

THE BUDDHIST PRINCESS AND THE WOOLLY TURBAN:
NON-BUDDHIST OTHERS IN A 15TH CENTURY BIOGRAPHY¹

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The analysis of references to ‘Bonpos’ in a fifteenth century biography has prompted me to reflect on what this term may have meant in the context of the religious climate of the time and in the context of that particular form of Buddhist narrative.

The biography of the Gungthang² princess Chokyi Dronma (Chos kyi sgron ma, 1422-1455) describes how during the earlier part of her life she had a series of encounters with Bonpos. Against her will she was married to the prince of southern Lato (La stod lho) defined as a keen supporter of Bonpo practices and had complex interactions with his court priests. Eventually she abandoned him to become a nun and follow a Buddhist religious life (and would eventually become the first Samding Dorje Phagmo). In this biography, compiled shortly after her death (see Diemberger 1997)³, Chokyi Dronma is thus depicted as a Buddhist hero and her conflict-laden interactions with followers of the ‘religion of Shenrab’, the wearer of the ‘woolen turbans’ (*bal gyi thod*), feature repeatedly. But who were these people? They could have been either members of local Bonpo monasteries or, more likely, a sort of court priesthood devoted to ancestral cults protecting the ruling house of southern Lato.

This paper will explore the passages in the biography that refer to these ‘Bonpo’ arguing that they were at the same time representatives of local cults and a reflection of literary and religious tropes. These passages provide a remarkable example of how ancient Indian notion of ‘heretics’ (*mu stegs pa*, *Skt. tīrthika*)⁴ could be merged with terms that refer to Tibetan non-

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² The kingdom of Gungthang (Gung thang) alias lower Ngari (mNga’ ris smad) established by a splinter of the ancient Tibetan royal house (see *Gung thang rgyal rabs* and Everding 2000).

³ In the volume *When a Woman becomes a Dynasty: the Samding Dorje Phagmo of Tibet* I gave a literary translation of the biography and discussed its compilation. Here I am going to quote passages in a more detailed translation, giving the transliteration of the Tibetan text in the footnotes.

⁴ The rendering of *mu stegs pa*, which translates the Sanskrit *tīrthika*, as ‘heretics’ is problematic and has been queried (see for example Karmay 2005: 159). ‘Non-Buddhists’ would probably be more accurate. However, I use the English translation ‘heretics’

Buddhist religious practices and of how references to real local practitioners could be used to substantiate a blanket category that identified, from a Buddhist point of view, the non-Buddhist 'other'. Rather than considering the notion of 'Bonpo' as a mere reference to a specific religious tradition, it might therefore be more fruitful in such a context to consider it as a relational term: a performative and contextual construction of non-Buddhist 'otherness', a fluid category encompassing a variety of not necessarily related religious practices and literary references against which are defined the deeds of a Buddhist hero⁵. By trying to solve the apparent paradox that Chokyi Dronma's Bonpo husband was the son of a celebrated Buddhist ruling family this paper will show how the construction of this category might be based on a very selective interpretation of events and encompass a variety of heterogeneous phenomena that are in all likelihood real but not necessarily related.

Chokyi Dronma and her Bonpo husband

As to be expected, Chokyi Dronma's biography describes her as a deeply Buddhist person since her early childhood. Her early spiritual aspirations were shattered by her marriage to Tshewang Tashi (Tshe dbang bkra shis), the son of the ruler of the neighboring Kingdom of southern Lato (La stod lho)⁶. He did not only represent Chokyi Dronma's entanglement in a worldly life but also the pursuit of religious aspirations perceived as hostile to Buddhism. Predictably the relationship between them was marred from the very beginning. The marriage gifts that he sent through his envoys were already inauspicious. The biography (folio 12a)⁷ tells that for the ceremony they took along "a hat said to have belonged to Shenrab", the

since it is still the most common and, in a Buddhist perspective, highlights the original sense of doctrinal departure on the basis of a common Indian religious background. The extension of this category so as to include the Tibetan non-Buddhist traditions is an interesting process in itself.

⁵ Stein observed that the position of the Bonpo "may have resembled that of Taoism in China which, on top of its own system, had a tendency to gather within it, or take credit for, unorganized and disparate folk customs and religious techniques (Stein 1972: 229).

⁶ He was the son of Situ Lhatsen Kyab (Si tu Lha btsan skyabs), the grand-son of Situ Chokyi Rinchen (Si tu Chos kyi rin chen) and a descendant of Sa skya dpon chen 'Od zer senge. The genealogy of this family is described in the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (folio 4a-8a).

⁷ *De'i tshes na 'jig rten la grags pa ltar du sa spyod tshes dbang bkra shis kyi tshem che dkar po cig 'khor gsum gshen rabs kyi sgröl zhwa cig rnam gsung pa so nams khyer te/ sgo mangs kyi kyams mthil du sku la bzhes par zhu pa na: 'jig rten rje su bzung pa'i slad du nam bza' dang sku 'khor rnam bzhes/ bon po'i zhwa gon pa rtog pa byed gsung ring du 'phangs par gyur to/.*

founder of the Bonpo religion, and items of clothing that had been offered to her by her future husband, Tshewang Tashi. The bride accepted the clothing and the jewels but “threw away the Bonpo hat”. She thus refused the gift that would entangle her in the web of moral and religious obligations to her husband.

Despite the initial misgiving the marriage went ahead. When the nuptial procession approached Shekar, the capital of southern Lato, her future husband,

“the prince who was a devotee of Shenrab, sent some sixty Bonpo priests, wearing turquoise furry cloaks (*g.yu yi thul pa*)⁸ and woolly turbans (*bal gyi thod*)⁹, carrying drums and *shang*, to perform some rituals of exorcism (*bgegs bskrod*). It was a depressing sight, like seeing Zangmo of Magadha leave the Buddha in the dwelling of the Anathāpin-dikavihāra and worship the heretical Jain teachers in the town of Buram shing phel. The princess said, “We can’t stand this! Chase them away throwing stones!” Her retinue did accordingly. The Bonpo escaped like scared ducks, leaving their ritual instruments at the crossroads like stones and pebbles. Thinking of this episode, the great *yoginī* invoked the victory of the Buddhist gods (*lha rgyal*). This seems to be the first auspicious gesture by which she paid respect to the doctrine of the Buddha. By doing so, for the first time, she revealed to the watching people that she was an emanation body (*sprul ba’i sku ’dzin pa*). They did not dare to raise their eyes and said, “This daughter-in-law is extremely beautiful and has great power and honor (*dbu ’phang mtho*)!” Later she heard this and thought: ‘This is a good omen!’ (*rten ’brel*)! (folio 16a-17a)¹⁰

⁸ These turquoise cloaks were possibly similar to the blue fur mantle of a Bonpo village member encountered by Milarepa. This was a rich man who wished that Milarepa looked after his funeral despite the opposition of his community. For a discussion of this episode in relation to the Bonpo see Stein 1972: 239. Many of Milarepa’s deeds took place in Chokyi Dronma’s homeland and his life and songs were compiled by Tsangnyon Heruka, sponsored by Chokyi Dronma’s brother, the Gungthang king Thri Namgyal De. Tsangnyon Heruka may have been familiar with Bonpo priests like those described in the biography of Chokyi Dronma, and with the climate of competition between Buddhists and Bonpo.

⁹ A well-known distinctive feature of the Bonpo like the drums and the *shang* cymbals (see Stein 1972: 233).

¹⁰ *rgyal bu de gshen rabs la skyabs gnas su ’dzin par snang bas/ bon po g.yu yi thul pa gyon pa bal gyi thod brten pa/ rnga bshang lag spyad du ’dzin pa drug bcu tsam gyis bgegs bskrod bgyid par brtsom pa na/ ma ga ta bzang mo mgon med zas sbyin gyi kun dga’ ra ba nas ston pa bcom ldan ’das kyi zhabs las ring du song stel/ grong khyer bu ram shing ’phel du mu stegs kyi ston pa gcer bu zad byed kyi tshogs la mchod gnas su ’dzin pa mthong pas yid rab tu dub pa bzhin du gyur nas: rang gi mkhor rnams la ’di ni bdag gis kun tu mi bzod kyis/ rdo ba dang ’phongs la rab tu bskrod cig ces bsgoof’khor rnams kyis kyang le lo ma yin par de bzhin du bgyis pa las/ bya gag gi phreng pa zhig pa bzhin du gyur nas rnga dang bshang la sogs pa rnams ni gzhi mdo’i gyo mo bzhin du bor nas rang gi yan lag la brtsis su byed pa tsam du zad do/ de ltar gyur pa na ni rnal*

As she tried to settle in as a new bride Chokyi Dronma tried to follow the customary expectations. However she is also depicted as already openly opposing Bonpo rituals and practitioners:

“Later, while the Bonpo were expected to perform the marriage rituals (*lha 'dogs pa*) in the royal palace, she said, ‘I am a Buddhist, I am not a worshipper of the [Bonpo] Woolly Turban (*bal gyi thod*). Please respect my beliefs!’ Accordingly, only the Bonpo teacher of her husband remained to celebrate a Bonpo consecration (*bon po mnga' gsol*), assisted by four other priests. Then the Queen of the Buddhas (*rgyal ba'i dbang mo*), by meditating on her deity revealed herself as its embodiment, and the followers of Shenrab, intimidated by this sight, became extremely anxious and dropped their ritual instruments.”¹¹ (folio 17a-17b)

For a while she tried to adapt to her new life at Shekar. At that time she used to express religious views that contrasted with those of her husband in the form of debates, possibly trying to win him over by using a device that had been used since the dawn of Buddhism in Tibet and, even before, in India:

“She insisted on a debate between the great long-standing tradition of the Buddha lord of the *dharma* and the evil tradition of Shenrab in a way similar to the manner in which Sakya Pandita debated with the heretics, so that the winner would establish the practiced religion. However such a beautiful vision could not be realized as she intended”¹² (folio 19b-20a)

The biographer presumably was referring to the famous debate between Sakya Pandita and Harinana and other prominent Hindu masters, probably Śaivaites, in Kyirong around the year 1238 (see Tucci 1999 [1949]:

'byor dbang mo'i zhal nas lha rgyal ba'i tshig gis spro ba bteg ci gsung ngo/de ltar na bstan pa rin po che la srid zhu chen po mdzad par 'gyur ba'i rten 'brel gyi sgo dang po mnyes par mdzad do/ltas mo la mngon par lhags pa'i skye bo rnam la sprul ba'i sku 'dzin par mdzad pas spyen cer gzigs par gyur ba na/ slar de dag gis blta bar ma yod de kha cig na re bag ma ni rnam pa 'char dbu 'phang mtho zhes gleng par byed cing/.

¹¹ *de nas rgyal mo'i khang bzangs su phyogs te bon pos lha 'dogs bgyid par 'dod pa na/ kho mo ni chos pas lha la thogs shig bal gyi thod brten pas ni ma yinno gsung pa la rang gi 'dod pa dang sbyor bar zhu phul nas/ drung tshes dbang ga rang gi slob dpon cig su nyid kyi bon lugs kyi mnga' gsol tsam bgyid pa la/ sku 'khor bzhi tsam gyi dbus su ci nang bgyid par zhus nas/ de dang de'i las la 'jug pa na rgyal ba'i dbang mos rang gi lha'i de nyid dran par byes te blta stangs kyi gzir bas gshen rabs kyi rgyal mtshan 'chang ba yon mchod 'khor dang bcas pa thams cad la shing tu mi zad pa'i 'jigs pa byin nas rang gi lag cha rnam rang dbang med par shor/.*

¹² *rje btsun sa skya panditas mu stegs byed dang brten pa dbang du btsugs nas/ brtsod pa la zhugs pa de gcig na du/ chos kyi rje sangs gyas bcom ldan 'das kyi ring lugs chen po dang/ gzhen rabs kyi lugs ngan dpang du btsugs nas mig mangs cig/ sus zhabs rtog du 'gyur ba cig bgyid pa lags zhus kyang/ las kyi ri mo ni rnam par bkra pas dgongs pa ji lta ba bzhi du ma gyur mod.*

626; Everding 2000: 353). Despite her attempts Chokyi Dronma was unable to impose her religious views on her husband. However she was able to defend her position concerning the education of their daughter:

“Later Tshewang suggested that Yundrung Lingpa, a great Bonpo master, should become the child’s teacher. The Magnificent Lady replied, ‘Had this child been a boy, you would have had the power to decide. However, [since the child is a girl,] an there is an agreement concerning female property, I request that she takes refuge in our Jewel of Buddhism’.”¹³ (folio 27a)

Chokyi Dronma claimed control over her daughter relying on the Tibetan idiom of relatedness that implied the distinct transmission of goods and roles through a patrilineal bone line and a matrilineal flesh line. The fruit of her union with Tshewang Tashi, however, did not survive for long and died when she was visiting her parents in Gungthang. While she was there the princess received the news that her daughter had died:

“While she was in Ngari she thought a lot about the premature death of her daughter. At first her mother-in-law did not have the courage to tell her. Eventually the Great Situ sent her a letter: ‘You came here fruitfully, but we were not as fruitful as you were. As nothing else could be done, we tried to earn merit by conducting her funeral in the best possible way.’ The Great Yogi thought that her daughter had died because her father had requested some Bonpo priests to take care of her and wrote a reply saying, ‘It is the fate of any being that has been born to die. We cannot help it. However, the child should have lived longer, but because of the actions against Buddhism this did not happen. This child will find its own way. Now there is no point in worrying.’”¹⁴ (folio 31b)

Although she showed remarkable equanimity in front of the loss of her daughter, she apparently attributed her death to Bonpo rituals and healing practices that she assumed her husband had instigated. In her mind these

¹³ *slad kyis tshé dbang pas phru gu ‘di’i skyed/ bsring pa’i slob dpon gyung drung gling pa la ‘chol lam zhes gsung pa na/ dpal gyi dbang mo phrug ma’i gsung gis bu pho yin na khyed rang sku dbang btsan pa la lags mod/ bu mo’i nor la ‘dum ‘dug pas ‘u cag rang gi dkon mchog la ka skyabs gnas zhu ba lags gsung/.*

¹⁴ *mnga’ ris su phebs shul sras kyi myu gu mi bzhugs par dgongs pa bzhin du gyur/ btsan lcam pa yum sras zhu ma bod pa la/ si tu pa nyid kyis gzung shog mdzad nas drung nges byes go chod nas phebs pa la/ nged kyi phul go ma chod mchis pa/ on kyang dge rtsa ni legs so bsgrubs lags zhes phul/ rnal ‘byor dbang mo’i sras kyi myu gu de yab kyi bzhed pas bon pos gso ba’i tshul brtan pa ‘dra bas/ zhu lan du lar skyes pa’i mtha’ ma mchi ba lags sems las kyi mi phen par gdas/ on kyan tshé de las ring tsam cig yong rgyu lags na’ang/ dkon mchog la ngo log tsa na de ka las ma’ das pa yin/ myu gu mo rang la ‘gro sa cig yod/ mchi tsa na sems las ma dgos lags so zhes pa’i zhus yig phul/.*

were in contrast with the Buddhist religion. During her stay at Shekar she kept supporting Buddhism and opposing the Bonpo as epitome of everything that had to be criticized. She was able to guarantee propitious weather and wellbeing of the country even better than court priests:

“What had to be praised, like the precious doctrine of the Buddha, was praised, what had to be criticized, like the banner of Shenrab and so on, was criticized. An ocean of magnificence spontaneously gathered in the great myriarchy, the crops were plentiful, there was enough water to irrigate the arid soil and the rains came on time. Everything became perfect.”¹⁵ (folio 34a-34b)

This state of affairs was not to last. Soon after the death of her daughter, Chokyi Dronma felt that the moment to abandon secular life had arrived and she started a struggle against both her in-laws and her own family. This culminated in a scene deeply reminiscent of the story of Mahāsiddha Lakṣmīnkarā (see below), and to some extent of the Buddha himself, in which she cut her hair, hurting herself and leaving everybody startled. At that point she was granted the right to leave and become ordained at Palmo Choding. Her brokenhearted father-in-law agreed with her wish and then decided to leave for a retreat. Before her departure she paid a last visit to her husband to ask for his formal permission to leave:

“He replied: ‘It seems that you are not to stay at my side for this life, and there is no hope that you will become my protector in a future life. You only behave as you fancy. Why do you ask me?’”¹⁶ (folio 42b)

He thus bitterly admitted the total failure of their union. Taking advantage of his father’s absence, Tshewang Tashi decided to wage war, in revenge, against the monastery and against the kingdom of Gungthang. The controversial military aggression was stopped as soon as his father Situ Lhasen Kyab returned to Shekar. Tshewang Tashi remained an unsettled character and died young a few years later, most likely before his father. The last time he appeared in Chokyi Dronma’s biography is when she heard of his demise. On that occasion she insisted in praying for his spiri-

¹⁵ *bstod par ‘os pa’i sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa rin po che’i dbu ‘phangs ni rab tu bstod/ slad par ‘os pa’i gshen rabs kyi rgyal mtshan la sogs pa ni rab du bsnyal/ phyogs bcu’i dpal gyi rgya mtsho thams cad ‘os pa med par ngang gis ‘dus nas khri skor chen po der ni/ sa gzhi la ‘bru smin pa dang/ lung pa skal po la chu skol ba dang/ char pa du su ‘bab pa la sogs pas snod gyi ‘jig rten thams cad phun sum tshogs par gyur cing/.*

¹⁶ *de nas tshe dbang pa nyid la chos bgyid pa zhu ba gsol pas/ tshe di la bdag gi gam du ‘dug pa ni mi byed par ‘dug; phyi ma’i skyabs gnas ni mi re: kyed rang ji ltar mno ba yan pa mi bgyid dus nga la dri rgyu ci zhig yod/.*

tual liberation despite the fact that the people of her entourage failed to understand her attitude and were critical of her actions. Chokyi Dronma's biographer apparently used this as an occasion to celebrate her compassion that defied all conventions and expectations. Indeed she went on to become both a fully ordained *gelongma* (*dge slong ma*) and a renowned *yoginī* following masters such as Bodong Chogle Namgyal (Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal, 1376-1451), Thangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po 1361-1485), Vanaratna (1384-1468) and Pal Chime Drupa (dPal 'Chi med grub pa).

The power of literary tropes

The biography of Chokyi Dronma, despite some remarkably distinctive traits, follows the general template of a *namthar* (*rnam thar*) – an account of spiritual liberation. It has therefore an exemplary character and is informed first of all by the Life of the Buddha, which was the original paradigm for an exemplary Buddhist life (Tambiah 1984). The biography describes how Chokyi Dronma revealed herself as a Buddhist hero in a narrative in which non-Buddhist antagonists play a significant role and are explicitly said to recall the 'heretics' faced by early Buddhists. The narrative is therefore apparently informed by the description of these early confrontations – the debate being one of the most common tropes.

Another trope that is very likely to have informed the narrative is the story of one of the Eighty-four Mahāsiddha, Lakṣmīṅkarā,¹⁷ of whom Chokyi Dronma was later considered a reincarnation¹⁸. This Indian princess was forced to marry a non-Buddhist king of a neighboring country. While her marriage was being celebrated she opposed the priests sent by her husband-to-be to welcome her and forced them to flee. Shortly after her marriage, she pretended insanity and cut her hair. She became an ascetic dwelling in cemeteries covered in ashes, and eventually managed to convert her former husband to Buddhism. Although this story is not explicitly referred to in Chokyi Dronma's biography, it was almost certainly known to its compiler, for Lakṣmīṅkarā was mentioned as a previous incarnation of Chokyi Dronma by the biographer of her master Bodong Chogle Namgyal¹⁹ (written before her biography was compiled). The representation of Tshewang Tashi as a keen follower of Bonpo practices and as the unde-

¹⁷ Her story is briefly narrated in Abhayadatta's *Stories of the Eighty-Four Mahasiddhas* (Robinson 1979: 250ff.; Shaw 1994: 110ff).

¹⁸ See Diemberger 1997: 239ff.

¹⁹ See Biography of Bodong Chogle Namgyal 268.

sired husband hostile to Buddhism may have been profoundly informed by this literary model. Like Lakṣmīṅkarā's husband, Tshewang Tashi sent his priests to welcome his bride and tried to impose his religious practice on her, and Chokyi Dronma responded exactly like Lakṣmīṅkarā. The end of the story was more subdued in Chokyi Dronma's case, probably to fit the actual events, but seems to have been written in the same vein, for after his death she is said to have stated that she would not give up on him until he would reach enlightenment.

The power of literary tropes often lies in that they provide a framework to organize actual experience, and the relevant narrative, rather than the source of complete preconfigured images. Especially when the writing occurs close to the events, the power of realistic detail is essential to confer authoritativeness to the text as an accurate and truthful account. It is therefore to be expected that in the biography of Chokyi Dronma, the rendering of details exceeds the literary tropes informing the narrative. For example the physical and psychological features of Tshewang Tashi appear too realistic to be a mere reflection of ancient narratives. He has a goiter, is mentally unstable, suffers of *rlung* disorders, undergoes specific crises, wages a real (albeit unjustified) war, and lives in the shadow of his parents, being resentful for not being taken seriously enough when important decisions are taken. From the point of view of Chokyi Dronma's biography, he is the anti-hero, the estranged husband that she gives up to devote herself to a Buddhist life. It is thus not surprising that he is not treated very sympathetically. In order to fully justify her momentous separation, which led to general disruption and a war, a certain amount of 'character assassination' was probably necessary (perhaps like an account in *Hello magazine* describing an ex-spouse in a conflict ridden divorce case?). But Tshewang Tashi was real and, at least initially, his description may have easily evoked memories in people who experienced him or heard of him.

One of the most surprising features in the narrative is that Tshewang Tashi is portrayed as a keen Bonpo follower while his father appears as a wise Buddhist ruler – an image that was further emphasized in later sources²⁰. This raises a number of questions concerning the relationship between the young prince and his parents as well as concerning the actual religious attitudes of his father (see below). Another interesting feature that seems to exceed literary tropes is the description of the Bonpo priests and their ritual instruments which resonates with what is known of priests of the ancient Tibetan royalty and 20th /21st century descriptions of the

²⁰ He appears a member of the heroic Buddhist family of the rulers of southern Lato (Lho bdag) celebrated in the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (see Wangdu and Diemberger 1996) and as a sponsor of Thangtong Gyalpo in his biography (269-270).

rituals of mountain cults in the region. In the next paragraph I shall explore the kind of religious practices that may have constituted the background against which the biographer of Chokyi Dronma compiled his text at the end of the fifteenth century.

A court priesthood devoted to ancestral cults?

During the fifteenth century Bonpo monasteries were certainly present in the Lato-Gungthang region. For example the monastery of Labuk or Palha Puk²¹ on the shore of the Palkhu (dPal khud/dPal khyung) Lake was presumably thriving for it is during this period that it was restored and decorated with its unique mural paintings (Baumer 2002: 137). It is possible therefore that the Bonpo invited to perform rituals at the court of the rulers of southern Lato were members of gradually consolidating Bonpo monastic communities that were competing with Buddhist institutions for influence and sponsorship. There is however the possibility that at the court of the rulers of southern Lato there was a priesthood devoted to ancestral cults, perhaps related to the Bonpo monastic communities but not necessarily identical with them. This is suggested by what we know about contemporary mountain cults in the region.

The nomadic area to the north of Shekar was the domain of the Porong rulers. Like the rulers of Lato and Gungthang these were keen supporters of the Bodongpa tradition and kept close contacts with both ruling families. From recent accounts by members of the Porong community in Tibet and in exile it is known that the Porong rulers were also involved with a class of priests, called Aya (A ya), who were devoted to the local mountain cults and played an important role in a sort of royal rituality. Aya used to transmit their ritual competence and empowerment through 'their bones' (*rus ko*) passed on from father to son. Until 1959 Aya priests used to celebrate a yearly animal sacrifice in honor of the mountain god Takyong. On that occasion the Porong ruler used to go with the Aya priest to a holy spot on the slope of the mountain where a white sheep would be sacrificed and the Aya would call for prosperity (*yang 'gug*) and perform divination reading the entrails of the animal. The community used to wait at the foot of the mountain and then participate in a feast in which the meat of the sacrificed animal would be shared (see Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 271-

²¹ Christoph Baumer describes the monastery of Palha Puk (sPa lha pug), the "Cave of the Pa gods" (often locally referred to as Labuk with a different explanation for its name) presumably founded in the 11th century by a member of the Pa (sPa) clan on the eastern shore of the Palkhu (dPal khud/dPal khyung) Lake and restored in the 15th century. He also mentions the monastery of Yadur in the Kyirong area as connected to Palha Puk.

272; Ramble 2007: 683-720 for a detailed account). The ritual relationship between Porong rulers and Aya did not interfere with the fact that they were considered a Buddhist ruling family.

According to the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (folio 13a) the rulers of southern Lato had the mountain god Gangmar (sGang dmar) as a main protector. This was a reddish peak in the vicinity of Dingri that was considered linked to the ancient Tibetan royalty²² and reportedly appeared as a red horseman in order to rescue Lhatsen Kyab's father, Situ Chokyi Rinchen (Si tu Chos kyi rin chen), when he was taken prisoner by the army of the rulers of northern Lato²³. This wrathful god is locally considered to be a brother of the Porong protector Takyong (rTa skyong/rTa khyung) and, until 1959, has been locally worshipped with animal sacrifices similar to those celebrated by the Aya priests for the sake of the Porong rulers (Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 268-270ff.). Such sacrifices were considered to be unacceptable from a Buddhist point of view. However, according to people who have witnessed their celebration, some members of local monastic communities were often present, as were members of the local administrative elite. In the Tibetan context this would generally be considered an aberration. However it is known that among Mongolian practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism this has been a rather common occurrence (Humphrey and Laidlaw 2007: 255-276) and might perhaps have been more frequent in Tibet than is currently assumed.

There is also the evidence of recent Aya cults to the south of Shelkar, in Phadrug, close to a locality called Shenkyung (gShen khyung) where the protector of Shekar monastery is considered to have had his original abode²⁴. Aya priests of Kyar used to make a live offering of a 'divine sheep' (*lha lug*) and members of the Shekar monastic community used to participate in these cults by looking after the *bsangs* rituals (Ramble 2007: 703-704). Charles Ramble and I came across this particular Aya tradition in a most unpredictable way: the head monk of Shekar monastery, the late Lobsang Sherab, who was a Gelugpa by training, replied to our question whether he knew anything about Ayas " I am an Aya!" He went on to explain how he had Aya 'bones' which enabled him to celebrate specific rituals to prevent hail and call for rain. He added that this was not good according to his training as a Gelugpa monk, but the community insisted

²² This deity mentioned in the *Gung thang rgyal rabs* (see *Bod kyi deb ther khag lnga* 130) is considered related to the protectors of the ancient Tibetan royal house, the Rolba Kyabdun (Rol pa skya bdun), and is discussed by Ariane Spanien/ Macdonald (1971: 300).

²³ The *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (folio 13a), which gives an epic narrative of the event, reports that an earlier source, the *Seng rdzong dkar chag*, mentions the red horseman that rescued the Situ as being Pholha Lhatsen Gangmar (Pho lha lha btsan sgang dmar).

²⁴ This is called Tashi Ombar (bKra shis 'od 'bar). On its mythology see Hazod 1998: 68-72.

that he fulfilled this role and therefore he felt obliged to do so. He then explained to us the details of the Aya tradition of Kyar to which he was related.

Charles Ramble (2007: 683-720), in his article reviewing the Aya category of priests, observes that some of them used to wear impressive woolen turbans evoking the term *bal thod can* reminding us of how priests that protected the ancient royal house of Tibet were often described²⁵. In some instances such priests considered themselves as having their origin in Zhangzhung and belonging to the Bonpo²⁶, but were not identical with members of specific Bonpo institutions. They seem to appear in a variety of remote places throughout Tibet, are sometimes considered equivalent to *lha bon* priests and, although it is difficult to infer the continuity of their traditions with references in historical literature, they present some striking similarities with what is known of ritual practitioners protecting the ancient Tibetan royal house. It is therefore plausible that the ruler of southern Lato in the fifteenth century may have been closely connected to a local priesthood of this kind, with its symbolic woolly turbans (*bal kyi thod*) and ritual instruments such as the *shang* and the drums. They would be 'a local type of priest concerned with ensuring protection and prosperity of their communities' (Ramble 2007: 715) and devoted to the cult of the ancestral deities of the southern Lato rulers presumably in a manner similar to that followed by the Porong ruler until 1959.²⁷

The rituals performed by this priesthood may have easily raised some objections from Buddhist masters and possibly prompted efforts to either fight or reform them. In this light it is not surprising that Lama Chopel Sangpo (Bla ma Chos dpal bzang po), the chaplain of the king of Gungthang Thri Lhawang Gyaltsen (Khri Lha dbang rgyal mtshan), i.e. Chos kyi sgron ma's father, did not only fight against the Bonpo (Biogra-

²⁵ The term appears for example in the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* (p57), see also Ramble 2007: 687-688. At the time of the compilation of this historical work in the 14th century, it is possible that the woolly turbans were not only a literary trope from dynastic times but also a reference that evoked living practices.

²⁶ For example Aya Bonpo are mentioned as the priests consecrating Thadrug (Khra 'brug) temple in its foundation myth (see Ramble 2007: 683; Sorensen and Hazod 2000: 155-156). In an interview the Ala of Nyemo mentioned as the ancient place of origin of his tradition Zhang zhung (Ramble 2007: 705-706) .

²⁷ The role of priests of this kind in marriage rituals is supported by an indication given in a ritual text described by Samten Karmay. This text was composed by Kong sprul Yon tan rgya mtsho (1813-99), who was originally a Bonpo, for the marriage of the prince of Derge with the daughter of an aristocratic family from Central Tibet. It provides an integration of a Bonpo ritual framework with Buddhist divinities. In this text a *lha bon* called Thokar (Thod dkar), i.e. White Turban, celebrates an original marriage between gods and human beings (Karmay 2005: 147-148).

phy of Chopel Sangpo folio 4b) but is also known as the author of an Aya ritual text that follows the Nyingma tradition (Ramble 2007: 707)²⁸. In this manuscript the name Aya appears only in the title whereas the rest seems to be a common Nyingmapa ritual text. This mystery, which puzzled Charles Ramble and has no obvious solution, might reflect Chopel Sangpo's attempt to adapt a standard Buddhist text for use by the Aya priestly community of Kyirong or elsewhere in the region. As a court chaplain he was an eclectic manipulator of the political and religious scene of Gungthang. He was therefore a plausible reformer of a local priesthood and may have done so by introducing Buddhist ritual texts substituting their orally transmitted ritual practices.

Chokyi Dronma is likely to have followed in the footsteps of the chaplain of her father and to have tried to purify religious practices by starkly opposing what she may have considered as an unacceptable compromise with followers of local cults. These were seen as similar to the ancient antagonists of Buddhism, equated to 'heretics' (*mu stegs pa*) and generically labeled as Bonpo. Sakya Pandita's debate against the 'heretics' in Kyirong is explicitly mentioned as a source of inspiration in Chokyi Dronma's fight against the Bonpo. Independently from whether such priests followed cults of Indian Śaivaites origin, Zhangzhung origin or indigenous, these were associated by the fact that they were all seen as standing in contrast to Buddhism. In the compilation of the biography, Chokyi Dronma's husband – the anti-hero – was the ideal figure to embody the support of such practices, which could in fact have been promoted by a variety of people.

The coexistence and close interactions of different traditions was probably a widespread phenomenon in a context in which a patron could support different, competing traditions at the same time. For example, the *Blue Annals* (112-113.) mention a patron who invited at the same time a Bonpo, a tantric priest and a Buddhist monk who decided to build a temple together and eventually quarreled among each other. In the Himalayan valleys to the south of Lato, I encountered a comparable scenario with Nyingmapa Lamas and a *lha bon* priests sharing altars and tolerating each other despite the fact that the latter were performing animal sacrifices. This arrangement was considered perfectly acceptable locally but was looked upon critically by Buddhist visitors to the area who would label it dismissively as 'Bonpo'. The *lha bon* however would never consider themselves members of a specific Bonpo tradition. The fact that reality tends to be much more fuzzy and multilayered than any binary opposition Bud-

²⁸ This text belongs to the Nebesky-Wojkowitz collection at the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde in Leiden, and has the title *A ya'i mdos kyi zin bris bkod pa legs so*, i.e. "Notes about Aya mdos rituals".

dhist/non-Buddhist would allow for, is also attested by Lobsang Sherab's double identity as Gelugpa monk and Aya mentioned above.

Like Chopel Sangpo, Chokyi Dronma is likely to have followed the template of the Buddhist reformer and propagator of the correct doctrine. Her deeds were possibly part of a Buddhification process that was happening throughout the region, trying to rationalize a fuzzy complexity according to a binary model. This was presumably linked also to a lively competition for patronage in the context of an increased production of wealth and enhanced communication in the aftermath of the Sakya/Yuan rule.²⁹

A Bonpo prince in a Buddhist family?

In Tibet it is rather common that the affiliation to a certain religious tradition is passed on in the family. It is therefore surprising to find the description of a keen Bonpo supporter within a Buddhist ruling family, especially without any reference to a clear religious contrast between father and son. How can this apparent paradox be explained? What may have actually informed Chokyi Dronma's biographer while using the literary trope of the non-Buddhist princely husband?

One explanation may focus on the psychology and the personal relations within the ruling family of southern Lato. Situ Lhatsen Kyab was firmly established at Shekar, and was the son of Situ Chokyi Rinchen, a famous Buddhist ruler celebrated in local epics³⁰. He had married a woman from the ruling family of northern Lato, repeating the pattern of his father's marriage alliance³¹. In Chokyi Dronma's biography both the Situ and his wife often appear as concerned about their son, who seems to have had a difficult personality, sometimes prone to mental instability. The Situ

²⁹ For example the rulers of southern Lato emerged thanks to the Sakya/Yuan rule and promoted economic development, trade and communication in their domain (see *Shel dkar chos 'byung* 33a.b). Although in later chronicles they are especially celebrated for their promotion of Buddhist institutions, they may well have been directly or indirectly the sponsors of the Bonpo monastery on the shore of the Palkhu Lake.

³⁰ In particular *The Thirteen Great Propitious Deeds of the Situ* (*Si tu legs mdzad bcu gsum*) reported in the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (folio 8b-34b) and originally quoted from a non extant earlier source, the *Seng rdzong dkar chag*.

³¹ According to the *Shel dkar chos 'byung* (folio 7a) Lhatsen Kyab married a daughter of the ruler of northern Lato Namgyal Dragpa (Byang bdag rNam rgyal grags pa, 1395-1475) and fathered Tshewang Tashi (Nam mkha tshe dbang bkra shis), Chokyi Dronma's husband. Lhatsen Kyab's father, Situ Chokyi Rinchen had married the daughter of the ruler of northern Lato Jamyang (Byang bdag 'Jam dbyangs) (see Wangdu and Diemberger 1996: 31).

seems instead to have been very balanced and tolerant, mainly concerned with keeping him at peace. So much so that when Chokyi Dronma rebelled and cut her hair, he accepted her request to be allowed to leave Shekar to be ordained, but begged her to appear in front of his son, her husband, as if nothing had happened in order to keep him quiet – which she did by dressing up and wearing a wig. Tshewang Tashi's mental state was not necessarily related to his religious interests but in Chokyi Dronma biography these two aspects of his life appear as closely related. Unless Tshewang Tashi actually used Bonpo practices to assert himself against his father – which is not indicated in the text – his personal negative qualities may have been enhanced and linked to his religious sympathies by Chokyi Dronma's biographer keen to underpin the narrative template he had in his mind.

A different, yet related explanation for the paradoxical religious affiliation of Tshewang Tashi may lie in the possibility that the Situ himself, although a keen supporter of Buddhist masters, cultivated also links to a priesthood devoted to ancestral cults and to Bonpo communities. In this case, Chokyi Dronma's biographer may have decided to be silent about her father-in-law's support of ancestral cults and enhance his Buddhist features as a respectable and compassionate ruler³² – in final analysis he was a powerful player in the political arena and an important patron of Buddhist masters. He may have attributed instead all the support to rituals that antagonized proper Buddhist practices at Shekar to his son, her unstable husband, who could be blamed for them. It is remarkable that all Chokyi Dronma's decisive negotiations were done with her father-in-law whereas her husband was the one who sent the ill-omened gifts and religious practitioners, wanted to appoint the Bonpo tutor for their daughter and possibly instigated the celebration of Bonpo rituals and healing practices that in her eyes brought about their daughter's death. Could Tshewang Tashi have done all this without the endorsement of his father? Isn't it more likely that marriage gifts, marriage celebrations, tutoring and rituals were decided by father and son together? Perhaps Situ Lhatsen Khyab and Tshewang Tashi were both supporters of a variety of Buddhist and Bonpo communities at the same time and were both followers of local ancestral cults. This seems to be implied also by the general statement indicating that Chokyi Dronma was 'criticizing the banner of Shenrab', for this would not have been an issue at Shekar if the Situ had not allowed for its existence. If this is the likely scenario, the biographer seems to have

³² Doubts on the actual strength of his religious beliefs is also evoked by the fact that he apparently neglected an important Buddhist collection preserved at Shekar. This was found in disarray by Chokyi Dronma who made a point of looking after it properly (Diemberger 2007: 161).

brought together several not necessarily related elements in describing the character of Tshewang Tashi: his personal weaknesses; the ancestral cults of his family towards which he may have had a particular propensity; the blame for the death of Chokyi Dronma's infant daughter; the war; the literary trope of the anti-Buddhist royal husband. In this context the category Bonpo/followers of Sherab/heretics appears as a literary construction that reflects a highly selective interpretation of actual events and brings together a range of real but possibly different and disjointed phenomena.

The construction of the non-Buddhist 'other'

The *dBa' bzhed* provides us with an interesting example of how the relationship between Buddhists and their antagonists could be construed in a relational way in the description of a Buddhist-Bonpo debate in the aftermath of emperor Thrisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan)'s death. The term 'Bonpo' indicates here the ensemble of non-Buddhist practitioners supported by the 'black ministers' (*blon po nag po*). For example it is used to describe the priests who came to celebrate the funeral, listed as: "one hundred and twenty seven Bon po such as A gshen, Byi spu, mTshe [mi] Cog [la], Ya ngal from 'Phan yul"³³ (folio 26a). More generally, it indicated, loosely, the political and religious supporters of a non-Buddhist system of beliefs and practices that linked royal power to mountain cults. This politico-religious theory was epitomized in the speech by the main 'Bonpo' minister who, during this debate, pleaded for keeping the traditional customs that included the worship of the ancestral mountain Yarlha Shampo (Yar lha zham po), royal funerals, rituals celebrated by the court priests (*sku gshen*) etc. According to him all this gave great majesty (*mnga' thang*) and high political authority (*chab srid mtho bo*) to the kingdom, which relied on the sacred law (*gtsug lag*) and on priests (*sku gshen*) such as the Tshe mi and Cog la protecting the king. If these customs were not continued, he warned, "the political authority (*chab srid*) based on the relationship between lord and subjects would decline" (see *dBa' bzhed* folio 27b-28a). In the reported speech the 'Bonpo' minister referred to Buddhism as the "religious tradition from India" (*rgya gar chos lugs*) as opposed to the Bonpo tradition (*bon lugs*). His argument in favor of the Bonpo is then attacked by the Buddhist representative. In a confrontational context the terms Bon and Bonpo seem to have been used as an overarching category to indicate a particular political and religious positioning rather than a specific religious tradition. The use of the term 'Bon' in this passage of the *dBa' bzhed* is

³³ *Bon po la 'phan yul gyi a gshen dang byi spu mtshe cog ya ngal brgya nyi shu rtsa bdun.*

also consistent with that found in Dunhuang documents (PT 972, PT 1284 and PT 239/II) reporting a Buddhist criticism of the pre-existing religion, equated to that of the 'heretics' (*mu stegs bon*), i.e. the 'non-Buddhists' (Karmay 2005: 157-168). These documents reflect Buddhist conversion attempts against the background of a loosely defined ensemble of religious practices seen as worldly and spiritually unsatisfactory. This perspective certainly continued and was enhanced in the post-dynastic era, since we know that encounters and competition with loosely defined Bonpo appear in the biography of many Buddhist masters, most notably Milarepa. In the context of Buddhist narratives the term Bonpo may have often defined anything that could be loosely subsumed under this category even when organised and institutionalised Bonpo communities were becoming established developing their own distinctive 'Bonpo' narratives.

Remarkably, when Chokyi Dronma chased away the Bonpo priests sent by her husband to welcome her, people commented that she had truly a high honor (*dbu 'phang mtho bo*). She had in fact dared to challenge and compete with an important source of the ruler's spiritual and political empowerment and of the country's prosperity. This is reinforced in the passage in which she is said to have been able to guarantee prosperity, timely rain and fertility of the fields while praising Buddhism and criticizing the 'banner of Shenrab'. This expression is significantly followed by the words '*la sogs pa*', i.e. 'and so on', which indicate that it encompassed a whole range of symbols and practices. Although by the fifteenth century the term Bonpo often indicated an organized tradition similar and competing with Buddhist ones, in this context it seems primarily used within a confrontational discourse. Used in this way, the notion of 'Bonpo' could easily overlap with that of 'heretics' in the construction of a binary opposition between Buddhists and non-Buddhists, as happens in the Dunhuang documents discussed by Samten Karmay and in several instances in Chokyi Dronma's biography. These are remarkable examples of how the 'others', the non-Buddhists, could be defined by merging the ancient Indian notion of 'heretics' used originally to define Jains and various Indian non-Buddhist traditions with terms that refer to Tibetan non-Buddhist religious practices. Such a category could indicate a variety of different things at the same time: local ancestral cults, non-Buddhist traditions that had come to Tibet from elsewhere, political opposition to Buddhist representatives and even compromises and adjustments among traditions considered unacceptable from a Buddhist point of view. A critical look at the biography of Chokyi Dronma and the *dBa' bzhed* suggests that sometimes rather than considering the notion of 'Bonpo' as a reference to a specific religious tradition, it might be more fruitful to consider it as a relational term: a performative and contextual construction of non-Buddhist 'otherness', a fluid category that may encompass a variety of not necessarily related religious practices, political or personal antagonism, perceived moral

shortcomings and references to literary tropes³⁴. Nevertheless, some of the heterogeneous elements that constituted this category were likely to be real and experientially attestable for this is what conferred circumstantial credibility to the trope applied to a specific situation.

Conclusion

Ancestral cults coexisting with Bonpo and Buddhist traditions constituted the likely background for the life story of Chokyi Dronma as a hero of Tibet's Buddhification; continuing the deeds of Padmasambhava and Milarepa. The biographer's distinctive use of the term 'Bonpo' – or any equivalent such as 'the woolen turban', 'the banner of Shenrab' – reflected in this case a confrontational and generalizing view, which contrasts with the use of these words in more specific and less judgmental contexts. It is this view that informed his way of weaving a narrative around what he witnessed or heard of. He thus described the conflict between Chokyi Dronma and her husband as a stark confrontation between a Buddhist and a non-Buddhist view of the world, between alleged highest moral virtue and total human failure – feeding on, and trying to overcome, the fuzziness of real life. This was the background against which Chokyi Dronma, despite all her idiosyncrasies, could emerge as a Buddhist hero, challenging and compassionate. At the centre of a strong literary image, in which the Bonpo epitomized all human shortcomings, she could be celebrated, for the benefit of followers and patrons, as a triumph of an ultimate Buddhist morality that defied the messy and conventional understandings of the world around her.

Were then the Bonpo mentioned in Chokyi Dronma's biography just a literary creation? The Bonpo with the woolly turbans were in all likelihood real but the boundaries between different traditions were still fluid and the category may have easily included heterogeneous forms of local priesthood as well as Bonpo monastic communities. Already in imperial Tibet, Buddhism and pre-existing traditions had stood in a continuous dialogue, mutually defining each other (see Kapstein and Dotson 2007: vii-xii). This dialogical relation was enhanced and transformed in the later centuries. Narratives that celebrated the Buddhists in contrast to the Bonpos made them increasingly present in public discourse as a homogenous, distinctive entity. The construction and enforcement of a binary opposition at a time of increasing competition for patronage may have thus substantially con-

³⁴ A parallel process may have led to the alleged attribution of a Bonpo identity to Langdarma, which is currently increasingly doubted (see for example Karmay 2005: 28,29).

tributed not only to the definition of distinctive Buddhist traditions but also of the Bonpo.

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