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gTer ston and Tradent

Innovation and Conservation in Tibetan Treasure Literature

Robert Mayer

This article reports from a research project largely run at Oxford by Cathy Cantwell and myself, with Janet Gyatso, Sarah Jacoby, Matthew Kapstein, Jonathan Silk, Lopon Ogyan P. Tenzin, Antonio Terrone, and Vesna Wallace contributing input in various capacities. The project is called *Authorship, originality and innovation in Tibetan Scriptural Revelations: A case study from the Dudjom Corpus*,¹ and its remit is to study the literary processes at work in bringing Treasure revelations to completion as published works ready for use. Here I give some general conclusions emerging so far.

Much work has already been done on the revealed or Treasure (*gter ma*) literature of Tibet, perhaps most famously by Michael Aris and Janet Gyatso, but so far the focus has mainly been on normative accounts of the revelatory processes, on the quests for recognition by individual Treasure Revealers (*gter ston*), on wider questions of legitimation, or on the Treasure Revealers as charismatic founders of new lineages.

Our approach here has been altogether different: we have shifted our gaze away from the Treasure Revealers as the putative revealers of texts, to the Treasures themselves, the textual revelations actually produced in their names. Similarly we have turned our gaze away from ideological constructions of the entire Treasure system, towards the actualities of specific Treasure literature. Through a forensic dissection of selected Treasure texts, by means of a sen-

¹ Our thanks to the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) for funding our project. For the project details, see http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/research/tibetan_scriptural_revelations.html.

tence-by-sentence unpacking, we are analysing in detail what textual components they are actually made from, and how they are constructed as pieces of literature.

The evidence gathered from this altogether more empirical approach suggests that Tibetology might fruitfully recalibrate some of its fundamental approaches to issues of authorship and composition, not only within Treasure literature, but within several further genres of Tibetan literature as well. That does not mean to say we are grandly proclaiming a Tibetological paradigm shift. On the contrary, we hope and expect that most Tibetologists are already aware of the broader issues of authorship we uncover: José Ignacio Cabezón, for example, made a commendable start in this direction, and might be seen as the person who first raised the issues and asked the questions, in print.² Yet nevertheless there still remains a considerable need to analyse and articulate the issues in greater detail, and to identify suitable terminologies and concepts.

Treasure literature, however, is not one thing, and its modes of production have varied enormously over time and circumstance. We have encountered three varieties in our studies so far, and can expect to encounter more as we proceed.

First was a Treasure text possibly found as an old physical manuscript, or at least repetitive of one. In 2010 we discovered that Nyangral (*ñān ral ñi ma'i 'od zer*), the seminal twelfth century Nyingmapa sage and Treasure Revealer, had republished verbatim a complete old anonymous text that he had found somewhere, a text we now know was also extant two hundred years earlier at Dunhuang in identical form, but which Nyangral had now concluded was a Treasure concealed by Vimalamitra, the famous Indian

² Unfortunately, limitations of time seem to have compelled Cabezón to base his analysis solely on five colophons with no analysis at all of the texts to which they were attached, thus greatly limiting the scope of his findings. By contrast, our project has had the resources to analyse many hundreds of pages of various texts in close detail, thus fulfilling what Cabezón had identified as a major desideratum. We can only regret that we were unable to include him as a project member of our team. See Cabezón 2001.

master who visited Tibet in the late eighth century. To be precise, we found that Dunhuang text IOL TibJ 331 III (circa tenth century) is lexically identical to Nyangral's Treasure text, *Byin rlabs phun sum tshogs pa phur pa'i sgrub pa bi ma las mdzad pa zi ba yon tan spo ba'i cho ga*, (twelfth century).³ Dan Hirshberg's recent doctoral thesis shows that Nyangral claimed in his autobiography that his Treasures were often simply old manuscripts physically recovered from abandoned temples and suchlike. The existence of the much older Dunhuang manuscript absolutely identical to his own Treasure discovery suggests this might have been true, at least on this one occasion.⁴ Scholarship is yet to assess the degree to which this type of Treasure recovery might or might not be particular to the earlier tradition, or even to Nyangral.

Second was a Treasure text that introduced seminal innovation, Kutsha Da'o's (*khu tsha zla 'od*) twelfth century Bon *phur pa* text, the Kawa Nagpo (*ka ba nag po*), which we edited and translated. Samten Karmay believes it represents the first beginning of the Bon *phur pa* tradition, although Cathy Cantwell and I postulate it was also substantially compiled from older existing parts.⁵ Certainly the later Bon take it as the point of departure for their entire *phur pa* tradition.

Although the detailed research on them still remains to be done, it is also widely perceived that at least some of Nyangral and his successor Guru Chowang's (*gu ru chos dban*) seminal Treasure oeuvres also share such genuinely innovative qualities. Scholarship is yet to assess precisely how any such instances of seminal innovation might or might not pertain to particular historical moments and conditions.

Thirdly were various texts of the later fully developed Treasure tradition, which we have most recently studied in a particular lineage running from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. It is here that the textual actualities seem to diverge more noticeably from

³ See Cantwell and Mayer 2010.

⁴ See Hirshberg 2012.

⁵ Karmay 1975: 198–200; Cantwell and Mayer 2013.

some of our received ideas about Treasure. Perhaps these divergences can best be subsumed under five rubrics:

[1] While many assume Treasure to be innovative, those developed Treasure tradition texts we inspected can, at least in their final published versions, better be described as conservative, and often extremely so. In the several hundreds of pages of *phur pa* texts so far analysed, spanning several centuries of Treasure production, the most radical innovations encountered so far have been such minor issues as switching the usual placement of a group of protectors within the *maṅḍala*, or presenting a narrative myth to explain the ritual use of barberry sticks.⁶ Nowhere have we encountered anything so radical as the invention of entirely new deities, *maṅḍalas*, or ritual procedures.

[2] While many emphasise the creative vision of the individual Treasure revealer, the particular texts in question can equally and often better be described as communally authored over several generations, not as individually authored at any one period. It follows that Treasure texts can indeed remain open to further redaction and evolution over the years.

[3] While many envisage Treasures as generically separate from and different from conventionally composed tantric manuals, in actuality the finished outputs of the two categories are in their overall literary construction, contents, and purport, not so different after all (at least, in our various samples, as listed below).

[4] When new Treasures do innovate, the innovations do not always all persist through the generations of later editors, who may seek to integrate the new tradition with established ritual and meditative sequences, retaining a few distinctive elements, but ensuring that the practice tradition fits smoothly with familiar ritual forms.

⁶ Pema Lingpa places the twenty-eight dBaṅ phyug ma, usually worldly deities at the periphery, within a more central part of the *maṅḍala*. Dudjom Lingpa presents from his Pure Vision revelation (*dag snai*) a narrative myth (*rabs*) explaining the use of barberry sticks, which Dudjom Rinpoche then transposes into his 20th century compilation of Dudjom Lingpa's Treasure, *Meteoric Iron Razor*. Although we have not seen such a narrative myth elsewhere, nevertheless we cannot be certain if it is indeed an innovation, since it might also derive from earlier Buddhist or Bon sources.

[5] A few distinctive and idiosyncratic features of new revelations may be re-framed and integrated into further ritual compilations, even into those of connected but different Treasure affiliation, when a famous master spans more than one lineage.

Let us start with the first point, of conservatism. The late Dudjom Rinpoche (*bdud 'joms 'jigs bral ye śes rdo rje*, 1904–1987), in the mid twentieth century, produced a Guru Rinpoche guru-yoga of the *Lama Thugdrup* genre (*bla ma thugs sgrub*), which claims to embody seven different Treasures of that specific genre (*gter kha bdun 'dus*), but with particular emphasis on Guru Chowang's 13th century *Secret Embodiment of the Lama* (*bla ma gsañ 'dus*), which is the earliest known example of the genre. With Dudjom Rinpoche himself as the seventh, the six previous Treasure discoverers mentioned are (1) Guru Chowang (*gu ru chos dbañ*, 1212–1270); (2) Urgyan Dorje Lingpa (*o rgyan rdo rje gliñ pa*, 1346–1405); (3) Ratna Lingpa (*ratna gliñ pa*, 1403–1479); (4) Pema Lingpa (*padma gliñ pa*, 1450–1521); (5) Shikpo Lingpa Gargyi Wangchuktsal (*žig po gliñ pa gar gyi dbañ phyug rtsal*, 1524–1583); and (6) Thrakthung Dudul Dorje (*khrag 'thuñ bdud 'dul rdo rje*, 1615–1672). The four Cathy Cantwell has read so far do indeed share extensive passages of text. Not only that, but virtually all Dudjom Rinpoche's key verses for recitation within his main Ritual Manual are almost word-for-word identical to those of Guru Chowang's. Here we see that Dudjom Rinpoche's narrative about these Treasures is intended literally: the texts are largely the same.

Nor is this case an exception: new Treasure literature can reproduce passages from previous Treasure literature, in most cases we have seen so far, not merely at whim or at random, but according to more specific criteria such as lineage, incarnation, affiliation, and the prophesied destiny of the individual Treasure Revealer. Thus highly distinctive sharings occur between the *phur pa* Treasures of the seventeenth century Dudul Dorje and the nineteenth century Dudjom Lingpa, further reflected in the redactions of the twentieth century Dudjom Rinpoche, in part because all three are said to be reincarnations of one another and of the same eighth century disciple of Padmasambhava, Drokben Khye'u-chung lotsawa (*'brog ban khye'u chuñ lo tsā ba*), who, it is said, originally heard the relevant *phur*

pa teachings from Padmasambhava in a particular way. Likewise, all their texts must quote verses from the ancient and canonical Transmitted Literature (*bka' ma*) tradition as found in the *Vajrakīla Root Fragment* (*rdo rje phur pa rtsa ba'i dum bu*), evidence that the newer revealed Treasures and the older Transmitted Literature scriptures are in essence the same unchanging Tantric teachings, even though the Treasure teachings might be revealed bit by bit through an ongoing time-release.⁷ Several further examples of text very similar to that found in suitably affiliated earlier Transmitted Literature and Treasure sources have been found in the samples we have studied, but there is no time to discuss them all here.

So although scholarship is only at the very beginning of its analysis of Treasure literature, already we can see from these examples I have just given and many others I have not given that Treasure revelation here is not primarily an exercise of progressive innovation. Quite the contrary, in the samples we have studied, it is primarily an exercise in continuity of lineage and tradition. Although allowed some leeway in expressing personal style, Treasure Revealers do not primarily act as innovative creative writers, or authors, in the modern sense. Rather, they offer, in communion with their spiritual companions of the past and present, their contributions as tradents, that is to say, as transmitters of the ancient traditions within lineage communities deemed authentic.

The term 'tradent' has become a replacement for the term 'author' in some of the study of Judaic and Islamic literature, and as Jonathan Silk was the first to point out, Buddhology and Tibetology too might profitably consider its uses.⁸ The term 'tradent' indicates

⁷ After thirty years of reading numerous *phur pa* Treasure texts, we have only rarely if ever found examples that fail to quote some version or another from among the famous root verses found in the *Vajrakīla Root Fragment* (*rdo rje phur pa rtsa ba'i dum bu*), the *phur pa* root scripture redacted by the Sakya Paṇḍita (*sa skya paṇḍita*) and preserved in the Kanjur. Of course, most Nyingma canonical *phur pa* tantras contained in their Ancient Tantra Collection or Nyingma'i Gyubum (*rñin ma'i rgyud 'bum*) also contain versions of these root verses. These verses have also become the basis of substantial commentarial exegesis.

⁸ I am indebted to Jonathan Silk, who first introduced me to uses of modern

a producer of sacred text, who claims not to invent new doctrines, but merely to pass on established, authentic, ancient ones. It applies particularly to the contexts of religion and scripture, where producers of sacred text must take great pains never to seem to innovate or invent, but only faithfully to pass on ancient truths.⁹ Thus in Tibet, even revealers like Nyangral and Guru Chowang, who it is currently believed really did introduce substantial cultural development, sought to represent themselves as merely renewing what went before, or reviving what had already been taught by the great masters of the past. And within the texts we have researched, by the time of the burgeoning later Treasure tradition, with comparatively few exceptions, substantial innovation seems only infrequently apparent, at least within finalised, published texts. Even where the Treasure Revealer's originating vision might have admitted an accentuated personal style or innovation of some kind, the finalised published texts, as far as we have read them, seem with only a few interesting exceptions to privilege the conservative concerns typical of the tradent. Carefully upholding existing traditions, they safely corall individualistic flourishes within the safe bounds of the stock repertoire of established and accepted ritual modules. Nevertheless, there do seem to be some occasions in which such individualistic flourishes do eventually resurface in later Treasures, perhaps from a later Revealer. These might involve such comparatively minor innovations as the placement of the usual deities in an unusual place in the *maṇḍala*, or the creation of an origin myth for some existing minor deities who do not yet have one, but only very rarely (if ever) do they amount to anything so radical as the invention of entirely unknown new deities.

Some might see a paradox here. As Tibetan sources repeatedly tell us, the whole purpose of Treasure is to provide the religious public with something new, a skilful means to satisfy their fickle

Hebraic scholarship for Buddhist and Tibetan studies, on the occasion of a talk he gave in Oxford in 2008.

⁹ The term 'tradent' has been widely used by Hebraists in recent decades: for an accessible explanation, see Jaffee 2007. Hebraists use the term to indicate a producer of sacred text, who claims not to invent new doctrines, but merely to pass on established, authentic ancient ones.

craving for novelty. Yet if Dudjom's *Lama Thugdrup* is so similar to Guru Chowang's of eight hundred years earlier, what is new? The answer is of course that the direct lineages of Treasure re-transmit the blessings direct from their original transcendent sources, rather than through a longer historical human lineage potentially polluted by breaches of tantric ethics and conduct (*dam tshig, samaya*). It is the blessings that are fresh, and their redissemination which is new, far more than any changes in actual ritual content. Thus the major Treasures of our own times – those of such famous twentieth century figures as Dudjom Rinpoche, Khyentse Chokyi Lodro (*mkhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros* 1893–1959), Dilgo Khyentse (*dil mgo mkhyen rtse*, 1910–1991), and so on – do not typically introduce new unheard of deities and rituals. On the contrary, they mainly serve up the same old favourite ritual recipes of previous centuries in substantially familiar forms, albeit now freshly baked and spiced.

By shifting our focus away from the ideological or normative constructions of Treasure, Treasure Revealers, and their methods of revelation, and by gazing instead at the finished product, at the actual literature that enters circulation as ritual liturgy, we can thus see that the authorship processes involved are as much communal as individual, and stretch out over long periods of time. For example, in our present project, we find that Dudjom Rinpoche in the twentieth century comprehensively rewrote the *Sealed Secret Heart* Treasure of his incarnational predecessor in the nineteenth century, Dudjom Lingpa, under the new title of *Meteoric Iron Razor*. Not only did he redact the original, but he also added to it, bringing it to a higher state of completion and polish. In the end, the finished product, while remaining nominally the revelation of the earlier Dudjom Lingpa alone, in fact contains as much input from the later Dudjom incarnation. Nor is there any reason why, in other regions of Tibet, Dudjom Lingpa's original versions might not still continue to circulate, perhaps receiving further quite independent redactions from lamas of his hereditary or "bones" lineage (*gdui rgyud*). In other words, Dudjom Lingpa's famous *phur pa* Treasure is not a closed book, but an open text, to which different lamas in different times and places can make various changes and additions, if they have the necessary qualifications. And as mentioned previ-

ously, all versions already contain copious passages from earlier *phur pa* texts, such as Dudul Dorje's of the seventeenth century, as well as from Transmitted Literature texts.

If this situation threatens to be hopelessly complex, in fact it is not. There is a relatively simple key to unravel most of it, and that is to understand the modular nature of Tibetan tantric literature. Rather than conjure words out of their own imagination as modern Western authors must, the more usual task of Tibetan tradents is to reconstruct or compile texts using a traditional stock of pre-existing textual modules. Moreover, the repertoire of modules used is not random, but reflects the lineage and religious affiliations of the Revealer. Thus Dudjom Rinpoche uses in his own revelation *The Razor Disintegration-on-Touch* ready-made modules from the canonical tantras and from the seventeenth century re-redactions of Guru Chowang's thirteenth century Treasures. Both these choices reflect his education at Mindroling monastery (*min sgröl gliñ*), and the traditions of its great seventeenth century founders Terdak Lingpa (*gter bdag gliñ pa*) and Lochen Dharma Sri (*lo chen dharma śri*), whose re-redactions of Guru Chowang became definitive, and who emphasised the early Nyingma canonical traditions. Some of these same modules are found also in the treasures of Pema Lingpa, a Treasure Revealer whose works Dudjom Rinpoche loved, and whose collected Treasure output he was later to re-edit and re-publish in Bhutan, and for which he also wrote some practice texts. Similarly, in his redaction of Dudjom Lingpa's *Meteoric Iron Razor*, he uses text from his and Dudjom Lingpa's previous incarnation, Dudul Dorje, as well as some from Guru Chowang and from the Transmitted Literature teachings. In some of his output, Dudjom also introduces the influential ritual framework texts (*sgrub khog*) of Mindroling. Much more work still needs to be done on the criteria by which Treasure Revealers select pre-existing modules to incorporate into their Treasures, but at the very least, we can already see this is not a random process, but a deeply meaningful part of the process. For a more detailed analysis of Dudjom Rinpoche's choices, see Cantwell in this volume.

Tibetan tantrism is by no means the only traditional religious literature to exist in modular form. So also did Talmudic literature,

and the study of how its modularity functioned is by now quite advanced. Despite many differences, one insight from the Hebraists which we do find possibly transferable to Tibetan tantric literature as a heuristic practice at least, is the analysis of modularity into three levels.¹⁰ The formulation we are following is the one first proposed by Peter Schäffer: [1] At the largest level is a text deemed to be a complete work, which the Hebraists call a macroform. [2] At the intermediate level are sets of conventionally determined complex modules, which cannot usually stand on their own as complete texts, but which when joined together make up the component sections or chapters of the complete text. Hebraists call these microforms. [3] At the smallest level is a conventionally predetermined stock of discrete cultural or ritual categories out of which the microforms are permitted to be constructed, which Hebraists call lemmata.

To apply this nomenclature to *The Meteoric Iron Razor* main ritual practice, the work as a whole would be the macroform; its several dozen conventionally required sections, such as the refuge and bodhistattva vows, the praises, the offerings, the feast, the liberation rite, the fulfilment, the four activities, and the dedication of merit, would each be microforms; while isolatable standard categories such as the seed syllable, the deity Vajrakīlaya, his consort, his throne, the protective vajra tent, the four gates of the visualised palace, their four gatekeepers, the visualised weapon wheel, and so on, would all be analysable as lemmata.

Because they are largely ritual in nature, and because religious rituals typically derive authenticity from their perceived antiquity, lemmata tend to remain unchanging over very long periods of history. This stability lends them a cultural familiarity, which can grow even greater through their regular and repeated liturgical rehearsal. As a result, lemmata can often become extraordinarily condensed in their conveyance of meaning. The merest mention of just a single lemma can conjure up in only a very few words a remarkably vast range of meanings. It would be entirely possible, for example, for a commentator to write scores of pages merely on the meaning of just one ritual lemma, such as the vajra tent, or the weapon wheel. For

¹⁰ Schäffer 1992, 1986, 1989. See also Jaffee 1999.

that reason, it is foolish to attempt to apply the threefold structure too rigidly, and one must be aware that classifications of microforms and lemmata can overlap, as can classifications of macroforms and microforms. Nevertheless this approach does offer an eminently practical heuristic device towards understanding how the modularity of Nyingma tantric literature is structured.

If Treasure literature is so often produced mainly through the joining together of pre-existent modules, with perhaps a little re-styling and rephrasing, the question arises, why can't anyone do it? Why do they have to be a recognised, authorised Treasure Revealer? And there is a related question: if Dudjom Rinpoche so comprehensively rewrote the *The Meteoric Iron Razor*, why is it Dudjom Lingpa's Treasure, instead of equally his?¹¹ The answers to both questions pertain, in the final analysis, to considerations of religious authority and credibility, but there is quite a lot of detail in the way these are worked out.

The original point of departure for every collection of Treasure literature is understood necessarily to be a particular visionary event, in which dharma is transmitted fresh from its transcendent sources into our world. If this event transpires to produce fully-formed

¹¹ Actually, its formal bibliographic attribution is to Dudjom Rinpoche himself – there are very clear colophons and it is placed in his collected works, not Dudjom Lingpa's. It is rather the Treasure (*gter ma*) classification which puts it under Dudjom Lingpa. In other words, in the empowerment rite, the Historical Narrative Section (*lo rgyus*) is focused entirely on Dudjom Lingpa, and his discovery of the Treasure (*gter ma*). In the main Historical Narrative section of the *Meteoric Iron Razor* (*gNam lcags spu gri*) also, the stress is on Dudjom Lingpa, and Gyurme Ngedon Wangpo (*'gyur med nes don dban po*) and Dudjom Rinpoche are then discussed as receiving the lineage and blessings etc. (there is also a mention that he was recognised by Gyurme Ngedon Wangpo as genuinely being the rebirth of Dudjom Lingpa). An interesting aspect of this portrayal of the *Meteoric Iron Razor* is that Dudjom Rinpoche is stressing that it is a special blessing from Guru Rinpoche because this particular Treasure is so complete with all the branch practices, yet it was Dudjom Rinpoche who really extended and elaborated the very brief branches found in the original Treasure. Reading the Historical Narrative Section, you could easily think that the *Meteoric Iron Razor* is entirely Dudjom Lingpa's production!

perfectly polished text ready for use all at once, that is well and good. But if, as we see from so many examples, the initial tangible output is only something fragmentary, not yet decoded, expanded, put in order, polished, or made ready for use, that also suffices, as the basis upon which the Treasure Revealer or some other qualified persons can complete the practice texts later. The key fact about this visionary event, however, and what actually makes it Treasure rather than mere madness, is that while it is necessarily visionary, it is equally necessarily communal in scope and remit, in other words, mediated through a Buddhist lineage. It cannot be simply individual. Its unfolding is in every case socially sanctioned only through its embeddedness within the encompassing historiographical Treasure narratives of the Nyingmapa, often expressed through prophecy describing the Treasure Revealer and the Treasures he is destined to reveal. Its revelation necessarily involves the agency of important Nyingma lineage masters from the past, as well as, in the present, the participation of a Principal Dharma Holder (*chos bdag*), a female consort, invisible Treasure Protectors (*gter sruñ*), and other actors too. The only ostensible reason the revelation happened at all was to meet the specific needs of a present day religious community, at the particular time when the auspicious links relating to the group and the occasion are fulfilled. Yet despite its communal nature, the internal logic of the historical Treasure narrative dictates that at the fulcrum of this entire social and cultural matrix must stand a single individual. He or she is the prophesied Treasure Revealer, the incarnation of one of Padmasambhava's disciples, whose person functions as the actual psychic bridge between the present day community and the golden age of Tibet's imperial past, when Padmasambhava was present in the flesh.

As any literary theorists amongst us might by now have concluded, something broadly analagous to Michel Foucault's famous theory of the 'author function' thus plays an absolutely indispensable part in Treasure literature, which I shall for now heuristically call the '*gter ston* function' or 'Treasure Revealer function.' Quite irrespective of what his actual literary contributions might or might not have been, the person of the Treasure Revealer, and his revelatory acts, must be constructed within a discourse of in-

tense respect and devotion, governed by the established cultural templates of the historiographical Treasure narratives and their vast temporal vistas. Without the confidence and faith engendered by such a 'gter ston function' or 'Treasure Revealer function,' only forgery or madness will be recognised, not revelation. This is what is important, and not the innovation, originality, completeness, or even the coherence of the initial revealed text.

Previous study has been devoted to the struggles of the individual Treasure Revealer for legitimation and social acceptance, and no doubt this is an important feature in the lives of certain Treasure Revealers, including to some extent Dudul Dorje and Dudjom Lingpa, who form part of our study. Yet we believe there is a still greater number of other Treasure Revealers whose acceptance was more ascribed by birth, than achieved by their own efforts. Many of the major Treasure Revealers of our time, such as Khyentse Choki Lodro, Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse, and so forth, were major incarnate lamas whose future trajectory as Treasure Revealer was mapped out at the time of their recognition and enthronement as children. In the case of Dudjom Rinpoche, for example, not only was he expected from childhood to become a Treasure Revealer, but even the specific content of his engagement with Treasure was to no small extent pre-ordained by his ascribed lineage affiliations. Again, this accentuates the communal aspects of Treasure: It is not merely that certain creative individuals feel the urge to express themselves, nor is it simply that certain ambitious or inspired individuals seek to elevate their religious status, or to found new Treasure lineages.¹² More often than that, perhaps, it is society at large that requires certain persons to reveal Treasure within a particular lineage, because of whom they are deemed to be, by birth. Scholarship is yet to explore the complex and varied historical and social-historical questions surrounding this.

The final point I wish to address is the question of what differentiates Treasure ritual texts from other tantric ritual writings. The

¹² This latter more sociological topic of the founding of new lineages has already been addressed by Holly Gayley, so that we have no need to expand on it here. See Gayley 2008.

answer seems to be, less than some scholars seem to have expected, except for the just-mentioned Treasure Revealer function and the broader historical Treasure narratives within which it is embedded. I mentioned just now that Treasure ritual literature is modular in nature: in fact, we can say two more things about modularity. Firstly, most Nyingma tantric ritual literature of whatever genre is modular in nature, and secondly, a considerable proportion of the same modules are shared by several genres alike, be they Treasure (*gter ma*), Transmitted Literature (*bka' ma*), canonical tantric scriptures from the Ancient Tantra Collection (*rñin ma'i rgyud 'bum*), or compositions and compilations of named authors. This sharing of the same modular structure, and of so many of the same textual and ritual modules, lends a certain homogeneity to all the different tantric ritual genres.

Even though every sentence or phrase of Treasure literature is distinguished on the page by a special punctuation sign (*gter śad*), the actual textual modules from which it is constructed overlap so considerably with other ritual genres, that if the *gter śad* were to be removed, as sometimes happens, there would be no easy way to discern if a text were Treasure, Transmitted Literature, or composition.

This fact is recognised in various ways within the tradition. Treasure deity practices are said to be measurable against the canonical Ancient Tantra Collection tantras as the arbiter of their orthodoxy, and as we have just seen, all Vajrakīlaya Treasure must also usually include at a minimum certain specific key root verses preserved in the Ancient Tantra Collection texts. At the same time, the various editions of the Ancient Tantra Collection themselves have over the centuries acquired several tantras explicitly revealed as Treasure. In other cases, particular texts, such as Dudjom Rinpoche's *Razor Disintegration-on-Touch Vajrakīlaya*, are described as embodying within a single work the three forms of transmission, of Treasure, Transmitted Literature, and Pure Vision (*dag snan*). Jigme Lingpa's (*'jigs med gliñ pa*) famous eighteenth century classic, the *Gyulug Phur pa* (*rgyud lugs phur pa*) is similar.

Beyond deriving from broadly the same overlapping stock of ritual modules, and being compiled from them in very much the

same way, there is also a unity of conception that serves to make the Treasure and Transmitted Literature traditions convergent. Both are fundamentally and predominantly shaped by the same conservative vision of the tradents, who seek to be seen only to pass on and endlessly recompile or re-anthologise from out of the established stock of ancient and authentic ritual modules, and only seldom if ever to be perceived as innovating by creating new modules. So even if Treasure may differ from other ritual genres by allowing, in the guise of revelation, more latitude for the expression of individual *styles*, as well as encouraging a more prolific output and more opportunity for the confluence of lineages, it resembles the other genres in only seldom rewarding or sanctioning substantive and radical *innovation*.

In conclusion, we believe our investigations into authorship in Treasure literature point to similar issues regarding authorship within Tibetan tantric literature as a whole, and beyond that, to varying degrees as yet unknown, in other genres as well. Not long ago I learned that a recent translation of a major work by Drigung Lamchen Gyalpo Rinpoche on the Fivefold *Mahāmudrā* was withdrawn by the publishers, upon the accidental discovery that the greater part of the work was a compilation of the writings of others, such as Longchenpa. When he was questioned about this, I am told Gyalpo Rinpoche replied that this was a correct way for lamas to compose: since there is nothing better than the writings of the great masters of the past, lamas of the present might fruitfully recompile them.

While we are not grandly proclaiming ‘the death of the author’ as did Barthes and Foucault so triumphantly for Western literature, we are certainly pleading the case for a much greater focus on the underlying structural aspects of tantric literature, and the ways in which its modes of authorship are situated within wider social and cultural horizons. We advocate more focus on communal aspects of authorship, more explicit discussion of the mentality and activity of the tradent, and, above all, more focus on the multi-levelled modularity of the literature, because we believe it is above all in reflection upon the workings of its remarkable modularity, that a key to the whole system can be found.

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