The Liturgies and Oracular Utterances of the Spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet
— An Introduction to their bSang Rituals —

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Introduction

In this paper, I present an introduction to the b sang (fumigation/incense purification) rituals of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet (sTod and Byang-thang). This work, as the first in a series, introduces the liturgies and oracular utterances of the spirit-mediums, which include a wide range of ritual procedures and pronouncements. The spirit-mediums (lha-pa/lha-mo, dpa’-bo/dpa’-mo) occupy an important place in the social and religious life of Upper Tibet. It is widely held that under the possession of deities they dispense healing therapies of both a physical and psychological nature. They are also believed to protect livestock and the countryside against harm, offer sage advice, and make declarations concerning the future course of events. In my book on the cultural history of the spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet (2005), I describe the trance ceremonies in some detail but do not present their recitations and dialogues verbatim. The actual words of the spirit-mediums constitute a fascinating and telling aspect of the trance proceedings from both a literary and historical perspective. These utterances are made in a variety of regional dialects (dBus, gTsang, sTod, and Hor), and in a cant peculiar to the lha-pa known as the ‘language of the gods’ (lha-skad).

Between 2004 and 2006, I made a series of recordings of trance ceremonies (lha-bzhugs) convoked by prominent spirit-mediums of the

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2 A pioneering study of the activities of spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet was made by Berglie 1980; 1978; 1976. An excellent overview of Tibetan spirit-mediums is found in Diemberger 2005. I consider this work highly complementary with my treatise on the cultural history of spirit-mediums (2005), in that Diemberger treats sociological and political aspects of contemporary spirit-mediumship, whereas I do not.
region. From the digital recordings I undertook the rigorous task of transcription and translation. Translations have been prepared for the proceedings of the trance ceremonies of ten different spirit-mediums, in part or in whole. These individuals dwell in the ‘brog-pa (herder) communities of the great Tibetan upland between gNam-ru in the east and Ru-thog in the west. The work of transcription and translation was carried out in collaboration with Yungdrung Tenzin, a Bonpo scholar of exceptional ability. In addition to well known ritual materials available in written form, highly unusual liturgical sequences are also represented in the transactions of the trance ceremony. These mostly belong to the bsang (fumigation) and gser-skyems (libations) types of ritual dispensation. The trance proceedings also reveal a scarcely known genre of ‘oral literature’, the purported words of the deities as spoken by their human mouthpieces. This highly colorful and evocative material includes poetic recitations about the lineages and activities of the deities, discourses on religious topics, the counseling of clients, and prophecies with wide-ranging implications.

The hallmark of the words of the spirit-mediums is its stunning diversity; it encapsulates a wide spectrum of Tibetan ritual observances. To my knowledge, no other ethnographic or literary source demonstrates such a rich and unmodified juxtaposition of ritual themes derived from disparate cultural sources. In the liturgical traditions of Tibetan texts, content is dictated by sectarian compulsions with their prescribed doctrinal conventions and stipulated modes of literary presentation. On the other hand, the oral tradition of the spirit-mediums is far more eclectic and elastic. Liturgical strands from Bon, bon and the various sects of Buddhism are woven into recitations without critical hesitation. The ordering of the oral liturgies is also much more fluid as it is not tightly bound by established literary tradition. As such, native and Buddhist deities, concepts and practices are interchangeable throughout the recitations, sitting right next to each other in apparent concord. Generally speaking, this eclecticism reflects the development of Upper Tibet’s religious and cultural heritage over many centuries (probably from pre-Buddhist times onwards). Ancient indigenous

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3 This work was carried out on the High Tibet Welfare Expedition (2004), the Tibet Upland Expedition (2005) and the Tibet Highland Expedition (2006).

4 I use bon written in the small case here and in other instances in this paper, to refer to the entire corpus of non-Buddhist religious traditions in Tibet. In this work, no attempt is made to differentiate ancient indigenous traditions from later folk practices, and I concede that both may be bound up in the term Bon. On the other hand, I employ the proper name (Bon) to refer to doctrines, deities and concepts directly derived from the literature of the Eternal Bon religion, an integral institutionalized faith that emerged in the late tenth century. I make this distinction to avoid necessarily equating non-Buddhist traditions with the ecclesiastic establishment of Eternal Bon and its many Buddhist inspired foundations. I hasten to add that the Bon-po (and the Buddhists for that matter) do not normally make this distinction, seeing the two types of bon/Bon as largely one in the same. Surely, the historical continuity that Tibetans predicate their position on has much validity (I begin to grapple with this extremely complex subject in Zhang Zhung: Foundations of Civilization in Upper Tibet (2008), nevertheless, the different pedigrees of tradition that make up the religious fabric of Tibet could be overlooked if only one word was used to designate them all. Bjerken (2004: 43–48) furnishes a critical discussion about the tripartite systems of classification of Tibetan religion studied by Stein and Tucci. As Bjerken makes clear, the dividing line between Buddhism/Bon and the so-called ‘popular religion’, ‘nameless religion’, or ‘folk religion’ is hazy indeed. That is to say, the allotment of a particular custom, tradition or belief in one category or the other is not always possible with any degree of certitude.
traditions and the various schools of Buddhism have conspired to leave their mark on the culture of Upper Tibet in a syncretistic arrangement. This is mirrored in the uncritical and embracing fashion in which the spirit-mediums conceive of their profession. In fact, the trance ceremonies and their philosophical basis are one of the best living examples of old religious and imported Buddhist concepts and practices existing side by side in the culture of Upper Tibet.5

The main bodies of ritual tradition represented in the trance ceremonies include that found in:

— Mahayāna and Vajrayāna doctrines
— Tibetan folk culture
— gCod cult practices
— The Gling ge-sar epic
— Bon Phya-gshen traditions

The bsang ritual usually occurs after Buddhist refuge prayers (skyabs-'gro) and aspirant prayers (smon-lam) are said. The bsang is a crucial part of the pre-trance invocations, which are intended to attract the attention of the relevant deities and make them amenable to assisting the spirit-medium. It has two parts: the actual fumigation of the deities with incense (bsangs) and the supplications to them (lha-gsol). Ordinarily, a long line of divinities are beckoned and cleansed with fragrant incense. The use of incense is not merely an offering but is intended to purify the deities and restore their equilibrium. It is commonly believed that the environment-bound pantheon is of a limpid composition (gtsang-rigs) and is especially prone to being contaminated by anthropogenic activities of a negative character. In order to counteract the harm wrought upon the gods and to insure that the ritual venue is suitably clean, incense is burnt throughout the bsang ritual and for the duration of the trance ceremony.6 One focus of the bsang ritual of the spirit-mediums is the possessing deities of the trance. Typically, many different mountain gods and lake goddesses are mentioned by name, and some description of them may also be given. In addition to divinities native to Upper Tibet, great mountain gods of other areas of Tibet may also be invoked. As part of the bsang the so-called higher deities of Buddhism are also entertained. These include the sky-goers (mkha’-’gro), mGon-po (Mahākāla) and other Buddhist and Bon protectors (Chos-skyong/Bonskyong). The bsang is composed in verse but unlike some of the textual variants of the ritual, the syllabification of the lines is not strictly regimented. The tone of language and style of chanting of the spirit-mediums tend to be stately and lyrical as befits a sacred ritual.

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5 Diemberger’s (2005: 146-148) analysis of the historical development of spirit-mediumship in both pastoral and agricultural regions of Tibet is largely in sync with what I propound here. She considers that the spirit-mediums are the embodiments of ancestral and territorial deities of pre-Buddhist origin as well as being involved in Buddhist tantric practices. She further observes that these two bodies of disparate tradition are part of a two-way assimilative process that has been informing the religious life of Tibet for centuries.

6 For an authoritative introduction to the themes and applications of the bsang ritual, see Karmay 1998, pp. 380-412. Karmay (ibid: 387) stresses that the cult of indigenous deities as ancestral figures for localized populations has an integral place in the bsang.
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KARMA RIG ‘DZIN (born circa 1935)

i. Biographical sketch

Karma rig-‘dzin hails from Mad-pa, in Shan-rtsa county. He is a man of considerable moral authority, which is derived from the great respect ‘brog-pa of the region have for him. Karma rig-‘dzin is frequently sought out by fellow herders to remedy a wide range of human and veterinary ailments. Initial interviews with him were conducted in 2002 and these are described in Calling Down the Gods (pp. 154–169). Both his father and mother were spirit-mediums for deities indigenous to the Byang-thang. Karma rig-‘dzin reports that he belongs to the Zur-bzhi lha-babs bzhi (Four God Descending Ones of the Four Corners), an illustrious lineage of lha-pa, which as he sees it, originated in primordial times. He is a medium for the gNyan-chen thang-lha and rTa-rgo circles of mountain gods, and for bDud-btsan dmar-po, a chief protector (srung-ma) of the sTag-lung bka’-brgyud subsect. 7

ii. The structure of the trance ceremony

The trance ceremony from which a digital sound recording was made was convened by Karma rig-‘dzin in sMad-pa, on May 17, 2004. Its purpose was to divine the road ahead for drivers who were accompanying part of the High Tibet Welfare Expedition. The presiding deity was the sTag-lung protector bDud-btsan dmar-po. The resulting transcription was checked with the lha-pa on April 27, 2006. Only the pre-trance portion of the proceedings could be reviewed by Karma rig-‘dzin, as he has no recollection of what transpires after the ‘descent of the gods’. The liturgical and oracular sequences of the trance ceremony were structured as follows:

1. Fumigation of the deities ritual (bsang/lha-gsol) (transpired between zero seconds, zero minutes and 12 minutes, 23 seconds of the trance ceremony = 00:00 to 12:23). This is a rather deliberate and cadenced portion of the ceremony with the somewhat subdued playing of the drum (rnga) and flat bell (gshang).

2. Libations offering ritual (gser-skyems) (12:24 to 17:31). This is a faster paced ritual but one in which the enunciation of the words is still relatively clear.

3. A discourse about Karma rig-‘dzin’s lha-pa lineage (18:06 to 20:00). This is primarily made to educate those in attendance about his trance practices.

4. A discourse about sundry historical and contemporary topics (20:01 to 28:00).

5. Prayers directed to specific deities (gsol-ba ’debs), refuge prayers (skyabs) and dedicatory prayers (smon-lam) (28:00 to 30:58). This portion of the

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7 Part of a triad of special protectors of the sTag-lung-pa, which also includes g.Ya’-dmar and dGe-bsnyen. For an account of their history, see Bellezza 2005, pp. 56–63.
ceremony consists of slow, distinct enunciations without musical instruments.

6. Invitation of the deities (lha spyan-'dren) to the ritual venue and body of the lha-pa (30:58 to 36:50). This segment begins slowly and methodically but gradually the tempo increases. It features just the drum.

7. Proclamation of the lineage of the deities (lha-rgyud smos-pa) (36:51 to 57:42). This sequence marks the beginning of possession by the deities of the trance. It consists of a long litany of names and descriptions of indigenous deities in verse. This is a musical segment with a euphony characteristic of many Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums. The canticle divulges the iconography of numerous divine figures in a lilting but dignified fashion. Just the drum is sounded in this interval.

8. The petitioning of the deities of the trance (bka'-lung) in which clients ask their questions to the lha-pa and he responds to their requests (57:43 to 1-03:16). More lore about the gods is also pronounced. In this conversational segment, the voice of Karma rig-'dzin has the same qualities it had during the pre-trance discourses. His possessing deity, sTag-lung bdud-btsan dmar-po, likes to speak to clients in the dialect of dBus, revealing his Central Tibetan origins.

9. Formulating the prophecy (lung-bstan brtag-pa) (1-03:17 to 1-05:47). This portion of the trance ceremony is highly lyrical and features the playing of the drum.

10. The oracular utterances (lung-bstan) and advice (zhal-gdams) of the lha-pa (1-05:49 to 1-10:14 approximately). This segment consists of a disquisition in which the fate of the client is pronounced and religious advice given, as well as a diatribe against the excesses of the old Tibet government.

11. The return of the deities to their abodes (gshegs-bskyod). The trance proceedings terminate with praises to the deities as they retreat from the lha-pa’s body and ritual venue (this part of the ceremony was not recorded).

iii. The bsang

Here for inspection, I present all of Karma rig-'dzin’s bsang ritual. Normally, most trance ceremonies are prefaced with Buddhist prayers in which refuge is taken and the protection of the Buddhist divinities sought. In this ceremony however, the introductory prayers were dispensed with because Karma rig-'dzin had already made his daily religious observances. As I have commented (2005: 14), it is likely that before the Buddhacization of Upper Tibet, spirit-mediums relied solely on native deities such as those that dominate this bsang. In any case, as we shall see, its liturgical structure has many bon or non-Buddhist characteristics. A cross-section of male and

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8 In Zhang Zhung (2008), I examine textual passages that specify the role of elemental spirits in the archaic funerary rites, which were designed to convey the consciousness principles of the deceased to the ancestral afterlife.
female deities inhabiting a large swathe of territory between gNam-mtsho
and Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho are invoked during Karma rig-'dzin’s fumigation
ritual, reinforcing its regional orientation. Many lines in the bsang end in the
verb bsang [ba] (I/we fumigate).9

The bsang of Karma rig-'dzin begins with the lha and klu of the
dichotomous universe (composed of heaven and earth) (ln. 1). This
heralding of the deities of the upper (yar) and lower (yog) realms is one of
many bon features in this bsang. It is made clear that this ritual is also a khrus
(ablations) type, which is carried out by the sprinkling of water during the
recitations (ln. 2). The first gods mentioned by name are atmospherical in
quality and represent personal tutelary deities of Karma rig-'dzin in his role
as a spirit-medium (lns. 4, 5). This is immediately followed by the invocation
of the mkha’-gro, those sky-treading benefactresses that occupy a
fundamental place in the pantheon of Buddhism (ln. 6). The non-
Buddhist character of the bsang reasserts itself with the sgra-bla
(a closely related class of martial spirits) (lns. 7–9). According to the Bon
religion, the sgra-bla formed the mainstay of the pre-Buddhist tradition of
spirit-mediumship. Known as lha yi bka’-bab (the commands of deities), this
oracular system is found as part of Phya-gshen theg-pa, or the first vehicle of
Bon teachings. To this day, the dgra-lha command a key position in the
various curative and protective rites of the trance ceremonies of Upper Tibet.
Another mainstay of the native Tibetan tradition is the words ki and
bswo/bso, which are commonly used in the bsang and lha-gsol rituals to
awaken, invoke and praise the deities (lns. 11–17). Essentially, these words
are employed to call to action the deities of the trance ceremony:

ln. 1: You are the lha and klu doctrine protectors (bstan-srung)
of the four directions of dBus and gTsang in the center (bar dbus gtsang ru-
bzhil lha klu bstan-srung khyed rnams /).
ln. 2: I invite you to come to this incense (bsang) and ablutions (khrus)
[ritual] (bsang dang khrus la spyan-'dren gshugs su gsol /).
ln. 3: Om A hum.
ln. 4: I fumigate (bsang) gNam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-rdzong (Sky
Master Portal Lha Horned Eagle Fortress) (gnam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-
rdzong bsang /).
ln. 5: I fumigate rNam-sras thog-lha me-'bar.10
ln. 6: I fumigate all the sky-goers of formless emptiness (ma-lus stong-
nyid mkha’-gro bsang /).
ln. 7: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty wer-ma.
ln. 8: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the eye beholders (lta-ba mig gi dgra-lha
bsang /).
ln. 9: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the ear listeners (nyan-pa rna-ba’i dgra-
lha bsang /).
ln. 10: Om A hum (repeated many times). <The drumming begins>
ln. 11: I call the lha saying ki ki (lha ki ki zer kyin ’bod-pa yin /).
ln. 12: I invoke you saying bswo bswo (bswo bswo zer kyin bswo ba yin /).

9 Karmay renders bsang-ba as ‘let us purify’ or ‘it must be purified’ (1998: 382). I have
elected to use a more direct and simple phrasing in my translation, which is reflective of
the candid spirit of the rituals conducted by the spirit-mediums.
10 This deity appears to be a composite form combining the wealth god rNam-thos-sras with
a celestial figure Thog-lha me-'bar (Blazing Thunder God).
In. 13: Ki and bswo are the [invitation] [words] of the lha (ki bswo lha yi spyan [drangs so] /11/).
In. 14: Yā (Ah yes), I call the lha saying ki ki (yā lha ki ki zer kyin 'bod-pa yin /).
In. 15: I invoke you saying bswo bswo.
In. 16: Ki and bswo are the callers of the lha (ki bswo lha yi 'bod-pa yin /).
In. 17: Ki ki ki la bswo bswo bswo!
In. 18: Hum hum ma ra yo phat !

A number of important gods are invoked next in the bsang, including the chiefs of the lha, gnyan and klu, the spirits of the three planes of existence (srid-pa gsum) (Ins. 19–21). Although well known Buddhist gods are represented here, the tripartite cosmos (steng, bar, 'og) alluded to is yet another bon motif of Karma rig-'dzin’s bsang. The Tibetan astrological gods are also singled out for special mention: the lha of the twelve lo-skor (duodecimal calendrical system), the lha of the nine sme-ba (basic constructs of existence), and the lha of the eight spar-kha (astrological trigrams) (Ins. 24–26). After some repetition in the names of deities mentioned, there is a litany of Buddhist protectors (Ins. 34–41). The identity of the last god/gods in this interval, Mi-mgon lcam-dral mchod-po, is not clear. The goddess of gNam-mthsho, gNam-mtsho ph Yug-mo, is invoked next in the liturgy (ln. 43). According to Karma rig-'dzin, this is ordinarily followed in his bsang by an enumeration of the goddess auxiliaries of the four cardinal directions of gNam-mtsho. He calls these subsidiary figures gter-bdag (treasure mistresses). They include: east – Klu-mo dung-khrab dkar-mo (residence: gNam-mtsho do?), south – Mi-tog g.yang-mdzes phyug-mo (residence: mGar lha-mo gdong?), west – Sa-klu dung-skyong dkar-mo (residence: Ti-rang smug-po do?), and north – Klu-mo gser-khrab ser-mo (residence: Sems-mtsho). In this particular ritual, however, the quartet of subsidiary gNam-mtsho goddesses was omitted. Finally, in this sequence all the invoked deities are invited to the ritual venue in order to win their favor:

11 Brackets designate uncertain readings of the lha-pa’s utterances.
12 This mantra is usually said for dispatching deities. It does not seem particularly appropriate this early in the bsang ritual. One might view this as an example of how the largely illiterate spirit-medium community of Upper Tibet is not especially versed in liturgical traditions, but this is actually not the case here. The spirit-mediums sometimes purposely dispense with liturgical conventions that other types of ritualists (monks, sngags-pa, etc.) feel compelled to follow. For his peers, the early use of this mantra is a demonstration of the great power that spirit-mediums such as Karma rig-'dzin are reputed to have, for he is invested with the capability to summon the gods with only a minimum of formalities.
13 There is also a rNyin-ma tradition of four goddesses of the cardinal directions. These deities dwell around the four bathing heads (khrus kyi sgo-mo bzhid) of gNam-mtsho and are conceived of along the lines of the phrin-las bzhid tantric scheme of worship and ritual dispensation (pacific, expanding, empowering and wrathful modes). See Bellezza 1997, pp. 103, 104. This textual tradition may possibly represent the Buddhist adoption of gNam-mtsho’s four klu-mo acolytes. In any case, as their names indicate, two of Karma rig-'dzin's klu-mo don armor made of gold and conch. According to Bon ritual tradition, it was customary for Zhang-zhung goddesses to be clad in such a fashion. For example, four lake goddesses of far western Tibet are described with armor and helmets in the Zhang zhung me ri'i sgrub skor (Bellezza 2008: 329–331).
In. 19: I fumigate the defending Lha-chens tshangs-pa dkar-po (Brahma) (skyongs lha-chens tshangs-pa dkar-po bsang /).
In. 20: I fumigate the great gnyan sKu-lha ger-mdzod.
In. 21: I fumigate the great klu gTsug-na rin-chen.
In. 22: I fumigate the sa-bdag and twelve brtan-ma. 14
In. 23: I fumigate the earth-holder Lag-pa chen-mo.
In. 24: I fumigate the lha of the twelve lo-skor.
In. 25: I fumigate the lha of the nine sme-ba.
In. 26: I fumigate the lha of the eight spar-kha.
In. 27: I fumigate gNam-bdag sgo-lha khyung-rdzong.
In. 28: I fumigate rNam-sras thog-lha me-bar.
In. 29: I fumigate all the sky-goers.
In. 30: I fumigate the 360 wer-ma.
In. 31: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the eye beholders.
In. 32: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the ear listeners.
In. 33: I invite you here to this place of repose (’dir bzhugs gnas la spyan-’dren no /).
In. 34: I fumigate Lha-btsan rdo-rje ’bar-ba (Blazing Adamantine Lha-btsan).
In. 35: I fumigate bTsan-rgod jag-pa me-len (Wild bTsan Plunderer Fire Bearer). 15
Ins. 36-37: I fumigate mGon-po chos-skyong ber-nag (Black Tent mGon-po Buddhist Defender). 16
In. 38: I fumigate all the black (rog-po) mGon-po chos-skyong (mGon-po Buddhist defenders).
In. 39: I fumigate the Buddhist defender Bya-rog gdong-can (Black Bird-Headed One). 17
In. 40: I fumigate Phyag-drug gser-khrab (Six Armed Golden Cuirass).
In. 41: I fumigate Mi-mgon lcam-dral mchor-po (Defender of Humans Others and Sisters of Riches).
In. 42: I invite you here to this place of repose.
In. 43: I fumigate the mother gNam-ntsho phyug-mo.
In. 44: I fumigate the owners of treasures of good fortune outcome (las ’phro gter gyi bdag-po bsang /).
In. 45: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The goddesses of the four cardinal directions around the rTa-rgo/rTa-sgo range are accorded more detailed treatment in the bsang (Ins. 46–59). Despite being a devout Buddhist, Karma rig’dzin admits that the rTa-rgo divinities could not be effectively brought into the Buddhist fold and retain a fundamental Bon/bon identity (Bellezza 2005: 157, 158). Only two of the directional goddesses are mentioned by name but all four belong to the klu-mo class. They are benevolent figures responsible for the protection of the "brTan-ma/bsTan-ma bcu-gnyis are examined in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 181–198.

A btsan especially popular among the ‘Brug-pa bka’-brgyud, which is also a common protective figure in the monasteries of other Buddhist sects in Upper Tibet and among the spirit-mediums.

This appears to be a native protector of the black yak hair tent (sbr-a-nag) of the ’brag-pa who came to be assimilated to Mahakala.

local 'brog-pa and their social and economic interests. As is often found in
the lha-gsol and bsang-ba (appeasement and expiation rituals) and in the
utterances of the bards (sgrung-mkhan), Karma rig-'dzin uses trisyllabic
indicators (sha ra ra, spungs se spung and brengs se breng) to vividly describe
the goddesses of rTa-rgo, a native poetical device:

In. 46: I fumigate the mistress of the east side of rTa-rgo, Klu-mo dung-
skyong dkar-mo (rta rgo shar gyi bdag po (= mo) la / klu-mo dung-skyong
dkar-mo bsang /).
In. 47: She rides on a white lioness mount (chibs su seng-ge dkar-mo
bcibs /).
In. 48: I fumigate the mistress on the south side of rTa-rgo, the
protectress of every human generation (rta-rgo lho yi bdag-po (= mo) la /
mi-rabs yongs kyi srung-ma bsang /).
In. 49: She rides on a striped tigress mount (chibs su stag-mo ris-bhra
cibs /).
In. 50: She has yellow golden armor spungs se spung (conveys that the
armor is piled high).
In. 51: I fumigate the mistress on the west side of rTa-rgo, Dung-
skyong dkar-mo of the earth klu.
In. 52: She rides on a yellow orange (ngang-ma) female hybrid yak
(chibs su mdzo-mo ngang-ma bcibs /).
In. 53: She has a draped arrow in her right [hand] and a jewel in the
left (mda’-dar g.yas dang rin-ch’en g.yon /).
In. 54: Her tray of jewels (rin-ch’en nor gzhong) spungs se spung (conveys
that the jewels are heaped high).
In. 55: I fumigate the mistress of the north side of rTa-rgo, the
protectress of humans, wealth and life, these three (rta-rgo byang gi
bdag-po (= mo) la / mi nor tshe gsun, srung-ma bsang /).
In. 56: She has a golden helmet on her head brengs se breng (conveys
that the helmet is quivering).
In. 57: She rides on a spirited big mule mount (chibs su rgya drel rol-mo
bcibs /).
In. 58: The big mule trots in a fine manner sha ra ra (conveys the
unstoppable quality of the trotting) (rgya drel ’gying ’gros sha ra ra /).
In. 59: It has the five types of jewels (rin-ch’en sna-lnga) spungs se spung
(conveys that there are great heaps of them).

In the next sequence of the bsang, a litany of goddesses who dwell in the
g.Yag-pa and Nag-tshang regions is enumerated. All of these figures in one
form or another are klu-mo who reside in the great lakes and mountains of
the Byang-thang. Nevertheless, their residences are not all identifiable by
Karma rig-'dzin. rGyal-gangs lha-mo is the goddess of the highest mountain

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18 The bsang ritual of the lha-bon priests of Dzar (in Glo) also petitions four local divine
benefactresses; these are collectively known as mo-rgyud ([divine] female lineage). The
bsang recitations of the lha-bon, as part of the ka-lag bi-pa ceremony, are studied in Ramble

19 ’Gying denotes a fine and imposing or majestic bearing.

20 Gold (gser), silver (dngul), turquoise (g.yu) coral (byu-ru), and pearl (mu-tig), with some
substitutions permitted.

21 This line either refers to the Goddess herself or to her mule mount.
(6444 m) in the meridional range just west of Shan-rtsa, but even she has a klu-mo persona (ln. 64). Mu-tig dag-ya-mtho resides in the eponymous lake of Ba-tsha, in g.Yag-pa (ln. 63); sKe-rengs/sKe-ring ‘bum-mtsho phyug-mo is the goddess of sKe-ring mtsho, in Shan-rtsa (ln. 65); and Ngang-bzang klu-bkra mchur-mo is the goddess of Mu-skyu mtsho, in sMad-pa (ln. 66). The prominent position of the klu-mo in the bsang reflects the potent role they have in the religious life of the Byang-thang. As archetypal divine females (mo-lha), the klu-mo goddesses are the epitome of fertility, nurture of the young, and insurance of healthy crops and flocks. Accordingly, they have a critical function in the curative and apotropaic rites of the lha-pa:

ln. 60: I fumigate Klu-mo dung-seng dkar-mo (White Conch Lion Female Klu).
ln. 61: I fumigate Klu-mo cang-seng g.yang-lha.
ln. 62: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the thousand (innumerable) human generations (mi-rabs stong dgra-lha bsang lha).
ln. 63: I fumigate Mu-tig dag-la g.yu-mtsho.
ln. 64: I fumigate rGyal-gangs lha-mo drel-brgyad (Mountain Queen Goddess Rider of the Mule).
ln. 65: I fumigate sKe-ring ‘bum-mtsho phyug-mo.
ln. 66: I fumigate Ngang-bzang klu-bkra mchur-mo (Good Goose Bright Klu of Riches).
ln. 67: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the thousand human generations.

The consequent figures to undergo purification with incense are the gods of rTa-rgo (thought to mean ‘snow mountain’ in the language of Zhang-zhung), a group known as rTa-rgo mched-bdun rol-brgyad (lns. 68–76). The names of the individual members in Karma rig’dzin’s bsang differ significantly from those found in the relevant gsol-kha literature, a sign of the inherent fluidity of the oral tradition. The gods of the rTa-rgo range are important possessing figures of spirit-mediums in much of the Tibetan cultural world, a legacy perhaps of the prominence they are supposed to have enjoyed in ancient times. According to Bon tradition, rTa-rgo was the soul rock formation (bla-brag) of the Zhang-zhung kingdom. In any event, this region is very rich in pre-Buddhist (archaic cultural horizon) monumental ruins. The most valuable figure in the rTa-rgo brotherhood for Karma rig’dzin and other spirit-mediums is Ngo-dmar lha-bsan (a chief possessing deity), and this is reflected in his mention twice in the bsang. The god sGo-bdag (Master of the Portal) (ln. 77) and the three ’Om-thang deities (lns. 80, 82, 86) are well known members of the rTa-rgo group and occupy

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22 According to the manuscript gNyan chen g.ya’ spang pa’i mchod sprin nam mkha’ ‘brug sgra (Voice of the Dragon of Space: Cloud Offerings to the Great gNyan of the Slave [Mountain] and Meadow), compiled at rTa-nag thub-bsan (a Sa-skya monastery in bZhad-mthong-smon) by the abbot Ngag-dbang bstan-pa’i rdo-rje (folio 4a, 4b); “The mistress wife and noble woman of the only man gNyan-chen g.ya’-spang (a mountain god of Shan-rtsa) is Shel-tsha gangs kyi rgyal-mo (rGyal-gangs lha-mo), the white woman of conch with a marvelous turquoise visage. You are the attractive woman at the margin of the slates and meadow. In your hand you hold a ga’u (a container for sacred substances) of crystal. You ride on a white lion mount. You are surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand gangs-smun. Your secret name is Gangs-klu sman-cig ma (Only sMan Mountain Klu Woman)”

23 For these standard lists of the rTa-rgo mched-bdun rol-brgyad, see Bellezza 1997; 2005.
prominent landforms in the vicinity. Nag-mer gser-mtsho phyug-mo is the protectress of a small holy lake situated high up on the flanks of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan (ln. 78). This pilgrimage lake is popularly conceived as being the right eye of the goddess Dang-ra g.yu-mtsho. Shod-tram phug, a vital location for the initiation of spirit-mediums, is also located on the flanks of Ngo-dmar lha-btsan (ln. 79). According to Karma rig-'dzin, the btsan yaks noted in the ritual are the nor-bdag of rTa-rgo, the divine protectors of yaks and other livestock (ln. 81). Another livestock god noted is the lha-lug or ‘divine sheep’, the protector of sheep and ally of spirit-mediums (ln. 87). The rTa-rgo gods are described in colorful language characteristic of bon liturgical traditions (lns. 83, 84, 87, 88), a form of verse that has spread to Buddhist texts and especially those of the Bon religion:

In. 68: I fumigate Byang-btsan rta-rgo dkar-po (White Snow Mountain Northern bTs'an).
In. 69: I fumigate rTa-rgo dge-rgan rogs-cig (Only Friend Venerable Old Snow Mountain).
In. 70: I fumigate Yon-tan chos-rgyal 'bum-me (Dharma King of Excellence One Hundred Thousand Fires).
In. 71: I fumigate rTa-rgo Gangs-bzang lha-btsan (Snow Mountain Good Mountain Lha-btsan).
In. 72: I fumigate rTa-rgo gangs-thig btsan-dmar (Snow Mountain Snow Spots Red bTs'an).
In. 73: I fumigate rBa-rong lha-btsan smug-po.
In. 74: I fumigate rTa-rgo lcags-nag dgu-khri.
In. 75, 76: I fumigate rTa-rgo ngo-dmar lha-btsan (Snow Mountain Red-Faced Lha-btsan).
In. 77: I fumigate sGo-bdag lha-btsan spun-bdun (Master of the Portal Seven Lha-btsan Brothers).
In. 78: I fumigate Nag-mer gser-mtsho phyug-mo (Overflowing Blackness Golden Lake of Riches).
In. 79: I fumigate rTa-rgo shod-tram phug-pa.
In. 80: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang gong-ma.
In. 81: The thunderous grunts (ngar-skad) of the btsan yaks di ri ri (conveys a thunderous sound).
In. 82: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang bar-pa.
In. 83: The sound of the btsan army di ri ri (btsan-dmag skad-sgra di ri ri /
In. 84: Their arrow, spear, the bow and arrow and sword shigs se shig (conveys a quaking motion) (mda' mdung 'khor-gsum shigs se shig /
In. 85: I invite you here to this place of repose.
In. 86: I fumigate rTa-rgo 'om-thang 'og-ma.
In. 87: The bleating (ba'-sgra) of the lha-lug di ri ri (conveys a very sharp sound).
In. 88: The whistles (bshug) of the btsan men kyu ru ru (conveys a whistling sound).
In. 89: Please come to this place of repose.

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24 The shrine of sGo-bdag on the rTa-rgo ‘phrang and that of ‘Om-rong (‘Om-thang) are described in Bellezza 1997, pp. 315, 327 (n. 43), 398.
25 For lore about this holy lake, see Bellezza 1997, p. 404.
26 Information on this cult cave is found in Bellezza 1997, p. 403; 2005, pp. 70, 71, 156–158.
In. 90: Please come, we invite you for tshogs (ritual cakes) (tshogs la sphyin-'dren gshegs su gsol /).

The next interval of Karma rig-'dzin’s bsang is devoted to the Mount Ti-se (Gangs rin-po-che) region, many of the places and deities of which are well known (Ins. 91–100). Some of the great pilgrimage centers located around Ti-se are mentioned by name in this litany (Ins. 91, 95, 96, 98). The sky-treading goddess of rGyang-grags monastery on the inner circuit of Ti-se is a substantial cult figure for many of Upper Tibet’s spirit-mediums (Ins. 94). She appears to be a native protectress of the locale that was subsequently brought into the Buddhist pantheon. The goddess rJe-btsun grol-ma dkar-sngon is said to be the guardian goddess of sGrol-ma la, the famous pass straddling the high point of the Ti-se pilgrim’s circuit (Ins. 97). dMag-zor rgyal-mo/dPal-ldan lha-mo is Tibetan Buddhism’s most important protectress, a key defender of the trance ceremony:

27 Originally a great charnel ground in India. The Ti-se counterpart is located above ‘Bri-ra phug monastery on the trail leading to the sGrol-ma la.

28 The tradition of Bon sgra-bla in spirit-mediumship is comprehensively examined in Bellezza 2005.
ln. 101: I fumigate bTsan-rgod rol-pa skya-bdun.  
ln. 102: I fumigate the great bTsan ’bar-ba spun-bdun.  
ln. 103: I fumigate gNyan-stag dmar-po of the dgra-lha.  
ln. 104: I fumigate Zangs-ri ’bar-ba btsan-rgod.  
ln. 105: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the father (pha) and paternal uncle (A-khu).  
ln. 106: I fumigate the lha of the mother (ma), maternal aunt (sru-mo) and maternal uncle (zhang).  
ln. 107: I fumigate the four brothers of the long-life lineage (tshe-rabs).  
ln. 108: I fumigate Kha’-dzin (Great Advisor) and your circle.  
ln. 109: I fumigate sKyes-dzun-po (Great Holy Man) and your circle.  
ln. 110: I fumigate Ye-shes chen-mo (Great Wisdom Mother) and your circle.  
ln. 111: I fumigate the dregs-pa (haughty ones) and your circle.  
ln. 112: I invite you here to this place of repose.  
ln. 113: I fumigate dGra-lha me-stag dmar-po (Red dGra-lha Sparks).  
ln. 114: I fumigate Mi-bdun rta-bdun (Seven Men Seven Horses).  
ln. 115: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the swift ones (myur-mgyogs-can).  
ln. 116: I fumigate the dgra-lha of abiding virility and bravery (dpa’-rgod ’dzoms-pa).  
ln. 117: I fumigate the dgra-lha of indomitable bravery (dpa’-snying che-ba).  
ln. 118: I fumigate the dgra-lha of abiding swift power (mthu-myur ’dzoms-pa).  
ln. 119: I fumigate the dgra-lha of the cutter of the life-force of the enemy (dgra-srog gcod-pa).  
ln. 120: I fumigate the dgra-lha that plunders the enemy’s wealth (dgra-nor ’dzoms-pa).  
ln. 121: You dgra-lha and your circles please come here (dgra-lha ’khor-bcas gshegs su gsol /).  
ln. 122: I fumigate the great army (dmag-dpung chen-mo) of dgra-lha.  
ln. 123: You are mounted on an onager with a white muzzle (chibs su kha-dkar rkyang-bo bcibs /).  
ln. 124: Always be our advisor and befriend us (kha’-dzin yun du ’gros-par gyis /).  
ln. 125: { / / } ³⁰ thibs se thib (conveys a convergence of great numbers of spirits).  
ln. 126: Surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand dgra-lha (’khor-yang dgra-lha ’bum gyis bskor /).  
ln. 127: I fumigate the 920,000 dgra-lha.  
ln. 128: I fumigate 990,000 dgra-lha.  
ln. 129: I invite you here to this place of repose.  

The next portion of the bsang contains a welter of divinities in which little attempt is made to separate one type from another (lns. 130–155). It begins with the btsan of Bar-tha, Go-ra, gNam-ru, and another named btsan (lns. 130–132), as well as the ma-sangs (ancestral spirits) and wer-ma (warrior

²⁹ A study of this btsan brotherhood popular in Upper Tibet is made in Bellezza 2005.  
³⁰ This pair of slashes enclosed in brackets designates that one or more words in a line are inaudible.
spirits) (lns. 131, 133). The dgra-lha are described using quaint similes of the Upper Tibetan oral tradition (lns. 134–137). In the midst of these diverse gods dPal-ldan lha-mo is invoked (ln. 139). In the Buddhist tradition, she is often viewed as the chief (gtso-mo) of these kinds of local and elemental spirits but in the bsang of Karma rig-'dzin she has an intimate place among them rather than being singled out for special treatment. Among more mountain gods and elemental spirits, the dgra-lha are again cited (ln. 149, 150). In the purification of the great mountain god of southern Tibet Yar-lha sham-po (ln. 152) and 'Od-lde spu-rgyal (ln. 153), an ancestral king, the caesura ni is added to the lines for greater emphasis. This grammatical structure is likewise encountered in the Dunhuang manuscripts and ancient gsol-kha literature:

ln. 130: I fumigate Nam-ra and bTsan-rgod go-ra.
ln. 131: I fumigate the ma-sangs, rKyang-khra and others.
ln. 132: I fumigate Zog gi bdud-btsan smug-po.
ln. 133: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty wer-ma.
ln. 134: I fumigate the dgra-lha who are like a herd of congregating yaks (dgra-lha 'brong khyu rub 'dra bsang / ).
ln. 135: I fumigate the wielders of swords (gri bzung) who are like a herd of congregating yaks.
ln. 136: I fumigate the spear holders (mdung bzung) who are like a mob.
ln. 137: I fumigate the bow holders (gzhu bzung) who are like a congregating herd of onagers.
ln. 138: I fumigate the red butcher of bSam-yas (a btsan deity).
ln. 139: I fumigate dPal-ldan dmag-zor rgyal-mo.
ln. 140: I fumigate 'Brong-dur rog-po of bSam-yas (a wild yak god).
ln. 142: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty orders of rma.
ln. 143: I fumigate the excellent southern world (lho yi 'dzam-bu-gling mchog).
ln. 144: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty circles of klu.
ln. 145: I fumigate gNyan-chen thang-lha of the west.
ln. 146: I fumigate the 360 circles of the gnyan.
ln. 147: I fumigate Lha-mtsho spos-gnas of the north.
ln. 148: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty circles of btsan.
ln. 149: I fumigate all the mighty dgra-lha.
ln. 150: Roving in all directions, east, south, west, and north (shar lho nub byang kun 'grogs-pa'i / dgra-lha gnyan-po thams-cad bsang / ).
ln. 151: I fumigate the rma fraternal lineage (rabs-mched) and the brothers and sisters (lcam dral).
ln. 152: I fumigate that Yar-lha, yes, sham-po (yar-lha de ni sham-po bsang / ).
ln. 153: I fumigate that 'Od-de, yes, spu-rgyal.
ln. 154: I fumigate gNyan-po sku-lha ger-mdzod.
ln. 155: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The next sequence of the bsang is dedicated to the gNyan-chen thang-lha group (lns. 155–165). It brings the zoomorphic circle of this mountain pantheon to the fore (lns. 160–164). These are well known remedial spirits of
the Upper Tibetan spirit-mediums, mirroring the dominance of the pastoral way of life in the region:

In. 155: I fumigate gNyan-chen thang-lha of the world.
In. 156: I fumigate Thang-sras mchor-po of gNyan-chen thang-lha.
In. 157: I fumigate Thang-lha yar-bzhur btsan-po.
In. 158: I fumigate Thang-lha'i dge-bsnyen dkar-po.
In. 159: I fumigate the circle of three hundred and sixty gnyan of Thang-lha.
In. 160: I fumigate the white lha-rta (divine horses) of Thang-lha.
In. 161: I fumigate the lha-nor gwa-pa (divine yaks with a white face) of Thang-lha.
In. 162: I fumigate the lha-lug gwa-pa (divine sheep with a white face) of Thang-lha.
In. 163: I fumigate the lha-ra ngang-ba (orange divine goats) of Thang-lha.
In. 164: I fumigate the khyi-btsan dmar-po (red btsan dogs) of Thang-lha.
In. 165: I invite you here to this place of repose.

The ensuing sequence begins with the Rong-lha/Rong-btsan gods of Khams, a celebrated group of yul-lha (Ins. 166–168). The rest of the sequence is primarily directed towards the rGya-gar (‘India’), a diverse class of possessing and remedial gods (Ins. 169–190). These include Indian Buddhist tantric adepts of yore (Ins. 171, 177); Thang-stong rgyal-po, the fifteenth-century Tibetan mastermind (Ins. 172); and a variety of cult gods involved in the proceedings of the trance ceremony. Also, famous personages of the gcod tradition, Pha dam-pa sngags-rgyas and Ma-cig lab-sgron, are heralded (Ins. 174, 175). These twelfth-century historical figures act as patrons and protectors of the trance. Each line ends in the typical fashion with the verb bsang:

In. 166: Rong-lha rgyal-mtshan of the south.
In. 167: Rong-btsan kha-ba dkar-po
In. 168: Three hundred and sixty valley Rong-lha.
In. 169: Lha lineage of eighty rgya-gar
In. 170: rGya-gar me-ri dmar-po
In. 171: Eighty sngags lineage rgya-gar
In. 172: The adept (grub-chen)
Thang-stong rgyal-po
In. 173: Yum-chen kun-dga’ blo-gros
In. 174: Pha-cig dam-pa sngags-rgyas
In. 175: Ma-cig yum kyi sgron-ma
In. 176: Adepts of the gcod lineage
In. 177: Sa-ra ha-pa
In. 178: sNgags-chen hum-nag me-bar
In. 179: Invitation
In. 180: rGya-gar me-ri dmar-po
In. 181: rGya-gar A-tsa sngon-po
In. 182: rGya-gar ri-brag mchor-po
In. 183: rGya-gar ///
In. 184: rGya-gar ///
In. 185: rGya-gar ///
In. 186: rGya-gar yang-rgud bla-ma
In. 187: rGya-gar chos-sgrub bla-ma
In. 188: Yar-rgud dbu-dkar bla-ma
In. 189: White vulture of the west
In. 190: Invitation
Consequent invocations in the bsang are for A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo (Noble Woman Benefactress of the Heavens Queen), a personality of the Gesar epic, who appears to be modeled on the ancient goddess gNam-phyi gung-rgyal (Celestial Grandmother Queen of the Heavens) (Ins. 191–213):

On the right side of the eight [parts] of heavens, on the left side of the eight [parts] of the heavens, between the horns of the male wild yak of the white clouds, in the precious house of crystal, I fumigate A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo. On your head you wear a golden crown of five diadems (rgigs-lnga). Your golden crown of five diadems thibs se thib (conveys a sparkling). You have the conch [white] face of the full moon. Your eyes are like the great star at dawn. In your right hand you hold the daru of acacia (seng-ldeṅ)31 with hangings (‘phur-ma). The melodious sound of the daru khro lo lo (conveys a musical sound). In your left hand you hold a white silver bell. The melodious sound of your bell khro lo lo. From your mouth you blow a human thighbone trumpet (rkan-ggling). The sound of the human thighbone trumpet di ri ri (conveys a thunderous sound). On your body are precious ornaments. Also, you are surrounded by a circle of one hundred thousand mkha’-gro. You ride the white lioness below you. You lead the blue dragon behind you. On the plain you lead a black (rog-mo) cow. I fumigate the chief of the one hundred thousand mkha’-gro. I invite you here to this place of repose.32

The next sequence of Karma rig-‘dzin’s bsang recitations are for a collection of tantric tutelary deities (yi-dam), Buddhist protectors (Chos-skyong) (Ins. 214–228), as well as for a couple native goddesses of Tibet. These latter figures are the well-known mountain goddess of the gNyan-chen thang-lha range, Jo-mo gangs-dkar, and the long life quintet Tshe-ring mched-lnga (Ins. 214, 219). Once again, we see the intertwining of diverse classes of deities with no regard for their relative doctrinal status. Reference to the 360 horse-headed tutelary gods uses a numerical ascription common in the Bon tradition (Ins. 226). All of these lines of the liturgy end with the verb bsang:

ln. 214: rGya-gar jo-mo gangs-dkar
ln. 215: mKha’-gro sgron gyi dbang-mo
ln. 216: mKha’-gro ye-shes mtsho-rgyal
ln. 217: dPal-ldan dungs-skyong lha-mo
ln. 218: ’Bri-gung A-phyi chos-skyong
ln. 219: dPa’-mo tshe-ring mched-lnga
ln. 220: Invitation

31 In a Bon mythic origins of the drum (rma-rabs) text, acacia is recorded as one of five different types of wood growing around the world mountain Ri-rab, from which the primeval gsten stTag-la me’-bar made drums. See Bellezza 2005, pp. 425–427.
32 dgung-gnam brgyad gi g.yas zur na / dgung-gnam brgyad kyi g.yon zur na / sprin-dkar ‘bron-pho’i rea bar na / rin-chen shel gyi khung chen na / A-ne gung-sman rgyal-mo bsang / dbu la gser gi rigs-lnga gsal / gser gyi rigs-lnga thibs se thib / zhal ras bco lnga’i dungs dla / spyan-mig thar-rang skar-chen ‘dra / phyag g.yas seng-ldeṅ daru bsam / daru gung-snyan khro lo lo / phyag g.yon dngul-dkar drel-bu bsam / drel-bu gung-snyan khro lo lo / zhal ras ni mkang-ggling-du’i / mi rkang skad-skra di ri ri / sna la rin-chen rgyan-cha la / ’khor yung mkha’-’gro’ bum gyis bsar / og la seng-ga dkar-mo bcibs / rol la g.yu-brug sngon-mo khrid / thang la ba-mo rog-mo khrid / mkha’-gro ’bum gyi gtsos-mo bsang / ’dir bzhus-gnas la spyan ‘dren no /
The final part of the bsang returns to native deities of Upper Tibet, not all of which can be identified by Karma rig-'dzin (Ins. 229–237). All lines terminate in the customary fashion with bsang. Although, he is not yet fully possessed, Karma rig-'dzin discloses that this interval was orchestrated by the gods themselves. He states that this is so because he has no recollection of what was spoken and this is not the way in which he would customarily end his bsang ritual. It seems as though the native divinities of Upper Tibet are exercising the right to be the last ones heard in the liturgy. In the bsang, they co-inhabit the liturgy with the so-called higher gods of Buddhism with no apparent contradiction or conflict. Here the two streams of Tibetan religious tradition, lamaist and non-lamaist, exist side by side as if each one was oblivious of the other. The deities of both categories appear to be able to fulfill the same protective and patronizing role, intimating that the Buddhist gods may not be as essential to the trance ceremony as they are unswervingly stated to be. This would seem especially true if one takes a long view of the history of Upper Tibetan spirit-mediumship:

In. 229: Lha-btsan mi-dkar (White Man Lha-btsan)
In. 230: Lha-ri (/ /)
In. 231: Lha-ri mi-bkra rta-bkra (Divine Mountain Shining Man Shining Horse)
In. 232: sKya-rengs and her circle, the assembly of lha
In. 233: bTsan-ggod [byang-chub] grags-pa
In. 234: {g.Yu-lung brag-btsan jo-bo}
In. 235: {g.Yu-'od} tsha-tsha dmar-po
In. 236: {/ /} Gangs la nyi-shar
In. 237: Invitation

PHO BO SRID RGYAL (born circa 1927)

Biographical sketch

Pho-bo srid-rgyal, a kind and gracious man, is gNam-ru’s senior-most lha-pa. I first had the privilege of interviewing him in 2003 (October 31 to November 2). Pho-bo srid-rgyal’s paternal clan is sBa-pha and his maternal clan gDong-pha. He worships a paternal clan god (rus-lha) named Khams-btsan, divulging his ancestral origin in eastern Tibet some generations ago. His main gods of possession are Thang-lha mi-dkar rta-dkar (the Thang-lha group), rKyang-khra (the main btsan of gNam-ru) and bTsan-ggod nam-ra (the main btsan of Bar-tha), all well known figures in the eastern Byang-thang. Pho-bo srid-rgyal’s mentor was the famous spirit-medium of Ring-pa,
dPon-skya mGon-po dbang-rgyal (died circa 1974), the father of the late dPon-skya lha-dbang. Pho-bo srid-rgyal states that when the two spirit-mediums went into trance together they would perform bsang and gser-skyems, to strengthen the bonds between themselves and the deities. This was necessary so that they would prove reliable partners in the service of the community. Pho-bo srid-rgyal notes that at the age of 25, a consecration ceremony (rab-gnas) was made for him by the high lama Sa-skya gong-ma. His final act before becoming a fully empowered spirit-medium was to undertake an 11-day pilgrimage around gNam-mtsho. Pho-bo srid-rgyal reports going into trance many dozens of times per year. He has no set fee schedule and treats the indigent free of charge. Those who can afford to pay for his services offer either money or livestock. In many ways, his regimen of curative rites resembles that of the great dPon-skya lineage to which he is connected through tutelage. He observes that none of his four children practice as spirit-mediums.

**ii. The structure of the trance ceremony**

The trance ceremony from which a recording was made was held on the morning of May 21, 2004. The presiding deity of possession was rKyang-khra (Variegated Onager), considered to be a son of gNyan-chen thang-lha. The purpose of the trance was to bless the participants of the ongoing High Tibet Welfare Expedition, which had suffered a number of logistical setbacks. The liturgical and oracular sequences of the trance ceremony were structured as follows:

1. **bsang** (3:47 to 9:20). A rhythmic chant. Near its end the pace of the recitations picks up in intensity until most of the last 14 lines of the ritual are inaudible. The bsang is made to the accompaniment of the drum and gshang. The bsang ritual culminates in the gods entering Pho-bo srid-rgyal, a development marked by his crying, “phaṭ!”

2. **Lha-rabs** (proclamation of the lineage of the deities) and 'phrin-bcol (entrusting of activities to the deities) (9:21 to 29:20). This section of the trance ceremony is characterized by poetic and often cryptic descriptions of the deities and their places of residence. The officiating god rKyang-khra announces his identity to those in attendance only well into this portion of the proceedings. Pho-bo srid-rgyal as this btsan spirit conjures a long line of protective dgra-lha and livestock deities. Interspersed between these native gods are occasional lines appealing to Buddhist protectors and sky-goers but very few proper names are articulated. Under possession, the timbre of the lha-pa’s voice is shallower. He plays his drum regularly and sometimes his gshang as well. The descant melody changes in pitch and tempo several times during this segment.

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33 The family history and activities of the lha-pa dPon-skya/Pho-bo lha-dbang are detailed in Bellezza 2005, pp. 110–141.

34 Information on this btsan, derived form the oral and literary traditions, is found in Bellezza 2005.
3. Lhung-btsan (the declamation of prophecies) (29:21 to 34:35). The gods declare that the High Tibet Welfare Expedition would indeed prove successful with all its aims being realized. There would however be challenges and we are told, “You make the prayer of clearing obstacles whatever place you go” (khyod sa-gar song-bar chad lam sel thon /). This segment also features the use of the drum and gshang. The enunciation of the words tends to be clear and measured, and the manner of chanting rhythmic.

4. gShegs-bskyod (the retreat of the deities from the lhapa and the return to their abodes) (34:36 to 39:30). rKyung-khra orders back the hosts of helping spirits under his charge to their homes in picturesque and stimulating language. The impression is one of tremendous activity taking place. This last part of the trance ceremony is musically identical with the preceding section; they are only differentiated from one another by what is being sung. The lhapa-bzhugs culminates with the word phat, indicating that Pho-bo srid-rgyal has returned to his normal frame of consciousness.

iii. The bsang

The fumigation ritual of Pho-bo srid-rgyal begins in a conventional fashion with a Buddhist dedication (Ins. 1–16). Technically speaking, it is not possible to fumigate or make any other type of action that could have any impact on the Buddha or other-worldly Buddhist protectors (’jig-rten las ’dus-pa’i srong-ma). In this theological context, the bsang becomes an offering of incense (bsang-mchod) rather than a cleansing procedure. In the first step of the performance, Pho-bo srid-rgyal calls upon the assistance of and takes refuge in Buddhism and its tutelary deities (yi-dam), sky-goers (mkha’-’gro), and protectors (srong-ma). This reflects the hierarchal arrangement of the deities in the trances of Upper Tibet; those of Buddhism watch over and orchestrate the actions of the ‘lesser’ divine members of the ceremony. It is popularly held by the spirit-mediums that all the transactions of the trance are made under the auspices of the Buddhist gods, which have full discretion over the spirits incumbent in the physical environment:

In. 1: Om A hum bdzra gu-ru padma siddhi hum.
In. 2: I offer the lama Dharma protector { / / } purification (bla-ma chos-skyong { / / } bsang { / }).
In. 3: I offer the objects of refuge Triple Gems purification (skyabs gnas dkon-mchog gsum-po bsang { / }).
In. 4: I offer the assembly of pacific and wrathful tutelary deities purification (yi-dam zhi khro’i lhapa bshogs bsang { / }).
In. 5: I offer the sky-goers, wealth lhapa and Buddhist Doctrine defenders purification (mkha’-’gro nor-lhapa bstban-skyong bsang { / }).
In. 6: Please receive these holy offerings (mchod-pa dam-pa ‘di bzhes la { / }).
In. 7: Please receive this adamantine libation (rdo-rje gser-skyems ‘di bzhes la { / }).
In. 8: Please carry out the activities to which you are entrusted (bcol-ba’i phrin-las sgrub gyur cig { / }).
Once the dedication is complete, there is a litany of Buddhist protective deities, some of which were originally enlisted from the indigenous pantheon (Ins. 17–28). These protectors (both minor and important) hold positions between the rarefied ontological plane of Buddhas and tantric tutelary gods and that of the genii loci. Like commanders on the battlefield, the Buddhist protectors mediate between the Buddhist sovereigns and the indigenous spirits (the foot troops who carry out the work of healing and combating demons). The *lha-srin sde-brgyad* are the eight orders of elemental spirits as conceived in Buddhist tradition (Ins. 29). They are found in the retinue of many a Buddhist protector. Each line of this segment of the ritual ends with *bsang* (I/we fumigate), as does much of the rest of the liturgy:

Ins. 9 to 16: <consists of a nearly identical repetition of the above lines>

... 

ln. 17: I fumigate Lha yi dbang-po brgya-byin (Indra).
ln. 18: I fumigate Lha-min dbang-po thag-bzang (a king of the demigods).
ln. 19: I fumigate Klu yi rgyal-po {dga’-po} (a king of the klu).
ln. 20: I fumigate Mi’-am skyes-mchog.
ln. 21: I fumigate gNod-sbyin gang-ba bzang-po.35
ln. 22: I fumigate the Dharma defender Ma-ha ka-la (mGon-po).
ln. 23: I fumigate gNod-sbyin shan-pa gri-thogs.36
ln. 24: I fumigate Srin-po {g.yu yi srog-bdag}.
ln. 25: I fumigate bDud-po re-ti ’gong-yag.37
ln. 26: I fumigate Chos-skyong gnod-sbyin dmar-po.38
ln. 27: I fumigate Lha-mo {cang-seng blo-Idan}.
ln. 28: I fumigate dGe-bsnyen rdo-rje [legs-pa].39
ln. 29: I fumigate the *lha-srin sde-brgyad* and their circles.
ln. 30: Please carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.

Now the focus of the *bsang* shifts to the native pantheon but with the generic kinds of figures found throughout the Tibetan cultural world. Perforce, many of these gods and goddesses have assumed Buddhist iconographic forms and classifications. Unlike the *bsang* of Karma rig’dzin, very few deities specific to the Upper Tibetan environment are heralded by Pho-bo srid-rgyal. I am of the opinion that the more standardized *bsang* of Pho-bo srid-rgyal is a liturgical innovation whose origin postdates the genre recited by Karma rig’dzin. Although there is an interpenetration of Buddhist

35 This god belongs to a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as Phyi yi sde-brgyad. This division of deities is commonly invoked during magic ceremonies. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, p. 254.
36 This god is part of a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as gSang-ba’i sde-brgyad (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 255, 259).
37 Originally, a chief *bdud* in the retinue of the Bon deity Mi-bdud ’byams-pa. According to Buddhist reckonings, he is a member of a subdivision of the Dregs-pa sde-brgyad known as gSang-ba’i sde-brgyad (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 254, 259, 274, 288).
38 This is the well known protector Ts'i’u dmar-po, a chief of the *btsan*. This god is scrutinized in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 166–176.
deities in Karma rig-dzin’s bsang, it is largely founded upon native or bon liturgical traditions.

The first deity mentioned, Klu-rgyal dung-skyong, is a popular king of the klu who is believed to reside in many places across the plateau (ln. 31). Reference to the dgra-lha of the right shoulder and the ma-mo of the left shoulder is an old Tibetan belief concerning the relative position of gender-specific protectors on the human body (lns. 38, 39). In addition to the ubiquitous sde-brgyad and lha-btsan (lns. 40, 41), there are what appear to be personal guardians who reside inside the human body (lns. 42, 43). Localized and astrological divinities are accorded a number of lines in the recitations (lns. 44, 49–53). These are immediately followed by celebrated Buddhist sa-bdag (earth sovereigns) (lns. 56, 57). Two lines are also devoted to the ‘go-bu’i lha-inga, the quintet of guardian spirits who are thought to have various seats on the human body (ln. 60, 61):

In. 31: Kye! We offer to the excellent klu, Klu-rgyal dung-skyong.
In. 32: Nag-po {//}.
In. 33: {///}.40
In. 34: In the center (dbus-phyogs).
In. 35: To the sde-brgyad and their retinues in [all] directions (phyogs gi sde-brgyad 'khor-bcas la /),
In. 36: Receive this adamantine libation,
In. 37: And please carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.
In. 38: I fumigate the dgra-lha manifestations of the right shoulder (dpung g.yas dgra-lha’i sprul-pa bsang /).
In. 39: I fumigate the ma-mo manifestations of the left shoulder.
In. 40: I fumigate the sde-brgyad manifestations of the right side of the body (glo g.yas sde-brgyad sprul-pa bsang /).
In. 41: I fumigate the lha-btsan manifestations of the left side of the body.
In. 42: I fumigate the gza’-bdud and gnyan-bdud manifestations [in],
In. 43: The eyes, heart and liver, these three (mig dang snying dang mchin-pa gsum/ gza’-bdud gnyan-bdud sprul-pa bsang /).
In. 44: gZhi-bdag manifestations and their retinues,
In. 45: Carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.
Ins. 46–48: <a largely repetitive sequence pertaining to Buddhist protection and refuge>
In. 49: I fumigate the seventy-five dpal-mgon (minor protectors often of the yul-lha class).
In. 50: I fumigate the haughty (dregs-pa) lha-srin sde-brgyad.
In. 51: I fumigate the five orders (sde-inga) of Srid-pa’i gza’-chen (Great Planets of Existence).
In. 52: I fumigate [the deities] of the year, month, day, and time {//} (lo zla zhag dus {//} / bsang /).
In. 53: All the yul-lha and treasure protectors,
In. 54: With your retinues please receive this libation (yul-lha gter-srung ma-lus pa’i khor-cas gser-skyems ’di bzhes la /).

40 Three slashes enclosed in brackets designates that an entire line in the recording is incomprehensible.
Indigenous and Buddhist deities are unabashedly interwoven in the next segment of the bsang (lns. 63–69). One might see this as a sign of the tremendous commitment that Pho-bo srid-rgyal has to Buddhism and indeed, this is the case. Although he will soon be possessed by local spirits and his consciousness replaced by theirs, his faith lies squarely with the divinities and tenets of Vajrayāna Buddhism. His religion, his conceptual and affective beacon, will see him through the difficult transition and keep him safe while his own consciousness rests somewhat precariously in the mirror (gling) of the trance ceremony. Yet, I think the interposition of native and Buddhist motifs must be seen in a historical light as well. These represent two cultural categories of largely independent historical genesis that have become intermingled over the centuries. Without critical self-reflection on the part of contemporary lha-pa, indigenous and Buddhist religious traditions have been brought together in the bsang as mutually beneficial forces, which reinforce the efficacy of one another. At least as regards the trance ceremonies of the spirit-mediums, these disparate traditions can be seen as having an equivalent function and worth. Pho-bo srid-rgyal concludes these recitations by offering the deities and his root lama the purification of incense (lns. 71–73):

ln. 63: To all the gzhi-bdag of tangible existence and their circles,
ln. 64: Please receive these adamantine offerings and incense (snang-srid gzhi-bdag 'khor-bcas la / rdo rdo-rje bsang mchod 'di bzhes la /).
ln. 65: Carry out the activities to which you have been entrusted.
ln. 66: I fumigate the glorious lamas of {ordinary and special consummations} (mchog thun dngos-grub bsang /).
ln. 67: I fumigate the pilgrimage protectors of the ocean of Buddhist scriptures and sky-goers (rgyud-sde rgya-ntsho'i gnas-srung mkha'-gro bsang /).
ln. 68: Mother protectors, sa-bdag and {Tshe-ring} mched-Inga to you,

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41 According to the Vaidūrya dkar po, this well known sa-bdag has human, canine, avian, and serpentine anatomical features (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 264).
42 According to the Vaidūrya dkar po, she holds a vessel at her breast and is yellow in color (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 264, 265).
43 The various mGon-po often appear in a group of seventy-five members. They are described in detail in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, pp. 38–67.
In. 69: I give offerings of incense, perfectly carry out our wishes (ma-
mgon sa-bdag (tsho-ring) mched-linga la / bsam-mchod 'bul-lo bsam-don
lhu-'grub mdzod /).

In. 70: Om Arya kro ta hu lu sarba tista bdzra hum phat.

In. 71: I fumigate the three hundred and sixty yi-dam.

In. 72: I fumigate the root lama of myself in this period (rang-rang dus
da rtsa-ba'i bla-ma bsang /).

In. 73: [I fumigate] the twelve brtan-ma.

The last segment of Pho-bo srid-rgyal’s bsang has a very different quality
about it than the previous ones. For one thing, the chanting is now much
more musical and the tempo livelier. The pace of the performance picks up
to the point that many of the last lines are completely inaudible. It is thought
that the deities of the trance having been beckoned to the ritual venue are
descending upon the spirit-medium’s gling and his very body. As his own
consciousness begins to dim, he beseeches his Buddhist allies to remember
and help him (Ins. 74–77). In the recitations he asks them to ‘be aware of
him’ or ‘think about him’, rendered by the verb mkhyen. In a last self-
conscious act he earnestly prays to his root lama (rtsa-ba’i bla-ma) to stay
with him (In. 78). The moment of possession is drawing close for Pho-bo
srid-rgyal because in rapidly sung lines he announces the presence of its
gods. First they appear as a generic group, merely known as the sde-brgyad
(In. 80). But in the course of scant seconds, the chief of the possessing spirits
is made known to the spirit-medium; it is an aspect of the great mountain
god gNyan-chen thang-lha in his most pacific form (Ins. 81–86). As Pho-bo
srid-rgyal’s consciousness slips from his body, this god is described in the
 guise of a long life deity holding a silver urn and draped arrow. Other lines
follow but most of them are incomprehensible and what can be gleaned has
little context (Ins. 87–99). The import of these recitations appears to be that
more and more gods and goddesses are entering the spirit-medium and
gling, as his consciousness is displaced to a special site in the gling:

In. 74: Kye! Please think about me tutelary god Gu-ru drag-po (yi-dam
gu-ru drag-po mkhyen /).

In. 75: Please think about me great mothers (yum-chen) and sky-goers.

In. 76: { /// }

In. 77: Please think about me the root lama of myself.

In. 78: I pray to you, please stay above the crown of my head (gsol-ba
‘debs so spyi-bo’i gtsug du bzhugs /).

In. 79: { /// }

In. 80: Circle of lha sde-brgyad { /// }.

In. 81: The power master of the world lha (‘dzam-gling lha yi mthu
bdag /).

In. 82: Thang-lha of the world (‘dzam-gling thang-lha).

In. 83: The world’s master of power gNyan-chen thang-lha (‘dzam-gling
mthu-bdag gnyan-chen thang-lha /).

In. 84: You ride on a light orange horse of the lha mount (chibs su lha-reta
ngang-dkar bcibs /).

In. 85: You [hold a draped arrow] in your right hand (phyag g-yas
{mda’-dar bsnams /).
You hold a white silver urn (dngul-dkar bum-pa) in your left hand.

Great mothers and sky-goers.

bTsan-god nor-bu spun-bdun (Wild bTsan Jewel Seven Brothers).

Relying on the borrowed body of the lha-pa, rKyang-khra announces his identity after vividly describing his abode. The god warbles, “Hey (A kho-re), the borrowed body of me, yeah (nga), gZugs mchor-po (Handsome Body). Hey, if you do not know the body of me, yeah, bTsan mchor-po (Handsome bTsan), yeah, it is me the eastern [jewel of] the world, hey, known as rKyang-khra.” Poetic and often enigmatic verses mark the utterances of the possessing deities. I shall explore these and other verbal aspects of the trance ceremonies of Upper Tibet in due course.

Bibliography


\[ nga gzugs mchor po'i rang las la A kho re g.yar po de \| nga btsan mchor po'i rang las la A kho re ma shes na \| nga shar [nor bu']i ]dzam gling la A kho re rkyang khra zhig zlo / . Diemberger (2005: 113–115) provides an unannotated translation (Tibetan words phonetically rendered, and without the benefit of the Tibetan text) of a possessing deity, an emanation of rTa-rgo, announcing his presence in old style language to those in attendance. This occurred in the trance ceremony of a female spirit-medium (lha-bka'-ma) from Ngam-ring.\]
Spirit mediums of Upper Tibet


gNyin chen g.ya spangs (= g.ya’ spang) pa’i mchod sprin nam mkha’ ’brug sgra, by Ngag-dbang bstan-pa’i rdo-rje. Manuscript of seven folios.


P1: Karma rig-’dzin donning his ritual attire before the start of the trance ceremony.

P2: Karma rig-’dzin as the god bDud-btsan dmar-po receiving an offering scarf (kha-btags) from one of the supplicants. Note the mda’-dar in the left hand of the spirit-medium.
Spirit-mediums of Upper Tibet

P3: Pho-bo srid-rgyal with an assistant preparing the altar for his trance ceremony.

P4: Pho-bo srid-rgyal possessed by Kyang-khrn forcefully recalls the lineage of the deities while playing his big drum (rnga-chen) and gshang.