: in Bon works, the *dgra-lha* term is consistently written *sgra-bla*.⁸ That this is not a mere corruption can be seen in the *Gsas-mkhar-rin-po-che*, which in a liturgy that repeatedly refers to the "queen of the *sgra-bla*" also names the female counterpart of Gesar as "*dgra-'dul-ma*".⁹

Not only is this *sgra-bla* spelling more in line with the colloquial pronunciation, it also makes possible an entirely new range of meanings. Couple *sgra* ("sound, voice, noise") with *bla*, and the term might be read, for example, "sound-soul" or "voice-spirit". Literary evidence supporting this reading against the other in books that deal exclusively with the *sgra-bla* admittedly seems scanty, but this may be a case of the literature coming into being after the primary meaning of an oral tradition has been lost. In Snellgrove and Namdak's *Nine Ways of Bon*, the term occurs in a variety of contexts. Although one passage claims that the *sgra-bla* "must be worshipped as an aid for subduing hateful foes",¹⁰ there are also such phrases as "the clairvoyance of the *sgra bla* of primordial knowing",¹¹ in which a mere "enemy god" will not suffice. Martin has remarked, in editing another Bon text,¹² on a so-called "Gateway Language" which stems from "the *sgra-bla* of the good aeon"; here at least the element of language seems to more closely relate to the *sgra* spelling.¹³

The traditional explanations of the *dgra-lha* often mention the deity as appearing in another capacity as one of the "five original gods" (*go-ba'i lha-nga*). These figures are said to be born with man and to accompany him through life. Interestingly, they are thought to occupy specific places in or around the human body. Although the locations of some of the *go-ba'i lha-nga* seem to vary with the sources, all agree that the *dgra-lha* abides on the right shoulder.¹⁴ This *dgra-lha* first appears in the legendary era of Tibet's first kings. The well-known story of the early king Dri-gum tells how, for some reason not satisfactorily explained, he challenged his stable hand Lo-ngnam to a duel to the death. Through a combination of circumstances, Dri-gum was prevailed upon to wear animal skins on his shoulders and wave a sword

above his head when he confronted the stable hand. But wearing the pelts, says the tale, offended Dri-gum's *lha* which deserted him, and waving the sword he cut his rope to Heaven. Thus when Lo-ngam killed him, his corpse remained on the earth. Read *bla* for *lha* here, and the story becomes more coherent — even today *bla-gugs* rituals are performed for those who have lost their *bla*, a condition which can lead to queer behavior, depression, and even death.¹⁵ It should also be noted that the *dgra-lha* was chased away from the right shoulder of Dri-gum by a piece of animal carrion — unexpected behavior in a marital “enemy god”.¹⁶

To sum up, a few characteristics towards a revised conception of the *dgra-lha* can be enumerated. First, the ferociousness of the later *dgra-lha* was not necessarily included in the original term, and influence from Tibet's northern neighbors was likely at least a contributing factor to it. Next, the *sgra-bla* spelling used in the Bon texts is consistent with the pronunciation, and thus could be an earlier rendering more closely approximating the meaning of the term, though the available literary evidence is inconclusive. Finally, from the earliest time that the *sgra-bla* is mentioned in a work having a historical context it has a physical location, on the right shoulder. Is there any evidence in Tibetan culture for a “voice-spirit” or source of language in that part of the human body?

Recall the figure of Milarepa, the famous poet-saint of the Kagyu school, who is depicted cupping his hand to his right ear as if listening. Stein says of this gesture that “it is characteristic, not only of Milarepa and other saints, but of the epic hero, when identified with the bard, or when receiving information from the gods.”¹⁷ In other words the gesture indicates the source of the saint's or the poet's inspiration. This source was none other than the *sgra-bla*, originally a figure perhaps comparable to the Greek muses, a “voice” separate from the poet (or in earlier times perhaps the king), an audible manifestation of his vital spirit that he was dependent on for advice and inspiration.¹⁸

Stein has repeatedly remarked, in his book on the Tibetan epic and its bards, on the close connection between the bard and the *sgra-bla*, but the deities he discusses are definitely of the warrior type, and the whole relationship falls into the complex nexus that also includes kings and sacred mountains. Of note, however, is that Gesar, the main hero of the epic, was probably imported to Tibet at the time of Tibet's military expansion;¹⁹ it does not seem at all illogical that an individual vital spirit, so important in village or nomadic life, should be exteriorized into a fierce protective warrior god during the time Tibet was undergoing military and political organization on a scale previously unknown.

The view of the *sgra-bla* presented here has ramifications beyond the correction of an old spelling of a minor deity's name. It obviously challenges a belief still strong, if not prevailing, that the “folk stratum” of Tibetan religion has remained largely the same from the earliest times

through the introduction of Bon and Chos to the present, and might provide a starting point for study of the shift from the autochthonous religion to these imports. It is clearly related to the history of oracles in Tibet, and might help shed light on their functioning. It could provide another clue to the mystery of Dri-gum, which has been considered a watershed both in the Tibetan tradition and by scholars on its outside. Perhaps most interesting, it shows how one element of the Tibetan religious world had its roots neither in imported beliefs and rituals, nor in a superstitious and fearful worship of the phenomenal world, but rather in what seems to be a simple empirical evaluation of man's place in the cosmos that may parallel those found in other societies.

NOTES

1. Nebesky-Wojkowitz p. 318; Hoffmann p. 97; Tucci (1980) p. 166.
 2. Tucci (1980) p. 187.
 3. Snellgrove (p. 258 n. 20) notes that "the meaning of 'enemy god' for a divinity whose protection one expects, seems rather unsatisfactory."
 4. Nebesky-Wojkowitz p. 318; Snellgrove p. 258 n. 20.; Waddell p. 375.
 5. Nebesky-Wojkowitz pp. 329-331.
 6. Tucci (1949) pp. 571-573.
 7. Stein (1959) p. 575: Vaiśravaṇa is of a "type iconographique propre a Khotan et a Tun-Huang, type qui a des affinités iranniennes, a aussi fourni aux Tibétaines le modèle du Dieu de la Guerre par excellence, le *dGra-lha*." Waddell, in his uneven but occasionally informative work (p. 375), points out the resemblance of the *dgra-lha* to the Chinese Kwan Te, and Kawaguchi (p. 550) goes so far as to identify Gesar, the arch *dgra-lha*, with Kwan Te.
 8. *Sgra-bla-spyang-zhon*, *Gsas-mkhar-rin-po-che*, *Sgra-bla'i-rgyal-mo'i-bskang-ba*; also, Snellgrove 258 n. 20.
 10. Snellgrove p.65.
 11. Snellgrove pp. 25,33.
 12. Martin p.11
 13. Parenthetically, among the retinue of Pehar, as described in the *Sagsum* (p. 22), a *Gelugpa* work, the "king of speech" is named *dgra-lha-skyes-gcig*. Thus the only member of the pentad whose function is related to language is classed with the *dgra-lha*.
 14. Haahr cites *Dpa'-bo-gtsug-lag* (p. 143) and the *Rgyal-rabs-gsal-ba'i-me-long* (p. 148); Nebesky-Wojkowitz cites *Klong-rdol Bla-ma* (p. 264).
 15. It seems just as likely, if not more so, that the *bla* would be said to occupy a position on the body as a *lha*, especially in view of the fact that
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the *lha* originally occupied the upper strata (cf. Hoffmann p. 94), while there are frequent references in Tibetan folklore to *bla-rdo-s*, *bla-shing-s* etc. where someone's vital spirit rests. Also relevant to this point, Shirokogoroff (p. 51) believes the Tungus concept of soul or vital spirit to be more basic than their various deity-spirits. Shirokogoroff also records a belief that the "soul" is multifaceted (p. 52), a balance of several aspects; perhaps the 'go-ba'i-lha (*bla*) reflects something similar. Obviously the present writer disagrees with his assumption that such beliefs represent degraded Buddhist concepts.

16. Especially since animal skins are frequently found among the offerings (*spyang-gzigs*) in latter-day *mgon-khangs* dedicated to the fierce deities.

17. Stein (1972) p. 370.

18. I refer the reader who feels his credulity stretched by this suggestion to Julian Jaynes's work, which presents a coherent and logical description of the mentation of ancient man in which such auditory guides played a leading role.

19. Stein (1959) p. 573.

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