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**Indian Crossovers to Tibet:  
Flights of Statues, Masks, Holy Mountains and Sacred Scriptures\***

**Abstract**

This paper is an overview of miraculous flights of statues, masks, holy mountains and sacred scriptures which represent cultural crossovers from India to Tibet.

**Keywords:** Tibeto-Indian interaction, miraculous flights, Buddhism, statues, masks, holy mountains, scriptures

Interaction between India and Tibet throughout one millennium and several centuries is so important and protracted that episodes in these exchanges have been assigned, on several occasions, to an expressive mode – wondrous flights – which goes beyond the domains of philosophy, history of religion or secular accounts. This literary solution is, rather, a combination of the three transferred to a different dimension.

When use is made of miraculous flights to describe cultural crossovers from India to Tibet, the accounts appearing in the Tibetan literature are a mix of historical verisimilitude and a taste for the extraordinary. Miraculous flights are extraordinary in that they are pervaded with a sense of the supernatural communicated to others in order to highlight the greatness of these events. It is, then, not so surprising that the significance of the long-lasting Tibeto-Indian intersections was, in the cases I introduce below, clothed in the literary garb of extraordinary flights to underscore the exceptional nature of these relations.

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\* The way I have organized my bibliographical references in the present article deviates from my customary system of introducing – when space at my disposal allows me to do so – all the passages (or full texts) in the original formulations from the Tibetan literary material I use along with my own translations of them. Here I restrict myself mostly to citing the sources and page numbers of this material (except for a few lengthier references in translation). A number of the topics I deal with – and consequently the related passages in the literature – are too well known to need anything more than straight quotations.

On the one hand, several instances of Tibeto-Indian interaction were so special that they deserved the attribution of uncommon characteristics; on the other, something special happened in Tibet in virtue of the fact that it came from India – the Noble Land, inasmuch as it was the Land of Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, these flights have been invariably unidirectional, for India (or Serindia) was the point of departure and Tibet the destination.

It is possible that a few of the flights I mention in this paper originally belonged to oral lore before being written down, and thus bear within them the intrinsic limitations of a genre not always reliable from a historiographical perspective. But in their role of multifunctional escamotage, they do reflect cultural developments during various phases of Tibetan history. Hence they can be grouped into various categories on the basis of the period in which they occurred.

## The proto-historical period of Tibet

### Sacred scriptures

The earliest cases of wondrous flights concern the introduction of civilising factors into Tibet, a land considered barbaric by its inhabitants even in periods during which sophisticated philosophical systems and cosmopolitanism reached an apogee. This is a typical Tibetan perception, based on the fact that its cultural features are considered by its inhabitants to be inferior to other civilisations, reflecting thus a common humble perspective about oneself, which allows space for improvement.

The first – utterly fabulous – flight I wish to talk about is the flight of Bon po *Tantras* from the Indian North-West to the Tibetan plateau. The Bon po literary tradition, recorded by Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan (1858–1934) in his *Legs bshad rin po che'i gter mdzod*, credits a triad of masters – Li shu stag ring, known in the literature as a great Bon po who lived in antiquity, and two less well known proponents of the religion (Mu tsha bDag of the sTong and Ma tsha of the lDe Bon [po]) – with this magical flight marking the introduction of their *Tantras* on Tibetan soil and thus the diffusion of these Bon po teachings in Zhang zhung during proto-historical times.

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<sup>1</sup> The common denominator in these accounts of cultural insemination that go beyond historical credibility and engender legendary fascination is the concept that India has been seen by the Tibetans as the source of a complex of composite spiritual ideas, religious formulations put into practice, and artistic or architectural expressions thereof. India obviously is one great cultural referent of the Tibetan civilization. This underlying conception is based on a strong Buddhist vision of life that has transformed Tibet from a tribal country pursuing the values of heroism and pride into a land with a deeply religious mentality. Even at present, for reason that may derive from the ongoing state of affairs, Tibetan personalities see in India the land of inspiration. This attitude may have to do with the fact that Indian hospitality is recognized and appreciated among Tibetans in exile, but it does not ignore the long-lasting flow of all sorts of cultural contributions from India to Tibet.

The books were loaded on flocks of *khruṅg khruṅg*, vultures and other birds (a veritable flying fleet) in the land of sTag gzig,<sup>2</sup> the semi-mythical territory in North-Western India, which I am inclined to locate in the wider expanse of land surrounding Chilas. For this identification I base myself on statements by the great Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124–1192) in his *chos 'byung* concerning 'A zha'i Bon po, the physician who lived at the end of the period of the gNam kyi khri bdun kings and had the ability to perform an array of miracles (ibid. p. 160).

Flying across the western Himalaya, the black neck cranes and the other birds brought these sacred scriptures to a destination in the ancient kingdom of Zhang zhung, not identified in the sources, but presumably in the heart of the kingdom, the area around Khyung lung dngul mkhar.

It should, then, not be considered as casual that the same myth of a magical flight, but without any involvement of black neck cranes, is associated with the appearance of Buddhist texts in Tibet. The earliest introduction of Buddhism and its literary monuments seems to have had its beginnings in the Indian North-West, when sacred scriptures were blown away by the wind from the palace of the Udiyāna king Indra bodhi (probably Indra bodhi the middle). They are said to have fluttered to the roof of Yum bu bla sgang, the palace of the sPu rgyal Bod king lHa Tho tho ri snyan btsan in Yar lung (*Nyang ral chos 'byung* p. 164–165), during a century which one can presume to have been the 5<sup>th</sup> of the Common Era. This episode, important for the history of the diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet, is well known. Here what one should stress are the points of contact with the literary tradition concerning the introduction of the Bon po *Tantras* to Zhang zhung and the role played by the Indian North-West as one major cradle of inter-religious exegesis.

The legend continues by saying that no one in Tibet could read what was written in those texts, and therefore the teachings contained in these books were not propagated. Despite this, the Tibetan literary tradition holds that the episode marks the entrance of Buddhism into the High Asian plateau, before the adoption of the Noble Religion by members of Srong btsan sgam po's court in the second quarter of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which is seen by some Western Tibetologists as the actual beginning of Buddhist practice in Tibet (for instance, R. Stein, "Tibetica Antiqua" IV. La tradition relative au début du bouddhisme au Tibet").

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<sup>2</sup> Shar rdza bKra shis rgyal mtshan, *Legs bshad rin po che gter mdzod* (p. 154): "Secondly, to talk about [the diffusion of the Tantric texts] in detail, it is in four [points]. They were introduced in Zhang zhung, rGya gar, China and the land of Tibet. As for the first (i.e. Zhang zhung), according to the *rnam thar* of Gyer mi, Mu tsha bDag of the sTong, Ma tsha of the lDe Bon [po] and sNya Bon Li shu stag ring, these three, loaded outer, inner and innermost secret Bon [po] *Tantras* and [related] meditation cycles upon 120 birds, such as vultures and black neck cranes, and arrived in the land of Zhang zhung. Innumerable *rig 'dzin* erudites disseminated [the use of these texts] everywhere in the ten directions, and so Bon po teachings were diffused. Provided with all [kinds of] inner and outer mental training, they were firmly established in every holy place, and *siddhas* existed, whose achievements are beyond human comprehension. So it is said. According to *rGyud nyi sgron*, too, 'Bum [and other] collections of texts, *gsas khangs*, *lha khangs* and *mchod rtens* were diffused throughout the land of Zhang zhung before they were diffused throughout gTsang [and] dBus".

### Holy mountains

Both the Puranic literature and the Tibetan sources dealing with Gangs Ti se do not fail to mention the Nine Dancing Mountains in their description of the holy geography of the Ma pham g.yu mtsho region (see practically all the numerous *Gangs ri mtsho gsum gyi dkar chag*).<sup>3</sup> This inheritance from Indian classical texts indicates that the Tibetan tradition is not immune from an anthropomorphic vision of the landscape and the Buddhist penchant for recognising the existence of flying mountains.

Although an idea less acceptable to a Western mind for its almost supreme improbability, flying mountains reflect notions pertaining to the sacredness of Tibetan landscape, especially important to Tibet's lower culture. Mountains took on significance proper of a higher culture – the one bearing features of the religion coming from India – with the transfer of their cult from a local milieu to a Buddhist context.

Typical is the legend that would have Chu bo ri, at the confluence of the Brahmaputra and lHa sa's sKyid chu, be a holy mountain. Blessed by 'Od dpag med in the paradise rNga yab padma 'od, it flew from India across the Himalayan range in order to pacify the demonic spirits of Tibet (*lCags zam Chu bo ri'i gnas yig rin chen 'phreng ba* f. 3a). Besides being known as Chu bo ri (the "great river mountain"), it is also known as Shwa bo ri (the "great deer mountain"), for it resembles a deer flying across the sky in order to reach Tibet from India (ibid.).

Chu bo ri is better known as the locality where the mKhas pa mi gsum sought refuge from Glang dar ma's alleged persecution of Buddhism in the years 841–842 before undertaking a journey, first towards Upper West Tibet and then across Central Asia, eventually on to A mdo, where they planted the seeds for the rebirth of Buddhism in North-Eastern Tibet (see, among many sources, Ne'u pandita's *sNgon gyi gtam me tog gi phreng ba* p. 32–36 and *Deb ther sngon po* p. 90–93, two sources preserving an interesting account of their endeavours).

Chu bo ri is also famous for having been a seat of Thang stong rgyal po (1385–1446 or 1458) and his rebirths. At the foot of the mountain the great *siddha* built one of his famed iron bridges, one of several across the Brahmaputra.

The rTsibs ri massif of slated rock in the proximity of Shel dkar rdzong (La stod lHo), and so called because its conformation resembles ribs, is commonly associated with the activity of two great masters of the sTod 'Brug school, rGod tshang pa mGon po rdo rje (1189–1258) and his disciple Yang dgon pa rGyal mtshan dpal (1213–1258). In one episode of his existence, marked by protracted periods of seclusion, rGod tshang pa, who derived his appellation from his stay at the locality rGod tshang of rTsibs ri, chose this mountain to retire to for meditation, preferring hermit life to the life at Rwa

<sup>3</sup> The Bod mNga' ris skor du gangs nyi shu (the "twenty snow mountains of the land of Tibet") are listed as follows in Rang byung ye shes's *Dictionary*: Thang lha gangs, Ma mkhar gangs, Ti se gangs, Bu le gangs, 'O de gung rgyal gangs, Sham po gangs, mKhar ri gangs, lHa rgod gangs, Pho ma gangs, rDo rje gangs, Jo mo Kha rag gangs, Ha'o gangs bzang gangs, rTse 'dud gangs, La phyi gangs, Tshe ring gangs, Tri gro gangs, gSal rje gangs, lHa ri gangs, Tsa ri gangs and Nga la gangs.

lung (see practically each one of the numerous *rGod tshang pa'i rnam thar* or *Deb ther sngon po* p. 801–802, *Blue Annals* p. 684–685).

In the realm of mythology, the ribbed massif is accorded, like *Chu bo ri*, a focal role in ferrying the lands of Tibet from local practices to Buddhism. *rTsibs ri* is said to have come flying from India. One legend has it that, beforehand, there had earlier been a poisonous lake in the area, which caused death to animals and birds. Indian saints sent a huge chunk of rock, *rTsibs ri*, flying across the Himalaya to quash the lake, and the area was converted to Buddhism (*rTsibs ri gnas bshad* p. 27ff.).<sup>4</sup>

### The imperial period (7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century)

Wondrous flights are described in different terms during the centuries of the Tibetan expansion in Central Asia.

#### Statues

*Khra 'brug*, the earliest temple built by *Srong btsan sgam po* in the view of the Tibetan tradition, and thus said to predate *Ra sa 'Phrul snang*, had its flying statues. Unlike the other flights mentioned in the present work – intersections with Tibet from Gangetic plain or North-West India – this crossover concerns Serindia. Perhaps referring to a historical event, a legend says that *Srong btsan sgam po* (617–650) undertook a military campaign against *Khotan* (*Li yul*) in order to fulfil a prophecy, whereby the king had to provide retinue statues to the main ones at *Khra 'brug*. The latter were a *Tathāgatha* pentad – *rNam par snang mdzad*, flanked by images of *sNang ba mtha' yas* and *Rin chen 'byung ldan*, with the subsequent addition of *Mi skyod pa* and *Don yod grub pa* – which had self-originated in rough form and were finished by Newar artists. The ruler of *Khotan*, admitting inferiority vis-à-vis *Srong btsan sgam po*, the miraculous king of Tibet, consented to spare his images. The statues flew across *Bal yul dpal thang*, the immense nomadic plain of *sPo rong*, where *dPe khud mtsho* is located, without sinking in the lake waters (on these events see *Khra 'brug gnas bshad* in *Soerensen-Hazod, Thundering Falcon* p. 62–64, [Section IV.1. The 'Invitaton' of the Sacred Statues from *Khotan*]).

Details of this account engender a controversy, for *Li yul* is, obviously, another name of *Bal yul*, the *Kathmandu Valley*, and *Bal yul dpal thang* is on the route that has connected the *Kathmandu Valley* to Central Tibet for some one millennium and a half, until Chinese occupation has severed these links. One wonders whether the eight male and female *Bodhisattvas*, four statues of *dakinis* and others portraying the protectors of the teachings were *Khotanese* or *Newar*. *Khra 'brug* has been ravaged by the wrath of

<sup>4</sup> *sDom gsum rab dbye* (f. 32b) tells a similar story concerning the formation of *Gangs Ti se*, said to have been a chunk of stone removed from the original mountain and brought to *Pu hrang stod* by *Hanuman*.

the Cultural Revolution and the doubt remains, both Khotan and the Kathmandu Valley being major centres of Buddhist influence over Srong btsan sgam po's Tibet.

The flying statue I talk about next exemplifies the process of mutual religious insemination between Central Asia – Serindia indeed – and Tibet during the Earlier Diffusion of Buddhism, which was marked by the import of tenets of Central Asian Buddhism into Tibet and the expansion of the *rDo rje theg pa* system prevailing in the Land of Snows beyond the borders of the plateau.

Legends tell of a statue of rNam thos sras mdung dmar can (the one “brandishing a red lance”) that was made in the northern paradise Alakavati. They say that it flew from heaven to earth and landed in China in a locality that became known as Bya rgod gshongs (the “vulture’s basin”) (*Guru bKra bshis chos 'byung* p. 502). It is also thought that the origin of this place name derives from the vulture which would have carried the statue from India to China.

The great general of imperial Tibet, blon chen lHa bzang klu dpal, traditionally linked to Khri song lde btsan (r. 756–797) but seemingly active during the reign of Khri Ral pa, got hold of the upper half of the statue during the campaign that led to the summoning of Pe har to bSam yas. He took this half statue to his family temple, dedicated to rNam thos sras, in the area of Bo dong E, and thus in the territory of 'Jad in gTsang. The temple became aptly known as Bya rgod gshong as well.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In referring to the episode of the fall of the Bha ta Hor *sgom grwa* in the land of the Mi nyag people from Kan chou and the consequent summoning of Pe har, who had been shot by rNam thos sras, to bSam yas (*ibid.* pp. 287–289), Stein (*Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* p. 288) cites dPa' bo gtsug lag 'phreng ba who, with sBa bzhed as his authority, attributes this military success to the minister Ta ra klu gong. Other sources attribute it to zhang lHa bzang klu dpal (*Guru bKra shis chos 'byung* p. 502, 503). Chronological factors favour lHa bzang klu dpal: Ta ra klu gong was ostracised before the construction of bSam yas, which preceded the alleged expedition against the Bha ta Hor. That credit in the literature for the conquest of the Bha ta Hor *sgom grwa* goes to lHa bzang klu dpal is supported by the account of the *gter ma* hidden by him at Bya rgod gshongs and rediscovered by gNyal pa Nyi ma shes rab. The fact that lHa bzang klu dpal left at this temple the banner associated with rNam thos sras and slob dpon Padma, the symbol and talisman of this military expedition, is one likely sign that lHa bzang klu dpal rather than Ta ra klu gong was the general of the campaign according to Guru bKra shis.

*Guru bKra shis chos 'byung* (pp. 502–503) reads: “gNyal pa Nyi ma shes rab was born in gNyal. He was the disciple of Zangs dkar lo tsa ba 'Phags pa shes rab. Having learned *rNal 'byor gyi rgyud*, he was extremely well versed in *Yo ga*. He established the foundations of the teachings in gNyal stod and smad, and made statues of rNam snang in many *lha khang*. He turned the wheel of the teachings on *Yo ga*, such as instructions and debate, and so the cycles of *Yo ga* became diffused in an extremely expanded way during his lifetime. He was beneficial and gracious to the teachings of *Yo ga*. His actual residence was gTsang Bo dong. From the *glo 'bur* of the *lha khang* of Bya rgod gshong (spelled so), he “invited” the mask together with the fluttering flag known as lJang yul ma (“from the land of lJang”) and the meditation cycle of rNam sras mdung dmar can (“with the red spear”), hidden in antiquity by blon chen lHa bzang klu dpal.

The mask had been made earlier under the sponsorship of rgyal po rNam thos sras himself at the palace of lCang lo can in the north. It was consecrated by Lag na rdo rje, the lord of splendid secrets. [rNam thos sras] spent many years in lCang lo can to benefit sentient beings and, on one occasion, he flew from the sky to a specific province of China. He landed from the sky the way a *bya rgod* (“vulture, eagle”) lands and remained there. It is said that this holy place was given the name of Bya rgod gshongs. Having remained in the land of China for

The Vaishrāvana half statue represents the insemination of a religious cycle, through the cultural influence of China, in the wider expanse of the Tarim Basin and the Ordos that eventually reached Tibet. The legend asserts that, when the two halves of the statue are reunited, the image of rNam thos sras will fly back to heaven.

### A *bstan pa snga dar* mask

Two most powerful masks are those that flew to Tibet from Gangetic India, one during the Earlier Spread of Buddhism, *bstan pa snga dar*, and the other during the Later Spread of Buddhist, *bstan pa phyi dar*. Both are masks of wrathful deities, the semi-demonic spirit Pe har, Protector of Treasures, and the great dharma protector or chos skyong Mahākāla in his form of Gur gyi mGon po, so called “Lord of the Tent”.

The making of sKu ’bag chen po yid bzhin nor bu, the flying mask of Pe har, is credited to Guru Padma ’byung gnas (i.e. Padmasambhava) at the Indian cemetery Sitavana, together with a second mask, known as the Pe har bse ’bag smug chung. Another legend

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many years, he stayed [there] (sic) and benefited the sentient beings of Ma ha tsi na. Then, during the time of Khri srong lde’u btsan, the king-protector of religion, when zhang lHa bzang klu dpal, having brought troops to China, seized China (sic), he took away the *sku stod* (“upper part of the image”; this is why it became a mask) to Tibet. Having brought it to his own locality gTsang Bo dong, he laid the foundations of the holy place in an extensive way. Following the appointment [of rNam thos sras] as its protector and a request [to him] to stay there, the holy institution became known as Bya rgod gshongs. The *sku smad* (“lower part”) is still in that province of China. It is well known that one day in the future the upper and lower parts will be joined together and will fly in the sky, and go to lCang lo can. It is indeed regarded as the true rgyal po chen po rNam thos sras (the text writes rNam mang thos sras).

As for the fluttering flag, when lha sras Mu rub btsan po went to guard the border in the north, slob dpon Rin po che having actually summoned rNam sras *rta bdag brygad* (“and the eight horse [riding] lords”) [to Tibet], mTha’ mi mGon brtson depicted (*bris*) the instructions and orders to the king and ministers in the form of the visions [Guru Padma had had] on the fluttering flag. rNam sras and his retinue dissolved into it. The prince and his retinue went to g.Yar mo thang of Khams. Zhang lHa bzang klu dpal surveyed the troops at the rGya *zam* (“bridge to China”). He counted them. In the east there were 90,000 with faces of falcons; 100,000 horsemen with forelegs of ghouls [and] with legs of Tibet[ans]; (p. 503) 120,000 with human bodies and rat tails; 130,000 with human bodies and donkey ears. These countless troops seized the lands of rGya Hor (i.e. Mi nyag) and Yu gu (spelled so). Out of fear, rgyal po Pe dkar transformed into a *bya rgod* (“vulture, eagle”) and fled. A *gnod sbyin* shot an arrow that hit its wing and [Pe har] fell to the ground. He was caught by rNam ras and his retinue, and brought to bSam yas. The *lha sras* saw innumerable heads of messengers, manifestations of rNam sras. At that time, they were used as models. A painting was made, known as rNam sras lJangs (sic) ’dra ma (“the depiction of rNam sras in the mode of lJang”). It is said that, earlier, a fluttering flag of smaller size (*’khor nyung*) given by the *slob dpon*, was the true lJangs (sic) yul ma (“the [painting] from the land of lJang”). It is well known that the fluttering flag is presently kept at Chos lung tshogs pa. As to this one (i.e. the flag), it was initially hidden as *gter* at Bya rgod gshongs, and gNyal pa Nyi ma shes rab rediscovered it together with meditation cycles of gDung dmar can. Much later, the fluttering flag came into the hands of the Karma pa. It was brought to gzhis ka rNe’u when the rNe’u rdzong pa demanded that shame should be brought upon the sGar pa. When there was unrest with the rNe’u [rdzong] pa, Rin spungs Don yod rdo rje took it to gTsang and offered it to Chos lung tshogs pa”.

On the circumstances of the foundation of Bya rgod gshongs, Ne’u pandi ta (*sNgon gyi gtam me tog gi phreng ba* pp. 29–30) says: “Because of the merit of his blind aunt, Tshes spong lHa bzang klu dpal (p. 30) built sBo thong (spelled so) Bya rgod gshongs”.

is perhaps far better known but less reliable. It has to do with the famous summoning of Pe har from the land of the Bhata Hor in the Ordos region, where an army was sent to take Pe har to Tibet, following Gu ru Rin po che's suggestion that this deity had to be brought to Tibet to guard the treasures of bSam yas (see *Nyang ral chos 'byung* pp. 342–344; *sPyid kyi rgyal mo glu dbyangs* p. 65, *Guru bKra bshis chos 'byung* p. 160, or Sum pa mkhan po's *dPag bsam ljon bzang* p. 339, among several others). Pe har came flying on his wooden bird after his treasures had been taken away by the Tibetans. During his flight to Tibet to get back his treasures, Pe har was shot down with arrows by an army of rNam thos sras and brought to the great *chos 'khor*.<sup>6</sup>

However, little known historical evidence shows that the introduction of Pe har into Tibet was probably not that gruesome, but was part of the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism into the Ordos region during the time of Khri srong lde btsan and Gu ru Rin po che (8<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>7</sup> Hence my view is that the presence of the Pe har masks at bSam yas indeed crossed over from India to Tibet, as part of the insemination by Buddhism from the Noble Land, symbolised by the activity of Guru Padma 'byung gnas and his associates, rather than from Serindic Central Asia.

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<sup>6</sup> Sog zlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan's *Padma 'byung gnas kyi rnam thar* (p. 113) cites lDan ma rTse mang, a member of the Shar kha family which founded the rGyal rtse principality, as authority for the account telling that Ral pa can brought the turquoise statue of Shakyamuni, known as g.Yu'i Thub pa 'jig rten sgron ma, to bSam yas as tribute from his second victorious campaign (the one against the Gru gu). The booty of Khri Ral pa's military successes included the golden statue of the Buddha, known as gSer sku chu ris can, tribute offered from his third campaign (the one against the Hor).

The attribution to lDan ma rTse mang needs validation, for he was a disciple of Guru Padma, and thus lived in the period before the reign of Khri Ral pa, but this does not rule out the possibility that he was still active under the latter ruler. Also see Zhig po gling pa's *bSam yas dkar chag* (ff. 30b–31b).

<sup>7</sup> Ch. 0021 (670, vol. 31, f. 116b) (Thomas, *Tibetan Literary Texts Concerning Turkestan* vol. II, Documents: the Sa-cu region pp. 85–86) from Dunhuang itself, opens with the following words: "Bod yul du byung ba'i dge ba'i bshes gnyen gi rgyud kyi mams". It continues with a reference to rGya gar gyi mkhan po Bodhi sa twa, said to have been the establisher of the various monastic lineages mentioned in this text (ibid.): "rGya gar gyi mkhan po Bo dhi swa twa (spelled so) las stsogs pa'i slob ma ni"). It then adds (ibid.): "Kam bcu'i chos gra'i slob (sic) dpon/ dBas Byang chub rin chen/ 'An dGe lam/ Lang 'gro dam mtsho/ lCe zhi rnal 'byor sKyor 'phru ma legs las bsogs pa ni/ Byang ngos su brgyud pa lags so/"; "The masters of the Kam bcu *chos gra* ("monastic school") were dBas Byang chub rin chen, 'An dGe lam, Lang 'gro dam mtsho and lCe zhi rnal 'byor sKyor 'phru ma legs, the lineage holders in Byang ngos".

The four generations of lineage holders in Kam bcu (Kan-chou) or Byang ngos indicate that this text covers the time from Khri srong lde btsan until sometime after his reign.

The Dunhuang document that records the name Byang ngos for the area of Kan chou is a kind of *gdan rabs ante litteram*. It contains the lineages of masters from the time of mkhan po Bo dhi sa twa onwards, active at five religious institutions: Ra sa 'Phrul snang, bSam yas and one *chos grwa* ("religious school") each in mDo Khams, Kam bcu (another or perhaps earlier name for Kan chou than Gan gru?) and Gog bcu.

This reference to the Kam bcu *chos grwa* and its lineage of Tibetan masters is an early and authoritative piece of evidence. It shows that the Tibetans controlled Kan chou during the reign of Khri srong lde btsan in a way stable enough to have a religious school in the same area where the Bha ta Hor *sgom grwa* was located according to the later sources.

It is significant that *sBa bzhed*, a most authoritative work on Guru Padma 'byung gnas and bSam yas, does not cite the account of the flight of Pe har to Tibet.

### The Later Spread of Buddhism and the following period

The cultural turning point, characterized by the definitive adoption of Buddhism as the country's civilizing factor, left a mark on the nature of wondrous flights which belong to another category, one that is strictly associated with the exegesis and practice of the Noble Religion.

The flight of the mask of Gur gyi mGon po, associated with lo chen Rin chen bzang po (958–1055), marked the introduction from India of the cult of Mahākāla during the Later Spread of Buddhism in Tibet. I dealt with the four main transmission lines of mGon po in Tibet – all of them associated with great objects transferred to the successive holders, including Rin chen bzang po's flying mask – in a work of mine of some years ago, and I do not intend to repeat myself here (see Vitali, “Sa skya and the mNga' ris skor gsum legacy: the case of Rin chen bzang po's flying mask” and, concerning the four transmissions, *ibid.* pp. 16–17). The history of Rin chen bzang po's flying mask is extraordinary on many counts, principally because of the implications of its origin at Bodhgaya in antiquity and the long standing controversy among Tibetan scholars concerning whether or not the mask was made of human skin (Vitali, *ibid.* pp. 7–11). For a modern historian the transmission of the mask along a string of great religious masters and its whereabouts, in particular the Sa skya Go rum, the foremost and oldest temple in Sa skya (Vitali, *ibid.* pp. 11–14), where it was kept until the Cultural Revolution which caused its loss, are issues of no less concern.

The points of contact and dissimilarity with the flying mask of Pe har, bSe 'bag smug po, and another one, bSe 'bag smug chung, which used to be housed in the Pe har dkor mdzod gling at bSam yas, should not be neglected. The reference to *bse 'bag* (“mask made of leather”) and the dark tone of the mask's surface connect the bSam yas mask with that of Rin chen bzang po, but there is no legend about the possible manufacture of the former with human skin. Mahākāla – the legend says – made the mask himself at Bodhgaya with the skin of an infidel king (Vitali, *ibid.* pp. 9–11), whereas there is no reference to Pe har having been directly involved in the making of his. It is popularly believed that both Pe har masks were made of cloth soaked in blood.

Zhwa lu had its flying statue, too. ICe btsun Shes rab 'byung gnas, the founder of this temple in the year of the hare 1024 (Vitali, *Early Temples of Central Tibet* p. 92), decided to obtain a statue from Gangetic India to install in his temple as its main holy receptacle. He left his freshly established sanctuary to 'A zha Ye shes g.yung drung as interim abbot and travelled to India (Vitali, *ibid.*). While he was returning back to Tibet an image of sPyan ras gzigs flew after him from the banks of the Gang ga river with the miraculous support of a manifestation of mGon po beng (Vitali, *ibid.*).

This wondrous flight is one significant episode among others that mark the adoption of the system by Tibetan masters from Central Tibet of going to India in the quest for teachings that became a foremost feature of the Later Spread of Buddhism. Until the early travellers to India, such as ICe btsun or Se tsa dMar ru – a member of the dPyal family from nearby Zhwa lu – the custom among the people of dBus gTsang of obtaining

teachings was to go to A mdo or Khams, where Buddhism was experiencing a modicum of prosperity (see my “Khams in the context of Tibet’s post imperial period” *passim*). Owing to these dBus gTsang pioneers who followed in the footsteps of the mNga’ ris skor gsum practitioners, India supplanted Khams and A mdo as a source of Buddhist teachings in the eyes of the Central Tibetans. The Zhwa lu flying sPyan ras gzigs is one symbol of this change of perspective.

A little known, small statue of rDo rje mkha’ ’gro ma, kept inside a somewhat less obscure temple, is one of the holiest images of Tibet. This statue is what makes the temple of Rwa tsag in sTod lung special, along with the fact that it was built by sNa nam rDo rje dbang phyug (976–1061), one of the pioneers of the Later Spread of Buddhism. The rDo rje mkha’ ’gro ma statue is believed to have self-originated in heaven.<sup>8</sup> It spent aeons in the custody of the *nagas*. Finally the *mkha’ ’gro mas* presented it to Na ro pa. After the death of the master, the Na ro *mkha’ ’gro ma* decided to abandon India and move to Tibet. She flew in the sky staying in Bal po and, on the way to Tibet, it landed seven times, spoke seven times and left seven footprints before reaching Rwa tsag, the temple the statue itself had selected to settle in (see *Ra tshag rje btsun Na ro mkha’ spyod ma’i chos ’byung lo rgyus*).

The statue is said to have been installed at Rwa tsag in the lapse of time between the year of the rat 1012 – the date of sNa nam rDo rje dbang phyug’s earlier foundation, rGyal lha khang – and the death of Na ro pa, these being statements difficult to reconcile on two counts. The first concerns whether the foundation date of rGyal lha khang should be considered as a useful *terminus post quem*. However important it may have been in sNa nam rDo rje dbang phyug’s life, this date has no relevance to the issue at stake, for what matters is fixing the date of Na ro pa’s passing with some precision. A determination of the year in which Na ro pa died is problematic because the sources are not without differing proposals. I favour iron dragon 1040 or iron snake 1041 for Na ro pa’s passing,<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *rGya Bod yig tshang* (p. 51) says that this Na ro mkha’ ’gro ma was of the same divine origin as the two Jo bo statues of lHa sa, for it was believed to have formed spontaneously from the residual material left over from their manufacture.

<sup>9</sup> I cite here sources which record a tentative death date of Na ro pa. *Chos ’byung mkhas pa’i yid ’phrog* gives it as fire hare 1027 (ibid. p. 52): “Na ro pa died in fire hare 1027. The reason for this assessment is the statement that Jo bo [rje] was born in iron horse 970”.

Immediately below this appraisal, the same source opts for iron snake 1041 (ibid. p. 52: *Des na Jo bo chu rta la ’khrungs pa ltar / dpal Na ro pa lcags sbrul la gshegs par ’dod dgos //*; “Hence in accordance with the [correct] birth [date of] Jo bo [rje] as water horse 982, the great Na ro pa must have died in iron snake 1041”), this being the date favoured by its author, Zhang chung pa dPal ’byor bzang po.

The dates of Na ro pa are given in btsun pa dBang phyug rgyal mtshan’s *Pan chen Na ro pa Ye shes dngos grub kyi nram thar* (p. 109): *lCags pho ’brug gi lo / dgung lo brgyad bcu rtsa lnga bzhes pa’i tsho ’od gsal mkha’ spyod dag pa’i gnas su gshegs pa lags so //*; “In iron male dragon (1040), aged eighty-five (b. 956), [Na ro pa] proceeded to the pure realm of clear light *mkha’ spyod*”.

An authoritative statement in favour of iron snake 1041 is mentioned by Tshe tan zhabs drung in his *bsTan rtsis kun las btus pa*. According to him, Sa chen (i.e. rje btsun?) Grags pa rgyal mtshan records Nag tsho lo tsa ba’s opinion that the year of Jo bo rje’s sojourn in Bal po was the same as Na ro pa’s death (ibid. p. 157). Tshe tan

and thus the extraordinary flight of the statue of Na ro mkha' 'gro ma must have happened after that year.

I also wonder whether the locality in Bal po where the statue was kept before its miraculous flight to Tibet could have been Pham thing (Nepali Pharping), the centre where the four Pham thing pa brothers, disciples of Na ro pa, resided.<sup>10</sup>

The Bod thang mGon po is an extraordinary stone statue of Mahākāla, so called “Lord of the Tent”, that stands in a temple dedicated to this deity in the Tundikhel Park, right in the heart of Yam bu ya rgyal (ancient Kathmandu). The flat expanse of land of Thundikel is known to the Tibetans as Bod thang (the “plain of Tibet”). This goes back to when Ba ri lo tsā ba Rin chen grags (1040–1112 rather than 1111<sup>11</sup>) in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century obtained a spacious *dharamshala* to be reserved for the use of Tibetans – religious masters or traders – when visiting Bal po, since they had difficulties finding suitable conditions to sojourn in the town.<sup>12</sup> Literary references to Bod thang after the 11<sup>th</sup> century are subsequently found at least as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup> The Tibetan literature associates the making of the Bod thang mGon po statue with the great philosopher 'Phags pa klu sgrub (Nāgārjuna), who seemingly created altogether many images of the same deity.<sup>14</sup> This attribution, however prestigious it may sound, is disputable as would

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zhabs drung also documents the view of Las chen Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, found in his *bKa' gdams chos 'byung*, that Na ro pa died in 1040.

<sup>10</sup> *Myang chos 'byung* (p. 138–139) says in a note: “Of the four Pham thing pa brothers, disciples who were transmission holders of the great dpal ldan Naro (spelled so) pa's bDe mchog and dGyes rdor, the eldest attended upon Na ro pa for twelve years continuously; the Pham thing pa younger to him attended upon Na ro pa for six years; the Pham thing pa younger to the latter attended upon Na ro pa for (p. 139) three years”.

One of the four Pham thing pa brothers has obviously been overlooked.

<sup>11</sup> See Vitali, “The transmission of *bsnyung gnas* in India, the Kathmandu Valley and Tibet [10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries]”.

<sup>12</sup> bSod nams rtse mo, *Ba ri lo tsā ba Rin chen grags kyi rnam thar* (pp. 262–263): “As soon as Ba ri lo tsā ba arrived in Bal yul, the locals snatched away half of the goods of the travelers going from Tibet to Bal po, from whoever was arriving, and allowed them to keep [only] the other half. If their (i.e. the Tibetans') behavior at that time was not good, the king's punishment was imposed. If [these Tibetans] were sick, there was no place to stay or die [since] they were evicted. For the sake of those people suffering, the *rin po che* (i.e. Ba ri lo tsā ba) paid [a bribe, and the Tibetans] were allowed to stay in a big open field at the side of Yam bu ya 'gal (Kathmandu), where they made a small house and earthen caves. The previous wrong doings (p. 263) did not happen again. Permission was granted to the travellers to [get back] their goods and purchase what they wanted [to buy]. Moreover, [Ba ri lo tsā ba] made a big wooden house without plastered walls, called a *cho pa ri* (“hut” in Nepali), in a very good way. He instructed: “If this collapses, you must rebuild it”, and it is said that he left a huge amount of wealth to the locals [for the purpose]”.

<sup>13</sup> bSod nams 'od zer, *U rgyan pa'i rnam thar rgyas pa* (pp. 176–178) talks about U rgyan pa Rin chen dpal (1230–1309) rallying the Tibetans who had left the plateau owing to the vexing taxation by the Sa skya pa officials, at Bod thang sometime between 1270 and 1273 in order to take them back, owing to the no less heavy-handed treatment by the Newar authorities. On the one hand, the episode establishes the existence of enough dissent in the Tibetan ranks against the Mongol “law” to lead people to prefer exile, eventually to find residence in the pro-Sa skya Kathmandu Valley hardly bearable. On the other, it indicates the popularity of Tundikhel among the people from the plateau not only because of its name, but because it acted as an obvious meeting point.

<sup>14</sup> *Bal po'i gnas yig* (pp. 344–346): “Bod thang mGon po. Some say it was self-originated; some say that slob dpon Klu sgrub made 108 statues of Nag po chen po and appointed him to be the protector of the teachings in general, and of great holy places, in particular, such as rDo rje gdan. It is said that, among them, this was the

be, consequently, any Indian origin of the statue. Indeed the stylistic rendition of the statue is unmistakably Newar.

Popular belief holds that Gur gyi mGon po flies from Tibet to Tundikhel every Tuesday and Saturday and, on these occasions, inhabits the statue. The Gur gyi mGon image is worshipped by pouring bottles of alcoholic drinks inside its *kapala*. These days it wears sunglasses and has a golden nose over the original one. People of Kathmandu put sunglasses on it because, having the task of guarding the Swayambhu *stupa* by sight, they think that the statue, in staring at the *stupa*, may destroy the town buildings blocking the view, even more so now that tall cement buildings have mushroomed everywhere in Kathmandu.

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statue chosen to be the protector of the great self-originated [’Phags pa shing kun] *mchod rten*, and that it had been personally made by Klu sgrub. However this may have been, it is endowed with the power of blessing and its manufacture is excellent. This *lhan gcig* (“co-emergent awareness”) root statue is made of black stone; was carved with one head and two hands holding a *gri gug* and a skull [filled with] blood and with a *ka tam ga* positioned against its shoulder (p. 345) over corpse [heads]. Earlier, during the intermediate period, Kīa klo troops invaded this locality and planned to destroy the statue, but not only could they not destroy it but also this [statue] is [the reason why] the Kīa klo religion did not come to the territory of Bal po. However, on that occasion, there was damage to it, such as to parts of the corpses and to the tip of the nose of the statue itself. The statue is also meant to guard the great self originated *mchod rten* (i.e. ’Phags pa shing kun). Given its fierceness, several people of the hamlets that had been established in this area died upon seeing its countenance to the point that there are no hamlets left at present. It is well known that the statue was placed at Ye rang on top of the nearby Phulla do hill, but it flew and left, taking the path of the sky. It landed at Bod thang. The reason for calling it Bod thang is that, during the time of Srong btsan sgam po, the emissaries of Bod, such as blon po ’Gar, stayed there. This is the place where rgyal po ’Od zer go cha built a fort (sic) for Bal mo bza’ Khri btsun. Hence Bod thang (p. 346) [is the name by which] it is known”.

The absence of any opening favourable to the diffusion of Islam inside the Kathmandu Valley is credited by Khams sprul Chos kyi nyi ma to the repulsion of those Kīa klo (Muslim) invaders by the Bod thang mGon po on that occasion.

I wonder how reliable Khams sprul Chos kyi nyi ma’s assertion of a raid into the Kathmandu Valley by Muslim marauders is. The account may have, as in some similar instances of wondrous flights, legendary undertones not confirmed by facts. He may have reported a popular belief based on a stereotyped concept of Islamic iconoclasm, possibly influenced by damage suffered by the statue, in particular the tip of its nose. This may explain the golden nose that still covers the actual one (or what remains of it) in stone.

Were Khams sprul Chos kyi nyi ma’s reference to an invasion of the Kathmandu Valley by Kīa klo troops a reliable historical reference rather than an educated guess, the only major inroad into Bal po documented in literary sources and epigraphs is the 1346 incursion by the sultan of Bengala, Shams ud-dīn Ilyās (r. 1342–1357). This devastating military action, known for the widespread destruction to the monuments in the Valley, is best documented in the Swayambhunath inscription dated Nepal Samvat 492. This would establish a pre-mid 14<sup>th</sup> century date for the making of the Bod thang mGon po statue, an appraisal I am not certain of. I also wonder whether the transfer of the statue from Patan to Tundikhel may be the result of linking the damage, caused to the image, to this invasion.

Seemingly unrealistic, too, is Khams sprul’s dating of the adoption of the name Bod thang for Tundikhel to Srong btsan sgam po’s reign, and specifically to the presence of blon po mGar and other Tibetan emissaries to Bal po in order to invite Bal mo bza’ Khri btsun to Tibet to marry the king. Whether or not Khri btsun actually existed notwithstanding, the fact that ’Od zer go cha built a fort (!?) for her at Bod thang, so that the name was bestowed then, deserves little credibility.

Another extremely important object which has attracted the devotion of Tibetans for centuries is the *rdo rje phur pa*, which is popularly believed to have flown to Se ra byes. The legend that it flew from India to the mountain behind Se ra is contradicted by the following account which has greater historical credibility. Having appeared at Sitavana cemetery in Gangetic India, the *phur pa* was brought by Gu ru Rin po che to Yer pa and eventually ended up in the hands of grub thob Dar 'phyar. In iron rat 1240, the Tibetan *siddha* defeated the Indian mu stegs pa 'Phrog byed dga' bo ("worshipper of Hindu gods"), who flew in the sky over sKyid grong to prove the superiority of Hinduism over Buddhism and his personal superiority over Sa skya pandi ta Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251)<sup>15</sup>. By stabbing with the *phur pa* the shadow that 'Phrog byed dga' bo projected on earth while flying, grub thob Dar 'phyar made him fall to the ground and lose the competition between the two religions. The *phur pa* changed hands down the line of the *siddha* successors in the family of grub thob Dar 'phyar and eventually was taken to Se ra.<sup>16</sup>

The story of the flight of the *phur pa* from India to Tibet combines with another type of flight, the one accomplished by religious masters with uncommon powers – a recurring theme in the Tibetan literature. In these instances, the human dimension, in its fabulous details, equals the extraordinary dimension of wondrous flights. It reverses the terms between the supernatural and the human, established by the several flying objects – books and masks, statues and mountains – I have been mentioning in this work. The latter wondrous flights occurred with human participation often reduced to a marginal role: people acted against the background of ordeals beyond human genius. But the history of the *phur pa* shows how the transmission of objects among humans, wondrous in its own way, rivalled the extravaganza of magical flights as an attempt to symbolise how Tibetan culture and people intersected with India in quests that have little mundaneness to them. It is the supernatural transferred to the human realm.

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<sup>15</sup> See *rNam grol rTsaṅgs rdo dmar ba'i gsung rabs lo rgyus deb ther padma raga'i do shal* p. 25ff. or *rGya Bod yig tshang* p. 323; also Vitali, "Historiographical material on early sKyid-grong [gathered from local documents and bKa'-brgyud-pa sources]".

<sup>16</sup> See Akester, *Jamyang Khyentsé Wangpo's Guide to Central Tibet* (p. 120 n. 193 forthcoming) for an analysis of Dar 'phyar's lineage, especially in reference to the passage of the *phur pa* from the hands of *grub thob's* successor, Mus srad pa kun mkhyen Blo gros rin chen seng ge, to the dGe lugs pa of Se ra, which involved Tsong kha pa's personal intervention.

On kun mkhyen Blo gros rin chen seng ge, who actually brought the *phur pa* to Se ra, he says: "Kun mkhyen Blo gros rin chen seng ge was a lineal descendant (*gdung brgyud*) of Grub thob 'Dar 'phyar, and son of rTogs ldan Yon tan mgon po. He was known as "Mus srad pa" after the monastery founded by his great-grandfather (?) Kun mkhyen dPal ldan seng ge in gTsaṅg La stod and his family estate was gZhis ka dPal 'byor lhun po. rJe Tsong kha pa is said to have personally encouraged him not to abandon the practice of rTa mgrin yang gsang. According to one Se ra tradition, Kun mkhyen pa's mother was on pilgrimage in central Tibet and (anonymously) sought rJe rin po che's blessing. He discovered her identity through clairvoyance and spontaneously commanded her to summon her son and his Phur pa to lHa sa".

## Typologies

The multifunctional role of miraculous flights served religious and secular purposes.

### Flights and lost religious records

When the circumstances of events impinging on the religious sphere were lost to the tradition, a wondrous flight was an apt way to communicate the sense of greatness surrounding them. The absence of historical records of these acts has been overcome by means of a transference to a superhuman level. The flights of sacred Buddhist and Bon po scriptures are not too dissimilar from myths of creation, where origination transcends the human dimension and is linked to extraordinary events belonging to the realm of nature or involving mythical animals.

Another typical criterion meant to establish authenticity was applied to episodes of Buddhist conversion, when records concerning them were lost. As in many cases of texts whose authenticity was accepted and revered by the Tibetans because of their certified Indian provenance, similarly lands became Buddhist by virtue of the mere presence of mountains, considered divine inasmuch as they are said to have flown from the Noble Land.

The case of Bod thang mGon po's flight is different still. It embodies a shared religious devotion, common to Tibetans and Newar-s, expressed in a long series of episodes of cultural exchanges. The attribution to Nāgārjuna of a statue, whose origin is manifestly Newar, is another case of a lost historical record.

### Flights and Tibet's cultural expansion in Central Asia

During the imperial period, the import of significant religious systems went hand in hand with the Tibetan expansion in Central Asia. Hence the fact that the wondrous flights of the Khra 'brug male and female Bodhisattva-s, rNam thos sras's half statue housed at Bya rgod gshongs and the Pe har mask at bSam yas have been staged within a secular – and, more specifically military – setting.

The flight of the Khra 'brug male and female Bodhisattva-s is an apt symbol of Srong btsan sgam po's stereotyped embodiment as the father of Tibet, the initiator of many enterprises in Tibetan lore, including the process of opening Tibet to other cultures, one of them being mentioned here.

The half rNam thos sras statue and the flight of the Pe har mask are a way of acknowledging the complexity of cults that were incorporated by the Tibetans into their religious system when they came into contact with other cultures during their expansion in Central Asia. This was a two-pronged process, the other obviously being the incorporation of local deities into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. Both activities should be credited

to Guru Rin po che, thus adding to the complexity of this personage more commonly associated with syncretism on a local scale.

### Flights and religious practice

With the Later Spread of Buddhism and its consequent adoption of a fully-fledged and definitive Buddhist practice, magical flights became associated with great religious masters and religious systems. Rin chen bzang po's flying mask and lCe btsun Shes rab 'byung gnas's sPyan ras gzigs flying statue mark their pioneering engagement in importing *bstan pa phyi dar* teachings into these two regions of Tibet where, for different reasons, they had previously been absent.

Perhaps the flight of the Na ro mkha' 'gro ma statue to Rwa tsag, in which no part is assigned to any master, documents the next phase of the Later Spread of Buddhism in dBu gTsang, when the establishment of Buddhism was being accomplished, and consolidation was the issue of the day.

The eventual presence of the *phur pa* at Se ra, passing hands in localities from Yer pa to sKyid grong, gTsang and finally to the outskirts of lHa sa, indicates a continuity from the Early Spread of Buddhism, *bstan pa snga dar*, to later times. The legend of its flight to the mountain behind Se ra is a case of dGe lugs pa appropriation, as happened with a good number of older temples and monasteries around the Tibetan plateau that were taken over by the school of Tsong kha pa.

All in all, these wondrous flights to the Tibetan regions from India or Serindia – the civilising sources – reflect the changes in focus of this interaction. The lands of the North-West were the root of these inseminations during Tibet's proto-historical period, while during the imperial period it was Serindia, besides lands to the south of the Himalayan range, that was a base of these crossovers into Tibet. With the end of the *lha sras btsan po* dynasty and the permanent adoption of Buddhism on the High Asian plateau, the Gangetic regions of metropolitan India were at the origin of these transfers from one country to the other.

These episodes are all treated by the literature in the same manner. They are the outcome of a vision of the past that is deeply influenced by religious values, even in the case of the more secular episodes that took place during the dynastic period of sPu rgyal Bod. They all seem to belong to the period following the 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> century when Tibetan culture had taken on religious traits eminently.

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