May the Curd of *g.yang* Mature: a 14th-Century Allegory for the Domestication of Sheep

Alexander K. Smith

(University of Erlangen-Nürnberg)

The rather modest aim of this paper is to present a narrative from the 14th-century *Mdo dri med gzi brjid* (*Cha* section, chapter 4), which plays a central role in the origin mythology of *ju thig*, a rare form of rope divination unique to the *g.yung drung bon* clerical tradition. In addition to offering a rich mythological account of the primordial domestication of sheep, the episode also contributes to an understanding of the hierarchical social taxonomies that structure the performance of a number of cleromantic practices encountered in Bon cultural milieus. Before proceeding too deeply into my discussion, however, it may be useful to first provide a short introduction to *ju thig*.

In brief, *ju thig* is a form of rope-divination that makes extensive use of sheep’s wool in crafting both the ropes cast by the diviner and the surface upon which they are cast. Minimally speaking, in addition to the requisite texts, the diviner must possess six ropes: five “lesser cords”, known as *thig gu*, which should measure roughly two cubits in length (e.g. roughly 88 cm); and a sixth longer cord, measuring one fathom (1.8 meters), known as the “divination guide”, or *mo rta*. Over the course of the casting, the diviner places the *mo rta* over his shoulders and, having tied the various rope-ends together in a series of simple nooses, the ropes are collected into a bundle and cast on the ground. The diviner then refers to a divination manual in order to interpret the patterns formed by the casting and the location of the nooses in relation to the cardinal and intercardinal directions. In Figure 1, the reader will find an illuminated passage from a 19th-century *ju thig* manuscript, which illustrates how combinations of ropes and nooses are correlated with prognostics in manuscript form.

---

1 See Smith (2011, 2015).
Ju thig diviners also make use of a small white felt mat, roughly 15 to 18 cm square, which is known as the lha gzhi dkar po, or “the divine white base”. In some cases, this can serve as a casting surface for the ropes; however, more generally speaking, the lha gzhi dkar po functions as the gzhi—literally as the “basis” or “support” for the divination. In this ritual capacity, it plays a central role in appeasing the clairvoyant (mgon shes) deities that are invoked during the divination’s performance, each of whom is requested to be seated on the wool mat following the completion of the divinatory invocations.
Considering the importance of sheep’s wool in fabricating both the lha gzhi dkar po and the ju thig cords themselves, when I first began to study rope-divination, I found it odd that many ju thig manuals did not appear to provide a mythological precedent for the usage of sheep’s wool in the divination’s performance. During my doctoral fieldwork, however, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue with the current Slob dpon of sMan ri Monastery in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh. Having noted that the cosmogonic narratives (smrang) outlined in a number of ju thig manuals were not helpful in articulating the importance of sheep’s wool, the sMan ri Slob dpon directed me to a particular episode in the Mdo dri med gzi brjid. The passage in question, which has also been briefly discussed by Tucci and Karmay,² pertains to the primordial conflict between Being (ye) and Non-Being (ngam), represented by the divinities Ye rje smon pa (aka Khri rgyal khug pa) and Ngam rje rtsol po (aka Med ’bum nag po) respectively, as well as the mediation of these forces through the prophetic abilities of the deity Phya bu g.yang dkar (aka Phya’u g.yang dkar).

The passage, which I have translated below, begins with a kind of armistice between the gods (lha) and demons (bdud), during which time a miraculous tree begins to grow on the frontier between the respective territories of Being (ye) and Non-Being (ngam). In order to ascertain who will be victorious in the brewing conflict between ye and ngam, the clairvoyant (mngon shes) deity Phya bu g.yang dkar rides a sheep (g.yang mo) to the peak of the Mountain of Existence and, ostensibly speaking, performs divination using a set of ju thig cords fashioned from the wool of the first sheep, Lug lha ba bal chen. In the Mdo dri med gzi brjid, this is depicted as an inaugural event, the primordial divinatory act that establishes divinatory knowledge in the world. Seen in this light, insofar as this episode serves as an origin myth for ju thig, it would appear that sheep’s wool, when used as a divinatory aid, may be associated with the clairvoyant deity Phya bu g.yang dkar, as well as with the mythological inception of divination as a viable prophetic tool.³

---

³ It is also worth noting that sheep’s wool—in particular white sheep’s wool—appears to be a common feature in apotropaic and divinatory rites throughout the broader Himalayan region, as well as in many Central Asian cultures. That said, it is important to emphasize that structural similarities such as these never imply a genetic relationship between ostensibly homogenous ritual traditions.
May the Curd of g.yang Mature

Translation

I.

Long ago, when Ye and Ngam were on friendly terms (’khrug pa ma), in the age of the Srid pa cam cam, a tree [began to] grow on the border between Ye and Ngam. Its leaves were made of fine silk. Its fruits were made of precious jewels and gold. Its sap was made of golden nectar. Its bark was made of life-protecting raiments. Its thorns were made of dangerous weapons and its flowers were a marvelous sight (ltad mo).

Who was able to interpret (dpyad ma zhog) the meaning of these [phenomena]? A phya prince, Phya bu g.yang dkar, interpreted them. He had come mounted upon a sheep, bearing a white-feathered lha arrow in his hand. He went to the peak of Yod ri rdel dkar, “the white pebble mountain of existence”, and performed a divination (dpyad) at the tree. Having done so, he saw that there would be a dispute between the teachings of the lha and the teachings of the bdud. Quarrels would arise between ye and ngam and there would be both intermittent (dus kyi) victories and intermittent defeats. A conflict would arise between the forces of Being (yod) and Non-Being (med) respectively; ultimately, however, he foresaw victory for Being and defeat for Non-Being. He proclaimed this prophecy from the peak of the three realms of existence. All of Being and Non-being came to hear him and, as a consequence, the two forces went to war. The phya prince phya bu g.yang dkar was thus named mngon shes kyi phya bu g.yang dkar, or “phya bu g.yang dkar, he who is endowed with clairvoyance”.

Phya bu g.yang dkar, who was greater than all, did this [e.g. performed divination] for both enemies and friends. He correctly examined (dpyad) the trigrams and accurately predicted (thig pa) both the past and the future. [His techniques] were better than representing truth and falsehood in the palm of one’s hand. They were greater than all [other] forms of divination and were superior to [the techniques] of all female diviners. All of the treatises on calculation in the kingdoms [of the world] are derived from this event.

---

4 The meaning of srid pa cam cam is currently unclear to me; however, it could perhaps be a reference to the srid pa’i lcam dral bco brgyad, a set of eighteen divine siblings who, according to Norbu (2009: 53–60), are cast as the forebears of mankind in the Srid pa’i mdzod phug.

5 It is important to note that this figures name has been changed slightly from phya’u g.yang dkar, which appears in the text, to the cognate phya bu g.yang dkar.

6 The three realms (srid pa gsum) mentioned in this passage are equivalent to the three levels of existence as imagined in a common cosmological schema that divides the universe into three vertical sections: (1) an under-earth, typified by the klu; (2) the earth, typified by human beings and animals; and (3) the sky, typified by the lha.
In what way, however, was the sheep born? In the distant past, for the great benefit of living, sentient beings, the god Srid pa ye smon rgyal po wished for an object that would fulfil man's need for precious stones and jewels. He searched from amongst gold, turquoise, and the five kinds of precious stones; however, [none of these were able] to satisfy the wants and needs [of man], as the objects for which he wished were [seen by man] as being worthless and [were treated] similarly to dirt and to the rocks of the soil. [Seeing this], he asked his consort, Chu lcam rgyal mo, “How is it that the needs [of humanity] can be met?” She replied, saying: “In order to achieve that which you desire, you [must] travel to the peak of Yod ri del dkar and bring together the essence (snying po 'byung ba'i bcud bsdus) of the heavens (gnam mkha'), the sky (bar snang), and the earth (sa gzhi). That which you wish for will be achieved”.

Taking the advice of his consort, Srid pa ye smon pa sought out thirteen various kinds of dissonant (mi 'phrod) substances. First, sky, which is essence of curd on the verge of becoming yogurt. Second, earth, which is the essence of gold and silver. Third, water, which is the essence of the froth of the sea. Fourth, fire, which is the essence of the steam of bodily heat. Fifth, wind, which is the essence of a fragrant breeze. Sixth, a budding wing-feather (the'u gshog) of a lord of the khyung. Seventh, a banner crafted from the skin of a black antelope. Eighth, an agate gem from the hands of a gnob sbyin. Ninth, the tongue of a wise bat (sgam khyer pha bang). Tenth, [an amount of] molten flesh the colour of a blacksmith's charcoal. Eleventh, the semen of a divine prince (lha bu). Twelfth, the womb-blood of a srin woman. And last, [Srid pa ye smon pa] covered [all of these substances] with a white cloud and, from the peak of Yod ri del dkar, the god manifested as a gillying steed with a white face. He then made a wish, saying: "I am the lord of all of phenomenal existence. For the general welfare and prosperity of mankind, I desire an animal that is like me. If it should be kept, it will be wondrous. And if it should be sold, [its value] will be diffused ('brim). May it [provide] food for eating and may it slake thirst (skom pa'i btung). May it [provide] wool for clothing and wealth for accumulation. May the curd of g.yang mature!" Thus, he made his wish. Having done so, after three nights, on the morning of the fourth day, [Srid pa ye smon rgyal po] heard a sound [echoing from] the peak of Yod ri del dkar, which went “tong tong” and that had never before been heard. He looked and saw the following: a living creature, the perfect size, which corresponded to the sheep of the phenomenal world (srid pa lug). Its head was like that of a wild deer. Its legs were like those of common domestic animals. Its fur resembled the southern clouds and it had a melodious voice.

If you are suffering, a sheep will make you merry (nyam dga' ba). If it is examined, a sheep will be beautiful and appealing. If you keep it, a sheep is ready money (smar ba) and, if it is sold, its [worth] will be diffused amongst [other] men. [A sheep] is of great price and value.
Its yogurt provides life-sustaining nourishment and its fur provides [wool] for clothing. [The sheep] appeared as a creature that would increase both phya and gyang.

Having arisen in harmony with a wish of Ye rje smon pa, the Lord of Primordial Aspiration, the sheep was called rin po che’i rkang ’gros lug, or “sheep, the precious animal”. Even so, in what manner was this [e.g. the creation of the sheep] accomplished? First, sky, which is the essence of curd on the verge of becoming yogurt, became the mind that thinks. Second, earth, which is the essence of gold and silver, became the soil that produces (bskyed byed). Third, water, which is the essence of the froth of the sea, became the blood that binds. Fourth, fire, which is the essence of the steam of bodily heat, became the bodily heat that conduces maturation. Fifth, wind, which is the essence of a fragrant breeze, became the breath that lifts. Sixth, the banner crafted from the skin of a black antelope became the [sheep’s] rightward-twisting (ldem pa g.yas ’khyil) heavenly horn (gnam ru). Seventh, the budding wing feather of a lord of the khyung became [the sheep’s] symmetrically opposed ears (snyan pa rnam ldem pa). Eighth, the agate gem from the hands of a gNod sbyin became the variegated, agate-like eyes with which [the sheep] sees. Ninth, the tongue of the wise bat became [the sheep’s] wonderful voice, which says “baa” “baa” (’ba ’ba). Tenth, the molten flesh the colour of a blacksmith’s charcoal became the iron wheel of [the sheep’s] hooves. Eleventh and twelfth, the white semen [of the divine prince] and the red [womb-blood of the srin woman] became the [sheep’s] curd, which is nourishing and abundant. And last, the windswept (bal le ba) white clouds became the [sheep’s] wholesome and plentiful wool.

Having attained this [form] from the [combination of] the thirteen various harmonious substances, [the sheep] came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired (gang ’dod ci ’dod). All of the treatises on the deeds (bya ba) of precious domestic animals are derived from this event.7

II.

The ju thig, which was known as shar ba rkyen drug, appeared from the shoulder-wool of the sheep Lug lha ba bal chen. It could not be tied down, however, and blew away. It [first reached] the peak of the wish-fulfilling tree (dpag bsam shing) and, falling from [on high], it fell into a nest (ra) of a lord of the khyung. Yet again, however, it could not be tied down and blew away. It [circled] the summits of the seven mountains surrounding the world and, in the middle of these, it fell upon [the head] of Ma btsun ’phrul mo.8 Yet again, however, it could

7 439 line 4 to 442 line 11.
8 It is worth noting that the newly created divination cords land briefly on the head of a figure named Ma btsun ’phrul mo. In his groundbreaking “Shenrab’s
not be tied down and blew away. It then fell upon the great Tortoise [who supports] the golden ground [of the world]. Once again, however, it could not be tied down and blew away. [Finally, it returned] to the peak of Yod ri del dkar, where it fell upon the sheep g.Yang lha ba bal chen. [From this wool] were fashioned six knots, the nooses of which were called mkhar drug, or “the six castles”. The god Ye rje smon pa named this heap of knots gur chen, “the great pavilion”, and laid it upon the divine white base (lha gzhi dkar po).

After Kun shes drang mkhan had taken [the ju thig cords] as a witness, Phya bu g.yang dkar made use [of them] in his diagnoses. As a consequence, he was able to accurately calculate (thib pa) the aeons and the periods of arising, existing, destruction, and emptiness inherent to samsaric existence (srid chags gnas 'jig stong), as well as to predict the past, the future, and the present, [including] the duration of human lifespans. He was [also able] to measure the changing of the elements and to calculate [both] good and evil and virtues and faults.

For our purposes, this passage is of interest for several reasons. To begin with, the narrative links the origins of divination to the creation of the primordial sheep (Lug lha ba bal chen) from a wish made by the god Ye rje smon pa, as well as articulating the central role played by the god Phya bu g.yang dkar in the mythological inception of divination as a viable means of prophecy. In both cases, the miraculous wool of the primordial sheep is of central importance and serves, in a narrative capacity, as a kind of Ariadne’s thread, linking the two dissonant episodes in the text. In the first section, divination also emerges as a catalyst causing the opposed forces of Being and Non-Being to go to war. In this sense, Phya bu g.yang dkar’s performance of divination could be read against cosmogonies in the Bon tradition, which share similar themes of duality and opposition.

Another aspect of the narrative that bears mentioning is the composite nature of the primordial sheep itself, which is crafted from the essences of thirteen different substances. Each of these substances is transformed by the deity Ye rje smon pa into one of the sheep’s physical attributes. As a result, the primordial sheep takes on a chimeric quality, with the various parts of its body composed using a type of thaumaturgic bricolage. This process and the correlation between the thirteen dissonant substances and their respective uses...
in forming the attributes of the primordial sheep are illustrated below in Figure 3.

| 1) The essence of curd on the verge of becoming yogurt | 1) The mind that thinks |
| 2) Earth, the essence of gold and silver | 2) The soil that produces |
| 3) Water, the essence of the froth of the sea | 3) The blood that binds |
| 4) Fire, the essence of the steam of bodily heat | 4) The bodily heat that conduces maturation |
| 5) Wind, the essence of a fragrant breeze | 5) The breath that lifts |
| 6) A budding wing-feather of a lord of the khyung | 6) The rightward-twisting (ldem pa g.yas 'khyul) heavenly horn |
| 7) A banner crafted from the skin of a black antelope | 7) [The sheep’s] symmetrically opposed ears |
| 8) An agate gem from the hands of a gnOd sbyin | 8) The variegated, agate-like eyes with which [the sheep] sees |
| 9) The tongue of a wise bat | 9) [The sheep’s] wonderful voice |
| 10) Molten flesh the colour of a blacksmith’s charcoal | 10) The iron wheel of [the sheep’s] hooves |
| 11) The semen of a divine prince | 11-12) [The sheep’s] curd, which is nourishing and abundant |
| 12) The womb-blood of a siren woman | |
| 13) A white cloud | 13) [The sheep’s] wholesome and plentiful wool |

Fig. 3 — “The Generation of the First Sheep”.

Looking closely at Figure 3, it becomes evident that the author’s choices regarding the correlation of substance and attribute have been carefully made. Substances two through five, for instance, incorporate four of the five the elements (excluding space) and link these directly to aspects of the sheep that make use of those respective elemental forces. Water forms the basis of blood, wind forms the basis of breath, and so forth. Additionally, a number of substances have been selected based on their resemblance to the physical features of common domestic sheep like Karakul, Altay, or Gansu Alpine (ovis aries) or, potentially, to regional breeds like the Himalayan Tahr (hemitragus jemlahicus). The derivation of the sheep’s wool from white clouds and its horns from twisted khyung feathers, for example, play directly on the theme of physical resemblance. Along those lines, the choices of agate for the sheep’s eyes and the tongue of a wise bat for the sheep’s tongue are of particular interest.

Beginning with the sheep’s eyes, agate is a stone composed largely of cryptocrystalline silica and microgranular quartz, which appears waxy or dull naturally, but becomes vitreous when it is worked and
The stone can appear in almost any color or combination of colors and is characterized by forms of multi-colored banding, giving agate a unique appearance, which can be supplemented by dying the stone or coating it with an enamel to alter its natural hue. Due to these features, certain small polished agate stones can resemble the colors and patterns of human and animal eyes. While this may account for the sheep’s ocular symbolism, the origin of the sheep’s tongue is more difficult to account for.

One possible solution can be found in broader Tibetan mythological representations of bats (*chiroptera*), which, as Charles Ramble points out in a recent paper, are sometimes viewed as chimeras due to their liminal and ostensibly composite nature. In particular, the bat is sometimes characterized as a figure capable of miraculous forms of speech or serves as an intermediary between humans and the supernatural world. In the Bon *le'u* corpus, for example, a figure named “Capable Bat” (*rgon po pha wang*) appears as the offspring of a rDzi king and a Ngad queen, who possesses a variety of preternatural attributes, including the ability of being undefeatable in oral debate. In his ethnographic research in Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Bhutan, Toni Huber has studied a similar figure, called “Clever Bat” (*sgam po pha wang*), who appears as a trickster or messenger in a number of myths common to the region. Additionally, as Professor Ramble points out, in the Naxi Dongba tradition, the bat is a reoccurring figure that serves as an intermediary between humans and the gods. Keeping the secondary literature in mind, there appears to be sufficient data to suggest a correlation between bats and the mythological leitmotif of tricksters or divine messengers in certain Tibetan folkloric traditions. While this is ultimately an inductive point, it may help to articulate the incorporation of a bat’s tongue in the construction of the primordial sheep.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return briefly to the theme of domestication. It is important to stress that, in the above narrative, the primordial sheep is created by the god Ye rje smon pa to respond specifically to the needs of mankind. Following its inception, the sheep not only exceeds humanity’s desire for precious stones and jewels (e.g. for material wealth), but also provides food for eating, slakes thirst, and offers wool for clothing and trade. This leads the

---

10 See Klien and Hurlbut (1999); Rice (1954).
11 See Ramble (2014).
12 *ibid.*: 19–20.
13 See Huber (2013).
14 Ramble (2014); Rock (1952: 187); see also: Jackson (1979); Berounsky (2016).
author, at the conclusion of passage one, to state that the sheep “came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired.” 15 With that in mind, the above excerpt links the mythology of the first sheep to the primordial inception of divination and provides a compelling 14th-century narrativisation of the pre-historical process of domestication.

Transliteration

I.

sngon ye dam 'khrug pa ma langs nas / srid pa cam cam gnas dus su / ye dang ngam gyi so mtshams nas / 'bras men ljon men shing geig skyes / lo ma dar dang zab las grub / 'bras bu rin chen gser las grub / khu ba bdud rtsi gser las grub / shun pa srog skyoobs gos las grub / tsher ma gdug pa mtshon las grub / dal la gdug pa dri las grub / me tog nge mtshar ltad dmod grub / de la gang gis dpyad ma zhog / de ltar phya sras phyau g.yang dkar de / g.yang mo lug gis rta la bcibs / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse la byon / shel la dpyad dpyad dpyad btag bas / lha bdud bstan pa rtsod pa dang / ye dam 'khrug pa ldang ba dang / dus kyi pham rgyal 'byung ba dang / yod med so sor rtsod pa dang / yod la rgyal kla lha ba dang / med la pham kla 'byung bar rig / de srid pa gsum gyi rtse la bsgregs / stong yod med gnyis kyi tshor bar byung / de nas ye dang ngam gnyis 'khrug / phyra sras phyau g.yang dkar la / mngon shes kyi phyau g.yang dkar kun las che / dgra dang zun dang gnyis ka mzdaz / da mo la legs spar dpyad pa la / snga lhang phyi ltag thig pa la / bden rdzun lag tu bkram pa dang / rno (440) mthong kun la bshad pa dang / mo ma kun las che ba dang / rgyal khams kun la rtsi ba'i gtsan thshigs de nas byung ngo / da srid pa srid srid lug la srid / lug la ci ltar srid pa na / sngon srid pa ye smon rgyal po de / skye 'gro sens can don ched du /mi bu nor bu rin chen la / nor bu dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rdzas shig 'dod / der dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rdzas btsal pas / gser g.yu rin chen sna lnga las / dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rgyu med kyang / de las bsam pa'i smons med kyang / sens med nor de sa rdo 'dra / sa rdo phrod du rdzas nges pa la / mnyi phyog po med pa'i nor yin pas / nam dgos ci 'dod ga la 'byung / de la smon pa'i bsam pa la / chu lcam rgyal mo'i zhal na re / smon pa'i ci bsam 'grub pa la / dgos 'dod nor zhig 'e 'grub bsam / nam mkha' bar snang sa gzhis yi / mnyi phyog po 'byung ba'i bcud bsdus la / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse la byon / gang 'dod smon pa 'grub ste mchis / zhed zer ba la / srid pa ye rje smon pa yis / mi 'phrod rdzas sna bcu gsum btsal / gnam zho khad ki ru ma dang / sa dngul gser gyi mnyi phyog po dang / chu bcud rgya mtho'i lbu ba dang / me bcud drod kyi rlangs pa dang / rlun bcud ngar gyi zer ma dang /

The full passage reads: “Having attained this [form] from the [combination of] the thirteen various harmonious substances, [the sheep] came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired” (de ltar mthun pa'i rdzas sna bcu gsum las grub cing / 'gro ba mi yi gsos su gyur pa / gang 'dod ci 'dod yon tan byung ba).
II.

lug lha ba bal chen sog bal la / ju thig shar ba skya drug byung / de ma chags phur te song ba la / dpag bsam shing gi rtse mo nas / spyi rje khyung gi thel shog las / snyan pa rum ldams pa ru grub bo / gnod sbyin lag gi mcông bu las / gzig pa’i mcông sbyan kha bo grub bo / sgam chen pha bang gi smra lce las / ’ba’ ba’i smra lce mgrün bzang du grub bo / zhung chen ‘gar gyi so rdog las / mig pa lcags kyi ’khor lo ru grub bo / thabs shes thig le dkar dmar las / srid len ‘phel chen gyi ru ma ru grub bo / sprin dkar theg ce bha le las / srid bal ’bal le ’boi bzang du grub bo / de ltar mthun pa’i rdzas sna bcu gsum las grub cing / ’gro ba mi yi gos su gyur pa / gang ’dod ci ’dod yon tan byung ba / rin chen rkang ’gro sbya ba’i gtan tshigs de las byung ngo16

439 line 4 to 442 line 11.

16
May the Curd of gyang Mature

bzung nas / phya’u gyang dkar gyis dpyad btang pas / da bskal srid chugs gnas ’jin stong dang / tsho rabs sngi phyi da lta dang / byung ba dus kyi ’gyur ldog dang / skyon yon legs nyes chugs tshad dang / srid pa rtsa dkar phel ’grub dang / na shi dur gsum gui dpyad lugs dang / dgra bzhi dur gsum gyi dpyad rnams thig

Bibliography

Tibetan-Language Sources

Other-Language Sources


17 443 line 17 to 444 line 11.


