Buried Bones and Buddhas Beyond
Ancestor Cults in 17th-century Khams and the Transcendentalisation of Tibetan Religion[1]

Reinier J. Langelaar

Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.
…
Peace, Peace, she cannot hear
Lyre or sonnet,
All my life's buried here,
Heap earth upon it.
O. Wilde, *Requiescat*

1. Ancestor cults and Tibetan Buddhism

The form and prevalence of generalised ancestor cults in Tibetan societies has long remained enigmatic.[2] As far back as 1969, Erik Haarh bemoaned the lack of extant Tibetan primary sources on ancestor propitiation. He attributed this lacuna to the historical dominance of Buddhist authors, who seemed to have purged the ancient "ancestral deities" – known as *mtshun* – from the literary record (Haarh 1969: 226, 316). Over the half century since, precious little has changed to revise Haarh's impression of Buddhist animus towards such ritual traditions. A monograph that surveyed the

[1] I thank Mathias Fermer, Guntram Hazod and Anna Sehnalova for helpful conversations and input while preparing this article, and Filippo Brambilla for his amicable hospitality during a writing retreat. A more elaborate treatment of the cults discussed here, including discussions of rituals, their geographic spread, their underlying social groups and communal burial plots can be found in my dissertation, *Bones and Thrones*. The research for this article was generously funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) through the special research program (SFB) F42: Visions of Community (VISCOM).

[2] "Generalised ancestor cult" refers to ritual traditions in which most men and/or women can expect to retain a role in their community after death. This sets the cults discussed in this paper apart from Tibetan mountain and most (if not all) *pho lha* cults, where select individuals may over time come to function in a protective ancestral role, but pose a rare exception in doing so.

Such generalised ancestor cults are ethnographically attested among neighbouring populations in the PRC, such as the Naxi (McKhann 1992: 289-297), Premi (Wellens 2010: 120-122) and of course Han Chinese (e.g., Watson 1982 and contributions in Watson and Rawski 1988). The ethnography of Ladakh, too, has produced some evidence of such cults (e.g., Aggarwal 2001, Brauen 1982). (Note that Dargyay 1988, reporting on Zanskar, seems to conflate *pha lha* "ancestral gods," i.e., gods of the ancestors, with the ancestors themselves; cf. Balikci 2008: 96 on this ambiguity of the term *pho lha* in Sikkim. The *srid pa'i lha* cults of Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, discussed in Huber 2020, are focused on high-level ancestors and not generalised.)

literature on Tibetan death ritual, for one, could not cite any proof of their existence,[3] and ethnographic work on kinship and clan structures similarly could marshal no evidence for their practice in Central Tibet or the eastern regions of Khams and A mdo.[4] Yet some authors have demonstrated that this silence does not in fact reflect a blanket absence of evidence.[5]

In Khams, as it turns out, *mtshun* cults have been practiced for centuries on end, and found favour among non-Buddhists and Buddhists alike. They have, moreover, left substantial literary evidence after all, particularly in the form of ritual manuals. In this paper, I will introduce the cosmology of these heretofore undocumented cults, and assay their interactions with Buddhism. The mutual impact of such different ritual and cosmological systems is of particular interest in the context of this volume, as it provides a theoretical template for how Buddhism adapted on the Tibetan Plateau, and how, vice versa, preceding forms of religiosity changed in their encounter with Buddhism – a foreign tradition that came packed with alien notions of universalism, soteriology, orthodoxy and canonicity. The associated developments, I will suggest, may have also had a sizable impact on Tibetan forms of unilineal kinship organisation.

The interplay between Buddhism and ancestor cults presumably dates back well over a millennium, since *mtshun*-centered ritual, despite its marginal literary status, enjoys a long-standing pedigree on the Himalayan Plateau. The attested history of the term *mtshun* goes back at least to the turn of the ninth century, when it was included in a Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionary to render the beneficiaries of Indian *kavyam* ritual, the offering of food to departed ancestors.[6] Due to the latter's role in Brahmanical *śrāddha* ritual, *mtshun* also reared their head in Buddhist scriptures translated from Indic languages, and would thus even find their way into Tibetan Buddhist canonical collections, albeit in peripheral roles.[7] *Mtshun* also appeared in Tibetan-language Dunhuang documents such as a dice divination text[8] translated from Chinese,[9] as well as in perhaps eleventh-century Dga' thang 'bum pa che materials (Huber 2020, vol. 2: 46-8; Bellezza 2013: 131, etc.). In the second millennium, they kept occasionally popping up in histories, dictionaries (Stein 2010: 62-63), and origin myths (e.g., Karmay 1998a), and even appeared in works authored by the third

[3] Gouin 2010, especially pp. 132-133.

[4] E.g., Aziz 1974: 25; Salomon 2015: 863; Samuels 2016; Thargyal 2007: 171; Langelaar 2017.

[5] Bellezza 2008: 393, fn. 120 gives a brief ethnographic note on a contemporary ancestor cult being practiced in pockets of the Byang thang. Huber (2020, vol. 1: 541) notes that a *mtshun mchod* ritual was still practiced in Khams in 2000, even though this clearly was no longer part of any generalized ancestor cult. (These two reports stem from western Nag chu and Sde dge, respectively, personal communication with John Bellezza and Toni Huber, 23.10.2020 and 02.06.2019). Also see Sehnalova's contribution to this volume on the select usage of an ancestor cult manual in Mgo log, which was written by the same author also focused on in this paper.

[6] Stein 2010: 62, which provides other interesting references, too.

[7] The *Lalitavistara*, for instance, lists reverence for the *mtshun* as one of the many qualities that mark those families into which a bodhisattva may be born in his last life: *rigs de ni mtshun rjed pa yin/* (*Rgya cher rol pa*: f. 15b.5).

[8] ITJ 0739: f. 4a.4 (*mgon btsun* [= *mgon mtshun*]).

[9] South Coblin 1991: 306, 310 (*mgon mtshun*, *lha mtshun*).

Karma pa Rang byung rdo rje (1284-1339), a respected Buddhist figure.[10] All in all, then, *mtshun* were a long-standing cultural presence, whose genealogy alone need not have posed a problem to the Buddhist authors that Haarh credited with "radical efforts at [their] suppression".[11]

Rather, Buddhists' historical tendency to avoid such ancestor cults was surely rooted in the cosmological rift between their distinctive conceptions of death. To wit, all ancestor cults incorporate the fundamental notion that *death does not part*: deceased forebears retain a presence within their community or its surroundings, and may still be interacted with and make their agency felt among the living.[12] In contrast, the Buddhist concept of reincarnation frames death as a chasm that is not so easily bridged. It typically catapults one's consciousness into completely new surroundings, effacing any former social roles, relationships, and attendant responsibilities in the process.[13] As a rule of thumb, then, social identity in Buddhism is just as fleeting as life itself. Huber's recent trailblazing work on ancestral fertility cults in the eastern Himalayas points out a similar conceptual discrepancy, and stresses those particular cults' virtual lack of historical exchange with the Buddhism surrounding them.[14] He even suggests that the Buddhist religion, with its focus on impermanence and universalist – rather than kin-based – underpinnings, simply "cannot accommodate the cult's central ideas." (Huber 2020, vol. 1: 16).

Yet despite obvious conceptual and historical tensions, there were regions in the Tibetan highlands where such distinct cosmological strains met and managed to strike common ground.[15] In this paper, I will chiefly focus on the writings of a figure who represents exactly such a confluence, the 17th-century *Bka' brgyud pa* Buddhist Karma chags med (1613-1678), a prolific author from Khams who composed a substantial number of ritual manuals that directly detailed or otherwise touched on these cults. His engagement with these traditions, a rarity for Buddhist authors, reflects the relatively high currency that such ritual enjoyed in his home region, which was centred around the Upper Ngom chu in Khams,[16] a river that flows south-east-bound towards Chab

---

[10] Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 208. Also see the reference below.

[11] Haarh 1969: 316. Cuevas 2003 takes a more nuanced stance (e.g., pp. 28-38).

[12] There is a wide variety of beliefs associated with ancestor cults. See Tatje and Hsu 1969 for one classification of the various conceptions of the roles played by ancestors.

[13] Both Buddhist theory and practice certainly did develop ways for the bereaved to advance the soteriological aims of the departed and to thus bend or even circumvent karmic law. Yet the presumption that the dead can be persuaded to "not wander off" and support their descendants, as the rites detailed in this paper hold, parts with this Buddhist law altogether. (e.g. *... ma bros ma 'khyams par/ /bdag gi gnas 'dir bzhugs la kha 'dzin mdzod/,* Mtshun-g: f. 151.3).

[14] Huber 2020, vol. 1: 15-16. Vinding 1982: 312-315 reports a similar situation among the Thakali of Mustang, Nepal, who, though identifying as Buddhists, are largely unaffected by notions of *saṃsāra* and rebirth.

[15] Also consider the sometimes mutually affirmative co-existence of Buddhism and ancestor cults in, for instance, China (e.g., Ebrey 1986: 23; Clarke 2000: 277-278). Śaiva traditions, too, managed to incorporate brahmanical ancestor cult rites, however conceptually awkward this was (Mirnig 2018).

[16] KCBio: ff. 19.5-20.1. The Ngom chu is the river formed after the Lci chu merges with another stream just south of the Qinghai-TAR border, which subsequently merges with the Rdza chu at Chab mdo.

mdo Town (Ch. *Qamdo*) in what is today the north-eastern Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). In a bid to cover the wider regional usage of such ritual and to illustrate the representative nature of Karma chags med's writings for broader regional practices, I will occasionally alternate references to his writings with confirmatory notes drawn from other eastern Tibetan works, of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist signature.[17] (For heuristic purposes, overt Buddhist influences are stripped from this section and taken up separately later in the chapter).

Next, I will detail some key influences that accompanied the meeting of such traditions with Buddhism as reflected in Karma chags med's works. This discussion will be theoretically framed around Alan Strathern's recently forwarded notion of immanentist and transcendentalist religiosity (2019), a framework that helps illuminate the dynamics behind Buddhism's ability to simultaneously embrace, challenge and gradually alter the ritual-cosmological landscapes it encountered. Conversely, it will also help cast light on how highly particularist religious traditions such as these ancestor cults – intimately wedded to local patrilines and pre-dominantly concerned with securing mundane benefits – could penetrate, influence, and enlist for their own purposes a universalist religion such as Buddhism. Such dynamics are sure to have reoccurred time and again across the Himalayan Plateau, and indeed across the wider Buddhist world.

2. Dead ancestors as embodied social actors

In Khams, *mtshun*[18] were believed to furnish support in wide-ranging aspects of daily life, such as the procurement of luck (*g.yang*, *phywa*, *rlung rta*), health, the welfare of live-stock, successful harvests, and support during war and travel. They held particular clout for their ability to boost their offspring's fertility, an association that was enshrined in origin myths[19] and was explicitly adduced in the 1740s as a local community's main motivation to engage with the ancestors, as another Buddhist from Khams reports.[20] This broad assistance provided by the forebears is neatly

---

[17] All in all, the following discussion is based on some 50-60 relevant works. I have identified and studied over 30 works by Karma chags med himself that explicitly address or mention the *mtshun* or their cult, ranging in size from a single to over 50 folio sides. Further works of his, moreover, have proved relevant even if they do not touch on these cults directly, such as genealogies or *bla bslu*, *g.yang* and *dgra lha* rituals.

[18] The terms actually in use for the ancestors are mostly compounds, of which I have counted close to twenty. Most common among these are *pha mtshun*, *ma mtshun, lha mtshun* and *mtshun lha*. Occasionally, the compound member *mtshun* is spelled *btsun* instead, as in *cho btsun* or *mgon btsun* (for *cho mtshun* and *mgon mtshun*). They are often additionally referred to as *dgra lha/bla.* Conversely, of course, not all *dgra lha* are *mtshun*, and the former tend to have a more strictly militaristic role.

[19] Karmay 1998a discusses a relevant myth in the *Dbu nag mi'u 'dra chags*. See Langelaar 2018 for a more recent discussion of this myth and related origin narratives, some of which also incorporate the relation between *mtshun* (or ancestors in general) and fecundity. The manuals under study occasionally include permutations of the same myth as well.

[20] *rang re'i rigs rus bskyed byed cho mtshun gyi ngo bo yin zhes kyang thos pa la brten nas …* Mtshun9: 368. ("[I also composed this ritual] because [I] heard [people say]: "The quintessence of the *cho mtshun* [patrilineal ancestors] is to engender our progeny.") The author in question is Kaḥ thog Tshe dbang nor bu (1698-1755) and the dating of the work is based on its colophon.

summarised in allusions to their potential functioning as "a wish-fulfilling jewel" (*yid bzhin nor bu*).[21] All in all, these cults served as a cultural means through which death and the crises it entails could be positively re-appropriated as a source of regeneration, vitality, as well as communal stability.[22]

Despite the ancestors' obvious skill in manipulating worldly circumstances on behalf of their descendants, they did not themselves enjoy an ethereal life detached from material trouble. They could still suffer from hunger, thirst, temperature extremes and other physical disturbances, and thus were subject to the same happenstances as living man. Accordingly, they did not dwell in some paradisaical world, but were rather believed to "settle in the ground,"[23] where their bones would generally be buried. In multiple passages, moreover, they are attributed with bodies that were subject to natural wear and tear. One ritual composed by Karma chags med presents them with a *"mtshun* sheep" to revitalise their physical frame[24] and another presents foodstuffs, including meat, "in order to mend [the ancestors'] bodily essence."[25] A longer ritual text, part of a larger cycle attributed to Confucius, offers libations, clothing and so on to prevent the ancestors from growing thirsty or cold.[26] In recognition of this embodied vulnerability, ritual works may expressly state that their goal is to ensure that the ancestors are not merely willing, but indeed "physically capable" (*nus*) of providing support.[27]

Although ideally a well-spring of boons, the ancestors were not invariably congenial in nature. Karma chags med warned that their descendants would offend or neglect them at their own peril, with disease and losses of livestock looming over those who shirked their ritual responsibilities.[28] Fear of these more irascible traits underlies recurring pleas such as "do not grow spiteful, even if the offerings are small,"[29] or "like predators [never attack their offspring], do not fight [your own] children."[30] A similar sentiment is encountered in a G.yung drung bon text preserved in the Bon canon (*Bon gyi bka' brten*), which makes offerings in an attempt to stave off their jealousy (*phrag*

---

21 E.g., Mtshun-i: f. 1449.2.

22 For enlightening anthropological reflections on the cultural links between death and new life see Bloch and Parry 1982. In a Himalayan context see Huber 2018 and 2020.

23 See, for instance, the passage translated below (p. 316) or Dur3 B: f. 4.2 (*dang po sa la dur ni btab pa'i dus/ bla yid sa la chags pa yin/*). This settling of the ancestor was contingent on the correct performance of appropriate ritual. Bellezza, too, reports that people of the Byang thang believe the ancestors "live in cemeteries" (2008: 393, fn. 120). But cf. the old ritual documents discussed in Huber 2020, where the location of the *mtshun*, though somewhat unclear, appears to be above that of living man (vol. 2: 47-8, 68).

24 Mtshun5 A: f. 39.5-6.

25 *lus kyi bcud rnams gso ba'i phyir/* (Dur3 A: f. 289.2-3).

26 Mtshun-p: f. 285.1-2.

27 E.g., *gson la mgon skyabs nus par shog* (Dkar A: f. 260.1-2), *rigs rgyud rnams la mgon skyobs byed nus nges so/* (Mtshun-i: f. 1449.4).

28 E.g., Dur-f: f. 182.2-3, Dur3 A: f. 285.2-3, and the passage translated below, Chap. 4.

29 ... *mchod pa chung yang ma 'khon la/* (Mtshun2: f. 201.3).

30 *gcan gzan bzhin du bu la ma rgol zhig* (Mtshun5 A: f. 45.3-4).

dog) and fury (*khro gtum*).[31] Such passages, which could easily be multiplied, reflect a broadly shared concern that the relations between the living and the dead could derail and erupt into an injurious affair.[32]

Yet fortunately, the ancestors had a rich emotional life that extended far beyond feelings of spite, anger and acrimony (*khro*, *'khon*, *'thur, ldang*, *'khang*, etc.). They could also be happy (*skyid*), pleased (*dga'*, *mnyes*), comfortable (*bde*), at ease (*thugs dal*), envious and frustrated (*phrag dog*, *ko long*), and even, it seems, be embarrassed into toeing the line. One text addresses the famous eastern Tibetan numen Mount Rma chen spom ra in his capacity as an ancestor of the 'Brong pa clan,[33] and pre-emptively seeks to shame him into compliance: "Ancestor, would the disgrace that should befall you in front of all *lha* and men not be great if you – the guardian of [your] offspring – should fail to defend us?"[34] As such passages illustrate, ancestors were not impersonal forces, but were believed to retain human features and a broad emotional pallet that needed appropriate engagement, much like a living ancestor would.

Indeed, the ancestors are repeatedly imputed with what comes close to full human mentality. Sometimes, they are referred to simply as *bla*,[35] the mobile vitality principle that is key to man's physiological and mental functioning. This vitality principle, which may leave the body in cases of "soul loss,"[36] is often believed, across and beyond the Himalayan Plateau, to linger after death, and is a stable feature of the *mtshun* in these writings.[37] Quite commonly, moreover, it is joined with *yid*,[38] thus yoking "thought" or "intellect" to the otherwise unpredictable momentum of the *bla*. On several occasions, furthermore, Karma chags med and other authors, too, even complement this duo

---

31 Mtshun-i: f. 1447.3-5.

32 In a nutshell, the *mtshun* were of a "rewarding-punishing" type (Tatje and Hsu 1969: 157). Sheils dubs this type of ancestor cult "supportive", which he sees as "the strongest form of ancestor worship" (1975: 428).

33 This clan is still in existence today, scattered largely across Nang chen and Rdza stod prefectures. More information on this descent group can be found in Myang Blo gros rab gsal, n.d. and 'Brong pa Rgyal po 2013.

34 *tsha bo nged rnams mgon skyabs ni/ /mes po khyod kyis ma skyobs na/ /lha mi kun gyi spyan lam du/ /khyod la sma phab mi che'am/* (Mtshun1: ff. 579.6-580.1).

35 See fns. 42, 47 and 79 below. On the *bla*, occasionally also spelled *brla* see Gerke 2007, 2012: esp. 137ff.; Karmay 1998b; Mumford 1989: 167-194, and Ramble 2009.

36 The translation of *bla* as "soul" is misleading and hence generally avoided here, although an exception is made in the case of compounds ("soul loss," "soul tablet," etc.), where stylistic considerations make "(mobile) vitality principle" too burdensome.

37 Cf. Haarh 1969: 17, which states that the *mtshun* can be distinguished from the living by the *absence* of a *bla*.

38 E.g., Mtshun2: f. 201.1-2 invokes the *mtshun mgon* alongside the *yang myes bzang po'i bla yid rnams*. We also repeatedly find phrases such as "you, the *bla yid* of the deceased" (*tshe 'das bla yid khyod nyid*, Dur2 A: f. 308.5, see also f. 308.4), or "the *bla* and *yid* settle in the earth," *bla yid sa la chags* (see fn. 26).

with *sems*, or "mind,"[39] completing a trio of constituents sometimes noted to make up a being's full mental apparatus.[40]

Such theoretical frameworks anchor the belief that an ancestor could persist in his or her established social role after death. This notion lucidly emerges, for instance, from a text that addresses an esteemed deceased man and promises him a good burial site. Reminding the departed that "when you were alive and had not yet died / [you] were a strident and mighty leader," it pleads with him to continue his tasks after death, too.[41] Another ancestor, 'Brong pa Ban thung, explicitly retains his clan name and affiliation after death,[42] and a myth contained in a G.yung drung bon collection has a ritual specialist address an early Tibetan ancestor in exactly this kin role: "Do you not think of [your] sons and grandsons!?"[43] Such continuation of trusted identities, whose carriers can still be appealed to for help, is a far cry from the description forwarded by Cuevas, who, relying on Haarh's older work, describes the *mtshun* as an "aggressive menace" that exerted nothing but "a hostile power over the living" and were therefore to be contained, but not put to beneficial use.[44]

These passages should suffice to illustrate that there was a significant intuitive overlap bet-ween departed ancestors and live human beings: The deceased could act decidedly human-like and had minds of their own, a panoply of emotions, memories, agency, kinsmen among the living, social roles to uphold, and health to preserve. They were "dead" only in the most nominal of senses.[45] The cult treats ancestors as full-fledged persons who remain socially invested in, and pivotal contributors to, their community. Although dead, they are not departed.

To accurately reflect this emic understanding of *mtshun*, I follow Marshall Sahlins in steering clear of the immaterial and supernatural implications that accompany the term ancestral "spirit" (and, for that matter, "deity"). Easily misconstrued as an otherworldly apparition that is only tangentially connected to mundane reality, the term's dualistic overtones can easily obscure the social and material lives of the *mtshun*. Above, I have consequently referred to these beings simply as ancestors – an ambiguous term in its own right – and will also employ the terms "metaperson"

39 E.g. Dur3 A: ff. 284.5-6 and 285.2; Dur-h: ff. 723.5 and 724.4; Mtshun-p: f. 269.2.

40 See Karmay 1998b: 311 and the references cited there. Somewhat different ontologies are given in other texts, e.g. *bla*, *srog* and *rnam shes* (Dur-f: ff. 181.6-182.1), or *bla*, *yid* and *rnam shes* (in the passage translated in Chap. 4).

41 *khyod ma shi gson po'i dus kyang / kha drag dbang chen gyi dpon po yin pas/ da lta shi ba'i tshe na yang / brla drag gzhung bzang gi gshin po khyod kyis/* ... etc. (G.yang2: 149.1-2).

42 See, e.g., the passages translated below.

43 *bu dang tsha la mi dgongs sam/* (Mtshun-p: f. 266.2-3).

44 Cuevas 2003: 31-2, following Haarh 1969. Salomon 2015: 811-13, 817-18 reports a similar situation for Nang chen, where the *bla* of the departed, with the exception of that of high Buddhist dignitaries, was considered a possible threat to the living, not a source of well-being. Similar fear of the dead *bla* is reported elsewhere, too, including in an article on funerary traditions in Dkar mdzes, Sichuan (Rinchen Losel 1991: 177-180).

45 Ancestors were "dead" in a literal sense (*gshin po*, *shi* etc.), but this only relates to their destroyed body and lack of life-force (*srog*).

and "metahuman" to help reflect the *mtshun*'s human-like motivated agency and continued presence within society or its direct surroundings (Sahlins 2017: 35-42).

In keeping with the social relevance of the deceased, these ancestor cults hold that a community's welfare comprises the weal of both the living and the dead. Their fates are believed to be intimately intertwined, as Karma chags med himself noted: "If you, *bla* of the dead, are not at ease / The living, too, will not enjoy good fortune."[46] Accordingly, a rich array of ritual tactics and techniques was available to address the needs of the departed, including soul-calling, the erection of shrines (*gsas mkhar*), the expulsion of beings that harangue the departed (*bse rag*, *dur sri*, etc.), petitions to enlist the support of numina, offerings of song and dance to the dead, and other rites.

Most crucial among all ritual was secondary burial, which served to settle down the wandering *bla* of the dead and to thus re-incorporate it into the community. This practice revolved around the interment of the bones left behind after cremation, bird exposure, or another type of primary funeral. Bone, let it be noted, is the endonym for patrilineal descent, and hence also the term in use for the patriclans of Khams (*rus* or *rus pa*, *gdung* in the honorific).[47] According to Karma chags med's manuals, this shared substance was ideally interred in a white-washed earthenware vase along with a "soul tablet" into which the *bla* of the dead was invited. Grave gifts were inserted as well, and could include grains, medicine, precious stones, pieces of cloth, weapons, and gender-specific items such as arrows and spindles.[48] Secondary burial was therefore a carefully orchestrated attempt to provide the ancestor with a well-equipped dwelling, "a residence, a house for the *mtshun*,"[49] as Karma chags med put it. This dedicated post-mortuary preservation of the shared substance of bone reflects the wish to sustain agnatic kinship, and indeed the lineage-centred community, across the threshold of death.[50]

3. The ancestor cult as "immanentist" religion

Such mutual engagement with the dead is radically different from what one may expect of Tibetan Buddhists, especially educated authors well-versed in religious doctrine. Buddhism, after all, tends to focus on rebirth and liberation, rather than on the continuation of worldly community. Notably, this is only one of multiple differences between these two traditions. Much ink has already been

---

[46] *gshin bla khyod nyid ma bde na/ /gson po dag kyang mi shis pas/* (Dur2 A: f. 306.1).

[47] Salomon 2015: 413, 212-15. I could confirm the continued existence of large, geographically spread-out exogamous patriclans in southern Nang chen during fieldwork in 2018.

[48] E.g., Rten dur: ff. 242-244.3; Dur-b: ff. 122.4-123.2, and Dkar A: ff. 254.1-256.3 (for further references on the latter source see fn. 64). These ossuaries, in keeping with their potentially rich grave gifts, are often referred to as "treasures" (e.g., *gter bum*, *rin chen sa yi gter*, *dkar rtsi bum gter*, *mkho dgu'i longs spyod zad med rin chen gter*, etc.).

[49] *mtshun khyim bzhugs yul* (Mtshun5 A: f. 42.2).

[50] Also see Wellens 2010: 108. On the meaning of preserving bones, specifically, also see Bloch and Parry 1982: 20-21.

spilled in attempts to analytically distinguish between religions[51] that display markedly different socio-cultural dynamics. Whereas some religious traditions, such as Buddhism, may preach universal ethics, actively missionize, have codified historical traditions, and champion salvation, others lack all such characteristics and instead enshrine the pursuit of mundane well-being as the operational creed of their ritual repertoire. A proper understanding of such differences helps explain the dynamics at play between Buddhism and *mtshun* cults, and why Buddhas eventually managed to eclipse the ancestors.

Among the numerous terms that have been forwarded to capture such religious diversity are, on the one hand, universal(ist), salvific, doctrinal, scriptural, literary, organised and world religion, as well as great traditions, which are juxtaposed with terms such as local, folk, ethnic, communal, pagan, traditional, nameless, domestic, indigenous or tribal religion, or little traditions, on the other hand. Although such terms do helpfully highlight the dangers of taking the likes of Buddhism, Christianity or Islam as the archetype of religion,[52] all come with either undesirable implications, limited explanatory power, or both. I myself found none to be particularly productive in analysing the relations, frictions, and interactions between Buddhism and *mtshun* cults.[53]

The historian Alan Strathern, in a helpful bid to provide a more satisfactory theoretical template, has recently proposed the usage of "immanentist" and "transcendentalist" religion instead. Crystallising notions previously forwarded by anthropologists,[54] he formulates this framework through a wide-ranging comparative survey of literature on both Buddhist and prospective (largely pre-contact) Christian societies, before deploying it to an analysis of the relations between religion and politics. At once more nuanced and encompassing than the analytic terms listed above, Strathern's scheme is better-suited to an analysis of the material under consideration.

All transcendentalist traditions, Strathern argues, are fundamentally marked by their embrace of "an ontological breach," which divides reality into a mundane realm on the one hand, and one that is in essence beyond and obscured on the other hand. Such traditions are therefore invariably accompanied by conceptions of "the sacred" as radically distinct and separate from everyday life, such as Islamic paradise or Mahāyāna Buddhist conceptions of enlightenment. In such traditions,

---

[51] The term "religion" itself has been infamously difficult to define. In the present context, a note on theoretical abolitionism and deconstructionism of the term must suffice. In my opinion, scholars such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Timothy Fitzgerald and Talal Asad sacrifice too much communicability and comparative potential by seeking to eliminate "religion" from our vocabulary, and place an unrealistic burden on language, which of necessity distorts and simplifies. Useful points are made in Saler 2008, Strathern 2019: 3-8, 11-16, and Strenski 2010, who all stress the strategic and heuristic nature of definitions. (Also see Bloch 2008 for a more wide-ranging understanding of what "religion" is all about).

[52] Cf. Huber 2020, vol. 1: 13-16, which distinguishes between "religions" (salvific, transcendentalist traditions) and "cults" (immanentist religions).

[53] I found salvific and universalist religion to be most helpful in this context, although the framework presented next incorporates their advantages, while opening up additional lines of analysis, too.

[54] See, for instance, Sahlins 2017: 35-42 as well as the references cited there to the work of Descola, Viveiros de Castro and others. Strathern (2019: 6) himself notes that anthropology has forwarded relevant ideas as far back as Durkheim, and cites copious relevant work throughout his book.

the sacred can be inscrutable, unspeakable, and ineffable, simultaneously beyond man's conceptual and physical grasp. Ordinary mortals, for instance, can neither comprehend nor travel to nirvana, nor inflict damage upon Amitābha or God; these beings inhabit a different plane altogether. This alternate sphere exudes a compelling allure and swiftly becomes a central concern of religious activity (Strathern 2019: 47-50, 24, etc.).

Such a dualistic perspective entails a slew of consequential developments.[55] Oft-recurring features of transcendentalist religiosity include the fact that salvation – the escape from rather than the embrace of mundane life – becomes the paramount goal of religious practice. Worldly values may therefore be inverted, with, for instance, kinship and sex being stripped of value. A "process of ethicisation" commences, accompanied by a turn towards inner mental cultivation. Concurrently, pragmatic ritual loses relative standing to hegemonic claims to ultimate truth. Founding teachers are framed as a "historical singularity" and consequently their doc-trines are codified, and canons created and gradually closed. This puts a conceptual brake, however sluggish it may operate in practice, on innovation and adaptation (Strathern, *op. cit.*, 63-64; also see 81-92). Great clerical organisations arise to function as erudite guardians of the tradition's heritage, and are often marked by a longevity that far exceeds that of the states that historically surround them. Along with claims to universally valid truth, strong self-conscious collective identities can appear, and rivalling metapersons are subordinated or abolished outright, as Buddhism and Christianity have respectively tended to do.[56]

In contrast, immanentist traditions are marked by a rather monistic understanding of the cosmos, in which metapersons and everything hallowed alike inhere in the realm that man occupies. "The sacred," although perhaps on occasion inaccessible to the human senses or too difficult to reach, nevertheless constitutes part of one and the same cosmos as man does. It is immanent to the physical environment and does not transcend it in any ontologically meaningful sense (Strathern, *op. cit.* 31-35). This applies neatly, for instance, to the old ritual cosmologies recently studied by Huber, which are "purely mundane" and firmly set in "the atmospheric and the terrestrial domains of the actual, cognisable natural world we live in" (Huber 2020, vol. 2: 69). Strathern cites examples in which the seats of wayward meta-persons were burned, drowned and even flogged (Strathern 2019: 34, 42), demonstrating the emic equation of these beings with specific physical objects. In such traditions, indeed, the distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" has little to no purchase (*ibid.*: 32-34, 6, etc.).

As a corollary,[57] immanentist religions tend to have undifferentiated notions of the afterlife, which are either modelled on everyday existence or considered unimportant and hence remain undeveloped. These traditions instead have an overriding ritual focus on mundane expediency, and are marked by a "communal, local and unsystematised" morality that is fundamentally focused on

[55] The following discussion is summarised from the fourteen additional characteristics of transcendentalism discussed in *ibid.*: 50-81.

[56] On the latter point see *ibid.*: 71, 75-78, 92-97 (on Buddhism specifically) and 97-100 (on Christianity).

[57] The following paragraph is summarised from the nine additional characteristics of immanentism dis-cussed in Strathern 2019: 27-47.

"the maintenance of successful communal living" (Strathern, *op. cit.*, 36-38). They tend to concentrate on metapersons' powers rather than their inspiring ethics, and have a pragmatic and empirical approach to religious practice, accompanied by a dynamic mutability. There is limited emic resonance with notions such as "belief" and "religion," and they have a "rather borderless and elastic" religious field (*ibid.*: 46) in which metapersons and their cults may spread without particular regard for their pedigree or provenance.

Despite these marked differences between immanentist and transcendentalist traditions, no religion can live off the intangible alone. Accordingly, transcendentalist traditions invariably include immanentist features, too, without which they could neither get started nor function, appeal nor spread. The transcendent sacred must at some point reach out and touch the world. Transcendentalism therefore remains dependent on and susceptible to the lure of immanentist religiosity, with whom it exists in a dynamic relationship.[58] This dependency is illustrated by the Tibetan Buddhist belief in spontaneously arisen statues, the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, the heavenly origins attributed by Muslims to the Kaʿbah in Mecca, the practice of glossolalia among Evangelical Christians, or the wide-spread belief in miracles. Combined with the fact that Buddhist doctrine conceptually allows for the absorption of "rival" metapersons (Strathern, *op. cit.*, 71, 75-78, 92-97), this helps explain why Buddhism could so often engage in constructive exchanges with the religious traditions it encountered.

The ancestor cult as outlined above, heuristically stripped of the incursions of Buddhism and G.yung drung bon, fit Strathern's immanentist model to a tee. Firstly, the cult's underlying cosmology is conspicuously monistic. The dead, as well as the metapersons they may encounter (*dur sri*, *sa sri*, *bse rag*, *sa 'dre*, *dur 'dre*, *sa bdag*, *yul lha*, etc.), remain squarely within living man's environment; they are not "supernatural." The cult's vision of life after death, moreover, does not meaningfully differ from the regular human condition, but is directly modelled on it. Associated concerns continue to revolve around kinship, food, clothing, shelter and physical safety. In one non-Buddhist source, an ancestor even bargains for a consort.[59] The notion of salvation, on the other hand, is wholly absent.

In a further fit with the immanentist model, these ancestor cults explicitly strive for the harmonious functioning of community by boosting vitality, fertility and security, but are not rooted in the clarion call of universally applicable ethics. Indeed, solidarity among humans, both living and dead, is primarily deployed along lines of kinship, ensuring that the cult's morality is communal at heart. The *mtshun*, moreover, must be "capable" of offering assistance, but there is no indication that they are any more ethical than their living brethren. Indeed, they were quick to lash out if ignored or offended. The empirical approach to ritual, too, we see confirmed – albeit tempered somewhat by Karma chags med's transcendentalist penchant for orthodox justification.[60] Although

[58] *Ibid.*: 7, 81-106. Note, however, that the opposite does not hold. Immanentist traditions can function well without a shred of transcendentalist influence.

[59] Mtshun-p: f. 261.3-4.

[60] One colophon, for instance, notes how Karma chags med, faced with the repercussions of a burial that had taken a wrong turn, took ritual counter-measures, inspired by a visionary dream. As a result, a horse that

the remaining features are too complex to satisfactorily address in brief, all indications confirm these points, too, including the high mutability of these practices across space, time and religious boundaries. The cult of the *mtshun*, all in all, was wholly practical and mundane in orientation, and seems to have lacked any notion of transcendence.

4. Transcendentalising the ancestor cult

Having come of age in 17th-century Upper Khams, Karma chags med was socialised to cherish the immanent ancestors. His autobiography, for one, records how his biological father, a Buddhist practitioner of some repute, instructed his son to carry out the appropriate post-mortuary ritual after his death. This request was coupled with a promise that the ancestor cult rite would benefit Karma chags med himself as well.[61] At the same time, Karma chags med received extensive training as a Buddhist specialist, especially in the bKa' brgyud and rNying ma traditions. First ordained at the age of eight, he studied and mingled with numerous teachers throughout his life, composing dozens of volumes of Buddhist works along the way. Therefore, even when engaging with *mtshun* cults, a larger Buddhist worldview always hovered in the backdrop, forever ready to bend down and absorb any mundane frame of reference by allotting it a subordinate spot under an over-arching Buddhist canopy.

Indeed, Karma chags med's most elaborate extant work on *mtshun* ritual explicitly sets out stating that by tweaking minor details he sought to compose a proper Buddhist framework for these otherwise perfectly acceptable rituals.[62] Such bids at harmonisation entailed several theoretical and practical mergers of Buddhism and ancestor cults, offering insight into a process of religious transculturation. Although the extent to which regional ancestor cults had already been subject to transcendentalist influence before his time remains unclear, Karma chags med's works clearly indicate that, at least among Buddhist literati, his was a lonely voice. For instance, in composing instructions on how to construct and inter an ossuary, he relied on observation of popular ritual practice (*mthong ba brgyud pa*), not on written sources.[63] In another work, he implies that he had not encountered a proper written Buddhist rendering of such ritual, and explicitly associates the

had fallen sick due to the error stopped shivering and quickly improved in health. Karma chags med "marvelled" at the results of his experiment and "wondered whether I had found a [suitable] ritual for moving [burial sites]," before adding, "but I figured that I had not, [and that I instead] should assemble [such a rite] from all transmitted literature." (*... ngo mtshar skyes nas ni/ /de phyir spo chog e rnyed bsam pa la/ /ma rnyed dpe rgyud kun nas bsgrig dgos bsam/*) (edited reading, based on Dur3 A: f. 296.4-5, Dur3 B: f. 20.4-5, Dur3 C: f. 107.3).

[61] *nga yi rus pa dkar rtsi sa yag sar/ /rgyobs dang khyod rang la yang phan no gsungs/* (KCBio: f. 25.2-3). (On the term *dkar rtsi*, used in these materials to refer to ancestral bones see Langelaar 2021).

[62] Mtshun5 A: f. 8.2-4, stating his doubts concerning the usage of *bon lugs* rituals by Buddhist mantrins, because invocations of non-Buddhist deities would clash with their vows.

[63] Dkar F: f. 806.6. This fragment reflects the beginning of a work otherwise only extant in edited and compiled form (e.g., Dkar A). For a translation and discussion of the compiled manual based on a witness closely related to A see Sehnalova's contribution in this volume. For critical editions and a discussion of the two original works see Langelaar 2021.

rites with "*bon* [or Bon] traditions" (*bon lugs*).[64] Below, I will outline five of the more conspicuous ways in which Karma chags med's rituals introduced a transcendentalist Buddhist layer to these ancestor cults.

First, to illustrate that ancestor cults had a proper Buddhist pedigree, Karma chags med presented his audience with fitting citations from a series of authoritative sources. In the preface to his longest ancestor cult manual, already adduced above, he cites a *dhāraṇī* that notes simply: "Oblations to the *mtshun*!"[65] A quoted *sūtra* confirms the possibility of providing deceased parents with food, and a treasure text notes that halting post-funerary offerings to the dead will precipitate a fall into poverty. The third Karma pa, Rang byung rdo rje, is cited as having prescribed the fumigation of "all formidable *pha mtshun*."[66] These neatly arrayed precedents serve to keep any suspicion at bay that Karma chags med was peddling "fabricated, [self-]composed *dharma*" – as he himself styles deviations from scriptural truth elsewhere.[67] Immediately at this work's outset, therefore, an appeal to the truth as enshrined in orthodox Buddhist works filters into the cult, drawing it into a broader religious realm.

Secondly, and more substantially, the author sought to logically integrate the cosmology of the ritually accessible ancestors with that of Buddhist reincarnation. To do so, he provided a theoretical discussion of the *mtshun*'s ontology in which he relies on a threefold taxonomy of mentality. By assigning the two different post-mortem paths of man to separate mental constituents, he can simultaneously accommodate both views:

> "[...] concerning the [beings] known as *pha mtshun*: [there are] three [mental components], namely the *bla* [mobile vitality principle], *yid* [thought], and *rnam shes* [karmic consciousness]. [The following ritual] is beneficial to the *rnam shes* [of] the deceased, which, as explained in Hīnayāna *sūtras*, must remain in the intermediate state between death and rebirth as long as [their] lifespan has not lapsed. [The ritual outlined below] is also beneficial to certain [other *rnam shes*], similarly described [in the *sūtras*], that do not [re-]take bodily form for many human generations and remain in the intermediate state [for that period]. In the general system of the *sūtras* and *tantras*, it is held that after 49 days, the *rnam shes* is [re]born into whichever of the six classes [of beings] is appropriate [to its karma] [...].

---

[64] *... bon lugs ma gtogs ban lugs la mi 'dug pas ...* (Mtshun5 A: ff. 51.6-52.1, see also f. 8.2-4). (This *bon lugs* may well be a catch-all category for any and all non-Buddhist traditions rather than a specific reference to the G.yung drung bon religion, although the latter certainly interacted with these ancestor cults, too – Mtshun-i offering one example [e.g., f. 1448.2-3]).

[65] *mtshun rnams la swā hā/* (Mtshun5 A: f. 9.2-3). The line is (correctly) attributed to the *'Phags pa rdo rje ri rab chen po'i rtse mo'i khang pa brtsegs pa'i gzungs* (see Tōh. 946: f. 293).

[66] Mtshun5 A: ff. 8.4-10.2, with the translated passage reading: *rje rang byung rdo rjes kyang / rgyal bu mthing ge la sogs pa'i/ /pha mtshun gnyen po thams cad bsang / /zhes ...* (f. 10.1-2).

[67] *rang bzo(s) brtsams chos* (Dur3 A: f. 297.1-2 and 297.3).

[As concerns] the *bla* of the deceased: after the [*bla* of the] departed has assumed form (*gzugs bzung*),[68] it takes up residence at the funerary grounds. If he is happy and has resources, [his] sons and grandsons will flourish. Yet if he grows frail, hungry and thirsty, and his pleas for protection to his sons and grandsons do not manage to lift [his hardship], then his sons and grandsons will incur diseases and losses. This is explained in Chinese astrological treatises."[69]

Here, in effect, Karma chags med embraces a type of soul pluralism in order to uphold both cosmological views of the afterlife current in these areas of Khams.[70] (In referring to Chinese materials, he must equate the Tibetan *bla* with either the *hun* or *po* soul of Chinese cultures).[71] By thus integrating reincarnation with ancestor cults, the ritual cosmology of the latter is again folded into a more expansive picture, in which Buddhism provides the grand scheme. The ancestor cult itself hardly moves beyond the local community and its immediate concerns ("the funerary grounds," "sons and grandsons," "diseases"), whereas the inclusion of the karma-bound consciousness elicits mention of Buddhist scripture, reincarnation, the intermediate state between death and rebirth (*bar do*), the existence of other realms within *saṃsāra*, and, implicitly, of course, the lure of enlightenment to escape from it all.

---

[68] See Dur2 B: f. 866.5 on the "form" of the *bla*, namely *yid* (*bla ni yid kyi gzugs can khyod /*; Dur2 A, f. 305.4 erroneously reads: *bla yid yid kyi gzugs can khyod/*).

[69] *de yang pha mtshun zhes pa ni/ bla* (B: *brla*) *yid rnam shes gsum ste/ tshe 'das rnam shes ni/ tshe tshad ma rdzogs bar du bar dor 'dug dgos pa theg pa chung ngu'i mdo rnams nas gsungs pa* (B, C, D: *pas*) *de la yang phan/ la la ni mi rabs mang por lus mi len par bar dor 'dug* (C: *dgug*; A: inserts *dgos*) *pa yang yod par gsungs pa* (B, C: *pas*; D: omits *pa*) *de la yang phan/ mdo rgyud spyi'i lugs la zhag zhe dgu* (C: *zhi bcu*) *nas rnam shes rigs drug gang rung du skye bar bshad kyang /* [...]

tshe 'das kyi bla (B: *brla*) *de ni tshe 'das kyis* (B, C: *kyi*) *gzugs bzung nas dur sa* (B: *dur de*) *de la gnas pas/ de skyid cing longs spyod dang ldan na/ bu tsha bor dar rgyas 'ong / de rgud cing bkres skom byung na bu tsha bo la skyabs zhu bas / de mi khyags nas bu tsha bo la na tsha dang god kha 'ong bar rgya nag gi rtsis gzhung nas bshad/* (edited reading with selected variants from Mtshun5 A: f. 10.2-6, Mtshun5 B: ff. 1277.5-1278.4, Mtshun5 C: ff. 102.3-103.4, Mtshun5 D: ff. 959.6-960.5).

[70] Rolf Stein already noted the co-existence of notions of a *bla* that "survives in the tomb or elsewhere" and the reincarnating consciousness of Buddhism (1972: 227). A similar presence of multiple "souls" is evident in various regions, including in Nang chen, where reincarnation and the lingering *bla* also operate independently (Salomon 2015: 813).

[71] Stein (1972: 226-227) suggests that Tibetan authors equated the *bla* with the *hun* 魂, the soul that is called upon after death and takes up residence in ancestral tablets. In Karma chags med's manuals, too, the *bla* is called upon to settle in a tablet, and hence the *hun* may indeed offer the most appropriate equivalent. However, note that the *po* 魄 soul, like the *bla*, is strongly connected with the body, sinks into the earth (on the *bla* see Salomon 2015: 812), is ritually associated with jade, and carries lunar associations, being etymologically tied to the moon's phases (Yü 1987: 370-371). (The *bla* is believed to move through the body in sync with the stages of the moon [e.g., Gerke 2012: 137-154] and an etymological connection between *bla* "soul" and *zla* "moon" has also been suggested [Schuessler 2007: 417, citing P.K. Benedict], although the latter claim may prove untenable). In any case, the theoretical fit with the Chinese model appears to be forced, and it remains to be seen to what degree Chinese materials constituted a genuine source of inspiration rather than a mere literary justification of a pre-established frame of local understanding.

A third Buddhist twist in these manuals is the deployment of tantric methodology, where the author enlists high-ranking Buddhist deities to command the entire ritual sphere. In a burial site moving ritual, for instance, Karma chags med stipulates that the practitioner must visualise himself as a transcendental bodhisattva and even verbally announce himself as "the body of Mañjuśrī"[72] to the *dur sri*, fearsome beings that habitually prey on the dead. The commands that follow are accordingly backed up by transcendentally ordained sanctions, as the ghouls are duly reminded: "Do not break the command of Mañjuśrī! / If you disobey his word / Yamāntaka will be furious / and crush you [into] dust!"[73] This same cloud of comeuppance also hangs over the head of bothersome ancestors themselves, who are told to stop causing trouble and to no longer mingle with the living, lest they "be destroyed for breaking [their] vows."[74]

Through such means, then, the metapersons that populate the cosmology of the ancestor cult (*pha mtshun*, *ma mtshun, dur sri*, etc.) are stripped of all power relative to those beings who manifest the Buddhist ideal of sentient perfection. The instalment of such an ultimate arbiter, lifted far above the rest of the playing field, has the effect of "dignifying [non-Buddhist metapersons] through conversion while diminishing them in the new hegemonic scheme" (Ramble 2009: 206) and perfectly illustrates what Strathern dubs the "inferiorization of metapersons" that is so typical of Buddhist confluences with other traditions.[75] Indeed, many of Karma chags med's manuals already display this dynamic simply by commencing with an invocation of Buddhist deities before addressing the ancestor cult itself.

Fourth, fascinatingly, we find conceptual expansions of who may qualify as a "patrilineal ancestor" (*pha mtshun*). Despite the *mtshun*'s intimate linkage to patrilines and their abundantly clear role as biological forebears, Karma chags med sometimes inflates the category to include Buddhist luminaries, too. In doing so, figures such as the widely revered eighth-century missionary Padmasambhava, who has no known descent lines, could also be styled *mtshun*.[76] Another manual, despite invoking bio-genetic forebears as well, reserves pride of place for "compassionate *pha mtshun* such as Samantabhadra, Mañjuśrī, Padmasambhava, and the Three Dharma Emperors," with whom the invocations starts off.[77] The immanent ancestors are thus neither elided nor attacked, but rather gently pushed aside, allowing bigger Buddhist names to shine instead.

---

72 *rang nyid 'jam dpal dbyangs su bsgom/* and *nga ni 'jam dpal gzhon nu'i sku/* (Dur2 A: ff. 304.3 and 306.5).

73 *'phags pa 'jam dpal bka' ma bcag_/gal te bka' las 'das gyur na/ /gshin rje gshed po khros nas su/ /rdul phran bzhin du brlag par 'gyur/* (Dur2 A: f. 307.1-2). (Yamāntaka is a wrathful manifestation of Mañju-śrī).

74 *'phags pa 'jam dpal gzhon nu dang / /rnal 'byor bdag gi bka' ma bcag_/gal te bka' las 'das gyur na/ /dam tshig chad pas brlag par 'gyur/* (Dur2 A: f. 309.3-4).

75 Strathern 2019: 75-78. Also see Mumford 1989: 178, where a soul-calling ritual's reliance on a high Buddhist deity ensures that "the outcome is certain" to be positive, turning the ritual's final confir-mation of success, in Mumford's view, into "a parody" of sorts.

76 *slob dpon padma la sogs pa'i / rgya gar grub chen mtshun rnams dang / bod yul mar pā* [*sic*] *lo tsā dang / srong btsan sgam po la sogs pa / bod yul rig 'dzin mtshun rigs* ... (Mtshun7: f. 170.1).

77 *kun bzang 'jam dbyangs padma 'byung / /mes dbon rnam gsum la sogs kyi/ /pha mtshun thugs rje mnga' ba rnams/* ... (Mtshun4: ff. 65.4-66.1).

Fifth, and perhaps most substantially, *mtshun* could be recast altogether in a Mahāyāna Buddhist mold. This happened in the case of an ancestor of the ’Brong pa clan on whom Karma chags med composed several works. Readers of his *Quick Supplication to ’Brong pa Ban thung*, for one, are presented with two different ontological frameworks, quite along the lines of the theoretical passage translated above. Here, then, we still tread familiar conceptual terrain:

“Ban thung of the ’Brong pa, lord among yogins,
[your] mind has departed to a pure Buddhafield.
[But your] *bla* has stayed behind as a *pha mtshun* and martial protector,
as such, offer support to [your] lineage, the members of the ’Brong clan!”[78]

In this passage, the immanentist cosmology of the ancestor cults remains firmly intact, even if expanded upon by the Buddhist insertion of a more-or-less transcendental world – a pure realm established by a Buddha in his quest to aid all sentient beings.[79] Yet it is clearly still the *bla* of the ancestor that stays behind in the world of men, and it is this embodied mental constituent that explains Ban thung’s continued engagement with his offspring (see Fig. 1). The same framework is repeated in another work.[80]

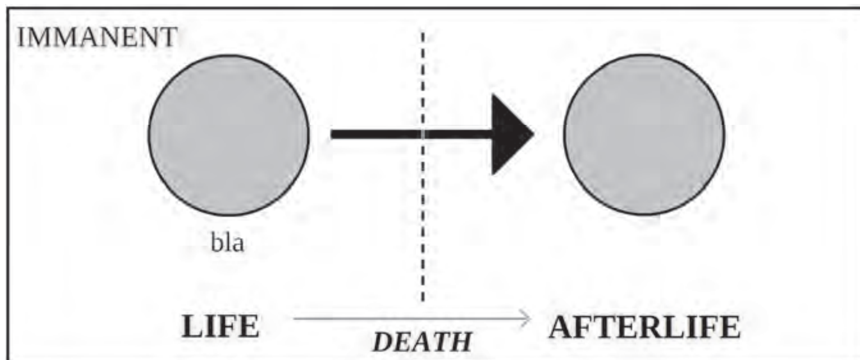

Fig. 1: A simplified immanentist framing of an ancestor’s post-mortem activity. The mundane *bla*, or vitality principle, survives death and provides the base for the ancestor’s continued presence and support.

Elsewhere, however, the picture changes. In yet another manual penned by Karma chags med, the cosmology of the ancestor cult comes crumbling down under the overbearing weight of a full-blown Mahāyāna Buddhist worldview, which not just overlays but wholly substitutes the original cosmology. This fumigation rite (*bsang mchod*) for the ’Brong pa clan’s ancestors moves to reframe

---

[78] *rnal ’byor dbang phyug ’brong pa ban thung ni/ /thugs ni dag pa rgyal ba’i zhing du gshegs/ /bla ni pha mtshun dgra bla’i tshul bzhugs nas/ /rigs rgyud ’brong rigs rnams la kha ’dzin mdzod/* (Mtshun-e: f. 425.1-2).

[79] In another post-mortuary ritual, Karma chags med describes a different pure realm as marked by the presence of innumerable Buddhas and the enjoyment of “incomprehensibly marvelous well-being and happiness.” (*bde skyid ngo mtshar bsam gyis mi khyab yod:*, Tshe: f. 12a.1-4). For all intents and purposes, then, this is a paradise.

[80] Mtshun-g: f. 150.2-3.

Ban thung as a transcendental Buddhist being, capable of manipulating the mundane realm at will by sending an emanation:

> "Ban thung ma, born into the clan of the 'Brong pa,
> became accomplished in [the tantric practice of] Tiger-Riding Mahākāla.
> The Black Protector revealed himself,
> [and] bestowed [upon Ban thung] the mastery to increase his clan's strength.
> As a sign of his attainments, he would travel and dwell in the sky.
> In reality, [he] dwells in [the Buddhafield] Khecara,
> [but] an emanation took the form of a martial protector (*dgra bla*),
> and acts as the *dgra bla* of the entire 'Brong [pa] clan."[81]

Here, then, the forefather's continued operation in this world becomes dependent on a complete Buddhist cosmology of attainment, enlightenment, powerful Buddhist deities, transcendental realms, and emanating bodies. Within this framework, the supra-mundane realm, reflective of a "reality" (*dngos nyid*) inaccessible to regular folk, has now become the critical quality of the ancestor's efficaciousness (Fig. 2). This framework, as I will show below, would gain increasing traction over time.

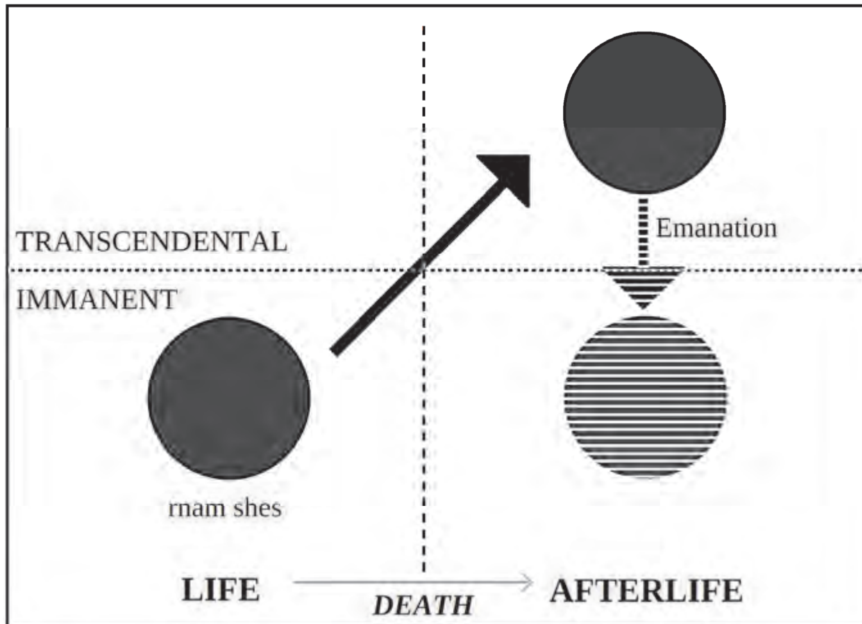

Fig. 2: A simplified transcendentalist framing of the ancestor Ban thung's post-mortem activity. The karma-guided consciousness, or *rnam shes*, attains a higher state and emanates as a *dgra bla* to provide mundane aid to his offspring.

---

[81] *'brong pa'i rigs 'khrungs ban thung ma/ /stag zhon ma hā kā la bsgrub/ /mgon po nag pos zhal bstan nas/ /rigs rgyud btsan dar dngos grub gnang / /grub rtags nam mkhar gshegs bzhugs mdzad/ /dngos nyid mkha' spyod gnas na bzhugs/ /sprul pa dgra bla'i tshul bzung nas/ /'brong rigs kun gyi dgra bla mdzad/* (Mtshun1: f. 577.3-4).

5. From buried bones to Buddhas beyond

Although Karma chags med upheld the ancestor cults of his homeland, Buddhist notions of transcendence had a greater and more compelling story to tell. The descendants of the respected clan ancestor Ban thung therefore may well have welcomed their ancestor's metamorphosis into a Buddhist emanation, rather than seeing it, with a suspicious eye, as a subversion of the ancestor cult's cosmology. It is surely noteworthy that the ritual manual cited above, in which this forebear was recast as a transcendent being, was in fact composed for a 'Brong pa clan leader[82] and left the descent group's collective identity and communal goals firmly intact. Ban thung's emanation, after all, still concerned himself solely with the weal of "the entire 'Brong pa clan" – not with that of all sentient beings. The petitions addressed to him remained mundane in orientation, too, and included requests for luck (*g.yang*), success in battle, for Ban thung to take care of his descendants and their horses, and to steadfastly dwell on his offspring's weapons.[83] As such, the ritual clout of Buddhism was incorporated in a way that upheld the social objectives of the clan-based ancestor cult itself.

In the long run, however, the transcendentalist layer that was introduced as a fresh fount of ritual efficacy could not but relativise the immanent realm in which it was deployed. If ancestors and ghouls alike should tremble in front of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, the *mtshun* grow only ever less likely to be relied upon for support. Strong concern for clan identities, too, would be more likely to wane than benefit if, as Karma chags med cites the Buddha, "class and clan are not central to my teachings."[84] The belief in the *bla*, too, only stood to lose ground to the reincarnating consciousness, which in contrast to the vitality principle was an integral part of Buddhist cosmology.[85] Once clan members open the door to Buddhist ritual and its attendant worldview, therefore, it is but a matter of time until a future generation produces a voice that understandably wonders why one should bother invoking one's great-grandfather at all.

---

[82] The man is identified as a leader of the Rdor shul section of the 'Brong pa (*'brong pa rdor shul dpon*, Mtshun1: f. 582.2).

[83] Mtshun1: f. 578.2-6.

[84] *... nga yi bstan pa la/ /rigs dang rus ni gtso bo ma yin te/ /'bras bu sa thob de nyid gtso bo yin/* (KCBio: f. 28.3). Note, however, that such notions are often the subject of substantial flip-flopping across contexts, Buddhist genealogies offering plentiful examples where the connection between lineage affiliation and Buddhist clout are emphasised. Indeed, the translated passage in fact appears in a section where Karma chags med goes to considerable lengths to settle his own affiliation with a respectable patriline. The *Lalitavistara sūtra* passage cited earlier also includes "eminent lineage" (*rgyud phun sum tshogs pa*, *Rgya cher rol pa*: f. 15a.6) among the criteria that mark a soon-to-be Buddha's family.

[85] A post-mortuary ritual not altogether dissimilar from that surrounding the ossuary in Khams is described for Klu brag in Mustang, Nepal, where a whitewashed vase, filled with jewels and offerings, also serves to attract the wandering soul of the departed. This ritual is soteriologically oriented, however: it centres on the *rnam shes*, not the *bla*, does not involve the insertion of bones, and the vase is discarded, not preserved (Ramble 1982). Alternatively, the *bla* could also be drawn into the very dynamics that typify the karmic consciousness. Salomon cites a *bla ma* from Nang chen who argues that the *bla* too must follow its karma (2015: 812, fn. 1082).

Such a gradual process of increasing Buddhist hegemony over *mtshun* cults seems to have largely come to completion in contemporary Khams. During a 2018 research trip to Nang chen, a region where Karma chags med composed some of his ancestor cult manuals in the 17th century, just upstream from his place of birth, I was invariably met with blank stares when I broached the topic of *pha mtshun*. Salomon's encyclopaedic work on Nang chen, based on 797 interviews with exiled people from the region, found no evidence of ancestor cults either. Despite his attention to funerary rites, religion, and the post-mortem *bla*, the term *mtshun* never appears in his 1000-page dissertation.[86]

In the wake of the historically surely haphazard shifts away from the ancestors, the ritual preparation and preservation of their bones, too, stood to lose both subjective appeal as well as objective logic. Once Buddhist cosmology reigned in the ritual realm, the social need and cosmological justification for the immanent ancestors would weaken. Nowadays, to be sure, not the retention of bone, but its abandonment or *destruction* through pulverisation are standard post-mortuary practice across the larger Plateau.[87] In 20th-century Nang chen, too, where many of Ban thung's descendants live to this day, bones were crushed and discarded, exceptions being made only for high *bla ma*'s and leaders.[88] The post-mortem presence of the common man's *bla*, moreover, had grown to be the object of fear alone (Salomon, *op. cit.*, 811-813, 817-818). Whereas the historical interment of bone, accompanied by a soul tablet and grave gifts, expressed the desire (and possibility) to preserve the integrity of the patriline beyond death, the bones' destruction now lends voice to the Buddhist belief in the social dissolution of the departed, in perfect keeping with the Buddhist tenet of reincarnation. The dead no longer partake in the community. This monumental social change affirms Strathern's suggestion that wherever "the archaeological record of gravesites [with grave gifts] suddenly plunges into mute emptiness it may be taken as an indication of the arrival of transcendentalism" (Strathern 2019: 35). Over the course of centuries, it seems, Buddhism has robbed Tibetan clans of their graves.

Dovetailing with such changes, undoubtedly, came a shift of attention away from a web of collective kin-based identities – which granted ritual rights and duties in ancestor cults – towards a focus on individual beings, who are all equally under the sway of karmic law and under the compassionate eyes of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Ritual power moved from lineage forebears to Buddhist deities, whose cults were perfected in sometimes distant monasteries. On the level of ritual practice, therefore, the gradual unravelling of *mtshun* cults was accompanied by a transfer of ritual

[86] Salomon does suggest that practices of calling the *bla* still "display features of an ancestor cult overlaid by Tibetan Buddhism." (2015: 863, my translation).

[87] Gouin 2010. Some exceptions can however be found in 20th-century Dkar mdzes (see Rinchen Losel 1991: 163, 171, 172) and may well still be encountered on the Byang thang and in other pockets of Khams (see the references to Bellezza and Huber in fns. 6 and 24).

[88] The bones of high-ranking *bla ma*s and leaders are still crushed, but are subsequently fashioned into *tsha tsha*, little clay figures stamped with pious imagery (Salomon 2015: 810-11). In Karma chags med's manuals, *tsha tsha* also appear, but major bones were destined for ossuaries and were not to be crushed (see Sehnalova's contribution in this volume).

clout from local lineage heads, ritual specialists and other lay community members, such as sons and in-married brides and grooms,[89] to trained and even ordained Buddhist specialists. Even the life of Ban thung, whose cult did persist and whose purvey was still a specific clan, would have inspired faith in a universalist Buddhism, since the ultimate source of his might was located in his tantric mastery.

In Nang chen, it was only when I approached a young and educated pastoralist nomad of the ’Brong pa clan that I found confirmation of the historical presence of *mtshun* cults. The man had come across *mtshun* in his personal readings on local history, and, revelling in the fact that a distant foreigner was familiar with his clan’s illustrious ancestor, volunteered to lead us to a nearby “soul tree” (*bla shing*) of Ban thung.[90] Although, as the man informed my guide and me, Ban thung is still respected and revered among ’Brong pa members, the tree now sits abandoned; he himself only knew of it from local literature.[91] In contrast, a statue of Ban thung still stands proudly in a ritually active setting, which, tellingly, is a Buddhist monastery. The once immanent ancestor has over time morphed into a Buddhist deity. This development is also evident in a recent Tibetan monograph on Ban thung’s clan, which fails to mention his immanentist framing and solely presents him as a Buddhist emanation. The term *mtshun* is absent; instead, Ban thung is presented as a *dgra lha*,[92] a protective martial metaperson commonly found in Buddhism and G.yung drung bon alike.

Such Buddhist transformations undercut the upkeep of any generalised ancestor cult. The forebear of focus, after all, is no longer simply a dead man’s vitality principle (*bla*), but a transcendentally sprung Buddhist avatar. This framework razes the hope of offspring to ever become such an ancestor, too, for only the most immaculate of Buddhist practitioners could ever expect to attain similar mastery. Once such conceptual developments have convincingly taken hold, and the social need for ritual efficacy is increasingly covered by what is now quite thoroughly Buddhist ritual, the ancestor cult’s original cosmology can simply be left to wither. Soteriology becomes central to funerary ritual, the *mtshun* gradually fade from the pantheon, bones start being pulverised, soul trees are abandoned, ancestors forgotten, burial sites consigned to oblivion. As such, Ban thung’s developmental trajectory perfectly embodies the move from an immanentist Tibetan religiosity, centred on buried bones, to a transcendentalist framework, in which he effectively became a Buddha beyond. Unlike Haarh may have presumed, Buddhists hardly needed to suppress the immanent ancestors for them to eventually disappear into the long shadow cast by Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

---

[89] Such kin roles all have parts to play in *mtshun* manuals, whether of Buddhist or Bon affiliation (e.g., Mtshun2: f. 201.3 and Mtshun-o: f. 243.4-5).

[90] This tree is a juniper (*shug pa*), the same tree or shrub from which, according to Karma chags med, men’s ancestral tablets should be made. (For women, *glang ma* “willow” is prescribed instead, e.g., Dkar A: f. 254.3-4).

[91] The *ma ṇi* stones that surround the *bla shing* still testify to the tree’s ceremonially active past.

[92] Myang Blo gros rab gsal, n.d.: 17.

References

Abbreviations

acc. nr. = accessions number

BDRC = Buddhist Digital Resource Center (www.tbrc.org, formerly the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center).

Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang = Khams stod nang chen ’bang sgang bzo rig gnas mdo gsang sngags chos ’phel gling gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang.

Primary Sources

Dkar = (A) Karma chags med and Blo gros rgyal mtshan. [2010]. “Dkar rtsi ’debs pa’i lag len dge legs gter chen,” in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung ’bum*, vol. 35: ff. 253-262. Nang chen.

— (F) Karma chags med. [2000]. “[Dk]ar [rts]i [zh]al [g]dams lag len,” in: *Mkhas grub karma chags med rin po che’i gsung ’bum*, vol. 30: f. 806.5-6. [Chengdu]: Si khron zhing chen mi rigs zhib ’jug su’o Bod kyi rig gnas zhib ’jug khang.

Dur2 = (A) Karma chags med. [2010]. “Dur sa spo thabs bsdus pa,” in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung ’bum*, vol. 35: ff. 303-10. Nang chen.

— (B) Karma chags med. [2000]. “Dur sa spo thabs bsdus pa,” in: *Mkhas grub karma chags med rin po che’i gsung ’bum*, vol. 30: ff. 865-872. Chengdu: Si khron zhing chen mi rigs zhib ’jug khang su’o Bod kyi rig gnas zhib ’jug khang.

Dur3 = (A) Karma chags med. [2010]. “Dur gyi spo chog gsal ba’i me long,” in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung ’bum*, vol. 35: ff. 279-298. Nang chen.

— (B) Karma chags med. (n.d.). “Dur gyi spo chog gsal ba’i me long.” *Dbu med* manuscript (numbered ff. 1-21) in the library of Se ra sku rgyab monastery, available from BDRC, acc. nr. W3PD446, *Se ra sku rgyab kyi dpe mdzod las gsang sngags rnying ma’i chos skor*, vol. 7 [pdf: 3-23].

— (C) Karma chags med. (n.d.). “Dur gyi spo chog gsal ba’i me long.” *Dbu med* manuscript (numbered ff. 89-108) in Dro bo bla ma’s private collection of texts from Khams, available from BDRC, acc. nr. W4PD971, *Dro bo bla mas nyar tshags mdzad pa’i dpe rnying dkon*, vol. 27 [pdf: 381-400].

Dur-b = Karma chags med. [2010]. “Kun rdzob bye ma lag khrid,” in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung ’bum*, vol. 58: ff. 103-130. Nang chen.

Dur-f = Karma chags med. [2010]. “Sa dpyad rin chen kun ’dus,” in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung ’bum*, vol. 32: ff. 181-196. Nang chen.

Dur-h = Karma rin chen dar rgyas. [2009]. “Dur sa spo chog bsdus pa,” in: Mkhan po Dam chos zla ba *et al.* (eds.), *Karma’i mkhan po’i gsung ’bum*, vol. 1: ff. 721-726. [Skye rgu mdo]: Skye rgu’i rig gzhung nyams gso khang.

G.yang2 = Karma chags med. [2010]. "Bkra rgan la sogs bkra shis pa'i ro la g.yang len," in: *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 46: ff. 145-150. Nang chen.

KCBio = Karma chags med. [2010]. "Dge slong Rā ga a sya'i rnam thar," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 1: ff. 13-194. Nang chen.

Mtshun1 = Karma chags med. [2010]. "'Brong rigs kun gyi pha mtshun gnyen po stag zhon spom ra ban thung bcas kyi bsang mchod 'dod don kun 'grub," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 36: ff. 571-582. Nang chen.

Mtshun2 = Karma chags med. [2010]. "Pha mtshun gyi bsang mchod," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 37: ff. 201-2. Nang chen.

Mtshun4 = Karma chags med. [2010]. "Pha mtshun dgra bla gnyan po'i bsang mchod mgon skyabs chen mo," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 46: ff. 63-76. Nang chen.

Mtshun5 = (A) Karma chags med. [2010]. "Pha ma'i drin lan bsags pa mdo rgyud dang mthun par ban lugs mtshun bcos/ zas gtad bang so mchod pa dang don gcig bon po'i srid pa'i lha sras brdar zhes pa yang don gcig yin par snang ngo," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 46: ff. 7-52. Nang chen.

— (B) Karma chags med. (n.d.). "Pha ma'i drin len bsabs pa / mdo rgyud dang mthun pa ban lugs kyi mtshun bcos / zas gtad / bang so mchod pa dang don gcig go / bon pos srid pa'i gsal brdar zhes pa yang mtshun bcos 'di yin par snang ngo." *Dbu med* manuscript (inconsistently numbered ff. 1275-1322) in Kartsa Tsering's private collection of texts from Khams, available from BDRC, acc. nr. W4PD1207, *Tshe ring bla mas nyar tshags mdzad pa'i dpe rnying dpe dkon,* vol. 46 [pdf: 763-810].

— (C) Karma chags med. 1977. "Pha ma'i drin len bsab pa _mdo rgyud mthun pa ban lugs kyi mtshun bcos te _zas gtad bang so mchod pa dang don gcig go / bon po'i srid pa'i lha gsar bsdar zhes pa'ang _mtshun bcos 'di yin par snang ngo," in: *The Collected Works of Karma-chags-med (Rā-ga-a-sya): Reproduced from Various Manuscripts and Blockprints Available in India*, vol. 8: ff. 99-166. New Delhi: Rta-rna Bla-ma.

— (D) Karma chags med. [2000]. "Pha mas drin lan bsabs pa dang _mdo rgyud dang mthun pa bon lugs kyi mtshun bcos te zas gtad bang so mchod pa dang don gcig pa'i phyag len 'don cha gsal ba," in: *Mkhas grub karma chags med rin po che'i gsung 'bum*, vol. 40: ff. 957-1012. Chengdu: Si khron zhing chen mi rigs zhib 'jug khang su'o Bod kyi rig gnas zhib 'jug khang.

Mtshun7 = Karma chags med. 1984. "Mtshun chos kyi don bsdus 'don 'grigs gsal zhing stabs bde ba," in: *The Collected Works of Karma-chags-med (Rā-ga-a-sya): Reproduced from Various Manuscripts and Blockprints Available in India*, vol. 8: ff. 167-179. New Delhi: Rta-rna Bla-ma.

Mtshun9 = Kaḥ thog Tshe dbang nor bu. 2006. "Rigs mtshun lha bsrungs gnyan po rdo rje brag btsan gyi gsol mchod 'dod don lhun grub," in: *Kaḥ thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu'i bka' 'bum*, vol. 2: 365-8. Pe cin: Krung go'i bod rig dpe skrun khang.

Mtshun-e = Karma chags med. 2010. "'Brong pa ban thung gsol mgyogs," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 31: ff. 425-426. Nang chen.

Mtshun-g = Karma chags med. 2006. [Untitled Prayer to 'Brong pa Ban thung], in: *Gnam lcags rtsa gsum gling pa'i ring lugs zab gter chog khrigs skor: The Treasure Teachings of Namchag Tsasum Lingpa*, vol. 2: ff. 150-151. Pharping: Ewam Publications.

Mtshun-i = Anon. (n.d.). "Pha mtshun sgra bla mchod thabs," in: *Bon gyi bka' brten*, vol. 87: ff. 1446-9. N.p. (ISBN7-223-00984-5, BDRC acc. nr. W30498).

Mtshun-o = Anon. (n.d.). "Mtshun mchod pa 'bul ba," in: *Slob dpon dran pa nam mkhas mdzad pa'i bsang brngan yid bzhin nor bu*, ff. 241-244. N.p. (BDRC acc. nr. W4CZ332272).

Mtshun-p = Anon. (n.d.). "Mtshun bcos rin chen 'phreng ba [sic]," in: *Slob dpon dran pa nam mkhas mdzad pa'i bsang brngan yid bzhin nor bu*, ff. 245-320. N.p. (BDRC acc. nr. W4CZ332272).

Rgya cher rol pa = "'Phags pa rgya cher rol pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo," in: *Sde dge bka' 'gyur*, *mDo sde* section, vol. *kha* (= vol. 46): ff. 1[a]-215[b]. Tōh. 95.

Rten dur = Karma chags med. [2010]. "Mi rabs bcu gsum gyi rten dur dkar rtsi skung thabs gzhung rnams dang rus mkhar rin chen phreng ba'i don bsdus," in: Gnas mdo dpe rnying nyams gso khang (ed.), *Mkhas grub karma chags med kyi gsung 'bum*, vol. 35: ff. 241-252. Nang chen.

Tshe = Karma chags med. (n.d.). "Tshe 'das gnas 'dren bsdus pa." *Dbu med* manuscript (numbered ff. 1[a]–12[b]) in the private collection of Bla ma Don rgyal, available from BDRC, acc. nr. W4PD975, *Bla ma don rgyal gyis nyar tshags mdzad pa'i dpe rnying dpe dkon*, [pdf: vol. 25, 623-646].

Secondary Sources

Aggarwal, Ravina. 2001. At the margins of death: ritual space and the politics of location in an Indo-Himalayan border village, *American Ethnologist* 28(3): 549-573.

Aziz, Barbara N. 1974. Some notions about descent and residence in Tibetan society, in: von Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph (ed.), *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal. Proceedings of a Symposium Held at The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, June/July 1973*. Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 23-39.

Balikci, Anne. 2008. *Lamas, Shamans and Ancestors: Village Religion in Sikkim*. Leiden: Brill.

Bellezza, John V. 2008. *Zhang Zhung. Foundations of Civilization in Tibet: A Historical and Ethnoarchaeological Study of the Monuments, Rock Art, Texts, and Oral Tradition of the Ancient Tibetan Upland*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

— 2013. *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet: Archaic Concepts and Practices in a Thousand-Year-Old Illuminated Funerary Manuscript and Old Tibetan Funerary Documents of Gathang Bumpa and Dunhuang*. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Bloch, Maurice and J. Parry. 1982. Introduction: death and the regeneration of life, in: Bloch, Maurice and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-44.

Bloch, Maurice. 2008. Why religion is nothing special but is central, *Philosophical Trans-actions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 363(1499): 2055-2061.

Brauen, Martin. 1982. Death customs in Ladakh, *Kailash* 9(4): 319-332.

’Brong pa Rgyal po. 2013. *Bod ljongs mdo khams nang chen spyi dang bye brag byung ba brjod pa ldong ’brong pa’i deb gter smug po zhes bya ba bzhugs so*. Dharamsala and Bloomington: Amnye Machen Institute and The Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies.

Clarke, Ian. 2000. Ancestor worship and identity: ritual, interpretation, and social normalization in the Malaysian Chinese community, *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 15(2): 273-295.

Cuevas, Brian J. 2003. *The Hidden History of the Tibetan Book of the Dead.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Dargyay, Eva K. 1988. Buddhism in adaptation: ancestor gods and their tantric counterparts in the religious life of Zanskar, *History of Religions* 28(2): 123-134.

Ebrey, Patricia B. 1986. The early stages in the development of descent group organization, in: Ebrey, Patricia B. and James L. Watson (eds.), *Kinship Organization in Late Imperial China*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 16-61.

Gerke, Barbara. 2007. Engaging the subtle body: re-approaching *bla* rituals in the Himalayas, in: Schrempf, Mona (ed.), *Soundings in Tibetan Medicine: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Proceedings of the 10th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies (IATS) Oxford 2003. Leiden: Brill, 191-212.

— 2012. *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths: Life-span Concepts and Longevity Practices Among Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills, India*. Leiden: Brill.

Gouin, Margaret. 2010. *Tibetan Rituals of Death: Buddhist Funerary Practices*. London and New York: Routledge.

Haarh, Erik. 1969. *The Yar-Luṅ Dynasty. A Study with Particular Regard to the Contribution by Myths and Legends to the History of Ancient Tibet and the Origin and Nature of its Kings.* Copenhagen: G.E.C. Gad’s Forlag.

Huber, Toni. 2018. From death to new life: an 11th-12th-century cycle of existence from southernmost Tibet – analysis of *Rnel ’dri ’dul ba*, *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* rites, with notes on manuscript provenance, in: Hazod, Guntram and Shen Weirong (eds.), *Tibetan Genealogies: Studies in Memoriam of Guge Tsering Gyalpo (1961-2015).* Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 251-349.

— 2020. *Source of Life: Revitalisation Rites and Bon Shamans in the Eastern Himalayas*. 2 Vols. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Karmay, Samten. 1998a. The appearance of the little black-headed man: creation and procreation of the Tibetan people according to an indigenous myth, in: Karmay, Samten, *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 245-281.

— 1998b. The soul and the turquoise: a ritual for recalling the *bla*, in: Karmay, Samten, *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point, 310-338.

Langelaar, Reinier J. 2017. Descent and houses in Rebgong (Reb gong): group formation and rules of recruitment among Eastern Tibetan *tsho ba*, in: Ptáčková, J. and A. Zenz (eds.), *Mapping Amdo: Dynamics of Change*, *Archiv Orientální*, supplementa x: 155-183.

— 2018. Chasing the colours of the rainbow: Tibetan ethnogenealogies in flux, *The Medieval History Journal* 21(2): 328-364.

— 2021. The "clan castles" of Khams: critical editions and provenance of two 17th-century funerary manuals, in: Lange, Diana, Jarmila Ptáčková, Marion Wettstein and Mareike Wulff (eds.), *Crossing Boundaries*.

McKhann, Charles F. 1992. Fleshing out the bones: kinship and cosmology in Naqxi religion. Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago.

Mirnig, Nina. 2018. *Liberating the Liberated: Early Śaiva Tantric Death Rites.* Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Mumford, Stan R. 1989. *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Myang Blo gros rab gsal, n.d. [2017?]. *'Brong pa smad ma'i byang sde khe tshab gnyis kyi rus rigs lo rgyus mar sgam smug po*. Glang chen lha ri shes rig khyab spel mthun gnyer khang.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Rene de. 1975 [1956]. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. The Hague: Mouton.

Ramble, Charles. 1982. Status and death: mortuary rites and attitudes to the body in a Tibetan Village, *Kailash* 9(4): 333-359.

— 2009. Playing dice with the devil: two bon-po soul-retrieval texts and their interpretation in Mustang, Nepal, *East and West* 59(1): 205-232.

Rinchen Losel. 1991. Burial customs in Garze, in: Hu Tan (ed.), *Theses on Tibetology in China*. Beijing: China Tibetology Publishing House, 159-181.

Sahlins, Marshall D. 2017. The original political society, in: Graeber, David and M. Sahlins, *On Kings*. Chicago: Hau Books, 23-64.

Saler, Benson. 2008. Conceptualizing religion: some recent reflections, *Religion* 38: 219-225.

Salomon, Anko. 2015. Der Lebenszyklus eines dPon in den konföderierten Stammesgesellschaften von Nangchen vor 1959. Ph.D. Dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin.

Samuels, Jonathan. 2016. Are we legend? Reconsidering clan in Tibet, *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 37: 293-314.

Schuessler, Axel. 2007. *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Sheils, Dean. 1975. Toward a unified theory of ancestor worship: a cross-cultural study, *Social Forces* 54(2): 427-440.

South Coblin, Weldon. 1991. A study of the Old Tibetan Shangshu paraphrase, Part I, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 111(2): 303-322.

Stein, Rolf A. 1972 [1962]. *Tibetan Civilization*. J. E. Stapleton Driver (transl.). Stanford: Stanford University Press. (Originally published as: *La Civilisation Tibétaine*. Paris: Dunod Editeur)

— 2010. *Rolf Stein's Tibetica Antiqua: With Additional Materials*. A.P. McKeown (transl. and ed.). Leiden: Brill.

Strathern, Alan. 2019. *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strenski, Ivan. 2010. Talal Asad's religion trouble and a way out, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22(2): 136-155.

Tatje, Terrence, and Francis L.K. Hsu. 1969. Variations in ancestor worship beliefs and their relation to kinship, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 25*(2): 153-172.

Thargyal, Rinzin. 2007. *Nomads of Eastern Tibet: Social Organization and Economy of a Pastoral Estate in the Kingdom of Dege*. Toni Huber (ed.). Leiden: Brill.

Vinding, Michael. 1982. The Thakālīs as Buddhists: a closer look at their death ceremonies, *Kailash* 9(4): 291-318.

Watson, James L. 1982. Of flesh and bones: the management of death pollution in Cantonese society, in: Bloch, Maurice and Jonathan Parry (eds.), *Death and the Regeneration of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 155-186.

Watson, James L. and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds.). 1988. *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wellens, Koen. 2010. *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Yü, Ying-Shih. 1987. "O Soul, Come Back!" A study in the changing conceptions of the soul and afterlife in pre-Buddhist China, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47(2): 363-395.