

DEATH BECOMES HIM: THE METAPHYSICS OF LIMINALITY AND THE CHAOS OF TRANSFORMATION IN PART TWO OF THE *TSHANGS- DBYANGS RGYA-MTSHO'I GSANG-RNAM*

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Maybe he's caught in the legend,
maybe he's caught in the mood.
Maybe these maps and legends
have been misunderstood.¹

REM (Berry/Buck/Mills/Stipe)

The identity of the central character of the *Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i gSang-rnam*² has never been clearly seen. We read as we wish to read - as literary scholars, as Buddhists, as anthropologists - and the process of reading begets within us our own organic understanding of the text and what it might signify on other levels and to other readers. The act of reading (auto)biography is, in some ways, to validate the life which it purports to describe: we enter into the story as participants - not necessarily accepting it as wholly true (for what linear, verbal narrative could present the whole truth?), but rather accepting and engaging with the internal logic of the discourse.

Given that this text purports to recount the life of a Dalai Lama, the participation which it invites necessarily takes place on a number of different levels. On a religious level - maybe on a spiritual level, too - the nature of reincarnation (the validity of the Dalai Lama as *sprul-sku*) is not hereby rejected, rather it is interrogated: after all, if this man who died in 1746 is indeed the *sprul-sku*, the *yang-srid*, of the Great Fifth bLo-bzang rGya-mtsho, then where does this leave the succession of the brilliant scholar and meditator sKal-bzang rGya-mtsho, the seventh Dalai Lama? Multiple emanations are not unknown of course, but in the case of the Dalai Lama it would have been unique.

On a socio-political level, too, it has a number of significant repercussions. Not the least of these would have been to deny the Chinese Emperor K'ang Hsi's deliberate desecration and disposal of the body (or maybe that should be the "body") of the Dalai Lama. Escape from the clutches of the Chinese (and thereby too from the Manchurians) would prove an embarrassment and a rejection of that country's (perceived) superiority over Tibet.

For me, however, the most interesting question which this text raises concerns the way in which the subject is perceived by his amanuensis - and, thus, by his audience. Much has been made about the stories of headless men and dancing skeletons, but no approach has yet been taken from within the story, as it were. In what ways could we read the text as a biography, a spiritual biography moreover, in which what was claimed as true was understood indeed as being true? What path might we, as post-Enlightenment³ liberals, follow so as best to grasp the meaning of this text, both as a literal and a figurative account of a individual's life?

My feeling is that the pivotal section of the book is the second part, which consists principally of what appears to be a visionary narrative. It is, furthermore, the only part of the book which is consistently in the lama's own voice. I believe it is pivotal for one specific reason: it illustrates the process of transformation, the alchemical development from secular and spiritual superno into wandering hermit, from melodious ocean (*tshangs-dbyangs rgya-mtsho*) into ocean of powerful Dharma speech (*ngag-dbang chos-grags rgya-mtsho*). To see how this is achieved, furthermore, we will need to observe the forces of chaos, liminality, vision and trance, and how they transmute and transcend linear, logical reality.

MYTHOPOËSIS AND LITERACY

A study of mythopoëtic discourse in a society such as Tibet or Mongolia in the eighteenth century must necessarily differ from that which pertains in contemporary societies, even those in which literacy is still

the preserve of an élite. Not only was there no broadcast media in the eighteenth century, but the absence of the “global village” meant that the majority of people were disenfranchised and thus able to perceive the world only from their own perspective.

The ways in which a given culture creates myth, and the reasons for these myths, have been rehearsed elsewhere on numerous occasions. From the point of view of the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism which existed in Central Asia at the time when the *gsang-rnam* was written, the visible world and the invisible world existed in the moment, spirits and gods and demons⁴ dwelling side-by-side with humans, yaks and the turquoise bee. Humans, of course, also came in a number of guises, whether as the (re)embodiment of great teachers of previous eras, or as transworldly forces or else as the myriad aspects of the perfect Buddha. The Dalai Lama, as the embodiment of sPyan-ras-gzigs (Avalokitesvara)⁵, falls into the latter category and, thereby, his life and activity open out into a number of interpretations.

Of course, the way in which belief and myth feed into one another on a personal or a societal level can only be guessed at. As one raised in orthodox Christianity, who subsequently converted to the Vajrayana, I myself have been lucky always to approach the mythic discourse from within the tradition. If my own experience is of any value in gauging that of eighteenth-century practitioners, I would perhaps identify the acknowledgement of different levels of perception as being central to the understanding of how mythopoësis might operate. With or without hallucinogenic drugs⁶, the practise texts, or *sadhanas*, connected with a *yi-dam* not only describe a perfect psychophysiological form but also attendant gurus, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, protectors and other *yi-dams*, in human, superhuman and non-human forms, on the land or in the sky. It would be both patronising and ethnologically ignorant to suggest that these images were simply metaphoric, that they were not representations of the world as understood by those who created and appreciated them. We must therefore bear in mind, as we read the *gsang-rnam*, that the world being described here is much different - at least on the ontoëpistemological⁷ level - from our own.

And the word “myth”, of course, does not necessarily signify untruth. The truth of the myth resides in the culture which creates the myth and, subsequently, in the culture through which the myth is filtered: it is, therefore, a relative and not an absolute truth, a set of ideas interpreted according to their framing across time and across space.

As I shall attempt to show here, the *gsang-rnam* engages us in an ongoing interrogation of the facts surrounding the “life” of the sixth Dalai Lama as it unfolded following his “death” at Kokonor in November 1706. My principle argument here is that, far from being an either/or situation (did he die then or didn't he?), the text - and its subsequent, multiple and seemingly exclusive readings - forces us to reconsider the transformative alchemy of spiritual biographies (*rnam-thar*) in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and come, perhaps, to a more provocative, yet inclusive, conclusion.

FANTASY AND CHAOS: TRANSFORMATION OF NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATION IN PART TWO OF THE GSANG-RNAM

“Ethnographic descriptions are translations from a language not just of foreign words but foreign acts. Even so, there is no doubt that beliefs about animating principles that reside in our bodies and may at certain times, in certain ways, to certain degrees, become separable are widespread.”⁸

In many ways, the *gsang-rnam* is a fairly pedestrian book. It was clearly not written to amaze its readers - rather to give an account of the author's teacher and the story of his life. Of the four sections of the book, as I have already said, only the second is narrated by the lama; the remainder of the text deals with the lama's early years (as Dalai Lama, Part One), his life after meeting with Nomunqan's family (during which he travelled back and forth between Tibet and Mongolia) and a lengthy description of his death (Part Three) and an epilog mentioning, among other things, his principal students (Part Four).

The second part is remarkable for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the fact that it is in the lama's own words (marked throughout by the honorific *gsungs*) means that it is not mediated by the authorial voice: the fact that, on occasions, Nomunqan tells us that he's been instructed not to reveal

any more of a given conversation suggests that what we're reading is (probably) an accurate record of what took place. That said, there is no doubt that the devotion which Nomunqan exhibits might have led him to edit the story, so as to portray the lama in the best possible light: what seems clear to me, however, is that the nature of the narrative in Part Two is so fantastic and that in the other parts so quotidian that it would be foolish to suggest that Part Two is Nomunqan's attempt at hagiographical fiction. So let us take it at face value.

DREAM < Anglo-Saxon *dream*, joy

Perhaps it is in our dreams that we become who we wish to be, who we believe we truly are. The act of dreaming, after all, allows us to fly to another planet, to score the winning goal in the World Cup, to make love with the person of...well, of our dreams. In dreams we transcend our mundane reality; and yet, to a person watching our sleeping, we are no different, we are not changed.

The act of description parallels the act of dreaming. We use language to step out of the world around us and transport ourselves into another world. Language has an oneiric currency, through which we can persuade ourselves and those around us of our parallel truths, so that maybe they might too come to recognise these aspects of our existence.

The second section of the *gsang-rnam* begins with the lama's account of his education and the political upheaval which caused him to arrive at Kokonor in the first days of November 1706. The narrative is straightforward enough, but there is one scene which haunts me and which I think is significant for the remainder of the narrative.

Nomunqan's sudden intervention to describe the lama's tracing out of the vajra dance steps in the snow has been discussed elsewhere by Heather Stoddart⁹. It's not the language which stands out here: rather it's the image, of the lama moving through the snow, transferring through time the lessons learnt fifty and more years earlier, presenting his knowledge to his student for the final time¹⁰. Reading this brief narrative, I am struck by the aloneness of the central character and by the act in which he is engaged: the vajra-dances are meditations, after all, meditations in which the dancer transforms, becomes the character in the dance: Nomunqan's comment that he, being just a child at the time, "looked on as though it was just a spectacle" reminds us again that to observe one level of reality is not to observe all others, that it is the dreamer, not the observer, who is dreaming, enraptured in vision.

The lama clearly felt in a precarious position at Kokonor and decided to leave his companions, setting off on foot disguised as a hermit. Of course, to disguise oneself is an act of transformation: for a Dalai Lama to pretend to be a hermit is an act of inspired chaos, the world turned upside-down. The world of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho had already been turned upside-down by the dissimulation surrounding the Great Fifth's death in 1682 and subsequent "enclosed retreat": these echoes may or may not be conscious, but they are nonetheless resonant traces, pointing to a parallel, alternative truth.

So, in effect, he dies to the world. He dies to history, too, of course, leaving the people of Tibet to mourn, the officials in Lhasa to breath a collective sigh of relief and the discovery of the Seventh Dalai Lama to be undertaken (this despite the political intrigue, including the controversy surrounding the alternative Sixth Dalai Lama whom the Chinese tried to install). Yet another parallel here to the Great Fifth - a pretend death, for the benefit of others, for the smooth-running of his society, for his own benefit too.

We should note well how he disappears: immediately (*ma thag*: this emphasis on a total change of circumstances is significant) a great dust-storm arises and hides his path, his head spins¹¹, he is lost in the chaos of the natural world. There is a tradition in transformative narratives of some kind of gateway between realities: dreams, of course, are a common gateway, particularly in shamanic and pre-literate literature; in more recent fiction, we have the wardrobe in CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the rabbit-hole in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Platform 9 3/4 in JK Rowling's Harry Potter books and the hole cut between worlds with the subtle knife in the *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman; elsewhere time machines and space ships and wormholes and hallucinogens provide alternative ways into alternative realities; and now we have the world wide web: each of these provides a specific entrance point, the place where the world becomes other, where the other becomes the default. It is a point, a singularity even, of immense power and so other is it that the adventurer, the hero, requires a guide (the White Rabbit, a shamanic power animal, Lyra for Will, Will for Lyra...) in order to get the measure of the place.

In the *gsang-rnam*, the lama's guide is a woman, "dressed like a nomad" ¹², who leads him into the

new reality but who, by morning (the liminal night-time having passed), has disappeared. The lama, the Dalai Lama indeed, has recreated himself as a nomad, a pilgrim: that the woman appears to be a nomad too is at once in stark contrast with his previous life (and this is reiterated in the next scene, during his rather awkward first meeting with a group of nomads) and also, in a way, a reiteration of the person he has now become. As I shall later show, such symbolism is central to the lama's identity both as Dalai Lama and as hermit, at once dead to the world and yet very much alive to himself.

Guides appear throughout Part Two, in various different forms and with various different intentions: a *sngags-pa* leads him to a feast, a *dakini* takes him to a ceremony of Vajrayogini, rDo-rje gZigs-byed releases him from house arrest; the list goes on. Of course, such guidance is not uncommon in the Tibetan vajrayana tradition, but nonetheless it is noteworthy that it's only in this part of the narrative that mention is made of the lama being himself guided, rather than being a guide to others. Sometimes, it seems as though he is being created through the narrative, that he is undergoing some kind of initiation into another mode of being (which may be understood to be the case) in which he can better realise (make real) himself. Note, for instance, how he encounters a number of difficult social situations in the opening scenes of Part Two, how he gains insight into people with whom he has thus far never had to deal¹³.

Transformation, of course, emphasises the *trans-* (and maybe also the *trance*), the acrossness, the betweenness of becoming. The appearance of the dustcloud and the nomad marks the becoming of the lama, his transformation from Dalai Lama into simple hermit-monk (whilst at the same time remaining both/and). At the other end of Part Two, the transformation moves the other way: at 'Bras-spungs monastery, the spell is broken by a Dharma Protector, who recognises the hermit for the Dalai Lama he in fact is. The *trance* in which the Dharma Protector moves here parallels the narrative: the monk is the Dharma Protector, the lama is the Dalai Lama.

So at both ends of this section we have transformative narrative. The lama is both Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the Dalai Lama, and Ngag-dbang Grags-pa rGya-mtsho, the "hero" of this *nam-thar*: are they the same person, we wonder, or simply the same personification, a parallel identification?

We'll return to these contentious and complicated ideas later in this paper. For the moment, we should remain aware that the nature of the narrative and the identity of the central character feed into one another, that both effect transformation on a profound and powerful level. Much of the remainder of this paper will seek to show how the narrative in Part Two illustrates the transformation, the becoming, of the Dalai Lama from hermit-lama into secret Dalai hermit-Lama, thereby emphasising the *gsang-rnam* discourse through the elemental and universal ideas of spiritual heroism.

THE HERO AS HUMAN

It might seem strange to begin this exploration of the many facets which make up our view of the lama with a discussion of his humanity. After all, a child was born and grew up and was enthroned in the new Potala in Lhasa: his humanity is not in question. But the nature of the *sprul-sku* phenomenon is such that sometimes humanness is forgotten: the act of calling upon the lama takes place across time and space, he is visualised in an iconic form and the gifts he makes to his students are treated as holding power enough to transform the mind. It is, perhaps, salutary to recall that the lama is flesh and blood.

Throughout the events described in Part Two of the *gsang-rnam*, we are constantly reminded in fact of the tension between the lama as holy man and the lama as human being¹⁴. At many times in the narrative, we are shown his fragility and his seeming inability to deal with the world. his meeting with the band of nomads in the first day after his escape from Kokonor is a case in point. Drinking from a common cup is new for him, he has to equivocate for the first time so as to conceal his identity, he travels on a yak, upon a saddle so uncomfortable that he claims he cannot continue in such a manner: he is forever being introduced to situations which, in their very novelty to him, show up the exclusivity of his life thus far: thus we are shown the extent of his humanity, for an enlightened being - and I feel that this is how he was seen by Dar-rgyas Nomunqan - might be expected to deal with these events without complaint and without surprise.

As his journey progresses, his human nature shows through again and again. Indeed, what super-human (or metahuman; or enlightened) nature he does express appears to be reserved in the main for specifically religious events. We'll deal with this in more detail in the next section, but suffice it to say at this point that there is very little in his quotidian existence which points to his indeed being a buddha -

although there are occasional indications that he had requested his amanuensis not to reveal any more details concerning his religious practise than might be necessary.

It seems that the lama strikes up but one really close relationship over the course of his journey - indeed, over the course of the whole book - and that is with Lo-brgya, who had saved him from herdsmen who accused him of killing their dogs. Lo-brgya is the closest we have to a real character in the narrative: he has a father, he feels fear (and has a narcoleptic streak when faced with onrushing yetis) and the fact that he and the lama part company and then meet up again indicates his importance to the story. The lama reserves special praise for him when he says, "My Lo-brgya was so very kind to me"¹⁵.

My feeling is that Lo-brgya is a real person but, whether I am right or whether he is in fact a literary device, he is emphasized in the narrative to create a warmth for the lama, who otherwise tends to remain outside the world of which he has chosen to become a part. The fact that Lo-brgya and his father act as hospitallers following the incident with the dogs points to the lama's need at this point for kindness to be shown to him: this vulnerability, of course, is a factor present in the poetic work ascribed to Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and it's interesting that such apparent physical helplessness is not repeated until the final weeks of the lama's life, by which time he is able to draw upon help from those who feel not only a personal, but also a spiritual, link (*samaya*) with him.

Kindness is offered to him, but he also offers kindness. Nowhere is this more poignant, I feel, than his discovery of two children, the final survivors of a smallpox epidemic which has killed their mother. What is extraordinary about this episode is that, for someone supposedly brought up in a monastic setting, whose experience with children was probably nonexistent (although there is a rumor that he did father a child), he made such an impression upon these two children that - despite the arrival by that point of their uncle - they wept and protested when he said he had to leave.

It would be futile I suspect to enter too deeply into the logistics of this episode, but it nonetheless points towards what could be seen as a more subtle transformation in the experience of the lama. It's almost as if taking care of the children humanises him, far more than does his spending time with the nomads: what this seems to do, therefore, is to transform his heart - not through spiritual practise per se, but through human warmth - and to make us realise that he is being changed, directly, by his interaction with the world.

It is important to note how these "human interest" elements of the *gsang-rnam* tend to trail off as we progress through Part Two. It is almost as though the transformational, alchemical, dreamlike nature of this section is driven at first by his development from a man ignorant of worldly life into one who, with his kindness, touches the lives of the very weakest. These two children, moreover, are the only people in the text with whom he has a relationship not defined, to some extent, by the explicit concerns of Buddhist praxis (even Lo-brgya's original reason for accompanying him appears to be to make a pilgrimage).

So while the idea of the lama as a regular human being might not seem at first to be of any importance, we must be aware that the bridge between two existences which is the second part of the *gsang-rnam* also emphasises the more subtle human change from fêted statesperson into anonymous hermit. The external transformation is not hard to perceive, nor does it seem especially hard for him to grasp: the internal transformation, however, is the transformation of the spirit and we are shown this, not through friendships or through coming to terms with etiquette (or with the smallpox, which lays him low in one of the text's few moments of comedy) but through a direct and brief relationship with sick children, for whom he cares with love and with generosity of spirit.

THE HERO AS SHAMAN

First, a word on terminology. When I talk of the lama as a shaman, I'm using this word as a nexus of ideas: in particular, I'm using it to refer to the act of being a mediator between worlds. Etymology is not meaning, but it's helpful here to remember that one of the various etymologies for the word "shaman" is a Tungusic word meaning "one who knows": this knowledge is clearly of a metaphysical, metaspirtual nature and has some parallelism with Tibetan *bla* (cognate with *blo*, "mind, ability", as in *bla-ma*).

When we consider the lama as one who moves between worlds, we should also bear in mind that the second part of the text can, in itself, be considered as a bridge, a liminal space where nothing is quite as it seems to the unprepared mind. It is across this bridge, back and forth, that the lama moves: at one moment, he is fighting rampaging skeletons, at another he enters a rock to enjoy the company of

praeternatural beings, at another he dreams himself singing a renewal of his Bodhisattva vow; effortlessly he interacts with those around him, whoever - gods, demons, headless humans - they may be, effortlessly he attempts to act not only in their best short-term interests but also in the best long-term interests of the society in which he finds himself.

DREAM : TRAUMA

The topology of the shamanic concept features music and trancelike dreams. The most startling example of this comes at a time when the lama and his party are visiting Vulture Peak, where the Buddha gave his first sermon following enlightenment. Here he has what he calls a *mthong-s nang*, a vision, of people thoughtlessly trampling underfoot a hill of sacred texts. Note that the term used is not *rmi-lam*, a dream: while there is nothing to suggest that other people were party to this experience, there is equally nothing to suggest that the lama was anything but awake. This kind of vision - which might be prophetic or, as in this case, analytical of a given situation - seems central to the tradition of Central Asian shamanism: the visionary stands between the mundane and the supramundane, commenting upon one level from the other.

Such a commentary, standing without "normal" experience, requires a medium which is not only declarative, but which is also transcendent. Song, with its rhythmic, melodic form is the perfect vehicle - preliterate societies used song for Epic poetry, in which time and space become fluid, in which the gods speak with humanity, in which dreams are given form.

The transcendent nature of the lama's song is interesting to us for several reasons. For those who are familiar with the iconoclastic personality of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtso as revealed in the *mgu-glu* and in the traditions created around him, his words may seem startlingly orthodox. This is not to suggest that, previously, he would have encouraged the desecration of sacred books: rather, we should notice that the people are making prostrations on Vulture Peak *at the same time as desecrating the sacred books*. For me, the confusion of means mirrors mental confusion: poetry and song, unlike narrative, work on levels other than the verbal, they allow apotheosis and *metánoia* in both the singer and the audience: in this song then we can see a referring back and forth to the past and future mistakes, both of the lama and of the people in his vision: in making this prayer and in promising to work thereafter for the benefit of all, the visionary is translated into - and back and forth from - the mundane.

The idea of transforming the world through visionary song, of course, is one which has universal resonance. The word *dbyangs-snyan*, used here to describe the song, reminds us of the lama's previous identity as the one whose voice is pure (*tshangs-dbyangs*): we're carried backwards, but also forwards, for it is as though the vision and the song and the prayer transforms the past and the future, the lama promising now to do whatever is necessary and to go wherever he needs to in order to be of benefit.

Elsewhere in the narrative, the lama takes on a rôle which is not only shamanic but which marks him out, in Buddhist terms, as a powerful and accomplished practitioner. On two occasions, he is led into celebrations where he appears to be a participant as well as being, on some levels, the chief guest.

At Kamaru, he is met by a *sngags-pa*, who claims that he has been expecting him¹⁶. They enter the *sngags-pa's* cave and, at the sound of the *rkang-gling*, they are surrounded by "a number of men and women, dressed as nomads, none of whom I recognised"¹⁷. It's important to notice here that they are "dressed as nomads", just like the woman whom he met just after leaving his companions at Kokonor: they are not necessarily humans, but simply beings *in the form of humans*, having the appearance of nomads; indeed, the fact that the *sngags-pa* sounded his *rkang-gling* definitely indicates that they are nonhuman beings. They all partake of *tshogs* and the guests go on their way.

On the other occasion, he is invited by a woman to another *tshogs* offering which her companions had prepared. Significantly, the monk who accompanies him is sent back by the woman¹⁸: a rock opens and they enter, passing down a path until they come to where a group of women are waiting, among whom he recognises rDo-rje rNal-'byor-ma (Vajrayogini). After what he imagines might have been a day of feasting, dancing and song, he leaves the rock to find out that a week has passed, that time has been distorted in ekstasis.

These short vignettes, unlike the dream discussed above, are important for what they tell us about the way in which the lama is regarded (or reports himself as being regarded) by what appear to be non-human beings, appearing in the human world. That the other monk is sent away by the dakini (for that is what she appears to be) singles the lama out for special treatment, as did the fact that the *sngags-pa*

was awaiting his appearance at Kamaru: however we read these experiences - as the ripening of positive karma, as the blessing of the guru, as the desire of beings at another level of existence to interact with this specific lama, for whatever reason - it is still clear that this is no ordinary lama.

Of course, we cannot tell to what extent Dar-rgyas Nomunqan exaggerated the stories told to him by his teacher, nor to what extent his teacher exaggerated his own history, but that may not be the point. The idea of contacting - or being contacted by - spirits on another level of reality is a topos central to shamanic praxis and we must be aware that, whatever the "objective reality" of these narratives might be, the very fact that such claims are being made is indicative of a profound level of spiritual practise.

Moreover, we should be aware that all three of these episodes take place within a secondary visionary experience: he sings the song within a dream, the *sngags-pa*'s feast takes place within or alongside a vision of what appear to be nonhuman beings and the dakinis' celebration is held inside a massive rock.

The transformative experience of Part Two of the *gsang-rnam* is here, then, focussed upon the lama's recognition as someone who does not simply represent the world-changing nature of spiritual praxis (as one could argue the Dalai Lama's rôle does) but as an individual whose spiritual praxis is acknowledged directly by spirits, dakinis and other high-level practitioners such as the *sngags-pa*¹⁹.

THE HERO AS BUDDHIST PRACTITIONER

Throughout the *gsang-rnam*, we are reminded that the author's teacher, effectively the narrator of Part Two, is a Buddhist lama, a *sprul-sku*, a Dalai Lama. Like many authors writing about their teachers, Nomunqan wishes to present the lama, both as an extraordinary person and as a regular - if advanced - practitioner of traditional Buddhism. In his rather plodding verse commentaries to each episode in Part Two, Nomunqan seeks to present the lama's activity within an orthodox context, it's as though he wishes to iron out the fantastic elements by linking them back to tradition.

What is also striking, is that Nomunqan frequently tells us that he has been asked by the lama not to reveal everything which the lama has told him regarding the fruit of his practise. Such instruction is not uncommon, of course, and we can only assume that the full narrative would have contained a detailed account of visualisations and visions: the lama's reticence means that his own practise - and thereby his spiritual life - remains a mystery.

That Vajrayana is a transformative path is clear to all who have had any exposure - whether first- or second-hand - to its practise. Although it would be foolish to suggest that the lama's serious practise began only after his escape at Kokonor, nonetheless the fact that he was travelling alone and in secret means that he might well have been able better to focus his mind upon practise at this time. After all, on several occasions, he tells us that he did several weeks or months of retreat, the details of which are not revealed to us: we get no direct information from the lama regarding his practise, only hints about what might have occurred.

Because we are told so little about the lama's practise, this is not really a sphere on which one can comment to any great extent. Occasionally, however, he mentions something which might indicate a deeper level of practise. One of the more startling examples of this took place at sTag-rtse Dzong, where the lama ended up being under house arrest at the behest of the Lha-bzang Qan. There he remained, practising day and night, until suddenly a vision of rDo-rje Zigs-byed appeared and then faded away: all the doors and windows opened suddenly, but the lama only berated his so-called captors, who had all been asleep, and did not avail himself of his chance of escape.

The fact that rDo-rje Zigs-byed seems to have offered him the means of escape, set against the fact that he chose not to put his captors at risk by escaping, points clearly, not only to his own compassion but equally to his relationship with, and trust in, the teacher in the form of the *yi-dam*. Significant also was the appearance of a goddess on the God-dkar pass, and her assistance in his ultimate escape from Lha-bzang Qan's forces: the red dust-storm from which she stepped reminds us of his departure from Kokonor: the confusion of a dust-storm again brings about a transformation²⁰.

The portrayal of the lama as a Buddhist practitioner is, throughout the text, paradoxically subtle: we are led, thereby, to see him as a classic spiritual teacher, unwilling to discuss his inner development in anything more than cursory terms. Nonetheless, if we look at the entire text, we can see a development which is clearly mediated by the events of Part Two. Part One contains nothing to indicate that the

Dalai Lama's commitment to the practise was anything but formulaic, while Part 3 presents us with a man who traverses Tibet and Mongolia seeking to establish both himself and others on the path of the Buddha, both by teaching and by encouraging the foundation of monasteries. Somewhere along the line, a fundamental change has been brought about - maybe through the natural process of human maturation, maybe through deep spiritual practise: nonetheless, we're again led to see in the metaphysics of Part Two a pivotal site of transformation - subtler in this context than in others, but most definitely present.

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DEATH AND DYING: A BRIEF INTERLUDE

skye 'gro mi rtag 'chi ba | snying nas ma dran zer na
spyang grung 'dzoms mdog kha yang | don la lkugs pa 'dra byung
attributed to Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho

Death seems to be more a cultural metaphor than an experienced verity. We talk about "the death of God", "the death of the novel", "a dead weight", "a deathly silence", "the dying of the light", "necrotizing fasciitis", "*nature morte*"...we have so many ways to inscribe our lives with figurative language, and death is just another way of achieving this.

In death we disappear, but gradually. Our spirit slips away, but the corpse remains to be buried or to be burnt or to be eaten by vultures.... Yet still our presence lives in societal and familial memory, in which it takes up a subtle residence, in which its influence is deep and lasting, though not overt.

The ones who notice death are the living. The living are forced to understand the nature of dying, the physical loss of life and the emotional loss of presence: a person who disappears without trace is given up "for dead", is grieved for as though their corpse were sitting before us on a bier.

It is the living who describe the death of one of their own, it is the living who provide biography, eulogy, obituary, it is the living who create the world over again, for the benefit of the living. It is for the benefit of the living that the living make sense of death.

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me:
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

Emily Dickinson

But the metaphor of death points towards a transformation, a reworking of the world in which we grow in wisdom and in the understanding of the deep processes of the spirit and of life. Initiation in some cultures include mock deaths: initiates are buried alive, deprived of food and water, sent into powerful hallucinogenic trances, scarred for life both physically and emotionally so as better to understand the world to which they return. Our eleusian attitude to sex today should not make us forget that the orgasm is a "little death", when spacetime collapses into a singularity²¹.

In our Judaeo-Christian culture, death, which only happens once and whose primary discourse emphasises eternal life on a different level of reality (in Heaven or in Hell), is a definite movement away from the living. In a culture like Tibet's, however, in which the circle of reincarnation is the primary discourse, death cannot be viewed in this way: it is, rather, a movement of constant regeneration, of return, of movement back to the living, of the living becoming the living.

In Buddhism, because the mind inhabits the body, and is not itself the body, the manifestation of mind is not limited to one fleshly vehicle, it can animate in multiple situations and in multiple vehicles. This is not acceptable to post-Enlightenment science, it does not at all fit into humanistic logic: nonetheless, it is a way of framing the world and we must not reject the idea of a single mindstream presenting itself simultaneously in more than one form simply because it is not our chosen discourse.

So death functions on many different levels, with many different meanings, in many different discourses. As we consider the nature of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's two deaths and what and how

they might mean, it behoves us to consider that the dead do not act upon us as much as we act upon the dead, that it is we who create the dead as we wish them to be (just as we will be created by those who remember us and follow after us).

)

TWO OCEANS INTERMINGLING

all ignorance toboggans into know
and trudges up to ignorance again:
but winter's not forever, even snow
melts; and if spring should spoil the game, what then?
e e cummings

Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's body was never found, never returned to Lhasa. We will probably never know what really happened at Kokonor in November 1706, we are pulled hither and yon by academics and religious who seek to establish their own as the only possible viewpoint. But what, in fact, do we have?

We have the Seventh Dalai Lama, sKal-bzang rGya-mtsho, born in Li-thang²² in 1708 and enthroned in Lhasa twelve years later: rumor, for what it's worth, has Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho spotted in the crowd during the enthronement ceremony. We also have Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho arriving in Alashan during 1716 and spending the remaining thirty years of his life engaged in religious and social activity.

Thus far in this paper, I have sought to present a brief analysis of the most complex part of the *gsang-rnam*: my intention has been to investigate the events of the narrator's journey, as though they were in fact a truthful, albeit oneiric, account. Now, however, we are forced to enter into the central argument which surrounds this text: in what way(s) can we understand Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho to be Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and how might this square with the seemingly oppositional viewpoints that he either died at Kokonor in 1706 or survived and died at Jak-rung forty years later?

Since we have no body, we cannot know where or when the death of the Sixth Dalai Lama actually took place. This means that, as I have indicated earlier, we - the ones who describe and re-member²³ death and the dead - are intimately entwined in the representation of the dead, in his communication with the living. There appear to me to be three possible trajectories:

i Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho died at Kokonor in 1706. This means that the Mongolian tradition, recounted in Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text, is simply false. It may or not mean that Nomunqan was a fool, a dupe, a liar or a combination of any of the above; it does, however, mean that the *gsang-rnam* is at best a piece of imaginative religious (hagiographic?) fiction which has gripped and infuriated the imaginations of Tibetans and westerners (myself included) alike for over two centuries.

ii The *gsang-rnam* is fundamentally an accurate account of the life and adventures of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, who reinvented himself as Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho and who died at Jak-rung in 1746. This means that the Tibetan tradition is false and that whatever he was, the Seventh Dalai Lama was not the *yang-srid* of the Sixth Dalai Lama (although he could nonetheless have been another manifestation of the *yi-dam* sPyan-ras-gzigs). Of course, this doesn't solve the problem of what we are to make of Part Two of the *gsang-rnam* - but it does exonerate the Chinese of any rôle in his death, whilst allowing the political intrigue to be played out back in Lhasa and establishing upon the Lion Throne a far more suitable Dalai Lama, in the person of the contemplative and literary genius that was sKal-bzang rGya-mtsho.

So far, we have a logical binary from which to choose. The third option, however, is my preference, despite being by far the most problematic of the three:

iii Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, who died at Kokonor in 1706, was re-membered, in the form of Ngag-

dbang rGya-mtsho, through the consensus of the community in which he (re)appeared.

In case this seems a surprising approach to the problem, let me put it a different way. I am not offering here a commentary upon the idea of rebirth, not even through the prism of twenty-first century spirituality; nor am I suggesting that either Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho or Dar-rgyas Nomunqan were (or were definitely not) participating, colluding even, in a literary, religious and political scam. My proposition is founded upon the ideas presented earlier, concerning the way in which we re-member the dead and re-present them as we would have them

Recall that Part Two is clearly an otherworldly narrative: even if we acknowledge that there is more to reality than the palpable, consensual and physical world around us, we need equally to assume that headless men and zombies do not partake of the same nature as we are. Through this dream sequence, the text changes our perception of the central character until he appears at Alashan, in what appears to be a new guise.

Note that I'm not saying that the central character in the *gsang-rnam* is anything but an exemplar: reality cannot be enclosed in words, just as even the most exhaustive (auto)biography can never hope accurately to represent the subject under discussion. And this is the point, that the *gsang-rnam* is merely a representation, a re-remembering, of a person and the life he claimed to have led: it is not true, any more than Big Brother is true, any more than the Bible is true, any more than 24-hour news coverage is true.

It is, however, perhaps better than true, for it provides us with a way of thinking about a number of important cultural and spiritual ideas. First, as we have seen, it allows us to re-examine our relationship with the dead and how we seek to re-present and re-member them; this is especially interesting in the cultural context, where the Tibetan (largely Vajrayana Buddhist) worldview is radically different from the western (largely Judaeo-Christian) worldview: how do societal attitudes to the process and actuality of death resonate in the discourse within which death is described? How is a death appropriated by the members of the society in which it occurs - and by those who are outside that society? Second, we find ourselves perhaps looking at the nature of dream from a new perspective, at how dream can transform us all - on a societal level²⁴, but also on a personal level: after all, it clearly had a great effect on Dar-rgyas Nomunqan whose commentary, though artless and quotidian, betrays nonetheless a profound and moving devotion to his teacher.

Finally, since Tibetan culture places such store upon names and upon the process of naming, we should look at the way in which the lama's name changes through the prism of Part Two. The Sixth Dalai Lama was Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, the Ocean of Melodious Song: this is the (supposed) author of the *mgu-glu*, the poems which form the centre of his legacy to us today. After the lama appeared in Alashan, his name was Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho, the Ocean of Dharma Speech: this is a name which, to some extent, suggests more the traditional teacher than the maverick monk, and indeed it is as a traditional practitioner, teacher and monastery builder that the lama is portrayed in Part Three of the *gsang-rnam*. The transformation, once more, is complete.

It could be claimed that the *gsang-rnam* seeks to rehabilitate the Sixth Dalai Lama, to re-present him as a serious, contemplative, practical lama. There is, after all, not a single mention of his poetic writing²⁵ in the whole of the text, nor of his refusing *dge-slong* ordination, nor of the political machinations which bedevilled his youth at every turn. It could be that the whole book was founded on an attempt to rewrite history, to offer an alternative to what in fact happened in Tibet at the turn of the seventeenth century.

But this is the subject of another paper, perhaps. Suffice it to say that, while the truth might never be known for sure, the waking dream that is the *Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho'i gSang-rnam* will endlessly excite the imaginations of scholars and practitioners, a finger pointing - in a deconstructive sort of way - at the moon rising white over the eastern mountains.

Since the dream is cleft
I will not put my heart on the pillow,
I will not count the brindled birds
since the nest is raided.²⁶

Ruaraidh MacThòmais

FOOTNOTES

1 from “Maps and Legends” (“Fables of the Reconstruction”, Capitol, 1985)

2 I will henceforth refer to this text simply as the *gsang-rnam*.

3 the irony of this terminology should not be overlooked.

4 these terms do not even begin to cover the range of transworldly beings which are found in the Central Asian *Weltanschauung* but I hope they will suffice as signifiers for the time being.

5 as the rGyal-dbang Rin-po-che, he is also the precious and powerful king/Buddha - an epithet which unites secular power with spiritual power.

6 it seems possible that the very special quality of Central Asian Vajrayana comes, not simply from external shamanistic ritual but equally from the psychosomatic praxis which informs that ritual - including the ingestion of hallucinogens.

7 a portmanteau neologism, designed to indicate that essence and experience might give rise, not to a linear development, but to a dialectic one. I use it here to emphasise the importance of accepting the internal logic of a culture’s experience, whether or not it fits with our own. It seems to me that this is the only way in which we can read a text such as the *gsang-rnam* with any intellectual credibility.

8 Timothy Taylor *The Buried Soul* (Fourth Estate, London, 2002), pp48-49

9 Stoddart, Heather “A Note on Vajra-Dance Choreography in the Snow in the Early 18th Century” in Jamyang Norbu (ed.), *Zlos-gar: Performing Traditions of Tibet* (LTWA, Dharamsala, 1986) pp125-31

10 indeed, Nomunqan tells us that, when he spoke with the Seventh Dalai Lama about the reestablishment of the dance schools, he was told that it was very unlikely that it would come to pass.

11 *mgo ‘thoms pa ltar byung-ba*

12 *‘brog mo’i chas byas pa*

13 although it should be remembered that Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho is notable as the one Dalai Lama who made tea for his guests, sat on a level with them and enjoyed archery and music as much as religious practise. Nonetheless, the chances of his entertaining a bunch of nomads at the Potala seem to have been less than likely.

14 it is not my intention to suggest that a human being cannot be a holy man: rather, it’s necessary somehow to make a distinction so as to emphasize the transformatory nature of this part of the text.

15 *nga’i lo-brgya de nga la drin chen po yin*: this is the only point in the narrative, so far as I can find, when the lama uses such personal and intimate language to talk about another person.

16 *khyod bsur yong ba zer ba*

17 *ngo mi-shes-pa’i skye-bo pho-mo ‘brog-chas byas-pa mang-po ‘dus byung-ba*

18 she tells him, “*khyod yong mi chog*” - which rather seals his fate.

19 there is, of course, an argument to be had regarding the practises undertaken by the sngags-pa community and whether the lama, being the Dalai Lama, would necessarily have openly accepted them. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that both Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho and bLo-bzang rGya-mtsho were sNying-ma practitioners, which suggests that it would not have been unusual for the lama and the sngags-pa to have recognised each other in this way.

20 and note also that the men who were guarding the lama seem to have been rendered petrified, or comatose, by the appearance of the goddess: *mi de rnam thams cad rengs shin dran med lta bur gyur song*. They too are transformed or transported somehow by this experience.

21 and let us not forget that the verb “to die” was a slang term in early modern English for “to come, to orgasm”.

22 this was presaged in one of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho’s poems: *bya de khrung khrung dkar mo | nga la gshog rtsal gyur dang | thag ring rgyang la mi ‘gro | li thang bskor nas slebs yong*. This poem was used as a prediction, but we still cannot be sure that it was in fact composed by the Sixth Dalai Lama. But this is maybe to approach the problem from too literal a viewpoint.

23 I deliberately hyphenate this term to indicate its uncannily corporeal echoes.

24 and this is true even if we choose to believe the Tibetan version, that Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho died in 1706. After all, there is no certainty that the poems attributed to him are in fact his work - but nonetheless Tibetan society (and a large majority, I would say, of the western Vajrayana community) chooses to believe that they are in fact correctly attributed. As with the matter of his death, there is no way in which we can ever be truly certain of the provenance of the poems: rather we need to acknowledge the lack of clarity which surrounds every aspect of the Sixth Dalai Lama’s life and work.

25 whether or not Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in fact was the author of the *mgu-glu* is neither here nor there. Had it been Nomunqan's intention to mention these poems, he would undoubtedly have mentioned them: the fact that he didn't is, for me, quite significant.

26 *A chionn 's gu bheil am bruadar sgailte/cha chuir mi mo chridh air cluasag,/cha chunnt mi na h-eòin bhreaca/a chionn 's gu bheil an nead creachte.* From "A chionn 's gu bheil" ("Since the Picture is Broken") and translated by the poet from the original Gaelic.