

THE MAKING OF TSHANGS-DBYANGS RGYA-MTSHO

Considering that he had died in 1706 and, two years later, had been reborn in Li-thang, it's hard to imagine quite how people might have greeted the sixth Dalai Lama, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho, upon his arrival in Amdo and Alashan during the spring and summer of 1716.

What we do know is that the son of the man responsible for welcoming the lama to Alashan in that year later wrote a book, purporting to be the "secret" biography (*gsang-rnam*) of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho¹. The author of this work, Ngag-dbang lHun-grub Dar-rgyas (hereafter Dar-rgyas Nomunqan, the name commonly used to identify him), clearly believes that the lama is who he says he is and proceeds to tell the story, as narrated to him by the subject himself.

So strange, so good. The problem is, of course, that whereas eighteenth century Tibet had one set of cultural norms, so we in the twenty-first century western world have our own set of highly different standards of fact and fiction. In his otherwise excellent work on the secret biography², Michael Aris resolutely refuses to look beyond his own liberal humanism and take part in the discourse as presented by Dar-rgyas Nomunqan. This is a pity, since it appears to me that, whether or not the lama's claims were true or false, it is in fact the way in which the text and the life create one another which is important. We have, in any case, precious little to confirm the facts of Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's existence: we have his official dates (1683-1706) and we have a temple guide which may well be by him; it is, moreover, by no means certain that the poems so often attributed to him are in fact his work; in truth, what we have is simply a series of possibilities which occasionally morph into probabilities, a set if you will of myths which, when framed in a certain way, seem to take on the appearance of reality - like the story of Caspar Hauser, perhaps, or the events of 9/11, in which some elements can be "proved" whilst others remain elusive, evading the forensic analysis of history, seeping ineluctably into urban myth.

Our shared experience of the life and work of the sixth Dalai Lama is, then, one to which proof cannot be affixed but which seems to have the following ghostly appearance. He was born in mTsho-na, on March 1st 1683, and his birth was accompanied by the kind of extraordinary miraculous events which traditionally accompany the rebirth of a lama. His recognition in 1685, however, was kept secret: the death of the "great" fifth Dalai Lama in 1682 had also been hushed up for reasons of expediency (not the least of which was a perceived threat to the ongoing construction of the Potala in Lhasa) and it was only in 1695, at age twelve, that his true identity was confirmed to him³.

The fact that he was only formally recognised at twelve and enthroned two years later made Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's position extraordinary, even for a reincarnate lama, who would generally be both recognised and enthroned at a very young age. More importantly, even in our own society, where children are kept children well into their teens, many have already established their personality by the age of fourteen; for a young man in Tibet in the late seventeenth century, fourteen was, if not the age of majority, at least young adulthood. And the personality which Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho had developed was one of great, if erratic, brilliance.

His regent, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho, the chief minister of the previous Dalai Lama, was arguably the greatest all-round scholar, sportsman, scientist and politician ever produced by the Tibetan monastic system. He it was who had held the country in his grasp since the death of the fifth and he was fiercely reluctant to lose control. Again and again, as he moved towards majority, the new Dalai Lama requested the temporal power which would rightfully accompany his spiritual power; again and again it was denied him.

This denial, however, probably had as much to do with the Dalai Lama's own wayward personality as with the regent's reluctance to hand over the reins. After all, despite himself being an outstanding scholar of both secular and religious disciplines, Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho was far more interested in writing poetry, practising archery and carousing in the red-light district of Shol, down behind the recently completed Potala, than in formal study⁴. His best friend and sidekick, Thar-gyas-nas, would have been killed by the regent's henchmen (an attempt to warn the young lama to keep his eyes on his books) had he not swapped clothes with a servant, who

got shot in his stead. All in all, Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho doesn't come out of any of this very well: in fact, he emerges as the over-cautious, over-protective father-figure, with all the misplaced control-freakery common to such a rôle, that his position made him heir to⁵.

It would be too involved here to go into the events which brought Tsangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho to leave Lhasa for Beijing and to set up camp on the banks of Kokonor in November 1706⁶. Suffice it to say that, by that time, his regent had been murdered (at the orders of one of the wives of the new Mongolian qan, Lhazang - who himself had attained the throne only by murdering his brother, the previous occupier) and he had developed such a close relationship with the Tibetan people that they mobbed him as he left for Beijing, trying (and failing) to persuade him against the journey (which was correctly perceived as a Chinese-backed plot to entrap him).

The high esteem in which his people held him was partly based on the beautiful and literary (love)songs which he had composed from a young age. As I have already suggested, he probably had a far more genuine interest in the arts than in his religious duties; his relaxed style (he made tea for his guests and tended to eschew servants) and his mistrust of authority greatly endeared him to the Tibetan people; over the last three centuries, he has emerged as a kind of national folk-hero, with the poems ascribed to him being passed down into contemporary Tibetan society (although, unfortunately, I have no up-to-date information on their reception at the hands of the Chinese authorities in Lhasa today).

So back to Kokonor: November 1706. The lama tells Dar-rgyas Nomunqan that he arrived and camped at the lake with his entourage and that, on receipt of a letter from the Chinese Emperor K'ang-hsi threatening his attendants with death on their arrival in Beijing (there is some uncertainty as to why K'ang-hsi behaved in this way, but it's most likely that Lhazang Qan had unilaterally "invited" the Dalai Lama to Beijing, which seems to have put the Emperor's nose somewhat out of joint), he decided to free them from their responsibility and escape to the south-east.

THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF DEATH (OR "DEATH")

In the context of mythopoësis, it is the second part of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text which interests me most. It first gives an account of the lama's education and goes on to detail the events leading up to his "death" at Kokonor⁷. At that point, though, as I have already suggested, the narrative splits from history and the Dalai Lama splits from his entourage, walking off into the night, dressed as a pilgrim.

What follows seems to me to be a classic example of a transformative narrative. Immediately on leaving his entourage, the lama gets caught in a dust-storm and encounters a young girl, dressed as a nomad, who leads him to safety and then disappears. From this point until he arrives in Amdo ten years later, the lama passes through a number of vignettes, in which he meets humans (including one with no head), yetis, zombies, dakinis, the yi-dam Mahakala and his consort and, finally, the gNas-chung Oracle who, entranced, recognises him and breaks the spell of secrecy.

This period in the lama's life is marked by three significant narrative markers, through which the story is transformed and (re-)positioned. First, it is framed by events which are clearly initiatory: the chaos of the dust-storm (which, like the wardrobe in CS Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* or Platform 9 3/4 in JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* books, marks a translation from one reality to another) provides a context in which the world is turned upside-down, permitting the momentary intervention of other worlds, whilst the oracular trance at gNas-chung provides a link between the rational (mundane, logical) and the irrational (supramundane, intuitive).

Moreover, the girl and the Oracle both function as guides between (and thus, in a sense, creators of) these two realities - the one leading him into, the other out of, his secret identity. Their own identities are equally significant, too. For, whereas the girl is a nomad, a wanderer, drawing him towards a decade of rootlessness (a kind of beneficent mermaid figure, perhaps, or else the embodied memory of the lover in his poems⁸), the Oracle is a monastic, a Buddhist practitioner, calling him back to the more formal teaching world in which he seems happily to have passed the remaining thirty-one years of his life.

Secondly, the mixture of events which are clearly of “our” world (the children with smallpox, his friendship with Lo-brgya, the speedy learning curve at his meeting with the nomads), with dreams (the trampling of sacred texts on Gridhrakuta), with religious figures (such as the intervention of Mahakala and his consort, or the interaction with Vajrayoginis and other dakinis), with culturally defined, though otherworldly, beings (the attacks by sprinting yetis and dancing zombies) and with the headless man, who, in his poignant humanness, seems to exist outside all contexts - even culturally conditioned ones: this mixture further exemplifies the way in which this section of the text exists outside quotidian reality and creates its own internal logic.

Finally, the inclusion at the close of each section of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan’s exhortatory commentary - albeit in rather plodding verse - reminds us that this is the story of a holy man, a Dalai Lama no less, and needs to be understood in such a way as to provide inspiration to fellow practitioners. So it is designed to be used - as all *rnam-thar* are (*rnam-thar*, after all, means “complete liberation”) - as a Buddhist teaching, from which we might draw conclusions, to be used in our own lives, about the path which is Buddhist practise.

It’s particularly interesting, in this context, to note how Dar-rgyas Nomunqan occasionally tells us that, although the lama has related to him his experiences of spiritual practise in a more detailed form, he has also made it clear that these experiences should not be put down in writing. To compare the treatment of the religious against the more fantastic material, he seems to find it more important to emphasize the fantastic over the religious - drawing attention to the other-worldly reality in which the lama has been caught up; beyond the exhortation, common throughout Tibetan religious texts, to keep silent about spiritual experiences, we may also be seeing here an acknowledgement by both men that these experiences fall as much outside the religious or spiritual worlds as outside the mundane one, inhabiting rather another realm altogether.

Which brings us to the nature of death. According to the official record, the sixth Dalai Lama, having died in 1706, took rebirth at Li-thang in the autumn of 1708. What Dar-rgyas Nomunqan’s text offers us is a death which is in fact a “death”, a metaphor for the translation both into the secret life and into the world of myth. The translation into the secret life produced what was most probably a dramatic shift in the lama’s spiritual practise: for one thing, he tells of a number of retreats he completed and a number of experiences which he had; furthermore, he was able on his journey to interact with laypeople as much as with monastics - and only very occasionally was his identity at all compromised. We can therefore read into the idea of death, as presented here, a death to the world as he had known it previously - a death leading to a new phase of spiritual practise, in which we see him functioning not infrequently in what could be identified as an undercover form of *Spyan-ras-gzigs* (*Avalokitesvara*), the *yi-dam* supposedly embodied on earth by the Dalai Lama.

The translation into the world of myth does not happen simply in the words of the secret biography. The very act of leaving his companions and attendants at Kokonor, taken in parallel with the official report of his death and the concrete recognition of his rebirth almost two years later, creates a situation which cannot help but be mythologised. In the binary world of life and death it is unusual even for a Dalai Lama to be both dead and alive at one and the same time and we should be aware of this when considering the nature of this story.

Whoever this lama in fact was, the fact that he was believed (then and subsequently) to be *Tsang-sbyangs rGya-mtsho* should make us look again at the nature of historical succession from the seventh to the present fourteenth⁹; it should also encourage us to examine the Tibetan worldview, its experience and understanding of ontology and epistemology; it might also, perhaps, encourage us to look at the way we in the west today (as much as did eighteenth century Tibetans) understand identity and the fluidity of experience. After all, just suppose that *Tsang-dbyangs rGya-mtsho* had escaped death at Kokonor: how would that affect our understanding of the position of *bsTan-'dzin rGya-mtsho*, the current Dalai Lama?

A LITERARY THANG-KA

So far from being the “cock-and-bull story” which Aris claims¹⁰, this is a narrative suffused with extraordinary mythic power. The creation of *Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho* rests as much on the

“secret” biography - and our reading of it - as on the sixty or so poems commonly ascribed to him.

Of course, like any reincarnate lama, Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho in death, on a thang-ka, has transcended time and space: whereas, in human form, his mandala was interpenetrated by the socio-political world of eighteenth century Lhasa (and Lhasa's fraught relationship with China and Mongolia) so now, after the death of his physical body, he resides (*bzhugs*) in the multi-dimensional hyperspace which is the dharmadhatu - in iconic form on a thang-ka, in oneiric experience, in memory, in dharmakaya (*chos-sku*) form in visualisation; and of course this metaphysical, post mortem, experience is not of Tsang-dbyangs rGya-mtsho per se - rather it is of a Platonic Dalai Lama, embodying all fourteen Dalai Lamas up to the present day, all the remaining rebirths in the future¹¹ and all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the three times and the ten directions.

Looking at the text from this viewpoint, we should remember that such an analysis is a twenty-first century western attempt to represent an atemporalised Tibetan analysis: I am simply framing the life, death and "death" of Tsang-dbyangs rGya-mtsho (and/or his impersonator) with my own understanding and experience of Tibetan cultural norms. That notwithstanding, I would suggest that we can read Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text as a kind of literary thang-ka, an in-scribed image available to us on a number of levels, in a number of different dimensions. Furthermore, we can read his songs (*mgu-glu*) in much the same way, especially if we remain open to the possibility that they are neither definitively his work nor definitively not his work.

In relation to both the poems and the secret biography, it might here be instructive to consider the nature of orality, since, in an oral society, songs and poetry occupy a different place from the one which they occupy in our highly literate society. Both song and poetry allow us to step outside our “mundane” reality, into a world which is not constricted by the material and physical. In their use of rhyme and rhythm - both "unreal" discourses - they tell of dreams and fantasy (as much perhaps in Frank Sinatra's "Fly Me To The Moon" as in TATU's "Not Gonna Get Us"¹²), they are the way we speak to God (or the god[desse]s) in hymns and chants and the archaic language of religious texts, and they are the way we seek to move to another dimension (the use of repetitive [vocal] samples in dance music, for instance). We can, then, seek to locate myth in the same cognitive sphere: myths appear to be created in order that we might open up for ourselves an alternative, transformative, view of the world¹³.

In the world of experience, though, there is no true or false, no fact or fiction. We experience the world and proceed, moment by moment, from and through our own individual experiences. Our reading of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text directs us away from the relatively unimportant (and completely unprovable) fact or fiction concerning the lama's identity and towards an involvement with, and a proactive reading of, the text, during which reading we come up hard against the fluidity of perception and the peculiar fuzziness of truth.

FINAL THOUGHTS: TENTATIVE ROUTES THROUGH THE TEXT

Looking at the second part of Dar-rgyas Nomunqan's text, then, it is definitely possible to ignore the fact that the putative Dalai Lama was none other than the character identified by Aris as Ngag-dbang Chos-grags rGya-mtsho and to identify him, nonetheless, as Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho - for it is Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho's reputation (and thereby his myth) which this text help to create. Furthermore, the veracity of this text has been held to be true at various times and in various places since it was written in 1757; this, of course, doesn't change the lama's “real” identity into (or away from) that of the sixth Dalai Lama, but it does certainly mean that many people have believed (or, maybe, one should say “known” or "realised" [ie made real]) that the story is in fact the true narrative of the sixth Dalai Lama's life as told by him to Dar-rgyas Nomunqan.

To acknowledge this is to open up this highly controversial text to a whole slew of analyses and it is the purpose of my research to identify and pursue various ways of approaching the narrative. I have already suggested a number of levels on which the more fantastical sections might be understood, but it would be instructive too to look at the remainder of the story, both from con-

textualised and decontextualised viewpoints, so as better to understand the mythology and the mythopoësis surrounding Tshangs-dbyangs rGya-mtsho . Not only might such a project free Dar-rgyas Nomunqan and his text from charges of gullibility and irrelevance, but it will also, I hope, allow us to see the subject, whoever he might be (or have been), as much as an exemplar as an individual.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 The term "secret" biography is in fact only used in the editions published in 1981 by the Tibetan Peoples Publishing House in Lhasa and the Peoples Publishing House in Beijing. The original title contains only the standard word for a biography, namely rnam-par thar-pa. Nonetheless, since it is the term used in reference to this particular text and since it fits my purposes to use it here, I shall not here seek to revise it.
- 2 Michael Aris *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives* Kegan Paul International, London, 1989.
- 3 He seemed already to understand his position: among his first words had been "I'm sLob-gsang rGya-mtsho, the refuge of the three worlds" - a clear reference to his being the rebirth of the previous Dalai Lama.
- 4 Whether this distaste for formal religious study found a parallel in his spiritual practise, we cannot say. Some - and they might either have special insight, or else they might simply be apologists for a louche playboy - have suggested that his drinking and womanising could be outward manifestations of Tantric practise (indeed, one of his most complex and famous poems seems to come from this tradition: it ends, "If you drink...with pure intent/You'll never experience the lower states" (my translation).
- 5 And it was the attempted assassination of Thar-gyas-nas which finally put the relationship between the regent and the Dalai Lama beyond repair. One can only imagine what a result this had on both men, not least the regent, who clearly had a very deep bond of love for his ward.
- 6 For further information on this crucial period in Tibetan history, see Luciano Petech's *China and Tibet in the Early XVIIIth Century: History of the Establishment of Chinese Protectorate in Tibet* (Leiden, 1972) and Michael Aris' book mentioned above (note 2).
- 7 The Tibetan sources say that the body was taken to the provincial capital of Hsi-ning, where it was cremated after lying in state for several days; the Emperor K'ang-hsi was informed of the death a couple of months later.
- 8 As an aside, I should perhaps point out that there is a strong possibility that the lover mentioned throughout the poems was none other than the daughter of the regent - who himself, so far as I am aware, had at no point renounced his monastic vows (and was, indeed, well-known for his many lovers. This liason, of course, might well have been a contributing factor in the regent's attitude towards the Dalai Lama's behavior.
- 9 Interestingly, there were independent reports of a man closely resembling Tshangs-dbyang rGya-mtsho being seen at the enthronement ceremony of the seventh Dalai Lama in 1720.
- 10 I should perhaps be far fairer towards Michael Aris' position than it might seem that I am from my attitude as presented here. Not only did he give me a great deal of personal encouragement in my work on Tshangs-dbyang rGya-mtsho, but his book (referenced in note 2) offers his understanding of the "secret" biography in a very clear and well-argued way. Indeed, he writes (p5) in full acknowledgement that it's quite possible to read the text in the way that I choose to read them, that "in a certain sense" the impersonator (and Michael was very clear that he was an impersonator, that Tshangs-dbyang rGya-mtsho had died at Kokonor) "became" the sixth Dalai Lama "when accepted as such by [his] devotees."
- 11 In this regard, we should be aware of the present Dalai Lama's suggestion that, in fact, he might not choose rebirth - a culturally-determined indication, perhaps, of his personal preference for an elected democracy as Tibet's future government.
- 12 And, of course, the fantasy extends into the personality of the performer too. Frank Sinatra appears to have been anything but the smooth romantic he would have had us believe and TATU, for all their titillating teen lesbian chic, are neither running away from outraged families nor

committed to one another for life (at least one of the two, Iulia Volkova, has expressed her wish to marry and have children): the act of performance (per-formance: forming something through something else) is a fluid doorway into another reality (and see note 13 below). Which of course brings us back to the relationship between the sixth Dalai Lama and his (apparent) impersonator. 13 Notice how frequently shamanistic, rather than religious, discourse is invoked when talking of dance music (both contemporary and traditional). It is, so far as I am aware, generally held that mankind's first songs and dances were invocations and embodiments of the god(desse)s.