


With the power of their forefathers: Kinship between early Tibetan ritualists and the Naxi dongba of southwest China¹

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 here is a well-documented history of translation between India, Tibet and China beginning in the seventh century and continuing for almost a millennium. The transmission of the Buddhist canon that took place during this time has been perceived as one of the world's greatest cultural exchanges.² But what about the transmission of the non-Buddhist Tibetan canon (if indeed it can be called a canon), that is, the ritual tradition from early Tibet that has been classified by some as "Bon"? In the mid-twentieth century it was suggested that the explication of the still-extant religious literature of a small tribe in southwest China, the Naxi, would lead to a fuller understanding of the Tibetan Bon tradition. But there has still been little comparative study between these two lineages. Analysis of the Dunhuang manuscripts, in particular the textual references to the archetypal ritualist, gShen-rab myi-bo, reveals a common through line from old Tibet, to Bon tradition, to Naxi ritual manuscripts, which feature prominently a chief ritualist known as Do-bbaq sheel-lo.³ I suggest that the Naxi manuscripts show an inheritance from early Tibet – perhaps before the formation of an organized "Bon" religion. In this essay I posit that the existence of an archetypal ritualist in the Naxi canon is a continuation of a narrative theme (that of the well-versed ritual practitioner), and indeed possibly of specific ritual personages themselves, from the old Tibetan manuscripts, filtered through the

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² Peter Skilling attributes this greatness to the creation of a "new" religious language, and the transfer of a "vast body of knowledge...not only in letter but in spirit". Skilling 2009: 23.

³ In this essay I use Naxi pinyin (a romanization system formulated by Chinese state-sponsored linguists in the 1950s) to write Naxi words, alongside the logographic dongba script for certain words where appropriate. Wylie transliteration is used for Tibetan words.

lens of cultural translation, across the borders from the Tibetan empire into southwest China.

Perhaps the most famous scholar of the Naxi, Joseph Rock,⁴ was keen to prove the links between the Naxi religious literature (of which the extant historical manuscripts mostly date to the late Qing dynasty in China, and at the earliest the Ming dynasty)⁵ and that of the Bon. He indicated that the Naxi texts were required for a complete understanding of Bon literature: "I contend that the translation of the entire Naxi literature...will be indispensable to the proper comprehension of Bon literature, for I believe that the Naxi religious literature is in its greater part pure Bon".⁶

The famous Bon text, the *Klu 'bum* (which Henk Blezer suggests can perhaps be dated to the beginning of the tenth century),⁷ has many textual analogues in the Naxi tradition. Rock identified areas of similarity between Naxi ritual practice and the rites detailed in the *Klu 'bum*, but he did so in broad strokes and without detailed explanations. He noted that the Naxi *svq kv* ceremony is, for the most part, derived from Bon tradition.⁸ First, the *svq kv* is marked by the invitation of the Naxi *svq*


⁴ Rock, known as the "father" of Naxiology, is a central figure in the Naxiological tradition. He gave us the first comprehensive English translations of the "dongba" texts (dongba is the Hanyu pinyin transcription of the Chinese word for the native Naxi ritualists, 东巴, who are known in Naxi as *dobbaq*. Despite being exonymic, "dongba" is now the standard term), as well as a Naxi dictionary (Rock 1963 and 1972) that has yet to be surpassed in terms of scope. During his lifetime he completed over 400 translations, although few were published in full. Rock's works remain the best way to access the Naxi ritual literature (at least in English). Perhaps it was the British anthropologist Anthony Jackson who best summed up this achievement: "No one understood just what these manuscripts were or how they were to be read until Rock commenced his systematic investigations" Jackson 1966: 147.

⁵ "Only a few Naxi books can be firmly dated with textual evidence. These dates are mostly in the nineteenth century, when there was a surge in manuscript production. The earliest date on a manuscript about which scholars can agree is 1703." Mueggler 2011: 91.

⁶ Rock 1952: 15.

⁷ See Blezer 2012: 2.

⁸ Rock was initially confused as to why the Naxi called their Naga spirits "*svq*" when, to him, they were clearly an analogue to the Tibetan *klu*. In his 1952 work, *The Naxi Na-khi Naga Cult*, he recounted a discovery: In Professor Tucci's book, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, a class of demons known as *Se* or *bSe* is mentioned, of which nearly all are Nagas. This led him to the conclusion that the Naxi *Svq* were in fact the Tibetan spirits known as "*Se*": "There is now no doubt that the Tibetan *Se* and the Na-khi *Ssu* are identical" (Rock 1952: 11). In fact, Rock believed that the Tibetan *Se* was the older name for the *kLu*, to which he ascribed a Buddhist origin: "I would therefore consider *Se* and *Ssu* the much older names for Naga then [sic.]

serpent spirits (Naxi dongba script: ) to the ceremony, which is followed by the offerings of grain, and then a rite in which all the gods and spirits are invited. This is followed by the *rherq zhail*, during which the dongba ritualists beseech the gods to invest them with their power, then the burning of juniper twigs as offerings, followed by the lighting of the lamps, and finally the portion of the ceremony where the gods fight and suppress their individual enemies. Rock states that the elements of the *svq kv* ceremony described above “nearly all” have their counterparts in the Bon text, the *Klu 'bum*, as translated by Anton Schiefner.⁹ But it must be noted that the *Klu 'bum* is a rediscovered Bon text, and as such offers no concrete evidence that the Naxi rites emerged from an older, pre-Buddhist milieu. Nevertheless, Rolf Stein said that the funerary rites in the *Klu 'bum* and those from the Naxi ritual corpus are “analogous”, a repetition of Rock’s earlier assertion: “I have myself tried to show that the archaic accounts with a funerary theme have the same structure and the same contents as the analogous rites from the *Klu 'bum* and from the Na khi (Naxi, Mosso) accounts.”¹⁰ Further, Stein believed the ritual elements of Naxi religious rites to be a “textual borrowing”, and he attributed the cosmogony to introduction of Bon rites among the Mosso in the Mongolian era, which he suggested was the period in which Naxi religious texts were “invented”.¹¹

While Stein never engaged with the primary sources of the Naxi ritual texts (instead relying on Rock’s studies), his enquiries, in his own words, “notably demonstrate to us the possibility, and even the necessity, of simultaneously utilizing many corpuses despite their chronological variation (Dunhuang manuscripts, relatively modern texts) and despite their membership to very different milieus (lamaist, bonpo, and Mosso)”.¹² It is my goal here to continue this line of work, of comparing two corpuses (Dunhuang manuscripts and Naxi manuscripts) despite their marked difference in historical period.

Much historical and philological work has been done on early Tibetan manuscripts in recent years,¹³ but there has been no serious comparative study between the early Tibetan sources and the Naxi

kLu, dating back to the ancient black Bon, and kLu of more recent Buddhistic origin, it may even have been derived from the Chinese word lung = dragon” (*Ibid.*).

⁹ See Rock 1952: 15.

¹⁰ Stein 2010: 245.

¹¹ *Ibid.*: 292-293.

¹² *Ibid.*: 328. Here “Mosso” means Naxi, and is the old Romanized exonym for the tribe based on the Chinese “Mosuo 摩梭”.

¹³ See for example van Schaik 2014 and Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016.

literature. It is precisely the “textual borrowing” of ritual elements as noted by Stein that I wish to explore: to ask how 21st century Naxi ritual texts (themselves belonging to manuscript traditions that can be dated back to the Ming dynasty) might relate to Dunhuang manuscripts from the old Tibetan period. Stein sees the through-line from Dunhuang manuscripts to the rediscovered Bon texts (*Klu 'bum*) and from those texts to the Naxi manuscripts of Rock's era. I believe we can trace connections between the Dunhuang manuscripts and the Naxi ritual texts more directly. Prior to the textual borrowing from organized Bon texts to the Naxi literature, we can see evidence of repeated narremes found in both the Dunhuang manuscripts and the later Naxi corpus; indeed, some of the more fundamental ritual elements of the Naxi literature can be said to have origins that date back to before the Tibetan *phyi dar* period.

Rock may have perceived the borrowing process as a simple transfer of “like equals like” (he writes of “the discovery of a Na-khi literature of purely Bon origin”).¹⁴ But the transmission of early Tibetan ritual tradition into Naxi lands should be understood as very much a nuanced process of cultural translation.¹⁵ Here I use the term cultural translation not to define a translation of one particular text from one language into another, but as an overarching term to describe the movement of ideas (potentially alongside written texts, but not necessarily) across cultural and linguistic borders. It is important to problematize cultural translations in the same way as interlinguistic textual translations, because the movement of an idea between nations and languages frequently necessitates some form of change; change that is enacted at both the linguistic and semantic level.

If these are ideas that moved from Tibet into Yunnan, and in doing so underwent some form of alteration, can we really call the rituals preserved in the Naxi literature “Bon”? What a comparative analysis will hopefully reveal is that the Naxi manuscripts preserve centuries old religious rituals that include elements from Bon literature as well as narremes similar to those found in the early Dunhuang texts. It is certainly true that Rock's assertions of the connection between Naxi

¹⁴ Rock 1952: 1.

¹⁵ The term can be said to have emerged in the field of social anthropology with Edward Evans-Pritchard, who described the process of interpreting one culture to another as “cultural translation”. My own approach is to combine linguistic translation with the anthropological theory of cultural diffusion, where one culture's ideas are borrowed, translated into the target culture language, and subsequently developed in a new cultural milieu. See Kroeber 1940.

manuscripts and Bon are somewhat contradictory. He has been criticized for claiming the Naxi rites as being a “pure” form of Bon: “First of all, Rock may have failed to fully appreciate the localized characteristics of religious practices in Tibet and its surrounding regions”.¹⁶ But he also recognized that Naxi literature was a combination of many different traditions, from non-Buddhist Tibetan religion to Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Taoism:

Na’khi religious literature is very diverse, and thereby proves that it originated at different times and in different places. It is a composite religious edifice whose foundation rests primarily on primitive nature-worship (*vide* Muan-bpö), and on the ancient pre-Buddhistic national religion of Tibet, known as the Bön, of which it is in fact not only a part but a part which has survived among the Na-khi in a purer form than can now be found in Tibet proper. Na-khi religious literature has been influenced by Burmese Nat worship, Chinese Taoism, and finally Tibetan Buddhism, its core is however Bön with an admixture of tribal shamanism.¹⁷

Indeed, Rock, based on his reading of early twentieth-century Tibetological studies, divided Bon into two distinct varieties, “primitive Bon” and a “degenerate present type which is a mixture of Bon and Buddhism”,¹⁸ a view that has been nuanced in modern scholarship, with the questioning of the existence of an old Bon religion: van Schaik states “in truth the ‘old religion’ [Bon] was a new religion, an inspired conjunction of Tibet’s pre-Buddhist myths and rituals with the teachings of Buddhism”.¹⁹

While the Tibetologist Michael Aris has described Rock’s efforts to connect Naxi ritual practices and the Bon religion as “muddled and unproven”,²⁰ I believe, starting with the publication of *Rock’s Na-khi Naga Cult* in 1952, and continuing with Rolf Stein’s investigations and the more modern (and methodologically distinct) ethnographic Chinese tradition of minority studies (*minzuxue* 民族学), there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the two traditions are closely intertwined. It obviously cannot be said that the Naxi material reflects *in toto* a pre-Buddhist Bon religion, particularly because the organized

¹⁶ Mather 2016: 509.

¹⁷ Rock 1952: 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 1.

¹⁹ van Schaik 2011: 100.

²⁰ Aris 1992: 18.

Bon religion only really began to take shape in the eleventh century alongside the Buddhist revival.²¹ Nevertheless, the Dunhuang manuscripts of the ancient period, dating primarily from the 9th to the 10th centuries (a period in which Buddhism had already emerged in Tibet) still predate the emergence of an organized Bon religion. It is in these manuscripts we find descriptions of funerary rites and divination texts, and in many of them appear ritual specialists known as *bonpo* or *gshen*, individuals who are analogous to the dongba ritualists of the Naxi people.

Tibetological studies have shown quite convincingly that the textual origins of the legendary founding father of Bon, sTon-pa gshen-rab, can be traced back to a certain ritualist mentioned in the early Tibetan manuscripts: gShen-rab myi-bo (an early orthographic rendering of the name gShen-rab mi-bo-che). This figure went on to become the founding father of the Bonpo faith, and many origin stories were later compiled to further embellish his mythology. The name “Bon” was likely coined (perhaps sometime in the early *phyi dar* period) in reference to the Bon and gShen ritualists that are mentioned in texts from the imperial period. One of these *gshen* was gShen-rab myi-bo, but in the early manuscripts he is just one among a number of ritualists mentioned. He is often referred to as a “father” (*pha*), and thus may be considered senior to the other ritualists who work together with him. This may be the reason he was elevated to the founder of the Bonpo religion, while the other figures are largely forgotten. Even so, the ritualists as presented in the Dunhuang sources are somewhat homogeneous: “in most Dunhuang sources the distinction between them already appears opaque or confused”.²²

The Dunhuang accounts of the Myi-bo figure seem to suggest a collective identity, while the later *phyi dar* narratives paint the picture of a great hero who is the founder of a unique cultural and religious identity labelled as “Bon”. It seems to me that if anything Rock was simply guilty of ascribing to the non-Buddhist Tibetan ritual practices the word “Bon” – whether or not Bon was a later invention, the kinship between old Tibetan rituals, whatever we may call them, and the Naxi rites is observable. Showing this kinship in its entirety would be an undertaking beyond the scope of a single essay, but I choose here to highlight a particular narrative that is consistent between these two corpora: that of the prototypical ritualist.

²¹ van Schaik 2011: 90.

²² Blezer 2008: 433.

Early Tibetan sources

We learn of gShen-rab myi-bo from early Tibetan language sources: the Dunhuang and Gathang (*dGa'-thang 'bum-pa*) manuscripts. But in these fragments, he is not the great teacher of the later Eternal Bon literature. He has not ascended to Buddhahood. Instead, he is a priest; a competent priest, to be sure, and one who wields spiritual power, but he is nevertheless one of a number of ritualists who perform sacrificial rites to protect the living and propitiate the dead.

In the Gathang manuscripts described by Samten Karmay, within a narrative that is concerned with a conflict between mankind and the *klu* (an analogue to the Naxi *Svq*) aquatic spirits, a priest who can be identified as gShen-rab myi-bo speaks, and affirms his ritual expertise: “gshen rab responded: ‘I am a man who knows how to do the *gto* rituals and diagnosis. and who knows how to perform the divination and ransom rituals’”.²³ Here we have a clearly proficient ritualist, but he is still presented as (just) a man, working in tandem with others, in Bellezza's words, a “prototypic ritualist”: “In the archaic ritual texts, gShen-rab myi-bo serves as a cultural icon, a laudable and highly influential personality of considerable antiquity, the memory of which must have been passed down to succeeding generations as an oral tradition. In his guise as a prototypic ritualist, gShen-rab myi-bo does not often act unilaterally and it conveys no assertion of omniscience. Rather, he is one of several priests working cooperatively with the support of special deities”.²⁴

In the Dunhuang manuscripts, gShen-rab myi-bo appears a number of times as a ritualist who assists in funerary and other rites. Only in PT1289 (a funerary text concerning animal sacrifice) is he physically described (holding a bell and a feather): “He held the *gshang* great bell in his left hand. He held the wing *the-ra ther-bu* in his right hand”.²⁵ Stein, in a translation that differs slightly (i.e. using “plume” instead of “wing”, suggests that this is a typical description of a “tantrist”).²⁶ After this description is given, Myi-bo goes on to perform funerary

²³ Karmay 2009: 71.

²⁴ Bellezza 2010: 33.

²⁵ *Ibid.*: 85

²⁶ Stein 2010: 258. The motif of the feather as a ritual implement is also found in the Naxi tradition. There exists an iconic depiction of Do-bbaq sheel-lo with a peacock feather (and a porcupine quill) in one hand, and a sword and sickle in the other. With these implements he will do battle with the demons (see Rock 1952: 77). On the topic of the ritual use of feathers see Siegbert Hummel, who writes of the feather in the hand of the Naxi ritualist as a prop: “So finden sich auch die betreffenden Requisiten, die Vogelkostümierung oder die Vogelfeder in der Hand der tanzenden Dto-mba, der Na-khi-Priester, die den Bon-po und damit in mancher Hinsicht auch den Schamanen entsprechen”. Hummel 1960: 320.

rites. He is often mentioned alongside other ritualists, notably Dur-shen rma-da. For example, in PT1194: “The fathers Gshen-rab myi-bo and Dur-shen rma-da spoke, ‘You, G.yang ngo-rtsa, your son... the compensation (skyin-ba) of your son, the substitute (tshab) for the destroyed one’”,²⁷ and also PT1068 “The fathers Dur-shen gyi rma-da, gShen-rab myi-bo and gShen-tsha lung-sgra, these three, replied, ‘We gshen have the ritual remedy ... we have the dpyad, we have the means to rehabilitate (sos) the dead, those who are no more’”.²⁸ In PT1134, gShen-rab myi-bo is again invited, once more alongside Dur-shen rma-da and another ritualist, to perform a funerary ritual.

Different from the picture painted in these sources, of a priest working alongside others, at some point after the 10th century, gShen-rab myi-bo took on the mantle of Buddhahood.²⁹ Elaborate hagiographies detailing his exploits, such as the *mDo 'dus* and *gZer mig*, were compiled. For Bellezza, this reinterpretation was likely a purposeful way of interpreting ancient traditions by placing them within the predominant Buddhist ideological framework. We see specific personages reappearing in different contexts. These “preexisting personalities” (alongside no doubt, some of the rites which they were said to have officiated) were grafted onto the Buddhist religion so that they might “live on in a Tibet where religion and ideology were undergoing radical change”.³⁰ The culture shifted, and thus we can see cultural translation at work. After all, “living on” is one of the great metaphors for translation. Ultimately, and what a further comparison with the Naxi literature will reveal, is that the belief systems of Tibet and the surrounding regions are not monolithic: “all Tibetan sects ... are more or less syncretistic affairs, born out of an ancient cultural crucible filled with ideas and personalities of Indic origins”.³¹

What we see in the Tibetan tradition, where the gShen-rab myi-bo figure becomes the founder sTon-pa gshen-rab, are story episodes (narremes) and names from early sources reappearing within new narratives that are classified as “Bon”. These may be new stories, but they contain familiar episodes. Even if the stories change, alongside the identities of those that feature in them, the narrative elements may remain the same. Henk Blezer has labelled these “migrating narremes”, the evolution of which can be seen from the Dunhuang manuscripts to

²⁷ Bellezza 2013: 216-220.

²⁸ Bellezza, 2010: 38.

²⁹ Buddha features prominently in only one Naxi ceremony, namely the *ssee zhul biu* [Ceremony for the prolongation of life]. Rock states that “it is identical with the Tibetan Tshe-gzungs... The ceremony in both instances is performed after a funeral for the prolongation of life of the relatives of the deceased”. Rock 1948a: 27.

³⁰ Bellezza 2010: 97.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Eternal Bon literature: “It is also clear that a smattering of context and various religious, historical, and literary sensibilities remain connected to migrating narremes and determine whether and how they eventually are incorporated into new contexts and master narratives.”³² But the “migration” may have encompassed a wider geographic area and longer chronological span. When these migrating narremes move into different cultural contexts (specifically the Naxi context) we can identify a specific mode of cultural translation.

The early sources suggest that the Bonpos were able to tap into a wellspring of traditional narrative: “older Tibetan documents or oral traditions, closely corresponding to what has been preserved in Dunhuang, were in fact available to Bonpo authors and also influenced later works”.³³ Just as the Bonpo’s influence spread to the tribes of southwest China, the influence of these older documents and traditions extends beyond Tibet proper, into the foothills of the Himalayas. The references to “gShen-rab” figure in the Dunhuang manuscripts are mere fragments, but they perhaps point to what must have one been a complex fabric of rituals and legends. It does not require a great leap of imagination to suggest that the Naxi literature represents a continuation of this fabric. While the contents of the Naxi literature cannot be considered an unchanged, pure preservation of old Tibetan religious rites, they may still reflect a record of their Tibetan antecedents.

The Naxi connection

Scholars agree that we can identify a continuous tradition that links Tibetan Bon and Naxi literature, but there is no consensus on exactly when and how these traditions found their way into southwest China. As we have seen above, Stein attributed the presence of Bon traditions among the Naxi to a Mongolian era policy of the Karmapas. British anthropologist Anthony Jackson believed that the *dongba* emerged in the eighteenth century as the inheritors of a systematized Bonpo tradition that was later supplanted by Buddhist monks: “the *dto-mbas* themselves were originally proscribed Bön monks who settled down and prospered after the overthrow of the matrilineages among the Li-chiang Naxhi”.³⁴ Looking at the primary sources, such as historical records and the Naxi manuscripts, we cannot trace the existence of the *dongba* before the eighteenth century. Jackson suggested that the Naxi manuscripts were developed by Naxi ritualists already familiar with Tibetan book culture. Both Stein and Jackson however discount the

³² Blezer 2008: 453

³³ Gurung 2011: 20.

³⁴ Jackson 1979: 74.

notion that the Naxi dongba inherited a ritual tradition that their ancestors received *directly* from the Bon priests who were driven out of Central Tibet in the eighth century: this is an idea that originated with Joseph Rock, and that Charles Ramble indicates might be validated by the discovery of the le'u corpus, which contains early Bon myths and rituals and reinforces the hypothesis of an eastward diffusion to Yunnan via Sichuan.³⁵

But what about the Naxi texts themselves? What clues do they hold? Perhaps the most obvious textual analogue (which may suggest a “direct” borrowing) between the Tibetan Bon and Naxi traditions that can be identified in the literature is that of sTon-pa gshen-rab, known in Naxi as Do-bbaq sheel-lo.³⁶ The fact that sTon-pa gshen-rab appears in some form in the Naxi literature is clear: Lhakpa Tsering's 2003 PhD dissertation is a comparative study between the two figures, and, although he does not conclude which name is the “original”, he estimates that they are reflections of the same narrative myth. Indeed, Do-bbaq sheel-lo is depicted in illustrations found in Naxi manuscripts as a green Buddha-like figure, seated on a lotus throne.³⁷

Rock said that Do-bbaq sheel-lo was “none other than” sTon-pa gshen-rab, but this is reductive: simply looking at the names, we can see various differences in the phonetics: at least *something* has changed. While it is possible that the Naxi *dobbaq* derives directly from Tibetan *ston pa*, there are other possible etymological origins (such as the Tibetan *bon po*), and, at any rate, a *dobbaq* is not directly equivalent to a *ston pa*.³⁸ In the later hagiographical accounts, sTon-pa gshen-rab is

³⁵ Charles Ramble made this argument during a presentation entitled *Bönpo and Naxi ritual texts: some more common features*, part of the workshop “Bonpo Manuscript Culture: Towards a Definition of an Emerging Field” held at the University of Hamburg in 2016.

³⁶ I romanize this name according to the graphs primarily used to represent the figure in the Lijiang manuscripts. He is known colloquially as Di-bbaq sheel-lo in Ludian and Do-bbaq sa-la in Sanba (see Yang 2012: 305).

³⁷ See Rock 1937: 53.

³⁸ Mathieu tells us that “In Rock's time, the priests were known as Dongbas, but this name, which is derived from the Tibetan *stonpa*, meaning “teacher”, never occurs in the manuscripts. The manuscripts depict several specialists, among them a male and female pair who are called Bubbu and Pa. Rock transcribed Bubbu as “Bpombo”, and it may well be that “Bubbu” is the Naxi version of “Bonpo” or “a follower” (2015: 373). This is an interesting, if perhaps oversimplified, assertion; certainly the graph *now read* as “dongba” (*dobbaq*) is present in many manuscripts, in fact almost every time the figure Do-bbaq sheel-lo is mentioned, we see the title “dongba” (*dobbaq*) written *and* read. However, it seems that in many other cases, the same graph is read as *biu* or *biu bbiuq*, (Mathieu's Bubbu) which Rock himself states probably derived from Tibetan *bonpo*. It might be asserted that the Naxi *dobbaq* is a corruption of Tibetan *bonpo* by way of “*py biu*”, that *biu bbiuq* (*bonpo*) became *dobbaq* (*stonpa*). Yang Fuquan has discussed the connection between “*dobbaq*” and “*biu bbiuq*” at length (Yang 2012: 298-334).

invited to a foreign land where he resolves a crisis and imparts teachings, then brings home a bride. In Naxi legend, Do-bbaq sheel-lo is invited down to the world of man to suppress demons, and also ends up with a bride as a prize. The stories are similar in terms of the broad narrative thrust, but many of the specific details are different: take, for example, the story of his birth. According to the *mDo 'dus*, gShenrab was born from his mother's right armpit after a ten-month pregnancy.³⁹ In Dongba myth, Do-bbaq sheel-lo resides in his mother's womb for nine months and thirteen days, and is then born from his mother's left armpit. Here, the movement from right armpit to left armpit represents a purposeful mirroring, but an expected one, for there is a transformative element to any cultural translation. In the movement from one culture to another, the same ideas are adopted, but in translation new elements are added, and other elements may be either lost or adapted. In this way, cultural hybridity is born. This article will focus primarily on previously unnoticed points of kinship between Naxi ritual texts and the Dunhuang manuscripts. Specifically, I believe the existence of the archetypal Naxi ritualist, "El-miq", is evidence of an early textual borrowing.⁴⁰

To tell the story of El-miq, we must start with the story of a cave, high up in the mountains of Sanba township, in the Baidi region of Yunnan in southwest China. The cave, on a mountainside overlooking the Baidi valley, is said to have been home to El-miq, a particularly adept dongba ritualist. It is a Karst cave, with two main apertures, left and right. The right aperture is some 3.2 metres high, with a diameter of around three metres. The left aperture is 4.2 metres high, with a larger entrance, and divided into two levels. It is a holy place that every dongba aspires to visit, and every year many rituals are performed at a ritual altar between the two apertures: "incense has burned at the cave for every generation, never ceasing".⁴¹

Potentially the earliest written record of the cave appears in the Zhongdian County gazetteer, from China's Republican period; which states that El-miq was a historical figure linked with the cave: "after [Do-bbaq sheel-lo] there is El-miq Yuq-lei, who commands the teachings of Do-bbaq sheel-lo, and achieved sainthood in the Jiashi cave, Beidi [modern-day Baidi], in Sanba. All those who practice the Dongba faith, whether from Lijiang or Zhongdian, must all come to be baptized at this stone cave".⁴² Here El-miq is written in Chinese as 尔米玉勒 Er

³⁹ See chapter 4 of Gurung 2011.

⁴⁰ I follow Rock in transcribing the first syllable of this name with the high tone in Naxi, although most Chinese sources use the level tone.

⁴¹ Yang 2008a: 49.

⁴² Duan 1997: 135-137.

mi yu le, (i.e. given his full Naxi name, El-miq yuq-lei), and it is revealed that he is second only to Do-bbaq sheel-lo in fame and power, thus making the cave a pilgrimage site of great importance to the Naxi dongba. This tradition of pilgrimage is referred to by the French Tibetologist Jacques Bacot:

Tous les sorciers ou tumbas des vastes pays Mosos doivent, une fois dans leur vie, faire un pèlerinage à Bedjri. On n'y voit pourtant aucun autre sanctuaire que notre petit temple tibétain. Il ne compte pas du reste, Bedjri est saint parce que Tumbashéra, le dieu des Mosos, est venu s'incarner là, quand il descendit sur la terre.⁴³

Bacot travelled to Baidi in 1910, and his accurate, if sparse, account of the holy place is in line with Rock's notes. At first, Rock connects the cave with Do-bbaq sheel-lo (and thus, by extension sTon-pa gshen-rab) himself: "There Dto-mba Shi-lo, founder of the Na-khi religion (Shamanism), was said to have lived, and from there he taught the people and spread his creed. Dto-mba Shi-lo is none other than sTon-pa gShen-rabs (pronounced Tön-pa Shen-rab), founder of the ancient pre-Buddhist Bön religion of Tibet, often also spoken of as Tön-pa Shen-rab-mi-bo ལྷན་པ་གཤེན་རབ་མེ་པོ་ (sic.)".⁴⁴ Later, Rock would nuance this position, suggesting that the cave was home to an "incarnation" of gShen-rab, and that this figure's son was in fact the founder of the Naxi dongba faith:

It is possible that later the Na-khi looked upon one of their 2dto-1mbas, especially the one who dwelt in the cave ³Shi-²lo ²ne-²k'o (see Plate 51) in ²Bbër-²ddër (Pei-ti 北地) as an incarnation of the real founder of Bön gShen-rabs-mi-bo, and that his son became the founder or co-founder of the ¹Na-²khi shamanism. ³Shi-²lo ²ne-²k'o is a famous place of pilgrimage for every ²dto-¹mba, for they believe that gShen-rab-mi-bo lived there. I visited the cave in company with one of my former ²dto-¹mba teachers in 1930.⁴⁵

Do-bbaq sheel-lo is, then, associated with the locale of Baidi, and specifically its sacred cave. Bacot does *not* mention the cave, but he does state that "Tumbashera" (Do-bbaq sheel-lo) was incarnated in Baidi. Without explicitly naming him, Rock seems to move toward the position that the incarnation was El-miq, and that El-miq is a historical founder of the dongba tradition, as opposed to a mythological one.

⁴³ Bacot 1912: 310.

⁴⁴ Rock 1948b: 267.

⁴⁵ Rock 1952: 369.

It is clear that El-miq and Do-bbaq sheel-lo are confused in these accounts, but this confusion is by no means exclusive to foreign explorers of the previous century; it exists in the work of contemporary local writers also. Sha Li, a prolific Naxi author of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, mentions the cave in an article reminiscing about Joseph Rock and his exploits in Lijiang:

有一次，洛克跟和诚等一行去朝拜东巴圣地三坝，在丁巴什柔（灵洞）洞里，和诚硬是把一卷又一卷的东巴经念得，倒背如流，飞天钻地，出神入化。

[One time, Rock and [the dobbaq] He Cheng went on a pilgrimage to the holy site of Sanba, and there, by the cave of Do-bbaq sheel-lo, He Cheng recited one ritual dongba manuscript after another, the words coursing through him, up into the sky and down through the earth, as if he were possessed.]⁴⁶

In the contemporary Naxi popular imagination El-miq's cave is linked to the founder of the Naxi religion: Do-bbaq sheel-lo [sTon-pa gshen-rab]. So, the cave is known, according to Rock and local commentators alike, as a place where Do-bbaq sheel-lo once resided, or at least an *incarnation* of Do-bbaq sheel-lo.⁴⁷ The figures of Do-bbaq sheel-lo and the prominent ritualist, El-miq, are thus here entwined. El-miq is a specific incarnation of the Buddha-like figure. The Dunhuang manuscripts, however, suggest another possibility: that the relationship could be inverted. The legend of Do-bbaq sheel-lo may have grown out from the stories of a prototypical ritualist, such as El-miq. He Zhiwu dates El-miq the historical personage to the 11th century, while Yang Zhengwen estimates that he may have lived as early as the 7th century.⁴⁸ This early dating is dependent upon oral folk genealogies native to the Baidi region, and cannot be corroborated.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Sha 2005: 64.

⁴⁷ The existence of this sacred cave indirectly connects the Naxi tradition with the history of Bon manuscripts: the Bon scriptures had to be hidden away in order to be saved when the religion was persecuted in the 8th century. This is a practice that has a twentieth century analog when it comes to the Naxi manuscripts: many were hidden in remote caves during the Cultural Revolution when the dongba and their "false superstitions" were denounced, and Yang Zhengwen has written a short story in which the most treasured of the dongba books are hidden away in a fictionalized version of El-miq's cave. See Yang 2008b.

⁴⁸ See Yang 2008a: 42.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that historical studies do not support these folk genealogies. "Dongba genealogies, like Dongba language, do not provide strong evidence of an early connection between the Bon religion and the Naxi Dongba tradition", states Mathieu, because, according to experts at the Dongba Research Institute in Lijiang, the longest genealogy only dates back twenty-five generations. For Mathieu this suggests that the modern dongba religion has little connection to the early feudal

El-miq is, in Chinese ethnographic scholarship, a historical personage of some importance (despite there being no historical evidence of his existence). He is given the status of a translator that mediated between the Tibetan and Naxi traditions: “We can be sure that, at the time, El-miq, aside from using dongba script to translate a number of scriptures, also introduced several Bon scriptures via phonetic transcription: dongba manuscripts of the Bon religion, read in Tibetan”.⁵⁰ El-miq is, then, in the Chinese historiography of Naxi manuscripts, responsible for both translation into the vernacular *and* transcription of Tibetan ritual texts into Naxi. He represents a nexus between Tibetan and Naxi written scriptures: himself a translational figure that symbolizes the power of the Naxi written texts and their performance. He is the great translator of Naxi legend; the model for all dongba ritualists who followed him (ritualists who translated the meaning of the spirits for the locals, and the meaning of the dongba books to European explorers and missionaries in the twentieth century). The statue of El-miq that was placed inside El-miq’s cave in 2014, as part of a local cultural restoration project, depicts him with a small ritual bell in his left hand, but in his right, he holds not a feather, but books. A stone library has been placed next to him. These books are symbolically important: local legends say that it was El-miq who invented the Naxi script in the first place, just as it was probably the migrating ritualists who created the Naxi script(s) as a means of recording their traditions.



Figure 1. Statue of El-miq seated alongside his books inside the sacred cave at Baidi. August 2019.

period, and instead that the religion and its literature developed primarily in the seventeenth century (2015: 373).

⁵⁰ He and Zhao 2017: 38.

To learn more about El-miq the person, we must turn to folk stories. Unfortunately, these are all modern tales, and as such place El-miq as part of a Buddhist cultural milieu. The following is a retelling of El-miq's "origin story" as a ritualist, as told by Naxi scholar Zhao Jingxiu:

There was once, long ago, a young *dongba* who lived amongst the *Diqing Naxi* of Yunnan. His name was El-miq. When he was thirteen, with only a coarse blanket and a pocketful of dry provisions, he travelled with a horse caravan, over the mountains and ridges all the way to Lhasa, where he wished to study the Tibetan classics.

After arriving in Lhasa, he found a great master of the scriptures, and asked him to take him on as a student. That master already had eight disciples, all of whom were sons of wealthy nobles. As El-miq was all dressed in rags, the master refused him. And so El-miq said "Well, please let me work here as a servant then." The master was impressed with El-miq's sincerity and shrewd countenance, and he allowed him to stay on as an errand boy. He brewed tea and made *tsamba* during the day, and re-filled the oil lamp at night, all in service of the disciples who were studying the scriptures. In this way, El-miq had the chance to secretly study alongside them. The eight disciples were indolent and lazy. No matter how much the master repeated himself, they just couldn't remember or recite what he said, let alone interpret its meaning. El-miq, however, paid great attention to the teachings. He could recite the words after hearing them once, and explain what they meant after hearing them twice. After three of four times, he knew them off by heart. Once, when El-miq was covertly reciting a scripture, and just about to reach a particular point of great intensity, he forgot himself and began speaking out loud. The master was shocked: the scriptures could only be mastered by the nobility; he couldn't allow a poor errand boy to understand their contents.

From that day on, the master did not ask El-miq to serve the disciples. During the day, he was sent outside to tend the horses, and in the evening, he was locked inside a dark room, and not allowed to leave. El-miq grew anxious. One day, as El-miq was sitting in his room, he realized that he could just about hear the master reciting scriptures: if he held his breath and listened intently, the sound of the disciples following the master grew louder. He had an idea: he grabbed some reins, and whenever he could hear a line from the scriptures clearly, he tied a knot in them, as a memory aid. The next day, when he was out with the horses, he'd recite a line from the scriptures and untie one of the knots. By the time he'd finished reciting, all the knots had been untied – he could remember everything. And that's how he learned the scriptures, year after year. By the time the young lamas were about to finish their studies, El-miq knew that he had already learned as much as he could. "How good would it be if I could take some books home with me to study at leisure?" he thought to himself. But where would he get the money?

The master wouldn't just give them to him. After much thought, he hatched a plan. Every day he would take nine horses out to the eastern pasture. Eight belonged to the little disciples, and one belonged to the master. There was a river in the eastern pasture, and a bridge across it. Every day he would take the horses out to the bridge, and let the disciples' horses cross. But he would stop the master's horse from crossing the bridge, striking at it until it turned back. Every day he did this, until he trained the master's horse to turn back at the very sight of the bridge. The time was right. In the early hours one morning, while the master and the disciples were still asleep, El-miq quietly took seven boxes of scriptures, and taking one of the horses, rode off to the eastern pasture.

After daylight, the master discovered the missing books, and set off on his horse in pursuit. But when his horse reached the bridge, it turned back. The master, furious, tried to force it back over the bridge, but whatever he did it would always turn away. The master believed it was the will of Buddha stopping him from crossing over the bridge, not allowing him to pursue El-miq, so he gave up and went home.

After two months of travel, El-miq returned to Baidi. Afraid that the master would send men to find him, El-miq hid the scriptures in a remote cave. He took up residence in this cave, and after much time had passed, was able to translate the Tibetan scriptures into Naxi.






That's why Baidi has a "cave of hidden scriptures", which is, as legend has it, is the very cave that El-miq had used to hide himself and the books, and every year people make pilgrimages to it, in the hope of acquiring some of El-miq's spiritual power.⁵¹

The story holds that El-miq learned his trade from the Tibetan lamas, which puts Tibetan Buddhism as the direct antecedent of Naxi dongba teachings. It is also a parable of translation that has motifs common in Buddhist folklore: El-miq goes west, from northern Yunnan to Tibet, to acquire spiritual teachings in the form of written books, and after much tribulation manages to bring them back home, where he can slowly translate them into his "native" language. This story also reflects the invention and evolution of writing, from oral recitation to the tying of knots to aid memory, finally to the creation of full (logographic) writing at the sacred cave. Of course, however, this writing is inspired by the Tibetan books. As he is presented in the early dongba manuscripts, El-miq was likely not ethnically Naxi, but in the folk story he becomes a native of Baidi, only travelling to Tibet to acquire knowledge. This is, I believe, an example of the nativizing process of cultural translation, and could represent a narrative that reflects a

⁵¹ This tale is collected in Chen 1998: 262-264.

historical migration of the Tibetan Bon priests in exile who perhaps became dongba ritual practitioners, naturalizing themselves in this new locale.

Turning to the Naxi manuscripts themselves, we can see El-miq's name appear in a number of different ritual books. His name is written in the sources via the following means: firstly via the "pictographic"


graph ;⁵² secondly with the two graphs   (*el* and *miq*; two phonetic loan graphs, where the first graph, 'el', represents a sound emanating from a mouth, and 'miq', fire); thirdly via his full name,  (El-miq yuq-lei, the latter two syllables used for their phonetic value only, 'yuq', a sheep, and 'lei' a roe deer); and finally  (El-miq yuq-lei, this time the final graph is written with a phonetic from the Geba syllabary, and not a graph from the dongba "pictographic" script). Sometimes these orthographies are used interchangeably. For example, in the British Library Naxi manuscript *El-miq rherq zail* (invest with the power of El-miq), we see El-miq first referenced with his full name in dongba logographs:




⁵³ Then, a few pages later, we see the final graph exchanged for



a geba phonetic graph: ⁵⁴ Manuscript D60 of the Harvard-Yenching Naxi manuscript collection follows this orthographic sequence exactly. First with the logographs (on page 2), then with the geba "lei" (page 7).

In his dictionary, Rock says of El-miq: "[he was] A famous ancient ²Dto-¹mba and apparently ²Llü-¹bu. His power is invoked to defend and invest officiating priests...his long hair would indicate that he was also a 2Llü-1bu or Shaman".⁵⁵ Aside from being either a ritualist (*dobbaq*) or shaman (*lee bbuq*), his main identifying trait is long hair. It seems that the single logograph used to depict El-miq () shows that he is either one of the early native shaman-sorcerers who predate the dongba, or a ritualist of Tibetan origin. Rock suggested the former, while I would argue the latter. Dipping our toes into the discipline of





⁵² On page 15 of Harvard-Yenching manuscript D24, "Perq la sa (to invite the gods)",

El-miq is referred to via the iconic logograph: . Here we see the visual depiction of El-miq, with the phonetics (el and miq) below an iconic depiction of a seated dongba with long hair, mid-chant. This pictographic graph is *not* read, the two graphs below it provide the syllables for the name.

⁵³ British Library Or.11417A: 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*: 5.

⁵⁵ Rock 1972: 196.

etymo-logography, I believe we can make an educated guess as to whether El-miq is supposed to be considered a tantric shaman or a Tibetan. The interesting thing about this iconic graph is the hair: most dongba (or indeed in this case, *biu bbiuq*) are not depicted with hair. I believe the hair here indicates that El-miq was a Tibetan ritual specialist. The following depiction of a ritualist is standard: .⁵⁶ The ritualist wears the five-lobed crown (only the front-facing three lobes are visible) which is common to the Bon and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, is seated, and is dressed in a robe. No hair is depicted. El-miq's long hair could be the long hair of the *lee bbiuq/sai niq*, the female shaman. Rock makes note of saying that the *lee bbiuq* has "dishevelled" hair, and this is generally depicted graphically by wavy lines:  (Naxi graph for *sai niq*, female shaman). The logograph used to depict El-miq has long, straight hair, leading I believe more credence to the assertion that he is of Tibetan origin. Fang Guoyu's Naxi dictionary depicts a Tibetan, with this long, straight queue of hair: *ggv-zzee* .⁵⁷ The Tibetan with his queue can be spotted in the manuscripts, such as page one of Harvard-Yenching D60: , which shows a depiction of the graph for "Tibetan", with the flowing queue of hair, and the distinctive Tibetan headpiece. The iconic depiction places El-miq (directly or indirectly) into a tradition probably more ancient than the Naxi dongba ritualists – for the early Tibetan ritualists certainly predated them. El-miq comes from a far-off land to lend his power to the rite being performed.⁵⁸

El-miq, if he was indeed a historical figure, was perhaps Tibetan all along: he brought with him knowledge of Tibetan religious teachings (either old Tibetan, Bon, or Tibetan Buddhist religious knowledge, or some combination thereof) and wrote dongba scriptures according to the model he knew, translating the names of the deities, and the gods. This would add weight to Jackson's assertion that the Naxi texts derive from the Tibetan ones.

El-miq in the Naxi manuscripts

I intend here to enumerate the manuscripts (both historical and contemporary) and the ritual traditions in which El-miq appears.

⁵⁶ Harvard-Yenching D24, page 14.

⁵⁷ Fang and He 1986: 221.

⁵⁸ The *gshen* ritualists in Tibet were often depicted as coming from far-off lands. Tibet, from the Naxi perspective, is also a foreign land: "That these male and female *gshen* types are associated with foreign origins is explicitly indicated. They are vaguely said to be from *dags ri dkar po* (sunny white mountain; yang 陽) and *sribs ri nag po* (shadowy black mountain; yin 陰), successively". Blezer 2008: 430.

Naxi manuscript traditions that include the name “El-miq”

Title	<i>El-miq rherq zail</i> (invest with the power of El-miq)	<i>rherq zail tei'ee</i> (book of investing with power)	<i>perq la ddeeq sa</i> (inviting the gods – greater ceremony)
Ceremony	<i>ssee zhul biuq, sheel-lo ngvl, jji mu ngvl</i>	<i>svq ggvq</i> , many others (perhaps a generic ‘investing power’ rite that can be performed before any major ceremony)	<i>ssee zhul biuq, svq ggvq</i>
Representative manuscripts from the Harvard Yenching Naxi manuscript collection ⁵⁹	D60, A9	5052, 1027	D24

From this table we see that the manuscript traditions most likely to contain mention of El-miq are books that detail the *rherq zail* 禳灾 ritual. Before every major ceremony, the dongba will perform a *rherq zail* rite to invest themselves with power. The *rherq zail* is practiced as follows: 1) Incense is burned; 2) the gods are invited; 3) great ancestors and masters are invited; 4) sacrifices are offered to the gods; 5) the gods of heaven and earth are invited to bestow their power upon the participants; 6) a ritual dance is performed; 7) the officiating ritualist scatters some grains, while the ritualist who is the subject of the rite receives them in a bowl. He must eat all those grains that are caught, symbolizing the planting of the seeds of wisdom; 8) a ceremonial name is

⁵⁹ These are fairly common manuscripts traditions, and as such an exhaustive list of manuscripts in museum and library collections around the world would quickly become unwieldy; instead I provide the mss nos. for those that belong to the Harvard Yenching collection, as these are freely available to view online.

bestowed upon the subject of the rite, for example if his name was Kee-sso kee-tal, he would become El-miq do-kee, or El-miq do-tal. The officiating dongba must sprinkle some blessed water; 9) some auspicious words are chanted and the officiating ritualist brings the *rherq zail* rite to an end.⁶⁰

Rock gives an explanation of the name of the *rherq zail* ceremony and an overview of its proceedings:

The first is a phonetic character read ¹ndshër meaning power, awe, pomp, majesty. It is known as ²ggö-¹baw character. It is often written with the diagonal line extending to the left and as such it can be read ¹ssan representing the seven maker of the Earth or ¹Ssan-³mi ²shër ³gkv. The second symbol is a pictograph and represents the Chinese harpsichord, a large lute 琴瑟, when it stands for the latter it is read in the first tone, here its phonetic value has been borrowed to express the verb “³tša” to invest.

This book is chanted at most of the larger ceremonies in the evening before the actual commencement of the ceremony. As the text reveals, the ²dto-¹mbas beseech the gods, spirits, deified ²dto-¹mbas or ²Bpö-¹mbö to invest the with their power and awe, with the help of which the ²dto-¹mbas are able to deal with malevolent spirits, demons, etc., to suppress them and finally to kill or evict them.⁶¹

Rock details a translation of a *rherq zail* manuscript which begins: “In the beginning of time before man had performed any ceremony, the high heavens were sacrificed to and the power of heaven was beseeched to descend; also the power of the vast land. Let the power of the long rays of the sun and that of the full, bright moon be given us...”⁶² In this translation, the investment of power begins with the power of the skies and celestial bodies, then of the gods, then the deified dongba who are enumerated. According to Rock, the rite only included the deified dongbas, but Naxi sources relate how the rite frequently also enumerates those dongba that are considered to be proficient (such as El-miq, who is generally not considered to be a god), not necessarily only those who have become elevated into deities.⁶³ The names in the historical sources listed directly alongside El-miq in the following examples are not dongba deities; they are instead rather proficient, noteworthy ritualists of the past.

⁶⁰ This breakdown is a paraphrase of the information found in He Shangli 2016: 101-102.

⁶¹ Rock 1952: 218.

⁶² *Ibid.*: 219.

⁶³ See for example He Jiquan 2018, and He Shangli 2016: 101-105.

I believe it would be worthwhile to show how El-miq appears in the texts themselves, and in what context. If El-miq is linked directly to the *rherq zail* rite, then he appears to be most directly associated with the *ssee zhul biu* ceremony.⁶⁴ The ceremony can be performed at certain years of a person's life as a means of ensuring longevity, and after a death, to extend the life expectancies of those who survive the deceased. According to Jackson, this is among the three highest ranked Naxi ceremonies in terms of purity (there is a "Buddhist-like abstinence from meat eating" during its performance). There is a Tibetan Buddhist analogue to the *ssee zhul* – the *tshe gzungs*. The *tshe gzungs* is a dharani for longevity, performed during morning prayers, where the name and animal sign of the patient is announced, and monks recite one hundred and eight mantras of each of the longevity deities.⁶⁵ In Tibetan, *tshe* means one's life-span. The actual particulars of the Tibetan Buddhist and Naxi rituals have few apparent similarities. One of the many rites performed within the ceremony is that of "investing with the power of El-miq".

The manuscript tradition that specifically bears El-miq's name in its title, *El-miq rherq zail*, is associated primarily with funerary ceremonies: *ssee zhul biu* (for longevity and performed at a funeral), *sheel-lo ngol* (funeral for a dongba ritualist), and *jjj mu ngol* (funeral for a worthy woman). El-miq is mentioned alongside other notable ritualists.



Harvard Yenching Naxi manuscript collection D60, page 2

Here, El-miq is mentioned alongside two other ritualists (they make a trio) in separate intonation units, the context is the calling upon the spirit power of each.⁶⁶ El-miq is written with the first four graphs (read

⁶⁴ Naxi ceremonies, often lasting several days, are comprised of many individual rites.

⁶⁵ See Gerke 2011: 188.

⁶⁶ This is a trio of ritualists as they are depicted in the Naxi literature. El-miq is merely one of a number of ritualists whose power is called upon to make the ritual more efficacious. Compare with the Dunhuang manuscripts, where the trio of ritualists is a common motif: "In this narrative of funerary ritual origins, gShen-rab is not distinguished in any special way from his priestly counterparts; he is merely one of a trio of ritualists" (Bellezza 2010: 37). In the Tibetan sources, Myi-bo is often accompanied by Dur-shen rma-da. I believe this individual also exists in the Naxi rites as a certain dongba known as Liuq-shee maq-ddal. The phonetics of the name, aside from the initial of the first syllable, are a very close match, and in particular,

top to bottom, left to right) El-miq yuq-lei. There is no visual depiction of the ritualist himself, unlike in the following two sections (each intonation unit is separated by vertical lines). The identity of the second ritualist is unclear, but he is here associated with the Naxi graph *bbaq*, meaning pig. There is a dongba known as Yi-shil *bbaq-zzo*, who's name is written with the graph for *dobbaq* and the graph for pig, but here we also have the graph *per*, white, above the dongba's speech. The depiction with the graph for 'white' is similar to that of ³Ss-¹p'ér-¹bpö-¹p'a [in Rock's transcription], a dongba who Rock tells us held the position of a sorcerer. The third ritualist here is a well-known disciple of Do-bbaq sheel-lo, Gge-bbaq. Of Gge-bbaq, Rock says: "disciple of ²Dto-¹mba ³Shi-²lo (gShen-rab[s]-mi-bo)...The ²Dto-¹mbas are desirous of being invested with his power and that of all the other disciples of ³Shi-²lo."⁶⁷ A translation of the first section above would be "The power of El-miq Yuq-lei rests here". Naxi script:



Transcription:

El-miq yuq-lei gge rherq ddeeq chee haq mei

In manuscript D24 we also see El-miq mentioned alongside another ritualist:



Harvard Yenching Naxi manuscript collection D24, page 14

Of the two ritualists mentioned above (the third and fourth graphs depicting a ritualist are accompanied by graphs for "power", "come

just like his counterpart Dur-shen rma-da, Liuq-shee maq-ddal is related as a ritualist who performs rites for the people, who can mediate between the living and the dead, and is proficient at both funerary rites and closing the gateway to the spirit world (see YSSMGZCGB 1989: 423-424). Of Liuq-shee maq-ddal, Rock says he is the "second son" of Do-bbaq sheel-lo (Rock 1972: 214).

⁶⁷ Rock 1972: 200.

down” and “invest”, making them category nouns, i.e. “the power of the *biubbuq* [dongba] comes down, invest with the power of the *biubbuq*”), only El-miq can be found in the second volume of Rock’s dictionary, which contains a section dedicated to the proper names of the dongba found in the corpus of Naxi literature. The first is marked by the graphs for conch shell, egg and eyes. I am not sure of the reading of this name, although it has been suggested to be Niu-hei gv-she.⁶⁸ The final sentence (the first six graphs from the right) of the above section *may* be read:



Biubbuq rherq zail mei perq ku ddee ku to (May the power of the [aforementioned] dongba be invested, may the door to good things be opened). The problem of reading manuscripts where the words are not all written down is evident here: the final three words on the page are “white” (good things), “one”, and “door”, but the reading *could* contain five or more words. This interpretation is in line with the appearances of El-miq in the other manuscripts: his power is invoked, and via his power as a proficient ritualist, “good” things may happen, but he is not physically present in the narrative.

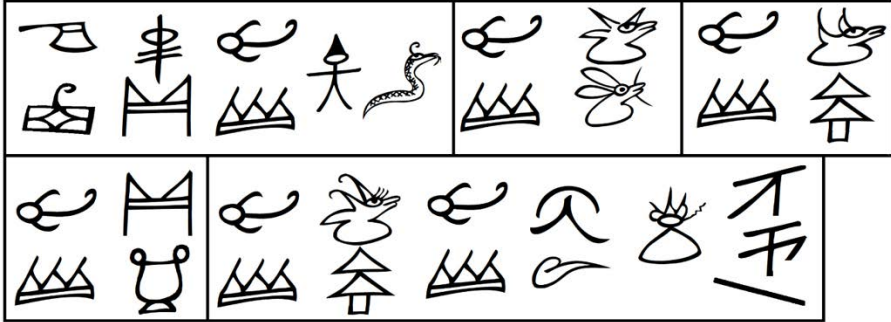
In contrast with these older sources, modern *rherq zail* manuscripts mention a lineage of El-miq ritualists, some with El-miq yuq-lei being the second in that line; the first being an El-miq dvq-reeq; I believe this is the same person as “A ming du ri cu 阿明都日粗” mentioned in Yang Zhengwen’s Naxiological study of the Baidi area.⁶⁹ Yang states that there are no written records of El-miq’s life. Nevertheless, he claims that his achievements are listed in a manuscript titled “*zhi zhang* 汁章”, which is probably a Chinese transcription of *rherq zail*. I have yet to see a manuscript that actually offers biographical details of El-miq, but there are certain texts where we see the name occurs as a prefix for an entire lineage of ritualists. These manuscripts that list exhaustive El-miq lineages are newer, late twentieth/early twenty-first century sources; as we can see in the newly-published collection of ritual manuscripts, the *Changyong dongba yishi guicheng ji jingdian* [Commonly-seen dongba ritual practices and manuscripts].⁷⁰ As such they can only reflect how the legend of El-miq has developed into the present day.

⁶⁸ I thank He Lingyu for the assistance with the interpretation of this section of text.

⁶⁹ Yang 2008a: 31.

⁷⁰ Some of the manuscripts in this 2019 collection are dated in a final colophon as being copied in “2012”, and all the reproduced manuscripts are recent copies.

An extract from one such *rherq zail* manuscript that focuses on the El-miq lineage is as follows:



Recreation of manuscript section in LJSDBWHYJY 2019: 254.

Shujjeq liulwe El-miq Ddvqreeq El-miq Yuq-lei El-miq Keetal El-miq Wessoq El-miq Seiqtal El-miq Yiheel rherq perq bbiuq
 [In] Shujjeq (Shuijia) village, the spirit power of El-miq Ddvq-reeq, El-miq Yuq-lei, El-miq Kee-tal, El-miq We-ssoq, El-miq Seiq-tal, and El-miq Yi-heel descends.

Here “El-miq” is clearly used as an honorific prefix for this lineage of ritualists, attributed to one particular village in Baidi: Shuijia village 水甲村. These are twenty-first-century copies, but the older books Rock collected (mostly nineteenth-century sources, and primarily from the Lijiang region) only refer to a single “El-miq” or “El-miq yuq-lei”: there is no El-miq lineage as such. This was likely because they were composed before the name El-miq came to be associated with any dongba of great power. The *rherq zail* rite is carried out to bestow a dongba with spirit power of his ancestors, and is often performed outside the cave of El-miq. Part of the rite is the bestowing of a ceremonial name upon the dongba for whom the rite is held.⁷¹ It is worth noting however that the old books of Baidi are now mostly lost, as according to local dongba they were burnt in huge courtyard-filling bonfires during the Cultural Revolution, so it may be true that manuscripts that did furnish El-miq with biographical details were once extant in the region.

It must be said that none of the manuscripts that we have access to, traditional or modern, have anything to say about El-miq beyond that his power should be absorbed: unlike the Myi-bo of the Dunhuang

⁷¹ The outer walls of the cave of El-miq, *El-miq naiq ko*, was in 2016 inscribed with graffiti by a certain “El-miq do-tal” and “El-miq ddiuq-je”. These are Naxi religious names, the former being the prolific Naxi anthropologist, Yang Fuquan, the latter the Naxiologist Yang Jiehong. It is likely that a rite was performed outside the cave to bestow them with these names.

manuscripts, he doesn't appear as a person that takes any concrete action. El-miq has, in effect, become just a name to be invoked and, in modern times, an honorific to be adopted by a competent ritualist. Nevertheless, the similarities to gShen-rab myi-bo are many: he comes from a far off land, he is responsible for the translation of Tibetan ritual texts into Naxi, whether phonetically or into the Naxi vernacular; he is associated with funerary rites and the driving out of spirits. He is mentioned almost always alongside other ritualists, as one amongst a number of powerful practitioners. A holy site is dedicated to him, and this site is often confused with the Naxi analogue to sTon-pa gshen-rab: Do-bbaq sheel-lo. El-miq is a priest; a guardian of ritual methods; he is laudable and influential, of considerable antiquity (his deeds having been passed down via oral transmission); he does not act unilaterally, but as one among a number of priests.

Rock has claimed that El-miq yuq-lei is the ritualist's full name, and that el-miq (Rock: ³ä-¹mi) is an honorific, equivalent to the Tibetan *a mi* ཨ་མི་ / *a myes* ཨ་མེས་, which can mean "grandfather".⁷² At the time of his writing, Rock seemed unaware of the fact that there are many other ritualists in the supposed lineage of El-miq (which suggests the likelihood that the El-miq "lineage" only developed in the mid to late twentieth century, or that the lineage of ritualists with this honorific was merely an oral tradition and not included in the manuscripts in Rock's time). In this interpretation, the "father" in the Dunhuang manuscripts becomes the "grandfather" in the Naxi manuscripts. Nevertheless, I believe there is another possible interpretation of the name: El-miq as a *translation* of the Tibetan "mi bo". There have already been several discussions of the underlying semantic meaning to the name, gShen-rab mi-bo.⁷³ "Rab" can be taken to mean "best", and "mi bo" means "best man", while "gshen" refers to a kind of priest. Gurung provides us with the complete formulation "'the supreme gshen priest' who is also 'the best man'".⁷⁴ In this translation, *gshen rab* is a title, and *mi bo* means "excellent man" (*bo* being an affix). That said, *mi bo* could simply be the proper name of an individual. Looking at the Naxi name El-miq, *el* is a prefix in Naxi indicating advanced age and station, whereas *miq* does not seem to carry any semantic meaning. It could simply be a personal name. I suggest that *miq* could also be a direct phonetic translation: Naxi *miq* for the Tibetan *mi*; that is, the affix is inverted into a prefix, both surrounding a common core phoneme (Tibetan *mi*, Naxi *miq*). There are cases where Naxi graphs are employed as transcriptions of Tibetan phonemes, and Rock has detailed these in

⁷² Rock 1972: 196.

⁷³ Gurung (2011:28-29), and Bellezza (2010:32).

⁷⁴ Gurung 2011:29.

his work. Even without the association of the name itself, the mythic narrative of the excellent priest, and his subsequent place as the legendary creator of the dongba writing system and spiritual head of the Diqing school of ritualists, reflects the bifurcating gShen-rab myi-bo / sTon-pa gshen-rab narrative. There is little doubt that, in myth, El-miq belongs to a lineage of old Tibetan ritualists, quite probably with roots in the non-Buddhist legends of gShen-rab mi-bo. Whether or not we take the Naxi “miq” to be a *translation* of the Tibetan phoneme *mi* is ancillary: the narrative traditions of these ritualists are a close match, regardless of the phonetics.

A syncretic tradition

If the relationship between El-miq and Do-bbaq sheel-lo is the same as that between gShen-rab myi-bo and sTon-pa gshen-rab, that the latter is the deified version of the former, a version which supplants the former in the mythos, the concurrent existence of both El-miq *and* Do-bbaq sheel-lo as two separate figures in the Naxi manuscripts could point towards the syncretic nature of the dongba tradition (that parts originated in organized Bon tradition and Buddhist sources, while other elements may have been borrowed from the earlier ritual sources evidenced in the Dunhuang manuscripts). Christine Mathieu has written incisively on the historical ethnography of the Lijiang area and the roots of the Bon tradition amongst the dongba. She convincingly argues that Rock’s insistence on the Tibetan Bon origins of Naxi tradition should not be discounted, but that Rock perhaps didn’t fully acknowledge the syncretic, hybrid nature of the rites he so exhaustively described: both valuable insights, but her analysis is limited to the Chinese materials and does not engage with the Naxi ritual manuscripts themselves. Mathieu, leaning on the linguistic investigations of Alexis Michaud, points out that there are “entire” Bon rituals to be found in the Naxi literature, but that they are written in the vernacular language:

A point of major importance noted by linguist Alexis Michaud...is that apart from the names of Tibetan deities, which evidently derive from Tibetan, Dongba ritual language shows little Tibetan influence. This not only suggests relative antiquity, but where entire Bon rituals are found in the Dongba manuscripts in Naxi language, it implies *the translation into the vernacular* and therefore the purposeful incorporation, and purposeful transfer of Bon into the Dongba tradition.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Mathieu 2015: 372.

This is not always the case: it depends which manuscripts we read. There exist within the Naxi literature rituals that have been classified as “Bon” that are read entirely in Tibetan and merely *written* in Naxi. There was no doubt translation into the vernacular, but certain written incantations are meant to be read in Tibetan and not Naxi. These recitations appear to be later additions, with Buddhist influences and motifs, when compared to the more ancient depictions of the funerary rituals. This suggests that there was *first* translation into the vernacular, a purposeful transfer of non-Buddhist Tibetan ritual into the dongba tradition, but that some rituals later became appended with Tibetan Buddhist incantations.

The oldest written records mentioning El-miq are those belonging to a Buddhist tradition, the *Tshe-gzungs*, and date from the 19th century; but the Naxi ritual as it is practised that may have its roots in pre-Buddhist Tibet. The manuscripts belonging to the *El miq rherq zail* rite are often appended with a phonetic mantra meant to be read in Tibetan, and that has been linked to organized Bon practice. It is in the northern Naxi areas that we find these manuscripts with sections written in Naxi but meant to be read in Tibetan – manuscripts that Naxi researcher He Jiquan has claimed as belonging to an (organized) Bon tradition. These are syncretic written traditions that combine logographic, semi-oral writing with phonetic transcription, the former to be read in Naxi and the latter to be read in Tibetan, detailing rites that have narrative origins in early Tibetan manuscripts, alongside elements of Buddhist ritual and a mantra that has been linked to the Bon tradition (but that is likely Buddhist in origin).

As an example of such a tradition, towards the end of the *El-miq rherq zail* manuscript (see Harvard Yenching Manuscript Collection A9) the traditional dongba script (where one word can stand for several words, and some words are not written) turns into a phonetic incantation, known as (according to He Jiquan) the *daiq shee shuq* in Naxi: a phonetic rendering of the Tibetan *bkra shis shog* (bring forth auspiciousness). This incantation was for many years believed to be untranslatable, and indeed, a translation is not given in a collection of translated manuscripts from the Harvard-Yenching collection published in 2011, which merely lists the Tibetan text in Naxi transcription as a “mantra”.⁷⁶ In 2018, however, He Jiquan published a translation of this incantation, directly associating it with what he called a Bon “incantation of good fortune”, 吉祥经 *jixiang jing* (I am not familiar with such a scripture in the Bon canon), and meant to be read in Tibetan.

⁷⁶ ZSKMYRY 2011: 135.

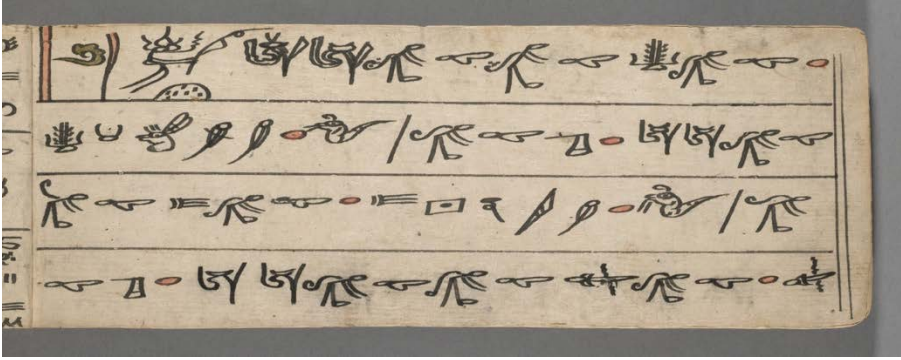
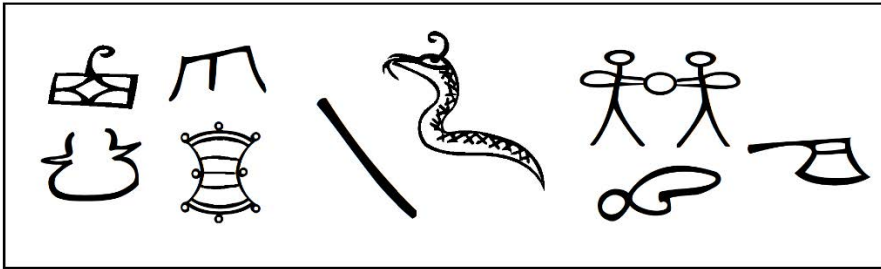


Figure 2. Tibetan incantation written in Naxi. Manuscript A-9. Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard Library, Harvard University

The incantation is particularly relevant to the present discussion because in certain manuscripts we see El-miq appear, alongside Do-bbaq sheel-lo and his father, Laq-bbv tvl-go (lha bon thod kar). The incantation includes certain proper names associated with the Tibetan Bon tradition. One sentence proper construction in particular is repeated often: “(proper noun) + *reeq ddiuq daiq shee shuq*”. In the manuscript contained in LJSDBWHYJY (2019), we see this sentence repeated for Do-bbaq sheel-lo, then Laq-bbv tvl-go (or the variant, Jje-bbv do-ka), and finally El-miq Yuq-lei.

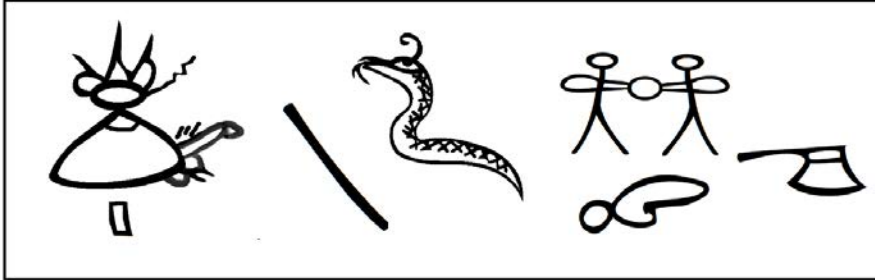


Transcription: *Jje-bbv do-ka reeq ddiuq shee shuq*. LJSDBWHYJY 2019: 399.

Here the name of Do-bbaq sheel-lo's father is given in Naxi graphs (all phonetic loan graphs). The first two, *Jje bbv*, are transcriptions of the Tibetan *rgyal bon*.⁷⁷ *Do* and *ka* (borrowed directly in graphic and


⁷⁷ He Jiquan (2018: 91) gives the Tibetan reading *rgyal po*. There are examples of him being referred to in Naxi by his alternate Tibetan name, Lha-bon thod-dkar: the name can be written in Naxi “(e ssee) laq bbv tvl go 𑄎𑄎𑄎𑄎𑄎”. Here, in the Naxi name as written by dongba Xi Shanghong, in He Shangli 2016: 11, we see the prefix *el ssee*, meaning “father”. Once again, the “el” acts as an honorific prefix

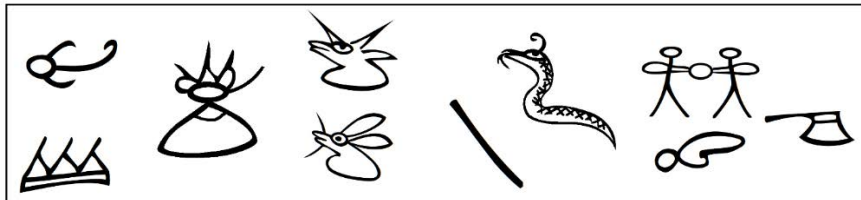
phonetic form from the *ka* of the Tibetan alphabet) are probably written in the incorrect order, and indicate the Tibetan *thod kar*, thus, rGyal-bon thod-kar.



Transcription: Do-bbaq sheel-lo reeq ddiuq daiq shee shuq. LJSDBWHYJY 2019: 399.

It is worth noting how the graphic depiction of Do-bbaq sheel-lo here uses the penis to indicate a phonetic (*ler*; “Do-bbaq sheel-ler” is a common pronunciation in the Baidi area instead of the final *lo* seen in Lijiang) – and locating the manuscript to the Baidi region, where this written form is common. Similar manuscripts from Lijiang record Do-



bbaq sheel-lo’s name with the following two graphs  *shee* (meat) and *do* (wooden board), again acting as phonetics (certain Lijiang manuscripts also omit “El-miq” altogether in the incantation). I would tentatively hypothesize that El-miq is more likely to appear in manuscripts from the predominantly Tibetan areas to the north of Lijiang.



Transcription: El-miq Yuq-lei reeq ddiuq daiq shee shuq. LJSDBWHYJY 2019: 399.

indicating age. Gurung notes how *lha bon* and *rgyal bon* are both common readings: “A passage from the Khyung ‘bum gong ma (a text found amongst the manuscripts collected from Gansu) sheds light on the question of why the phrase *rgyal bon thod dkar* is attached to the phrase *lha bon* (divine bon)...*Lha bon thod gar* must also be identified as a divine figure. That is probably the reason why the name *Rgyal bon thod dkar* was also attached to *lha bon* (divine bon) to construe the name of Shenrab’s father, *Mi bon lha bon rgyal bon thod dkar*”. Gurung 2011: 9.

In this section, after the first two graphs, *El* and *miq*, there is a depiction of a ritualist, this graph is not read. It is followed by “Yuq” and “lei”.

He Jiquan reads the two Naxi graphs,  *reeq* = snake,  *ddiuq* = stick, as Tibetan *zhi bde* (peace), which he glosses as the Chinese *genben* 根本 (fundamental). As we saw above, the Naxi *daiq shee* is a phonetic translation of the Tibetan *bkra shis*, and *shuq* is likewise equivalent to *shog*. Thus, *zhi bde bkra shis* becomes, in He's translation, “fundamental auspiciousness”; the sentences above therefore reading “call the fundamental auspiciousness of Do-bbaq sheel-lo” (etc). While this reading of *reeq ddiuq* as *zhi bde* is based on what He Jiquan calls the difference in initial sounds of the Diqing southern Khams Tibetan dialect, the difference in vowel sounds between Naxi *ddiuq* and Tibetan *bde* is not addressed. Moreover, *zhi bde* means peaceful, not fundamental. I would perhaps offer a tentative contextual reading of the two Naxi graphs as *gzhi grub*, that is, “established base”, or simply “all things that exist”; in this case an example of this formula might read in Tibetan: *El-miq Yuq-lei gzhi grub bkra shi shog*, i.e. “let come the existent auspiciousness of El-miq”. That is, in this rite the power or auspices of these “Bon” figureheads: rGyal-bon thod-kar, sTon-pa gshen-rab and El-miq, is summoned.

Of course, the phonetics of modern Naxi *reeq / ddiuq* cannot match exactly with this Tibetan reading. This is a problem that cannot be avoided: we are dealing with phonetic renderings of Tibetan words in Naxi based on the pronunciation of the dialect of the people who dictated what was presumably initially an oral text, and the earliest manuscripts from this tradition that we have access to are 19th century copies; the manuscript tradition probably dating back a century earlier, and the oral tradition earlier still. At any rate, I suggest that the repeated refrain of *bkra shis shog* is a Buddhist-influenced incantation, and there are many Buddhist symbols mixed up with the personages more familiar to Bon. This incantation cannot, in my view, be classified as pure “Bon” as He Jiquan (2018) does. What is interesting is its position as embedded within the main rite written in dongba script and read in Naxi. We are left, then, with a piece of concrete evidence for the Naxi religion as being, in Rock's words, a “composite religious edifice”.

As noted previously, *El-miq rherq zail* is a manuscript generally used towards the end of a funeral (either as part of the *ssee zhul* or the *sheel'lo ngol* ceremonies). Its first few pages generally depict a traditional, non-Buddhist funerary rite that involves animal sacrifice (in Harvard Yenching A9, an ox is sacrificed) and certain narrative elements found in the Dunhuang manuscripts. El-miq is not mentioned in the main body of the text of A-9, but in this manuscript a trio of ritualists,

from later Eternal Bon sources, or is there an inheritance from older Tibetan tradition to be found in the Naxi manuscripts? Where borders – geographic, linguistic or cultural – are crossed, there is translation. If we go beyond the linguistic definition of translation towards an understanding of transfer across semiotic borders, then translation can be understood as the reforming of a concept from one cultural framework into another. In this way cultural translation can be understood as creating, in Homi Bhabha's words, a "borderline condition" of "hybrid states of meaning" (1994: 234). The journey of gShen-rabs mi-bo to sTon-pa gshen-rab, subsequently refracted in a different cultural milieu to El-miq and Do-bbaq sheel-lo, is not a translation from any one source text into any one target text. Nevertheless, these mythic narremes travel across semiotic and cultural borders, and "Myi-bo" is reshaped in the Naxi lands as a competent ritualist who later develops his own local lineage, one that reflects the hybridity of his semiotic journey. While Myi-bo was likely replaced in Tibet by the legendary deity sTon-pa gshen-rab, El-miq's legend as a competent ritualist has continued, alongside the separate (but often interchangeably used) figure of the legendary Do-bbaq sheel-lo (who, specifically in his Buddha-like form, was probably an import from organized Bon). Essentially, the roots of both Naxi mythical personages can be traced back to the Myi-bo (gshen) of the Dunhuang manuscripts. Centuries later, ritualists such as El-miq have faded into the background, but their names still hold power in the Naxi rites practiced today: often literally being adopted by contemporary ritualists as religious names (Chinese *faming* 法名).

It's clear from the above analysis of Naxi sources that El-miq was an adept ritual practitioner, and his provenance may well have been Tibetan (indicated in both his contemporary origin myth, and an etymo-logographic analysis of the graph used to depict him). He is primarily (but not exclusively) mentioned in funerary and life-preserving rituals as an ancestor whose power can be divested to dongba performing a ritual in the present day, but modern manuscripts only usually include his name in their title (e.g. "investing with the power of El-miq"), he is only rarely referred to in the texts themselves, and even then only as one ritual specialist among a number of others. The texts do not furnish El-miq with any biographical information. Nevertheless, his station is clearly elevated when compared to other famous ritualists, such as the Naxi analogue to the Tibetan Dur-shen rma-da, Liuq-shee maq-ddal, whose name does not appear in any manuscript titles.

The argument I am making here is nothing as grandiose as suggesting that the Naxi dongba tradition *as it is now written* dates back to the tenth century and the time of the Dunhuang manuscripts, merely that we can identify narrative elements from Dunhuang manuscripts in the

tradition as it is still practiced today – if we know where (and how) to look. In trying to define the mechanics of translation, Walter Benjamin used the metaphor of a tangent:

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point-establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity - a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux.⁷⁹

In this conception of translation, the Naxi literature perhaps radiates as one tangent from a larger circle: the wellspring of Himalayan oral traditions, the *written* versions of which can be traced back to the Dunhuang manuscripts.

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⁷⁹ Benjamin 2002: 261.

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