

Aspects of the Traditional Gambling Game known as *Sho* in Modern Lhasa — religious and gendered worldviews infusing the Tibetan dice game — ¹

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1. Introduction

That Tibetans love gambling may be a somewhat stereotypical view shared among outsiders who have firsthand experiences in culturally Tibetan areas. In contemporary Lhasa, where I have lived for some years, it is not very difficult to come across situations that would support this conventional view. Sichuan style Mahjong has evidently been popular among the locals, regardless of generation, gender and locality, for perhaps several decades. Very recently, playing cards (*tag se*)² whilst smoking and drinking has been one of the most favourite Lhasan pastimes, particularly among young urban males. Certainly, modern Lhasans have very rapidly developed a particular predilection for Chinese or modern styles of gambling and gaming. This is actually concurrent with, or reflected in, the present situation in Lhasa, within which Chinese customs and culture have been introduced on a massive scale.

Despite the recent popularity of imported games, the established status of a traditional Tibetan gambling game continues to attract Tibetan males across the generations. This game is called *sho rtsed*, but more commonly, just *sho* (literally meaning a dice).³ In modern Lhasa, it is relatively easy to encounter the loud shouting of *sho* players in local teahouses, pubs, streets and picnic places (*gling ga*). *Sho* has indeed been one of the prevailing Tibetan national games and, most importantly, many locals seem to perceive it as quintessentially

¹ This article was originally written for the workshop ‘Playing Games in East Asia – Gaming & Gambling’, held at the University of Hong Kong on the 28th and 29th August, 2010.

² In this article I employ the Wylie system in transliterating Tibetan words. Tibetan words in current circulation amongst English speakers are given phonetic representations (e.g. Palden Lhamo).

³ In Tibetan, to play a gambling game involving dice is termed *sho rgyag* or *cho lo 'gyed*. *Cho-lo* is another word for a dice. In this article, following the most ubiquitous usage, I employ the Tibetan word, *sho*, to designate a dice or a dice gambling game.

Tibetan. Whether wagering for money or not, this dice game is played extensively and with much enthusiasm across the urban-rural divide, regardless of one's socio-economic position, and over the whole area of Central Tibet (U-Tsang).⁴

In this article, I want to introduce the background to and perspectives on this popular yet little studied Tibetan gambling game, analysing its various cultural and social aspects using ethnographic data gathered in Lhasa in 2010. To start with I will present some evidence of *sho* in previous times as found in existing (if significantly scant) historical records. Then I will move to the present and highlight some social aspects, such as issues of gender and modern Tibetan identity revolving around *sho*. The rules will also be introduced in detail together with a variety of intriguing oral "dice-prayers" (*sho bshad*) uttered by the enthusiastic players. The final section will deal with the profound, inextricable associations between *sho* and some supernatural or divine figures in Buddhist and Tibetan folk traditions.

Through exploring different aspects of *sho*, it is my hope to demonstrate the various ways in which this traditional gambling is (and has been) informed by and embedded in the Tibetan socio-religious worldviews and moralities engaged in by the people in Lhasa. In so doing, I aim to show that gambling may be a productive arena of research through which significant aspects of a people and their society may be appreciated.

2. *Sho* in history

In pre-modern Lhasa there were some outsiders who observed and reported the Tibetan predilection for gambling, including *sho*. Charles Bell (1924), a British colonial officer in Tibet and neighbouring regions, reports that during the 'national pastime' of picnicking in Lhasa the gambling practices of *sho* and *sbag*⁵ were prominently ob-

⁴ According to my Tibetan informants from outside Central Tibet: Amdo (Qinghai Province and some parts of Gansu) and Kham (approximately, the western half of Sichuan Province and parts of Qinghai and Tibet Autonomous Region), *sho* is not commonly played among the Tibetan people living there. As for the exile community in India, as far as my observation in 2000 suggests, *sho* appears to be played in Dharamsala by some men. However, most of these players are *gsar 'byor* (new arrivals) who recently crossed the Himalaya and settled in the community.

⁵ A Tibetan traditional game of *sbag* is often translated as dominoes, but looking at its principles it can be termed a Tibetan mahjong. As to its rules and historical development, see Wang (1995) and Otani (2003). In contemporary Lhasa there are very few who can play *sbag*, perhaps partly because of the dominance of Chinese mahjong.

served. He points out that “(g)ambling has always been rife (ibid. 267)”; and that “[s]ho is the national gambling game, played by all Tibetans, high and low, the peasantry included (ibid. 265).” Since Charles Bell had firsthand experiences of Tibetan cultures for over a decade, and applied his scholarly eyes to them, his account is worth noting. It also resonates with those of other witnesses, including Ekai Kawaguchi, a Japanese monk who penetrated ‘closed door’ Tibet in 1900, making deprecating remarks about the monks’ enjoyment of *sho*, which he appeared to perceive as a corruption (e.g. 1978: 129).

With regard to the period before the nineteenth century, it would be highly difficult to follow the historical traces of *sho* gambling. Within Tibetan literary traditions, documentation of the daily practices of ordinary people has been uncommon, including traditional gambling. However, the next example is intriguing.



Fig. 1. A Mural Painting in the Potala Palace.

Fig. 1 is a part of a mural painting found in the east entrance of the white part (*pho brang dkar po*) of the Potala Palace. This image unambiguously depicts the picnic site where some aristocrats enjoy gambling while listening to live folk music. In the centre the picnickers seem to enjoy the Tibetan mahjong called *shag*, and at the bottom right it is clear that three men play *sho* (one man is about to throw the dice, while the other appears to be listening to dice-prayers uttered by the thrower). Jiayang and Wang (2000) and Otani (2003),⁶ intro-

⁶ Otani’s comparative analysis of *sho* (2003) is enormously interesting. By focusing

duce this painting, saying that it was painted during the Qing Dynasty (1636[44]-1912). Although the construction of the Potala Palace was completed by the end of the seventeenth century, it seems hasty, given the fact that the Potala buildings and their numerous murals underwent repetitive refurbishments, to conclude that *sho* (and *sbag*) existed three centuries ago. While accurately dating this painting is beyond the scope of this article, it would be presumable that *sho* was played during and/or before the nineteenth century.

Another example, which I want to introduce, attempts to trace the origin/existence of *sho* much further back. Wang (1995), in his discussion of the origin of *sho*, encourages us to look at the legend of Milarepa (1052-1135), one of the most famous yogis in the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. Wang points out that the legend depicts the grandfather of Milarepa as addicted to *sho*, so much so that he was forced to abandon his family fortune after losing at *sho*. Based on this part of the legend, Wang concludes that *sho* gambling was already played at least in the end of the tenth century or the beginning of the eleventh century. This seems to be a quick judgement, because the account he focuses on was written in the fifteenth century. What could be learnt from the legend would be that *sho* might be played when the legend was written, and even so, the form and principle of *sho* gambling in the fifteenth century might be radically different from those we see today. However, Wang's claim, although unconvincing, has something we cannot simply dismiss in the light of the following.

The epic of King Gesar, which is believed to be one thousand years old, has been transmitted through bards from its inception until the present day. In this legend, Gesar, the superhuman or divine hero, defeats various enemies confronting him. On one occasion Gesar beats his enemy in a game of *sho* by performing the impossible act of casting the number thirteen with only two dices. This famous narrative seems to be seriously taken by some knowledgeable locals, including Dechen Drokhar (2003: 1), a renowned Tibetan folklorist of many literary arts, providing Tibetans with conviction in the ancient origin of *sho*. It is true that in the Tibetan Empire (c. 600 – c. 850), dice of oblong shape with no more than 1-4 points was used to design some laws and regulations; to practise divinations (cf. Dotson 2007;

on the principles of the game, he points out some analogies between *sho* and traditional Chinese and Korean dice games, implying that *sho* is not specifically Tibetan. He notes various levels of similarities between *sho* and games played over East Asia, both in the past and present. It seems to me that Otani's point is not just to degrade the ethnic uniqueness of *sho*, but to allude to the historical interaction of dice games in the whole of East Asia, thus situating *sho* as a culturally Asian gambling game.

Nishida 2008). However, it is speculative to assert the existence of *sho* gambling more than one millennium ago. Further support for this assertion may perhaps be found in future textual research on the Dunhuang manuscripts and other ancient documents dealing with the use of dice.

3. Social aspects of *sho* in contemporary Lhasa

In this section I want to move back to the present, discussing some social aspects surrounding *sho*, which can be observed in contemporary Lhasa.

Some locals may say mahjong for the young, *sho* for the seniors, and it is true that such preferences between age groups do exist. However, as far as my observations go, as a resident of Lhasa, *sho* is one of the games that Tibetans of all generations love playing. The kit for *sho* gambling is not large and heavy. Hence, since the kit is easy to carry, *sho* can be played virtually wherever the players want – in tea-houses and pubs; on the streets and grasslands. It is portable, therefore less restricted in terms of space for playing. However, it is slightly restrictive in terms of time. For example, it is believed to be very inauspicious to play *sho* on the New Year's Day of the traditional Tibetan calendar. In throwing dice, one needs to bring down the dice-cup on the pad. This act of making the cup upside down (*kha bub*) reminds the Tibetans of the funeral period. During some dates (or most preferably forty-nine days) after the death of one's family member, every morning butter tea is poured into the dead person's cup. Naturally nobody drinks it, the inside is thrown away after some time, and the emptied cup must be put upside down. It is an act intended to make the wandering consciousness (*rnam shes*) of the dead person not notice his or her emptied cup. It is believed that if he or she saw it, it would induce gravely sad feelings. For many Tibetans butter tea is vital for life, and one's own cup for butter tea is, therefore, indispensable to sustain one's life. Thus turning one's cup, or any cup, upside down is considered to be a bad omen, except in the case of some serious monks and nuns who, before sleep at night, intentionally do this act in *memento mori*.

The temporal prohibition of playing *sho*⁷ sounds very modest in comparison with that in terms of gender. In Lhasa and neighbouring areas, it is considered inappropriate or even evil (*sdug po*) if women play *sho*, which is surprising and noteworthy considering the fact that

⁷ Apart from the point mentioned above, on some sacred Buddhist dates, such as Sakadawa, many people tend to avoid playing *sho*.

if one is male *sho* is freely and extensively played regardless of one's socio-economic position, across the generations and rural-urban divide. Since earlier times, even people such as nomads, farmers and serfs have played *sho*, the sole criteria for participation being to be male. In Shigatse and the surrounding areas (Tsang), the prohibition seems less restrictive, so women can play at least in private spaces, but in Lhasa, the moral code is unambiguously manifest. This might be related to the conventional association between gambling and conceptions of manliness. To this I could add another possibility: traditional preconceptions regarding women, partly informed by Buddhism, seem to be operating to regulate their participation.

Indeed, gender stereotypes pervade Tibetan social conceptions and language itself. Most common is the word, *skye dman* (inferior birth), to signify women. This demeaning trope is (and has for some centuries been) employed both in the colloquial and literary language; misogyny and androcentrism are truly pervasive in many Buddhist texts (Gyatso and Havnevik 2006: 9-10). To be born as a woman means having bad karma and low capability in terms of Buddhist means and goals. This perceived inferiority of women, which is still durable and powerful, may underlie the exclusion of women from some social activities, including playing *sho*. However, questions remain, such as why the women in Shigatse and its surrounds are *not* prohibited from playing *sho*. Why can Lhasan women play Chinese mahjong and its Tibetan counterpart, *sbag*, even wagering for money, but not *sho*? The sheer gender ideology, which most local men would support with regards to *sho*, is not convincing enough to explain the strict exclusion of women in Lhasa, and there seems to me something more fundamental in this social mechanism. I will come back to this point later, and present an answer to this riddle.

Another social aspect involving *sho*, which I want to stress, is related to Tibetan consciousness regarding national identity. Against the backdrop of increasing Chinese political and cultural influences, it seems natural for some concerned Tibetans to nurture acute sentiments concerning disappearing national and cultural identity (e.g. Murakami 2009; 2011). While fully accommodating Chinese modernity (i.e. the political economy endorsed by the socialist ideal and capitalism) in order to secure their economic interests, simultaneously, the desire to reaffirm and reassert Tibetan national distinctiveness has sometimes erupted in an abrupt manner – the demonstrations and violence in the March 2008 being a poignant example. However, more often, such Tibetan reactions, due to political surveillance, tend to emerge in oblique and passive forms: their national passion and belief being expressed through forms of art, such as the metaphorical

lyrics of pop songs, or publicly burning ethnic clothes made of animal skin following the Dalai Lama's announcement of ecological and Buddhist concern on killing,⁸ or the popular disregard for the Panchen Lama recognised by Chinese authorities⁹. These kinds of examples are numerous, and in these I would include the recent popularity of *sho* among the youth. For the last few years, I have noticed more youth playing *sho* in the streets and teahouses, which is quite surprising compared to a decade ago, when most players appeared senior. "Mahjong is a Chinese game, so meaningless," some say. In this situation of ethnic animosity it can be said that playing *sho* is a somewhat antagonistic expression, a form of articulating Tibetan identity; a moderate manifestation of pride and culture. It is true to say that Chinese mahjong already occupies such a dominant place in contemporary Tibetan pastimes, almost displacing *sho*.¹⁰ Despite, or rather because of this, playing *sho* tends to be viewed as a symbol of Tibetan tradition and identity that needs to be consciously protected.



Fig. 2. Tibetains playing *Sho* in a local Teahouse.

⁸ Incidents of public burning are reported in some articles of TibetInfoNet (<http://www.tibetinfo.net>).

⁹ Historically, successive Panchen Lamas are the religious and political leaders of the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism, after the Dalai Lama. The present Panchen Lama, who was chosen by the Chinese authorities after their refusal to acknowledge the boy selected by the Dalai Lama, is now the vice president of the Buddhist Association of China, and the government seems to attempt to authorise him as the head of the followers of Tibetan Buddhism in China.

¹⁰ This, I would say, may be partly because participation in mahjong is not regulated on the basis of gender.

4. Rules of the game¹¹

The rules of *sho* are more complicated than is apparent from watching the game, and actually the players need to make quick, sophisticated calculations during the game. Dechen Drokhar, a local female folklorist and editor of *sho bshad* (dice-prayers), notes that if children play *sho*, the gates of their intellect can be opened (*blo sgo 'byed thub pa*); so it will be beneficial for their mode of thinking (2003: 2). It is true to say that any beginner of *sho* would be surprised at skilled players' computations.

The rules vary in accordance with different localities and possibly with different temporalities. The set of rules described below is one I learned in contemporary Lhasa. To play *sho*, the following objects are necessary: two *sho* (dice) with the spots on sides denoting 1 and 4 are red, and the others are in black or blue; *sho gdan* – a round yak leather pad especially made for the *sho* game; *sho phor* – a wooden dice cup, whose size and shape are almost identical to those of ordinary butter tea cup, except that there is a tiny hole at its bottom which functions as an air outlet; sixty-four *rde'u* – pebbles – shells (*'gron bu*) would normally be used these days; *lag khyi* (or *lag skyi*)¹² – coins of two or three kinds, for each set of which nine is needed.

Sho can be played by two or three people, or two pairs of people. They are respectively called, *gnyis 'dzing*, *gsum 'dzing* and *mi gnyis gnyis cha byed pa'i cha 'dzing*.

¹¹ Despite the fact that the many academics who have lived in Tibet have been reporting the presence of the *sho* gambling game for almost a century, to my knowledge, there are virtually no substantial explanations of its rules, either in English or Japanese. Therefore, in this section, rules including some minor norms and customs, are presented in detail to help the readers to capture the image of *sho* as precisely as possible.

¹² *Lag-khyi* are usually coins of different localities and temporalities. For example, Nepalese or Indian coins can be used. Some kinds of fabricated old coins of the Republic of China and Qing Dynasty are also preferred in contemporary Lhasa. The iron fragment called *dgu mig* (literally, "nine eyes") can be substitutes for coins. *Dgu mig* is a small flat iron, whose surface has nine holes. In previous times, *dgu mig* was used tied together to make armour. In the Tibetan symbolic world, the number nine signifies protection against obstacles, therefore, *dgu mig* is normally used as a talisman among the Lhasan locals.



Fig.3. *Sho set.*

At the start of the *sho* game, the pad is placed in the centre, and the sixty-four shells spread in a loose circle around the pad, each player holds nine coins of the same kind. The players bring the dice cup with the two dice inside down upon the pad and make their coins proceed across the shells. This is called *la rgyag* in Tibetan, meaning "to pass over mountains", the player moving according to the total number of the dices thrown. The object of game is to make all one's coins pass over all sixty-four shells, the winner of the game being the one who first succeeds in this.

During the first round, each player can place (*'dzugs*) two coins, but from the second round onwards they can place only one. Different coins cannot exist at the same points. If there are one or more of one's opponent's coins at the point where one wants to place or move his own, and if the number of coins he wants to move is same or more than those of the opponent, he can "kill" (*gsod*) the opponent's coin(s), and those coin(s) will go back into the hands of opponent. If the player succeeds in killing an opponent's coin(s) or piling up his coins in the shell field, or if he gets *pa ra* – throws the number one with both dice – he will be entitled to throw the dice once again. If the player succeeds in piling up all of his nine coins in the shell field, this is called *dgu mo* (literally, "nine women"), which is the best and most powerful position to be in killing others' coins.

| Numbers (Probabilities) | Spellings ^{13*} (Pronunciations) in <i>sho</i> | Lhasa dialect in counting |
|----------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| 2 (1/36) | <i>pa ra</i> (para) | <i>gnyis</i> (ni) |
| 3 (2/36) | <i>sug</i> (sug) | <i>gsum</i> (sum) |
| 4 (3/36) | <i>tshigs</i> (tshig) or <i>tsig gi</i> (tsigi) | <i>bzhi</i> (shi) |
| 5 (4/36) | <i>kha</i> (ka) | <i>lnga</i> (nga) |
| 6 (5/36) | <i>'brug</i> (durg) or <i>drug</i> (tug) | <i>drug</i> (tug) |
| 7 (6/36) | <i>ri</i> (ri) or <i>sdig</i> (dig) | <i>bdun</i> (dun) |
| 8 (5/36) | <i>sha</i> (sha) | <i>brgyad</i> (ge) |
| 9 (4/36) | <i>dgu</i> (gu) | <i>dgu</i> (gu) |
| 10 (3/36) | <i>chu</i> (chu) | <i>bcu</i> (chu) |
| 11 (2/36) | <i>rdog</i> (do) or <i>thog</i> (tho) | <i>bcu-gcig</i> (chuchi) |
| 12 (1/36) | <i>'jang</i> (jang) | <i>bcu-gnyis</i> (chuni) |

Fig. 4. Counting in the *Sho* Game and Equivalent Terms in Lhasa Dialect.

There are some other norms observed in the game. The coins must proceed in the clockwise direction, the direction believed sacred and appropriate according to Tibetan Buddhist custom. If one plays in the morning, the eldest player should start casting the dice, if in afternoon, the youngest (*snga dro che*, *dgong dro chung*). However, from the second match, the winner of the previous casts the dice first. There is also a special way of designating the numbers of the total spots of two dice, which is very different in Tibetan from the usual pronunciation of numbers (see Fig. 4).

It may be unsurprising that drinking tends to systematically accompany the game, making *sho* a drinking as well as a gambling game. If one gets the number *pa ra* (2), one needs to drink one's glass of *chang* (Tibetan barley alcohol) or beer.¹⁴ If one gets *sug* (3), one's opponent(s) need to drink their glasses. If one gets *'jang* (12), all the spectators need to drink their glasses. If one mistakenly drops the dice out of the cup or pad, or if one's miscounting of the placed coins is pointed out by others, one needs to drink one's glass. These drinking penalties could be substituted with a certain amount of payment, and this option is decided before the game starts. As Fig. 4 shows, the probabilities of getting *pa ra* (2), *sug* (3) and *'jang* (12) are very small,

¹³ These vary according to different areas and players.

¹⁴ An enthusiastic player might sprinkle *chang* over the two dice of *pa ra* with his finger, a small ritual which is called *pa ra chang*. *Pa ra* is indeed known as 'lucky spots,' since the player can throw once more if he has thrown a *pa ra*.

their total is 4/36 (1/9). However, additional rules such as these tend to make the game more cheerful and exciting.

Some other minor rules:

- During the first round, if one gets *pa ra* (2) or *sug* (3), he can place three coins down instead of two.
- During the first round, if the second (or third) player gets the same number as the first (or second), he can kill the opponent's two coins and place three coins of his own down. The opponent can place two coins down on the following throw.
- If one cannot find any point to place or move his coin(s) to – one cannot place one's coin(s) at the point where the opponent's coins outnumber one's own – one can kill the coins of one's opponent however many they are, and place one's coins equal to the number of coins killed, plus one. For example, if one has no choice but to kill three of one's opponent's coins, one can place four coins at the point where one's opponent's coins used to exist.
- If one gets *pa ra* (2), there are actually two choices: to throw the dice once more (as mentioned above) or to place two coins down. The latter may be chosen when one has no possibility of killing the opponent's coin(s).
- Except for in the first round, if it happens that one does not have any coins in the shell field, and one gets *dgu* (9) with a combination of throwing a 3 and a 6, one can place all nine coins. This special *dgu* is called *dgu sna kyog*, literally meaning "9 crooked nose." Some of my informants told me that this name came about because the spots on the face of the dice that number 3 are arranged diagonally, forming a point which looks a crooked nose.¹⁵
- If the thrown dices are piled up one after the other, this is called *sho rtseg*. If this happens, the thrower is entitled to be gifted the whole *sho kit*, on the condition that he can smoothly utter a particular lucky expression, the phrasing of which varies according to the localities and persons. In the case of Lhasa, for example, *pa su rtsi kha drug ri ma, sha dgu chu rdog 'jang mos chod, sho dang lag kyi sbrum bug sho phor dang, rdab se sho gdan bcas pa nga la thob* (The dice-divination cut [the whole

¹⁵ However, it seems to me that some traditional symbolism might be operating in this revolutionary rule. The dice faces of both 3 and 6 are in black. Therefore, throwing these two can be referred to as *dgu nag po* or "black nine." In Tibetan symbolism, the number nine is considered a perfected protection or power; black being a most inauspicious colour.

numbers of] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. The dice, coins, shells, cup and pad: I got all of them!).¹⁶

5. *Sho-bshad* – prayers to win –

Sho in itself is a complex and interesting game, but one can add, with linguistic skills and characters, another exciting element to this dice gambling: dice-prayers or *sho bshad* (“shobshey” in pronunciation). In playing *sho*, it is not uncommon that the players demonstrate their favourite *sho bshad* while praying for the dice to fall in their favour. Most interestingly, these are not just simple prayers, but their contents poignantly reflect Tibetan customs, moralities and worldviews, etc, some of which are usually hidden from social view. The nature of *sho bshad* is, indeed, down-to-earth, unreserved and exposing, and, as Dechen Drokar, the editor of *sho bshad*, points out (2003: 3), their various contents “have intimate relations to actual lives” (*tsho ba dngos dang 'brel ba dam zab yod pa*). *Sho bshad* as a “literary art” (ibid.: 4) is fascinating and informative, and can even be described as one of the enduring genres of oral literature in which Tibetans excel, both in secular and religious spheres.¹⁷

Sho bshad varies according to areas, villages and persons, and its wording and contents can be improvised under the influence of alcohol. It is thus susceptible to the tastes of the respective players, and also to the socio-temporal situations in which they live. In what follows, I want to present some representative *sho bshad* that I collected in Lhasa in 2010.

With regards to its structure, at the beginning of *sho bshad*, the number the players desire is shouted, and the verses follow this, which could be two, four or more lined. Usually, *sho bshad* is aimed at one or two numbers of the dice.

Firstly, straight prayers for *pa-ra* (2):

pa ra dpal 'bar bkra shis bzhugs

Para, the Auspicious Splendour,
come!

¹⁶ This phrase is introduced in Dechen Drokar (2003: 3). The one that I collected from one of my informants is slightly longer. It may be a personal improvisation motivated by his sense of fun. In his version, after the main expression, follows the expression: *rgyu yo na sprod, sprod rgyu med na pus mo tshugs* (If you have treasure, give it to me. If you don't, kneel down!).

¹⁷ In addition to high literature such as the Epic of King Gesar, these oral literatures include various Buddhist prayers, poems created by diverse Buddhist saints (e.g. Milarepa and the Sixth Dalai Lama), popular maxims such as *Sa skya legs bshad*, and a variety of widespread verses and proverbs (*gtam dpe*).

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>rgyang mkhan <u>rda yi su khe red</u></i> | The dice thrower is [now] <u>Daisuke!</u> |
| <i>yang steng lha la bzhugs pa'i pa ra bzhugs</i> | Para, who lives in the higher realm of gods, come! |
| <i>'og klu la bzhugs pa'i pa ra bzhugs</i> | Para, who lives in the under- ground realm of naga, come! |
| <i>bar btsan la bzhugs pa'i pa ra bzhugs</i> | Para, who lives in the intermedi- ate realm of tsen, come! |

In the second line, one needs to put one's own name in place of the underlined (as I have placed my name, Daisuke above). The second verse evidently demonstrates the traditional Tibetan worldview, in which three realms are composed vertically of the gods (*lha*), naga or serpent deity (*klu*), and spirit (*btsan*), inhabiting the sky, underground and inbetween, or on the ground, respectively.

* * *

The next ones are on (Buddhist) moralities; both are prayers for *sha* (8):

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>bshan pa la sgang la gri bdar dus</i> | When a butcher sharpens his knife at a pass, |
| <i>rgan po thang sder la ngu shor</i> | An old man cries in a vast plain. |
| <i>shar chu'i phug nas chu zhig len</i> | Bring water from the cave of the eastern spring, |
| <i>'grul pa gal chen skad shig btang</i> | [And] call the important guest. |

Near Sera monastery in Lhasa there is a renowned spring, the sacred water of which is believed to be effective in curing digestive problems.

* * *

The next ones are sarcastic indictments of Buddhist figures; both are prayers for *ri* or *sdig* (7):

| | |
|--|---|
| <i>sdig pa'i khro chung sgal par 'khur</i> | [He] carries sinful small anger on his back, |
| <i>kha nas om bzang ma ni drangs</i> | [But] from his mouth, recites mantra nicely. |

sdig gsum mi bsags bla mas gsungs A lama says, "Don't pile up your
sins."
bla ma khong nyid gang 'dod byas [But] the lama himself is doing
whatever he desires.

In the second one, *sdig gsum* seems to be a transformation of a widespread Buddhist term, *dug gsum* (three poisons [of mind]), to signify and emphasise *sdig*, meaning misdeeds or misdemeanours.

* * *

Sexual themes seem to be the favourite among *sho* players, constituting a good proportion of the whole *sho bshad*, so I will introduce a relatively decent one here:

gug gug ma byed stu mthong Don't bow down, or your cunt
will be exposed!
stu'i nang nas 'bu don From its inside, insects (lice) will
come out!

In old Tibet, no underclothing was used when wearing traditional ethnic clothes. The above is a mockery of an old unmarried woman, assumed to never have had sexual intercourse.

* * *

The average altitude of the Tibetan plateau is more than 4,000 metres above sea level. Its arctic, and harsh environment is also a favourite topic:

ri sdings sdings gla ba nyal sa red [The top of] a flat mountain is
where a musk deer sleeps.
nyal drag na gla ba 'chi sa red If it sleeps for a long time, the
place becomes where the deer
will die.

dgun chu rta la ma ster Don't give wintry water to a
horse,
rta pho grang ngad kyis shi yong or the horse will die of cold.

The first verse is used for *ri* (7), the second for *dgu* (9) only, or *dgu* (9) and *chu* (10).

* * *

The following ones are about food, happiness and humour. These topics may be most acceptable amongst all generations, both male and female, whether spectators or players:

sha rdog sgang la mar rdog rgyag A chunk of butter is piled on a
chunk of meat,
a gu 'brog pa'i skyid shas la How happy Uncle Nomad looks!

sha rdog bzas na sngags pa'i dge If you want to eat meat, become
phrug byed a tantric yogi's disciple.
sngags pa so med can gyi dge phrug Become a toothless tantric yogi's
byed disciple!

Both are for *sha* (8).

* * *

The last subject that I want to introduce in this section concerns Tibetan images of different ethnicities or nationalities. Together with salacious verses, this topic is not usually made public. In fact, in the Tibetan book of *sho bshad* (Dechen Drokhar 2003), these two subjects are avoided due to their sensitive nature. Firstly, here is one about the Bhutanese:

'brug pa bal po'i g.yog po red The Bhutanese are Nepali slaves,
tom tom sgal par 'khur mkhan red They are the ones carrying big
water cans on their backs
[like livestock].

The nation of Bhutan accomplished independence from the Dalai Lama's government in the seventeenth century. They are historically close to Nepal, and so stand with their close allies against the shared enemy of Central Tibet. Despite sharing the same religion of Tibetan Buddhism, Lhasans' bitter feeling against Bhutan is palpable. The next verse concerns the Khampa, the Tibetans in Eastern Tibet (Kham):

kham phrug la rtsed mo ma rtse Don't play with a Kham boy!
rliq thang sbar rdzog rgyag yong (He) will grab your balls!

It is widely perceived in culturally Tibetan areas that Khampa men are courageous, aggressive and belligerent. The verse above jokingly

informs us that Khampas have warrior natures even in childhood. The next:

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>chu srin zer ba'i mgo leb ba de</i> | The flat-headed one called 'crocodile' |
| <i>rgya mtsho dkrug mkhan ded dpon yin</i> | is the captain who disturbs the ocean. |

At first sight, the meaning conveyed by this verse is ambiguous. However, it is very clear to some Tibetans: the word "crocodile" can be a metaphor for the new population increasing since 2008, that is, the Chinese army. What they do in Lhasa appears to some Tibetans metaphorically analogous to what crocodiles do in their territories. While the implied content appears to be a politically sensitive pronouncement, the clever choice of the metaphorical expression by the unknown authors seems to make this *sho bshad* vague and indefinite enough to be used in politicised Lhasa. Some say that the origin of this *sho bshad* may be nearly a century ago, perhaps indicating that its metaphorical nature leaves it open to differing interpretations dependent on the climate of the times. The last one:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>ri pin dmag mi ri la phyin</i> | Japanese Army go to the [top of] the mountain, |
| <i>ri la phyin nas za ki ki</i> | [After] going to the top, [they] shout "Sa-ki-ki!" |

Anti-Japan films have been very popular all over China, Tibetan regions being no exception. For Tibetans exposed to those patriotic films, the Japanese appear crazy and violent people, who just shout "Shageki!" (Shoot!) or "Totsugeki!" (Attack!), appearing rather comical.

6. Transcendental background: *sho* in the Tibetan religious world

Sho is a mere game, and one that leads its players to spontaneous gain and loss, since it involves gambling. However, if one traverses different cultural aspects revolving around dice, one can find that it also plays a distinctive social role in the Tibetan religious realm, the role of divination (*mo*) by means of dice. This is perhaps, a more fundamental function of dice or *sho* within the whole Tibetan cultural milieu. Although it is true that *sho* should not be simply connected to the world of divination, particularly within historical research (cf.

Otani 2003: 323), mystic features of dice, some religious or transcendental associations in *sho* gambling are pretty evident, and it is inappropriate to disregard them if one wants to understand *sho* from a Tibetan cultural perspective.

In what follows, before discussing about Tibetan dice divination and its transcendental features, I want to present a somewhat parallel phenomenon: the role of a supernatural being in *sho* gambling. Among *sho* players and others, it is not uncommon that if a player is good or lucky in throwing dice, he is said to be associated with a certain worldly spirit called *the'u rang* ("tebrang" in pronunciation). It is believed that once this spirit possesses a player, he suddenly excels in *sho*, obtaining whatever number is desired when throwing dice. Some say, if one becomes absorbed in playing *sho* alone in sky-burial place, a *the'u rang* will appear to join the game. Others told me if one plays *sho* alone at night in mountains, using *yos* (roasted barley sweets eaten among children in countryside) as a substitute for shells, this spirit of *the'u rang* will again appear. If the person wins, he can get anything he wishes, but if not, he will die soon. The *the'u rang* might often appear, people say, near babies or infants to play with them, and the causes of their sudden smiles or tears are often attributed to this spirit's behaviour. The spirit likes "playing in general", including *sho*, and it is believed that if a *sho* player can evoke the *the'u rang* to be on his side, this spirit helps to increase his luck (*rlung rta*), enabling him to win whilst gambling.

In the Buddhist or Bon pantheon, a *the'u rang* is one kind of *dregs pa* (literally, meaning "arrogance"), which means the entity belongs to a multitude of gods and goddesses occupying a lower rank than that of enlightened members of the pantheon, i.e. worldly gods (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993 [1956]: 253). It is believed that, as one of spirits gifted with 'arrogance', the *the'u rang* is a malevolent deity, causing disunity and quarrel and making children ill (ibid.: 283). Since they are also responsible for weather changes, including hail and lightning, they may be appeased by local *sngags pa* or local magicians (ibid.: 467), which are still common in culturally Tibetan areas. Perhaps the most intriguing account for our interest comes from a Bon or indigenous perspective: "[*the'u rang*] is thought to be embodied in boulders and ashes, as well as in dice. He brings success in games, particularly dice, but also any board games (Trungpa 1978: 301; *my italics*)." From these accounts, it can be said that the *the'u rang* is a worldly deity influencing the trajectories of changeable, fragile and unpredictable nature of the present-future, such as weather, infants and the thrown dice!

On the basis of what is outlined above, I want to present two points related to gambling in religion. Some intersections between gambling and religion are explored by the anthropologist Per Binde

(2007), by focusing on the relationship between Christianity and gambling. One of his arguments is that monotheistic religions such as Christianity and Islam tend to denounce gambling, whereas religions of animistic or polytheistic kind “accept gambling and often merge with gambling (ibid.: 154).” Although I do not have any particular objection to this claim, introducing the dichotomy between monotheistic and polytheistic seems to me a slightly unsophisticated approach. The concords or conflicts between gambling and religion seem to be affected, I would contend, by both the degrees of felt cognitive closeness to supernatural powers on the one hand, and the qualities of their worldliness on the other. Although the polytheistic may imply familiarity with various gods in the living world, the dichotomy seems to obscure a crucial point: the proximity (or even identity) of the players to divine power(s) – whether they live in the monotheistic or polytheistic world. In order to discuss the relationships between gambling and religion, we should first explore to what extent (and in what ways) notions of supernatural beings permeate peoples’ daily lives; how the realities of those powers are lived in the nexus of cognitive and social worlds.

The other point, which should be noted regarding the relationship between gambling and religion, is elucidated by the indigenous way in which *the'u rang*, the deity of *sho* gambling, is evoked. Certainly, there is no systematic means or ritual to bring him to the living realm in the context of *sho*. However, at this point, a piece of advice given me by a senior skilled *sho* gambler has something insightful to say: “You need to become *nga rgyal* (literally, “I, king” meaning “arrogant” or “proud”) to win! Without *nga rgyal*, it’s not fun to play *sho*, but if you become *nga rgyal*, the luck of dice will come with you!” He did not specify anything about *the'u rang*, but its relevance seems to be evident, particularly given the religious world mentioned above; *the'u rang* is a malevolent deity from a family whose quality is “arrogance” (*dregs pa*). To have luck in throwing dice, to be assisted by *the'u rang*, one is required to transform his ordinary state of consciousness and consciously generate *nga rgyal* within his mind. This performative act is radically opposed to the value of *sems chung* (literally, “small mind”) or modesty, something ordinarily espoused by Tibetans in modern Lhasa (Murakami 2011: 166-8). However, in the context of *sho* gambling, one needs to transcend ordinary worldly morality in an overtly performative manner, as enthusiastic *sho* players normally do.

In order to comprehend the point above, it seems to be pertinent to introduce the Tibetan shamanic practice and its internal mechanism as articulated by Geoffrey Samuel, an anthropologist and western academic expert on Tibetan Buddhism. In his discussions on the na-

ture of Tibetan tantric deities, including Avalokiteśvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion), he maintains:

Avalokiteśvara is not a specific deity 'out there.' ... he is present wherever his practice is done, and to the extent that it is done successfully. If we regard Avalokiteśvara not as a deity but as a mode of feeling, cognition, and behaviour, then to say that Avalokiteśvara is present whenever his practice is done is not some kind of a poetic statement but a simple description. ... To the extent that the Tantric deity Avalokiteśvara exists, he exists because he is brought into existence through the millions of Tibetans who do Avalokiteśvara practices, develop appropriate qualities, and thus, to a certain degree, 'become' Avalokiteśvara. ... Avalokiteśvara, in other words, is best seen neither as a person nor as some kind of free-floating spirit entity. He is a potentiality that can be realized within the body and mind of a particular practitioner ... (1993: 247-8)

This "tantric" practice is not the monopoly of the mystic figures of yogis or yoginis, but can be realised by virtually all who attempt to "become" the deities or Bodhisattvas through transformation of their mental states. Naturally, it is not restricted to Avalokiteśvara, but open to many other deities including our *the'u rang*.¹⁸ The deity of *sho* gambling does not exist "out there." A player of *sho* cannot only evoke the deity, but also even become *the'u rang* himself, as long as the player can become arrogant and proud to a significant degree. The stories about meeting *the'u rang* at night, mentioned above, are very true; the frantic player, playing alone in fearful places, actually meets himself in his arrogant aspect face-to-face, with *sho* as an eloquent medium.

* * *

In the rest of this section, I will focus on some aspects of Tibetan dice divination and its relevance to *sho* gambling. In the dice divination (*sho mo*), one of the most powerful protector deities of Tibetan Buddhism is evoked. That is Palden Lhamo, the protector goddess of the successive Dalai Lamas, and the supreme guardian deity of Tibet, particularly of its capital, Lhasa. This wrathful goddess is believed to

¹⁸ Identification with *the'u rang* may be dubious according to dominant Tibetan Buddhist teachings, in which *only tantric deities*, not those of lower rank, could normally manifest through sentient beings. However, I would say that, within lay understandings at least, lower spiritual beings, including our *the'u rang*, could be embodied in relevant persons, particularly in some explicitly non-Buddhist settings such as *sho* gambling.

have the clairvoyant power of seeing the future,¹⁹ and also, even the capability to “determine the karmic outcome of any situation” (Beer 2003: 158). Two or three dice are attached to her body (see Fig. 5 and 6); “magical weapons” (ibid.) with which to conduct these divine deeds. If someone, usually a monk, can successfully evoke the goddess in the dice divination,²⁰ it is believed possible to predict the future according to the numbers of the thrown dice, empowered as it is by Palden Lhamo’s blessings. Thus, religious specialists employ dice divination for various purposes, such as determining the cause of sickness for followers, prescribing treatment, and predicting the prospects for a marriage. Moreover, *sho*, as an embodiment of the divine wills of Palden Lhamo or other subordinate supernatural beings, has also been (and is) used for various social functions. For example, it is used to elect a new chief of the valley (Walsh 1906: 303-8); to judge a difficult court case (Henderson 1964); to decide the allocation of pasture land and order of distribution of irrigation water (Bauer 2004: 55-7); to call back one’s soul from a demon in a ritual for soul-retrieval (Ramble 2009); and to demonstrate the victory of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in the national festival called *tshogs mchod* (Yamaguchi 1987: 316-8).

¹⁹ Palden Lhamo’s clairvoyance is manifested in her ability to predict the time and place of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, whom she protects. Thus, the Lake Lhamolatso, where she is believed to reside, is visited by high officials and lamas after the death of each Dalai Lama, because it is said that various supernatural signs and visions appear on the surface of the lake. Examining this information, high lamas interpret clues about where and when the next Dalai Lama will be reincarnated. For the search preceding recognition of the present Dalai Lama, see Goldstein (1989: 310-24).

²⁰ Instead of Palden Lhamo herself, *dPal ldan dmag zor ma*, one of her emanations, may often be evoked (e.g. *Don kun grub pa* n.d.), though the nature of these two are identical. There is also a dice divination involving Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom (e.g. Jamgon Mipham 1990).



Fig. 5. Palden Lhamo.



Fig. 6. Two Dice hung below Palden Lhamo.

So, how are this traditional practice of dice divination and its religious background connected to *sho* gambling? Where is the intersection between gambling and divination? To answer these questions would involve substantial textual analysis on various usages of dice in Tibetan cultural history. In this article, I just want to present some perspectives from which to tackle these questions, by returning to the riddle mentioned earlier, which is the problem of gender.

In section three, I pointed out that women in Lhasa and neighbouring areas are generally excluded from playing *sho*. This may be attributable to the perceived inferiority of women in Tibetan society, which may operate to alienate women from some social activities, including gambling. However, as reason for their exclusion from *sho*, this is unconvincing, since women in Shigatse are not forbidden to play, and also, those in Lhasa do play other styles of gambling such as mahjong. In my view, perhaps, one answer to this apparent conflict could lie in the seemingly mysterious but poignant notion widely circulated among Lhasan men that “*if women play sho, they always win*”. This peculiar belief is remarkable. Women are considered superior to men in *sho* gambling.

Here it would be pertinent, I believe, to present another small episode: In the monasteries and temples in Lhasa, there are some spaces where women are forbidden to enter. Interestingly, these are not male spaces of some sort, or those within which celibate monks are segre-

gated, but totally the opposite. They are actually feminine places, believed to be abodes of Palden Lhamo²¹. It is taboo for women to get close to her, since if they do, they are believed to get mad and uncontrolled due to the divine influence of the goddess. Women are easily possessed or affected by Palden Lhamo.

I would also like to comment that in discussing the historical traces of Tibetan dice divination, Róna Tas (1956: 171-6) emphasises the close connection between divination and healing practices, and also the possible identity between fortuneteller and healer. In this context, Palden Lhamo was the source of inspiration. Importantly, Róna Tas further suggests that these two different practices could be done by "female shamans." By using a dice with the help of Palden Lhamo, these "female shamans" played the roles of healer-cum-fortuneteller in old Tibet. Róna Tas also introduces interesting circumstantial evidence raised by another academic: it may not be coincident that the word denoting divination by dice (*mo*) is the identical with that meaning woman (*mo*).

In our discussion on women's exclusion from *sho* gambling, the above point is immensely insightful. Women must be separated from the dice, throwing dices, and of course, from *sho* gambling, because they are potentially 'shamans' who could be easily influenced or possessed by the powerful, victorious Palden Lhamo. Just as enthusiastic *sho* gamblers may meet *the'u rang* with dice as a medium, women could meet or merge with the goddess, who is much more powerful than *the'u rang*.²² In the case of *the'u rang*, to get assistance from him one needs a performative act of arrogance, whereas in the case of the Palden Lhamo, women are not required to enact anything but their sheer sexual bodies. In a sense, the female body itself is a performative act evoking through identifying with the wrathful goddess. In *sho* gambling, any man would be unable to compete with a woman protected by her.

²¹ It is also sometimes forbidden for women to enter the chapels of other protector deities. However, the association between Palden Lhamo and women is most often evoked and manifested in the context of spatial taboo inside the monasteries and temples of Lhasa and neighbouring areas.

²² During the discussions in the workshop (Playing Games in East Asia – Gaming and Gambling) where I presented an earlier draft of this article, Dr. Paul Festa (Stanford University), an anthropologist working on China and Taiwan, pointed out an interesting triadic idea found in the context of Chinese gambling. He articulated that between or above the dichotomy of luck and skills, there is a "fate" (Ch. *mingyun*), which determines the course of gambling in a most decisive manner. To relate this point to our Tibetan context, luck (*rlung rta*) can be associated with *the'u rang*, and fate or karma (*las*) with Palden Lhamo. Applying the Chinese idea analogically may be helpful in comprehending the hierarchical nature of these two supernatural powers in the context of *sho*.

As to why women are not excluded from *sho* gambling in Shigatse, one needs to be reminded of the spatial frontiers of Palden Lhamo's power. Indeed, she is the protector goddess of the Dalai Lama and Tibet as a whole, but she tends to be most often associated with the supreme guardian deity of Lhasa in particular, i.e. Lhasa's *yul lha* (guardian deity of locality). Lhasa is, thus, the space where she radiates her divine power most strongly. In effect, within Lhasa and its surrounding areas, her sacred power must be awed and respected in any situation and temporality. Shigatse is quite far away from Lhasa, and moreover, as a region it is historically and culturally distinctive from the areas around Lhasa, hence the people there have a different degree of fear towards this goddess. The nature of the goddess and the differences of her spatial influences affect the lives of women in different areas in Tibet differently, operating to determine their social inclusion in or exclusion from certain activities.

7. Conclusion

In Western or secularised societies, it may be that gambling functions as a substitute for official religions, providing the players with some sort of mystical or transcendental experiences (cf. Binde 2007: 149-52). In the case of modern Lhasa, in contrast, the *sho* gambling is a field to which the Tibetan religious or transcendental world extends itself. In modern Lhasa, religious tenets and values are not completely segregated from the world of *sho*. It can be even said that perhaps, without certain religious or mythical aspects, including taboo on (or fear towards) women players, Tibetan men would not have maintained such fascination and enthusiasm for the world of *sho*.

It is true that gambling in general attracts certain people. Indeed, *sho* is about spontaneous gains and losses that entice people. The actual practices of gambling, to put simply, are putting a butter-tea cup upside down with force, and generating one's arrogance with the help of alcohol. These simple performances are symbolic in themselves – the former concerns 'death' (see section three), and the latter may be an indication of 'life.' This symbolism embodied in *sho* can indeed be said to be a metaphoric expression of gambling as a 'life-and-death' matter. However, simultaneously, what this mystic symbolism implies – a manifestation of two ambivalent natures – may be the secret of the attraction that *sho* holds; a sort of indication of non-worldly realms.

Throughout this article, I have attempted to demonstrate and analyse various aspects of this intriguing gambling game based on my ethnographic experiences in Lhasa. It is my wish to introduce readers

into the core of Tibetan socio-religious worlds still permeating modern Lhasa through this variety of stories about the Tibetan dice game. As shown, some residues of traditional beliefs, in terms of gender and worldviews, are indeed palpable and vigorous within the world of *sho*. Anthropological research on gambling should not be content only with documenting its practices and economic implications, but should encourage us to traverse different aspects of society and tradition in order to re-appreciate that gambling is not only a unique cultural repository, but a distinctive culture in itself.

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