

## THE VAGRANT POET AND THE RELUCTANT SCHOLAR:

### A STUDY OF THE BALANCE OF ICONOCLASM AND CIVILITY IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF TWO FOUNDERS OF THE ‘BRUG PA BKA’ BRGYUD LINEAGES

W. BLYTHE MILLER

#### I. Introduction

In his history of Buddhism, *The Sun that Causes the Lotus of the Teaching to Bloom* (*chos ‘byung bstan pa’i padma rgyas pa’i nyin byed*), the prolific sixteenth century Tibetan scholar Padma Karpo (*pad ma dkar po*, 1527-1592) declared that many followers of the Kagyu (*bka’ rgyud*) tradition, a Tibetan lineage tracing a common pedigree through Gampopa back to the north Indian siddhas Tilopa, Saraha, and Maitripa, have for centuries misconstrued the name of their lineage. In Kagyu sources of the Kamtsang (*Kam tshang*) and Drikung (*‘bri gung*) transmissions, the word *bka’* that forms the first syllable of the term Kagyu is spelled in a way that conveys the meaning “word”, “instruction” or “command”<sup>1</sup>. With this gloss, Kagyu means “instruction lineage”, a label so non-specific it must have vexed even the most accommodating Kagyu morphologists. Padma Karpo, for his part, insisted that *bka’* is a misnomer for *dkar*, which means white<sup>2</sup>. Rightly speaking, according to Padma Karpo, Kagyu is not the “instruction lineage” but rather the “white lineage”, alluding to the cotton meditation garment worn by some hermetic yogis of this tradition, most famously by the yogi and poet

<sup>1</sup> “Generally” is a most unsatisfying qualifier. Tracking down first appearance(s) of the term *bka’ rgyud* in literary sources as a referent to Gampopa’s legacy of lineages is an important bit of research that needs to be done. By the fourteenth century, the term must have been in use as the Third Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (*rang ‘byung rdo rje*, 1284-1339) used it in his compositions

<sup>2</sup> See Jampa Thaye, *A Garland of Gold: The Early Kagyu Masters in India and Tibet* (Bristol: Ganesha Press, 1990), p. 97.

Milarepa<sup>3</sup>. This garment is steeped in symbolic value for adherents of this lineage: those who wear it ideally ascribe to the life of a wandering ascetic who begs for food, lives in mountain hermitages and vows only to wear one cotton garment<sup>4</sup>.

While Padma Karpo's epistemological defense seems to have fallen short of panoptic success, as many Kagyu sects—including some later hierarchs of Padma Karpo's own Druk ('brug) sect—now use the spelling *bka' rgyud*, his commentary highlights the lasting emphasis this lineage has placed since its inception on an ascetic and peripatetic lifestyle, non-elaborate meditation, solitude and withdrawal from public affairs. In concert with a number of factors including geographical isolation, close connections to siddha dohā literature, loose or even antagonistic ties with institutional norms, a soteriology of naturalness (*mahāmudrā*), and a mode of composition called *nmyam gur* (creative songs of experience) this tradition was initially fairly tolerant of individual expression and unconventional behavior. Yet since the beginning of the 12th century, when Gampopa (*sgam po pa*, 1079-1135) synthetically organized this lineage into something resembling a full-fledged religious tradition with a strong monastic bent, many of its prominent apostles were increasingly influenced from within by ecclesiastical demands and from without by pressure to compete with the other religious traditions burgeoning during the Renaissance period<sup>5</sup>. By the 12th century, the Kagyus were actively

<sup>3</sup> Milarepa (*mid la ras pa*, 1052-1135) accepted a name indicative of these garments. The second part of his name *ras pa* means "the cotton-clad one".

<sup>4</sup> Ascetics of this type are referred to in Kagyu literature as *ras pa* (pronounced "repa"), and their lifestyle and practices are outlined in texts belonging to the *ras rgyud*, "the lineage of repas" initiated by Milarepa and his disciple Rechungpa (*ras chung pa*, 1082-1161), but probably formalized by Rechungpa's disciple Zhang Lotsawa (*zhang lo tsa ba*, 1123-1193).

<sup>5</sup> The periodization of the Tibetan Renaissance used by some scholars including Deborah Klimburg-Salter, David Germano, and historian Ronald Davidson, is 950-1238. In support for applying the term "renaissance" to this exuberant and fecund moment of Tibetan history, Ronald Davidson forwards a model from systems analysis called "punctuated equilibrium". In a renaissance, "civilization can appear to compress phenomenal development into an incredibly short span of time—a veritable burst of sociopolitical, economic, artistic, intellectual, literary, and spiritual activity." For a more complete discussion of the term "renaissance" in this context see Ronald M. Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the rebirth of Tibetan culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 20-21. This period is marked on one end by the approximate beginning of the estab-

involved in founding anchored communities, forging connections with local officials and patrons, investing more time in group ritual practices, and even going to war. Over time, all the Kagyu lineages would be dominated and perpetuated by ecclesiastical corporations, conglomerates that would likely have been viewed with dismay by the early founders of the lineage.

Because this advance towards consolidation did not by any means efface the soteriological ideals (connected to hermeticism) distinctly advocating movement away from it, there is little wonder that the personas and inherited histories of the Kagyu lineages reflect a tension between ideals of solitary withdrawal and ideals of community involvement. It is the position of this paper that the biographical representations of early lineage holders manifest this tension as a rhetorical struggle between ideals of iconoclasm and ideals of compliance with institutional norms. Here the term “iconoclasm” is used not to denote conscious contrarianism on the part of any one individual, but to suggest a rhetorical mode of representing individuals via biography (*rnam thar*) as expressed (although sometimes inadvertent) mavericks who resist subservience to a set of codes of conduct and belief. In concert with this position, I hypothesize that some details of the biographies here considered reflect that in the lineage as a whole (in its formative period) this tension manifested as diametric allegiances rooted deeply in the soteriology, personal histories and stated ideals of the lineage: allegiances to poetic discourse and scholarship, lay-values and monasticism, sex and celibacy, solitude and communal life, wildness and tamedness<sup>6</sup>. These tensions, I surmise here, rather than catalyzing a dysfunctional implosion, instead fed the fuel of

ishment of the order of Western Vinaya monks (950) and on the other end by the beginning of the Mongol invasions (1238).

<sup>6</sup> It would be inaccurate to suggest that these tensions are by any means limited to the Kagyu, the Tibetan or even the Buddhist milieu. As pointed out by Patrick Olivelle, the tension between ideals of asceticism and domestication in India is at least as old as the Upanishadic culture of 600 BCE. See Patrick Olivelle, “Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement” in *Religions of Asia in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 122-135. Rather, I would suggest that unique *styles* of expression of this tension emerge from various lineages and traditions. Furthermore, I would propose that (1) patterns of resolution and non-resolution of these tensions are highly variable and (2) the intensity of these tensions is variable.

the burst of Kagyu sub-sects branching out in the 12th-13th century. These sub-sects, later categorized into the “four great lineages” (*che bzhi*) were the Tsalpa Kagyu, the Karma (or Kamtsang) Kagyu, the Barom Kagyu, and the Phagdru Kagyu. The disciples of Pagmo Drupa, the founder of the latter sect, were retrospectively seen as founding an additional “eight lesser lineages” (*chung brgyad*): the Drikung Kagyu, the Drukpa Kagyu, the Taklung Kagyu, the Yam Zang Kagyu, the Tropu Kagyu, the Marpa Kagyu, the Yalpa Kagyu and the Shugseb Kagyu (See Appendix I)<sup>7</sup>. The tensions between demeanors of naturalness and domestication in these lineages were expressed, resolved and remained unresolved in a variety of ways by these different subsects.

One subject that carried this web of tensions to an appreciable degree is the Drukpa Kagyu. A sect with expressed commitments to the hermetic (*ras pa*) lifestyle<sup>8</sup>, the Drukpa Kagyu nevertheless parented strong lineages of abbatial hierarchs, even while producing some of the Kagyu lineage’s loudest voices of conscience. This polarity of allegiances and tendencies was to have two important consequences: it spawned an adaptableness that would ensure that the Drukpa Kagyu not only survived but also competed with the other lineages of its day, and it tolerated more lifestyle options for religious specialists than most other modern (*gsar ma*) lineages, attracting a wide following. In consort with the peripatetic ideal, the lineage was to survive not by creating and settling into large institutions, but rather by casting its net as wide as possible via the trajectories of wandering missionaries. In the span of its first three genera-

<sup>7</sup> The Tibetan names for these lineages are *tshal pa bka’ brgyud*, *kam tshang bka’ brgyud*, *‘ba’ rom bka’ brgyud*, *phag gru bka’ brgyud*, *‘bri gung bka’ brgyud*, *stag lung bka’ brgyud*, *khro phu bka’ brgyud*, *‘brug pa bka’ brgyud*, *smar pa bka’ brgyud*, *yel pa bka’ brgyud*, *g.ya’ bzang bka’ brgyud* and *shug gseb bka’ brgyud*. This retrospective classification (and in general sectarian depictions of lineage formation and continuity) is a very simplified picture of what was undoubtedly an extremely complex web of relationships and transmissions. Some significant lineages omitted from this classification are detailed in Chapter VIII of *deb ther sngon po* (In English translation as *The Blue Annals*) by ‘gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal (1392-1481). Included in his presentation is the *zhang pa bka’ brgyud*, a lineage founded by the zhang rin po che who was one generation removed from Gampopa. Also included there are descriptions of the various branches of the Drukpa Kagyu: the Lower Druk, Upper Druk and Middle Druk lineages (described in more detail later in this paper).

<sup>8</sup> See note 7.

tions, the Drukpa lineages challenged the geographical breadth of other lineages of the Tibetan Renaissance period. After establishing a foothold in the religious milieu of central Tibet, it moved across into Eastern Tibet and even into Bhutan. This burst of initial expansion, that seems almost dazzling looking back, is certainly both symptomatic of the fervent activity of the renaissance period and of the Drukpa Kagyu's resourcefulness as a lineage.

Standing right at the diffident beginnings of this lineage were two Drukpa hierarchs, whose hagiographies form the basis for this analysis: Ling Repa (*gling ras pa*, 1128-1188) and his disciple Tsangpa Gyare (*gtsang pa rgya ras*, 1161-1211). Although it is unlikely these two individuals foresaw their future identification as lineage architects, they are the only two distinctly "Drukpa" founders to which all Drukpa Kagyu lineages trace their pedigree and they are highly revered (even today) in the imagination and literary culture of all Drukpa Kagyu sects. Therefore, examining their biographical personas and legacy is an opportune prelude to understanding the elements that bind together the disparate sub-lineages of the Drukpa Kagyu tradition, and to exploring the seminal events that eventually propelled a disparate group of people and amorphous set of teachings to become self-identified as a distinct lineage. Furthermore, in this paper I wish to consider the concept of "founder": What factors elevate individuals to the status of founders? What kind of rhetorical picture is constructed of an embryonic moment in Drukpa history, by narrative portrayal of an alternating attraction, antagonism and ambivalence towards consolidation, monasticism and scholasticism? Is it possible to see founders themselves as the archetypical embodiments of such tensions? These are a few guiding questions that I hope to pose of the biographical material forming the nexus of this article.

## II. What's in a Stream

The Tibetan word for lineage is *brgyud*. Attempting to identify what exactly is meant by lineage in the premodern Tibetan context is not as easy as it would appear on the surface, because indigenous representations of lineage tend to emphasize diachronic lines of descent that sustain strong elements of stasis, cohesion and solidity, an emphasis that does not nec-

essarily stand up under historical analysis. Here I would like to experiment with constructing a definition around a configuring metaphor evoked by an etymological interpretation of the word *brgyud*, which descends from *rgyud*, literally meaning “stream” or “continuum”. Like a stream flowing from one place to another, lineage is suggestive of the passage of time, displaying a pattern of diachronic lineal descent. This descent at every level is not impermeable but picks up compositions, people, ideas, hermeneutics, books, places, things and so forth through time, like a stream picks up branches and leaves as it moves. The conducted matter leaves traces, a sediment of traditions and artifacts. Practices and texts sometimes snag on branches of controversy or obsolescence and are abandoned. Therefore, while the appellation “lineage” (*brgyud*) implies continuity and consolidation, its infrastructure is temporally, geographically and soteriologically fluid.

Lineage is also geographically fluid: like a stream moves across landscapes, lineages move into new places— Buddhist lineages permeated the Tibetan landscape during the tenth century onwards and interacted with physical space in real ways by inhabiting, anthropomorphizing, consecrating and using it in a ritual context. Just as waterways sometimes fork and merge, lineages occasionally part or flow together, as when the Drukpa lineage parted from the Marpa Kagyu, or when Gampopa combined the streams of the Kadampa and Mahāmudrā lineages. Just as a stream adapts to terrain, lineage accommodates changing environments, as expressed for example by Tsangpa Gyare’s eventual decision to establish monasticism as a precedent for the Drukpa Kagyu lineage, despite the disinterest of his main preceptor. Just as buoyant material floats downstream, lineages involve human agents who pass on more enduring entities to future lineage holders: texts, ideas, practices. Just as a river erode and change the terrain, lineages impact the religious, political, social, and economic environment. The complexity of the Drukpa lineage apparent within the first few generations confirms that while a given lineage in the Tibetan milieu tends to be identified by a consistent name and set of characteristics, a closer look reveals that it is in fact the accumulation of many things acting and appearing together as a continuum. With this metaphorical approach as a basis, I will venture a tentative definition. Lineage is a fluid and adaptable collection of material and non-material transmissions that

are passed down from one generation to the next: these transmissions may be textual, abbatial, geographical, ritual, instructional, scholastic, material, visual, artistic, auditory, and so forth<sup>9</sup>.

In contrast to lineage, but also very much related to it is the term *chos lugs* which means “religious tradition” or “sect”. On the difference between “sect” and “lineage”, Matthew Kapstein states:

By *sect*, I mean a religious order that is distinguished from others by virtue of its institutional independence; that is, its unique character is embodied outwardly in the form of an independent hierarchy and administration, independent properties and a recognizable membership of some sort. A *lineage* on the other hand is a continuous succession of spiritual teachers who have transmitted a given body of knowledge over a period of generations but who need not be affiliated with a common sect<sup>10</sup>.

The Tibetan use of this word *sect* therefore implies consolidation, a soteriology and set of practices distinct from other traditions, and bureaucratically linked institutions. Continuing with the aquatic metaphor, a sect is a repository for lineages that may either flow into it or flow through it. David Snellgrove links the development of sects to the guru-disciple paradigm and centralization in a single place:

The eventual development of religious orders in Tibet is closely related with the great importance attached to devotion to one’s chosen teacher, whence there derives immediately the concept of spiritual lineage... Tibetan religious orders developed...as the result of the fixing of such a spiritual lineage at a particular place, namely a monastic establishment, which happened to become a recognized religious center of importance, consequently growing in wealth and prestige...only a favorable combination of a particular monastery with a particular lineage might result in what came to be recognized as a distinctive religious order<sup>11</sup>.

In Tibet, sects are associated primarily with institutions, and the affiliation with a specific place is augmented by the creation of texts and abbatial successions associated with that place. Eventually, this central-

<sup>9</sup> The “so forth” is intended to indicate that the potential identification of elements that can be considered part of lineage transmission is mind-boggling.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Kapstein, “gDams ngag: Tibetan Technologies of the Self” in Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre, Cabazon and Jackson (eds.), page 249, note 2.

<sup>11</sup> David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1987), p. 486.

ization results in a self-definition so complete that people carry personal names reflecting their sectarian affiliation, and monastic centers carry names that announce their sectarian status. Therefore, lineages and sects differ largely on the basis of the intensity of their self-definition. Whereas lineage survives through popularity, a sect cultivates and develops uniqueness: its survival rests on its ability to present aesthetic, ritual, and soteriological perspectives that differ from and appear superior to rival sects. Furthermore, while a sect derives authority from its appropriation of specific lineages, lineage is not necessarily linked to a single sect. In short, sects are more structurally rigid than lineages.

Nevertheless, sects in Tibet have never been static or permanent. Those sects that survive appear to have done so by adapting to the political and social climate<sup>12</sup>, but also through the ingenuity and fortuitous non-conformity of their parishioners and leaders. By shirking, evading or simply augmenting the expressed codes of their tradition, the subscribers to sects have throughout Tibetan history provided a healthy milieu for change, evolution and adaptation at the juncture of every generation. Included among these “every-day” iconoclasts are examples of practitioners who, while steeped in one or more traditions, decline to announce a sectarian status and search for threads of continuity between traditions. One such figure was Taranatha (*sgrol ba'i mgon po*, 1575-1634), the eclectic scholar of the Jonang (*jo nang*) tradition, who doggedly stated he was simply “Buddhist”, and inadvertently contributed to laying the groundwork for the nineteenth century non-sectarian (*ris med*) movement. Moreover, sects sometimes hybridize, such as the extremely popular Ka-Nying (*bka' snying*) tradition of Eastern Tibet that combines elements of Kagyu and Nyingma (*snying ma*) doctrine and textual transmissions into a loosely defined system. In short, while sects formalize and systematize lines of transmission, they remain flexible to a degree.

### III. The Drukpa Kagyu Tradition

Although it is certain they considered themselves the common holders of Gampopa's lineage of instructions, there is no decisive evidence that

<sup>12</sup> No example of the adaptability of sects is starker than the numerous adjustments Tibetan sects have had to make as they encountered the cultures of China, India and the West in the last forty years.



the Drukpa Kagyu had self-identified as a sub-sect of the Kagyu lineage in the 12th century. However the composition of *A Short History of the Drukpa Lineage* ('*Brug pa'i lo rgyus zur tsam*, a two-folio document found in the *gsung 'bum* of Gotsangpa<sup>13</sup>), by Gotsangpa (*rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje*, 1189-1258) or one of his disciples, indicates that the Drukpa lineage was beginning to emerge as an independent entity by the 13th century. Within a few generations, the trickle that opens with the life story of Ling Repa had become a watershed. The new lineage would be known by two names: Lingre Kagyu (*gling ras bka' brgyud*) and Drukpa Kagyu. The former name, still commonly used, graced Ling Repa retroactively with the status of a founder. The latter name was extracted from the monastery of Namdruk (*gnam 'brug*) established by Tsangpa Gyare. However, it was Ralung (*rwa lung*), founded jointly by Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare, that was to become the major seat of the Gya (*rgya*) abbots, the most powerful Drukpa abbatial lineage in Tibet. Ling Repa entrusted this incipient center to Tsangpa Gyare who built it into a monastic complex and eventually passed it to his nephew Sangye Onre Darma Senge (*sangs rgyas dbon ras dar ma seng ge*, 1177-1237), who became its second abbot. For the next 400 years, this abbatial lineage residing at Ralung would be known as the Middle Druk (*bar 'brug*) lineage. However, in the seventeenth century, an unresolved political dispute would compel the center to relocate and split the lineage into a Northern and a Southern branch<sup>14</sup>. Due to the same dispute, in 1616, the coeval scion in the succession of Middle Drug abbots Ngawang Namgyal (*ngag dbang rnam rgyal*) was forced to flee to Bhutan where he quickly rose to power. After his death, he would be recognized as the individual who established the Drukpa Kagyu in Bhutan, where it remains the official national religion.

Tsangpa Gyare's disciples Gotsangpa (*rgod gtsang pa*, 1189-1258) and Lorepa (*lo ras pa*, 1187-1250) were later seen as the founders of two major offshoots of the Drukpa lineage: the lineage of Upper Druk (*stod*

<sup>13</sup> '*Brug pa'i lo rgyus zur tsam*, in *Chos rje rGod tshang pa'i bka' 'bum dgos 'dod kun'byung* (Timphu, Bhutan: Tango Monastic Community, 1981. Reproduced by the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center from a manuscript preserved at rTa mgo monastery), Volume III, Pages 91-94. An article about this short document is forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> *byang 'brug* and *lho 'brug*. For more details on this dispute and its fall-out see E. Gene Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts: History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), pp. 44-45.

'brug) and the lineage of Lower Druk (*smad 'brug*), respectively (See Appendix II). The lineage of Upper Druk gave rise to a number of important sects: the Nering Kagyu (*ne rings bka' brgyud*), the Dowo Chewa (*mdo bo che ba*) and the Yang Gon Kagyu (*yang dgon bka' brgyud*) among others. The lineage of Lower Druk would flourish primarily in Bhutan. Minor traditions originated from four disciples of Tsangpa Gyare: Pariwa (*spa ri ba*), Kyangmo Khapa (*rkyang mo kha pa*), Gya Yagpa (*rgya yags pa*) and Dremopa (*'bras mo pa*). In addition, one of Got-sangpa's disciples Urgyenpa (*u rgyan pa* 1230-1309) would establish an important sub-lineage that later merged with other Drukpa sects. In short, the Drukpa Kagyu lineage in Tibet eventually branched into four major sub-sects and many minor sub-sects, and spread to Bhutan where it became the national religion<sup>15</sup>.

Moving upstream, Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare were also the inheritors of an already well established Kagyu lineage (See Appendix I). Ling Repa's teacher, Phagmo Drupa, was a staunch monastic patriarch and prolific author, following in the footsteps of his preceptor Gampopa. Gampopa was inheritor of two main lineages which he synthesized into a single system: Atisha's Kadampa lineage and Naropa's Kagyu lineage. The former instilled in Gampopa an appreciation of monasticism and sūtra-based scholarship, but the latter—a lay-based esoteric lineage that embraced texts on tantra and somatic yogas—supplied Gampopa with the soteriology that served as the nexus for his compositions<sup>16</sup>. Biographical representations of Naropa, one of the Kagyu lineage's principal Indian founders, depict a man a bit like Gampopa in his regard for bringing a scholarly approach to tantric practice. However, unlike Naropa, Gampopa and his line of succession saw the prudence of establishing a stable monastic community and training many disciples<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the line-

<sup>15</sup> The information in the above two paragraphs comes from Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts* (see note 20). For a pictorial presentation of the Drukpa Kagyu lineages, see Appendix II.

<sup>16</sup> Gampopa reserved teachings on the Six Yogas of Naropa and the tantras for his most advanced and promising disciples. See Gampopa, "A Brief Account of Dharmā Lord Gampopa's Life" in *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen, ed. Ani K. Trinlay Chodron (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1998), p. 325-332.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, in his writings, he occasionally apologizes for his consolidating activities and bemoans his fate as a popular abbot. But his activities and compositions overall

age that Ling Repa inherited had already articulated a monastic and scholastic agenda, but carried with it the strong memories of a close past of yogis meditating in mountain retreats. Ling Repa saw it as his mission to revive the old ways and defy the ecclesiastical model that was fast becoming normative. His insubordination made him a beloved and influential lodestar not only for his student Tsangpa Gyare but also for the Drukpa lineage in general. But what situated him and his student Tsangpa Gyare as founders of a new order bears investigation.

#### IV. A Tale of Two Founders

The purpose of the remainder of this essay is to scope out the tenor of the lives of two very important figures against the backdrop of the renaissance period, and probe (in an admittedly inchoate fashion) the question of what made these two individuals “founders”. This project is in actuality a task beyond the scope of a short article, and I will therefore have to be selective in entertaining possible answers to this question. It is my hope that the reader will consider this a modest contribution to a dialogue that has herein been opened. In the next section, I will briefly summarize the lives of these two saints as presented in some biographical sources, and then will explore a few topics relating to founderhood that emerge organically from the material at hand.

In his essay *The Lives of Indian Buddhist Saints: Biography, Hagiography and Myth*, James Burnell Robinson proposes three ascending ways of reading the accounts of saints: “as history, as hagiography and as myth.”<sup>18</sup> Inspired by this paradigm of reading modes, I will for heuristic purposes in this essay propose two alternative models: religious biographies may be viewed as *cultural artifacts* and as *cultural agents*. On the one hand, this involves viewing life-accounts as valuable portraits of time and place. Robinson touches on this perspective when he defends the value of reading saint’s accounts as histories: “Even if the historical accu-

nevertheless reflect a deep concern with succession and systematization characteristic of an institutional format.

<sup>18</sup> James Burnell Robinson, “The Lives of Indian Buddhist Saints: Biography, Hagiography and Myth” in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, Jose Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson, eds. (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), p. 61.

racy of certain events and personages may seem suspect to critical scholarly eyes, recurrent motifs probably are quite accurate in mirroring the conditions of the time.” Taking the historical perspective further, we might also hypothesize that these accounts are shaped by events, and their content is influenced by religious and political agendas. In this sense, religious biographies are cultural artifacts, with potential to reveal much in their pages about the time, place and manner of their composition.

On the other hand, religious biographies may be viewed as cultural agents that “act” upon those who read or possess them. The motifs, language and even their physical existence influence the conditions of the present and future. In line with an agential interpretation, it is possible to see the individuals portrayed in these biographies as archetypes, delineating to some extent what is possible and recommended for future generations of a particular lineage. In other words, religious biographies are not merely reflective: they are templates that shape lives, literature, culture and institutions.

Looking through the lens of biography as cultural artifact and agent, the degree to which the content of these biographical accounts contains historically accurate information is not necessarily of paramount importance. Still, the biographical material considered for this paper may proffer content of historical significance that is worthy of a Tibetanist’s attention, so the question of accuracy is worth addressing at least in passing. Janet Gyatso reflects the observations of a number of Tibetanists when she remarks that “the life-writing impulse in Tibet reflects a long tradition of record-keeping”, and notices that biographies (*rnam thar*) often turn out to be dictations from the protagonist to a disciple, and therefore may sometimes be partially autobiographical<sup>19</sup>. Her observations are in keeping with a concern with specific details and dates evident in the two narratives below. More explicitly, it might be possible to hypothesize some autobiographical elements to the first version of the biography of Tsangpa Gyare<sup>20</sup> which was written by his disciple Lorepa (*lo ras dbang phyug brtson ‘grus*, 1187-1250). The direct link between the author and his subject supports to some degree the potential authenticity of events

<sup>19</sup> Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 103.

<sup>20</sup> *gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje'i rnam thar*.

recorded in that account. While in the case of Ling Repa's biographies none of the versions have a colophon, the inclusion in the 'ba' ra biography of specific quotations indicated to be from the mouth of the subject<sup>21</sup> might indicate a link between the author and his subject (or perhaps his subject's direct disciples). But perhaps the most corroborating evidence for the historical value of both texts is the relative lack of hagiographical details found therein: the early biographies of these two Drukpa hierarchs generally have the sense of being records, with a smattering of miraculous events. However, there is a similarity of some details in both biographies with the story of Milarepa, and this could be examined more closely to determine if parts of the stories might have been adapted from another source.

*Ling Repa Padma Dorje*<sup>22</sup> (1128-1188)

Ling Repa was, as depicted in the two religious biographies considered here<sup>23</sup> and suggested by the content of his writings, a free spirit who found more affinity with the *repa* tradition of Milarepa's followers than with the more orthodox monastic tradition of Gampopa, although he eventually reconciled the two at the urging of his guru Pagmo Drupa. To the consternation of his teacher, he was rarely without a wife or a female companion of some sort, but his leanings towards a solitary life were strong. In style and activity Ling Repa was something of a vagrant poet.

<sup>21</sup> There are a number of examples of these quotations in the biography found in the 'ba' ra *gser phreng*. For example, on folio 377 of the text, Ling Repa is quoted as saying "Every time I requested a Dharma session with Lama Lo, I never neglected to offer him tea. As a result, I do not suffer from lack of tea...." (*bla ma lo la chos thun re zhu ba la ja sun re ma ched pas da lta jas nyon ma mongs*).

<sup>22</sup> Also known as *sna phu ba*, a name he acquired on the basis of his founding of a hermitage at *sna phu*.

<sup>23</sup> There are three surviving biographical accounts (*rnam thar*) of Ling Repa found in three collections: *rwa lung gser phreng* compiled by rje shakya rin chen, the 'ba' ra *gser phreng* (19th century) and the *rta mgo* (*pha jo sding* manuscript, 18th century). None of these accounts have colophons, and their authorship is unknown (Gene Smith 4/16/2004, email communication). For this compilation, I relied on the text entitled *grub thob chen po gling chen ras pa padma rdo rje'i rnam par thar pa* in the 'ba' ra *bka' brgyud gser 'phreng chen mo*, and on Go Lotsawa's accounts in the Blue Annals. There are significant differences between the content of these two sources. Therefore, the following brief account generally includes the information held in common by these two sources. Discrepancies will be discussed here or later.

Inspired by stories of his predecessor Milarepa, he sought teachings from Sumpa Repa (*sum pa ras pa*), the inheritor of Rechungpa's lineage. Like Kagyu bards of yore, he was peripatetic and often inspired by the creative muse.

The 'ba' ra biography begins with a long account of Ling Repa's past life as the Bodhisattva Good Fortune (*skal pa bzang po*), an account that seems to be extracted from a sutra, although I have been unable to determine the source. Even though this account is not in the form of a "prediction narrative" (*lung bstan*), its inclusion in the biography accomplishes at least two authenticating purposes related to the validation of Ling Repa's status as a founder. First, the account links Ling Repa with Indian precedents and legitimizes him as a Bodhisattva who has connection to a previous Buddha. This observation reaffirms the notion that Tibetan biographical narratives function to forge connections between lineage founders and Indian personalities (either sutric or tantric), hence legitimizing, or at least attempting to legitimize, the founders of sects in the Indian-centric Tibetan imagination. Second, the past-life account can be read as an indirect defense for Ling Repa's loss of monastic vows, and his lay tendencies in general, as indicated at the end of the passage, when Good Fortune and his Bodhisattva friends take a long set of vows, swearing to never slander other Bodhisattvas. A piece of this vow is as follows:

From now on, if we speak of the downfall of a bodhisattva—whether it may be dishonorable or not—we will be deceiving the tathāgata. If we should blame or speak unpleasant words to a bodhisattva, we will be deceiving the tathāgata. Transcendent Conqueror, then, if we see a bodhisattva individual—whether he may be a layperson or a monk—partaking of the sense pleasures, and we then give rise to faithlessness, disrespect, and no impulse to praise him, we will be deceiving the tathāgata. From now on, upon seeing a bodhisattva, if we utter as much as a single unflattering word, we will be deceiving the tathāgata<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> "Grub thob chen po gling chen ras pa padma rdo rje'i nram par thar pa", 'ba' ra bka' brgyud gser 'phreng chen mo. Dehradun: Ngawang Gyaltsen and Ngawang Lungtok, 1970, Volume I, folio 369-370. From here forward, all indented quotes in the Ling Repa section are translations from this text unless otherwise noted. This piece of vow in the Tibetan reads: *deng slan chad nas byang chub sems dpa'i ltung ba smad pa 'am/ smad pa ma lags pa yang rung stel/ gleng na bdag cag gis de bzhin gshegs pa bslus par 'gyur rol de nas byang chub sems dpa' la snyad pa'm/ mi snyan pa brjod na bdag cag gis de bzhin gshegs pa bslus par 'gyur rol des 'dre'ol bcom ldan 'das de nas byang chub sems*

This passage reads like an edification of how a reader should approach the potentially disquieting lifestyle of Ling Repa: the reader should cultivate “sacred outlook” (*dag snang*), more specifically the attitude that the unconventional behavior of a lama is in fact the manifestation of his enlightened wisdom. This passage provides a compelling example of how the details in biography incorporate normative Buddhist doctrine into a narrative format, while simultaneously justifying (and sometimes glorifying) the actions of the biography’s protagonist.

Both biographies agree on the details of Ling Repa’s early religious career. He was born in the village of Langpo Na (*glang po sna*) in the Upper Nyang (*nyang stod*) district of Tsang (*gtsang*) in Central Tibet in 1128, as the youngest of four children. In Upper Nyang, there were two clans: Upper and Lower Ling (*stod gling* and *smad gling*). Ling Repa’s family belonged to the clan of Lower Ling, from which he would later take his name<sup>25</sup>. His father, who was learned in Tantric propitiations, and earned his livelihood as an astrologer, named him Pema Dorje (*pad ma rdo rje*). At the age of nine, Pema Dorje learned to read and write. In exchange for a plot of land, he received instruction from a local physician in the practice of medicine.

At 17, he began formal religious training in the presence of a preceptor named Ling (*gling*). One passage in the ‘*ba*’ *ra* biography calls into question how specifically Buddhist this religious training may have been:

About this time, [Ling Repa] had a dispute with a local official and a local clansman. Resorting to black magic, he cast many spells, performing 20 black magic rituals in a single month. Thus, he completely destroyed all the officials. In Upper Nyang, he became known as the greatest magician, and thus stood at the crown of his district<sup>26</sup>.

*dpa'i gang zag khim pa'm rab tu byung pa yang rung stel 'dod pa'i yon tan la yong su spyod pa mthong na/ ma dad par bgyid dam/ ma gus par bgyid dam/ de la stod pa'i 'du shes me bskyid na/ bdag cag gis de bzhin gshegs pa bslus par 'gyur ro/deng nas slan chad byang chub sems dpa' mthong pa la yid du mi 'ong pa'i tshigs tsam tang smras na/ bdag cag gis de bzhin gshegs pa bslus par 'gyur ro/*

<sup>25</sup> The custom of prominent religious specialists taking their personal name from their clan or region of birth is extremely common, as can be seen from references in *The Blue Annals*. This underscores yet again, the importance of *place* and *clan-affiliation* in the identity construction of Tibetans.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Folio 373. *de tsam na rje dpon gcig dang rabs chad gcig la ma 'cham pas/ mdze' po shang lung du brtson gnyis gzung la bcur la phab/ mthu mang po mdzad/*

The similarity of this detail with the early life of Milarepa is apparent, except the eventual contrition of the protagonist is conspicuously absent and the rhetoric of the passage not only fails to excuse Ling Repa's revenge—it glorifies him as “the greatest magician”, standing “at the crown of the district.” Therefore, whether this passage is a redaction of a Kagyu theme or reflective of Ling Repa's history, the passage indicates a certain tolerance towards and even endorsement of coercive magic. It seems plausible that the religious environment of the 12th century not only tolerated the presence of coercive ritual specialists, but glorified violent practices (eventually modified and incorporated into institutions as “averting” [*lzog pa*] practices and so forth) as evidence of the puissance of the practitioner. An interesting study would be to see how these references change and are modified in biography as Buddhism because increasingly institutionalized from the renaissance period onwards.

Whatever the case may be, we are led to wonder if Ling Repa's bravado, in addition to vanquishing his foes (how he “destroyed” his enemies is left distressingly non-specific), added to his personal charm, as the next line of the text reads simply “Then, he got together with Menmo.”<sup>27</sup> Menmo (*sman mo*), referred to alternately in the ‘*ba*’ *ra* hagiography as Menmo and “the Lady” (*jo mo*), would be Ling Repa's wife for much of his adulthood. At this point in the story, Go Lotsawa's account launches into apologetics for Ling Repa's wantonness. However, this invective is absent from the ‘*ba*’ *ra* biography, perhaps indicating that the later biographical account is older. With or without the apologetics, references to Ling Repa's relationship with Menmo are significantly present in both biographies.

For a few years, Ling Repa and Menmo received instructions and empowerments from Ra Lotsawa (*rwa ye shes senge*, 12th century) and his disciples in the esoteric cycles of Kalachakra, Chakrasmavara, Yamantaka and Vajravaharahi. Ra Lotsawa encouraged the couple to seek instruction in the Six Dharmas of Naropa from his teacher Khyung Tsangpa

*zla ba re la gtad phogs nyi shu tsa re mdzad nas rje dpon thams cad rtso ba rlag/ngang stod na mthu chad bar grags pa yang de btsug lags par gda’/*. This is yet another example of a quote attributed to Ling Repa himself.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* *de nas jo mo sman dang gnyis ‘grogs.*



(*khyung tshang pa*), who claimed to be a direct disciple of Rechungpa. Ling Repa, greatly inspired by the stories he had heard about the great cave meditator<sup>28</sup>, declared at the time of receiving instruction, “From this time forward, I will follow and act according to [Rechungpa’s] life example.” Rechungpa, who was not a monk and had founded a community of non-celibate renunciant yogis (*repas*), was an apropos role model for Ling Repa who—although he had fervent religious leanings—was married.

After some time, however, Khyung Tsangpa convinced Ling Repa to accept monastic ordination [and apparently send Menmo away]. For one year, Ling Repa practiced the Kadampa teachings and lived as a monk under Khyung Tsangpa’s guidance. But then Menmo visited him:

...while he was residing at Gyache Lumpa Monastery, the Lady turned up. Powerless to resist her, he lost his vows. Later he would say, “I was weak.”<sup>29</sup>

This would be the last occasion that Ling Repa attempted monastic ordination. Recommitting themselves to Rechungpa’s example, both Menmo and Ling Repa (who was now 31) took on the discipline of the repa lineage: they vowed to only wear a cotton garment and refrain from cutting their hair. However, their enthusiasm would soon be dampened by a troubling revelation. After taking repa vows, Ling Repa heard the rumor that Khyung Tsangpa never really met Rechungpa as he had claimed, much less received the nectar of Naropa’s teachings from him. Instead, it was whispered, he was a disciple of Lama Olkawa (*’ol kha ba*)<sup>30</sup>, a less glamorous student of Gampopa. Given that he requested instructions initially from his guru on the basis of a connection with Rechungpa, Ling Repa felt betrayed. In his old age, however, he would regret these doubts and attribute obstacles in his practice to them. He is quoted in the biography as saying, “This is the reason my yogic heat is enervated now.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Rechungpa did not pass away until 1161, so he was alive at this time although apparently inaccessible to young Ling and his wife.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Folio 374. *de nas rgya phed lum pa’i zungs po dgon par bzhugs yod tsam nal jo mo byung nas dbang med du zlog/ nga rang snyan po chung pas lan gsung/*

<sup>30</sup> *’ol kha ba grol sgom chos g.yung* (1103-1199). See Gene Smith, *TBRC Website*: <http://www.tbrc.org/cgi-bin/tbrcdatax?do=so&resource=P5167>.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Folio 374. *da lta drod chung pa des lan gsung*.

Motivated anew to receive the Six Dharma tradition from the purest possible source, Lingre<sup>32</sup> (who was now 35) and Menmo traveled to Loro<sup>33</sup>, the hermitage of Rechungpa. They discovered on arrival that Rechungpa had passed away in the previous year (1161). But the couple was satisfied to ascertain that Sumpa Repa, a direct disciple of Rechungpa, was residing at Loro and was willing to bestow the Kagyu precepts completely. Lingre, in appreciation, offered tea at every instruction session and later declared that as a result, for the rest of his life, he never wanted for tea.

When Lingre was 38, he traveled with Menmo to Pagdru Monastery, the great monastic complex founded by Pagmo Drupa, Gampopa's main disciple. His first meeting with the great abbot left him in a state of typical Kagyu infatuation:

He met Phagmo Drupa on the seventeenth day after the summer solstice, and was instantly filled with fierce devotion. The feeling was so strong, he had the experience that the members of the entire congregation were Buddhists. He had the thought that even the local animals—birds, dogs and foxes—were manifestations of the lama, and lost his perception of them as ordinary creatures<sup>34</sup>.

Pagmo Drupa, for his part, was a strict advocate of monasticism and orthodoxy, and was disinclined to seriously teach any disciple who was not celibate, but the eager repa won him over by conducting a large fire ceremony in honor of the lama and singing a song expressing his realization. Although the congregation was scandalized at the sight of a lay disciple making vast offerings to their teacher, Pagmo Drupa expressed his appreciation to Ling Repa unequivocally: “Ling Repa, you have authentic wisdom. In my residence, I have a special person, someone who will accomplish waves of benefit for beings. With just this one song, you

<sup>32</sup> Lingre is a nickname often used to refer to Ling Repa in Drukpa literature.

<sup>33</sup> *lo ro* in *dmyal*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Folio 378-379. *phag mo gru par dbyar gyi nyi ma bzlog 'tshams kyi tshes bcu bdun gyi nyi ma la 'byal bas/ mos pa drag po skyes bla ma dang lta ci rmos stel grogs po dam pa rnams kyang sangs rgyas yin te te na gnas pa'i bya khi tang/ ba la sogs pa byol song rnams kyang bla ma'i rnams 'phrul yin snyam pa las/ tha mal pa'i byol song yin snyam pa'i 'du shes ma byung gsung/*

have bestowed precepts.”<sup>35</sup> During his time studying with Pagmo Drupa, Lingre would delight his master many times over with his composition of songs of experience (*mnyam mgur*) such as these. Posthumously, they would earn him the admiration of all Tibetan lineages and the epithet “Saraha of Tibet”.

Despite his satisfaction with Lingre’s progress, Phagmo Drupa was still troubled by his luminary disciple’s married status. Sometime around 1167, Lingre approached Pagmo Drupa, saying that his wife’s jealousy was becoming an obstacle to his spiritual practice. Pagmo Drupa took the opportunity to encourage Lingre to end his relationship with Menmo. Lingre protested that Menmo would not leave him just for the asking. But Pagmo Drupa insisted declaring, “I will perform a rite!” Apparently the master’s coercive action worked, as Lingre was successful in escorting his wife to an area close to her parents’ home and letting her go.

Lingre’s abstinence did not last long, however. He soon developed a relationship with a woman from Zangri<sup>36</sup>, but wanted out of the affair almost immediately. The temptress would have nothing of it and pursued him so aggressively Ling Repa was compelled to flee to Kham<sup>37</sup>. The trip was not in vain, as he was able to visit Gampopa’s monastic center on the way. Later, the woman from Zangri came to Khams in search of her par amour, but died on the way.

Lingre seems to have spent several years traveling in Kham because when he returned to Pagdru Monastery, his teacher had passed away. The next fifteen years of his life would be spent visiting localities in Central and Western Tibet. He met Lama Zhang<sup>38</sup>, and assisted in mediating in one of his military feuds. He also donated (whether by coercion on Lama Zhang’s part or voluntarily is not clear) a great deal of the wealth accumulated during his travels to a statue commissioned by Lama Zhang.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Folio 380. *gling ras pa khod la mngon par zhes pa mnga’ bar ‘dug pas/ nga’i ‘di na skyes bu khad par can ‘gro don brlabs can ‘grub pa gcig yod de khod kyis tshol gcig gxung nas bka’ bgo ‘dzad do/*

<sup>36</sup> *bZang ri* in *sNye mo* province of Tsang (THDL Website).

<sup>37</sup> *khams*, Eastern Tibet

<sup>38</sup> *bla ma zhang* (1123-1193), a controversial figure of the 12th century who was known for his mastery of the satirical pen and involvement in military endeavors. He was a stu-

Once, on his way to Pagdru monastery, he stopped at Samye, the first Buddhist temple built in Tibet. There,

...a blue woman appeared and bestowed the reading transmission of the tantras. Then she commanded, "Explain the tantras!" Although her command seemed impossible, knowledge of [the tantras] arose [in Ling Repa's mind] without his having to train, and he composed a number of commentaries. A number of people were displeased and disparaged Ling, calling the compositions fake..<sup>39</sup>.

This vision seems to have given Lingre the confidence to begin the tradition of tantric discourse that would become a specialty of the Druk hierarchs. Despite the doubts of some of his contemporaries, Lingre composed four volumes related to tantric practice and exegesis: *Source of All Qualities: A Practice of the Mandala of Chakrasamvara*, *A Practice of the Mandala of the Glorious Transcendent Conqueror Vajrapani*, *Heart of Interdependence: A Wrathful Rite* and *An Explanation of Tantra*<sup>40</sup>. During his lifetime, he also composed several other texts on devotional practice and mind instruction. He was most famous however for his poetic composition, an art he was so skilled at that later generations speculated that he must have studied with the great Sanskrit scholar Parpupa (*spar phu ba*)<sup>41</sup>, who was known for his mastery of *kavya*<sup>42</sup>. Ling Repa's songs are housed in collection called "Lingre's Collection of Songs" (*gling ras gsung 'bum*, literally "100,000 Songs").

Sometime during Ling Repa's late forties or early fifties, he established a community of practitioners at Napu Hermitage (*sna phu dgon*) and began training disciples. Eventually, an inadvertent karmic mistake would bring about his demise:

dent of *tshul khriims snying po*, one of Gampopa's main disciples. Gampopa himself refused to teach the rebellious young man.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, Vol. 1, Folio 397. *bud med sgnon mo gcig byung ste brgyud sde rnams la lung nos byas nas/ khod kyis rgyud sde rnams la bshad pa byis gcig mi srid kyi gsung nas/ brgyud sde rnams ma brlabs par mkhyen pa byung nas yig sna mdzad pas/ ma bsnyan par bshad zer nas sgro bkur 'debs pa...*

<sup>40</sup> *bde mchog dkyil 'khor gyi cho ga yon tan kun 'byung, bcom ldan 'das dpal phyag na rdo rje'i dkyil 'khor cho ga, rten 'brel snying po'i las byang and rgyud kyi rnam bshad.*

<sup>41</sup> *spar phu ba blo gros senge*, student of Pagmo Drupa.

<sup>42</sup> Go Lotsawa, who states he has compared their two styles, is unable to confirm or deny this theory.

While he was imparting a religious teaching from the graduated path texts to an assembly of students, in the section on the five tantric commitments, two men with impure tantric commitments appeared. This caused his teeth to clench, and he passed away on the twenty-eighth day of the first summer month in the year Earth-male-ape (1188 A.D.). He was sixty-one<sup>43</sup>.

While there is no certainty of the historical accuracy of the details of the biography, a death caused by the clenching of teeth is curious and specific enough to suggest some reflection of a physiological symptom or terminal illness which Tibetans are familiar<sup>44</sup>. In any case, the linking of his death with a karmic cause reflects one of the soteriological metanarratives present in this biography. Nothing is more important in the esoteric Buddhist context than maintenance of tantric commitments. Even a saint like Ling Repa is not ultimately immune to the results of his transgression. Therefore, appropriately, as Ling Repa's story began with the admonishment to maintain sacred outlook, it ends with a revelation of the consequences of not maintaining it.

*Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje*<sup>45</sup> (1128-1188)

The adoption of the name Dorje (*rdo rje*) for Drukpa hierarchs is a tradition that seems to have started right at the roots of the lineage. Perhaps this is significant, because it may mean that by the time Tsangpa Gyare began to study with Ling Repa, he and his contemporaries were already aware they were in the incipient stages of founding a bona fide religious order with unique monikers for its members, structures and organization.

<sup>43</sup> 'gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, *deb ther sngon po*, (Chengdu: Si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khan, 1984), p. 779. *der slob ma rnams khrid kyi rim pa dang tshogs chos kyis skyong zhing bzhugs pa'i tshel dam tshig lnga pa gsung zhing yod pa'i 'phro la dam tshig mi gtshang ba'i mi gnyid byung ba'i rkyen gyis tshems khrig de 'khrigs nas/ sa pho spre'u lo drug cu rtsa gcig pa'i dbyar zla ra ba'i nyer brgyad la gshegs.*

<sup>44</sup> A friend finishing up study in medicine suggested to me that Ling Repa may have died of lock-jaw caused by tetanus. Tetanus bacteria causes the jaw to contract until the teeth are forced together, and the victim eventually cannot open the mouth to eat or swallow. The disease is not contagious (it is caused by the bacteria which is found in soil entering a puncture wound), so its appearance must have seemed mysterious to premodern peoples who encountered it. I selected this version of his death from *deb ther sngon po* because of its brevity. The version in the '*ba' ra gser spreng* does not mention the clenching of the teeth as a cause of death, but the other details are consistent.

<sup>45</sup> *gtsang pa rgya ras ye shes rdo rje*

While Ling Repa was known as the “Saraha of Tibet”, Tsangpa Gyare would be revered as an incarnation of Naropa, and his unique ability to combine scholarship with an emphasis on non-elaborate meditative techniques greatly resembled the style of the Indian Pandit. There is ample evidence in the story to follow that Tsangpa Gyare, like Naropa, had a far reaching vision for his monastery and decedents that extended beyond the parameters of his own life. To use the word “ambitious” to describe this precocious and motivated figure would perhaps be an understatement. Whereas Ling Repa traveled a lot and did not begin consolidating his legacy until fairly late in his life, Tsangpa Gyare’s religious career began in childhood and continued at a stunning pace until his early death at age 51. In that short lifetime, if his life accounts are accurate, he managed to found a number of monasteries, compose numerous texts, gather thousands of disciples, send out missionaries far and wide, and thoroughly groom a number of successors.

Tsangpa Gyare was born in the district of Kule (*khu le*) in Upper Nyang (*myang stod*)<sup>46</sup> in 1161, the youngest of the seven sons. The number of boys was too much of an economic burden for the household, so his mother entrusted her new son to a bonpo<sup>47</sup> who gave him the name Yungdrung Pal (*gyung drung dpal*).<sup>48</sup> At the age of twelve, the boy was taken by an elder brother to a local monastery to learn the alphabet. The boy was either extremely precocious or extremely diligent or perhaps both, as he was immediately transferred to the quarters of one of the region’s most eminent scholars where he lived and studied for three years. In his teenage years, he is depicted as studying a dizzying curriculum of texts and practices with seven eminent scholars. The transmissions he received included the Abhidharma, Yoga Tantra, the Pacification (*zhi byed*) System, the Great Perfection, logic (*tshad ma*), the *rdzogs chen rigs rdzogs*, the Mahamaya Cycle, the *Treasure of the Great Merciful One* (*thugs rje chen po gter ma*), the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*, the *Names of Manjushri*, and *Great Compassion* (*thugs rje chen po*, by Atisha). This portrait of a young scholar contrasts noticeably with the biographical representation of Ling Repa’s youth, in which Lingre is depicted studying medicine and the dark

<sup>46</sup> *myang stod* is in Southern Tibet, not far from the Bhutanese border.

<sup>47</sup> A religious specialist in the Bon tradition.

<sup>48</sup> Although this is a distinctly Bonpo name, it is interesting that Tsangpa Gyare never relinquished it as his personal name.

arts, much in the same way (interestingly) that the depiction of the Gam-popa's early Kadampa training contrasts starkly with that of the occult education of Milarepa.

By the age of 22, Tsangpa was officially installed by a local guru as a scholar and religious instructor. He then took up residence in the hermitage of Lamda Barzang (*la mda 'bar bzang*). Soon after, he met Ling Repa while the latter was residing at his retreat at Ralung. Tsangpa presented Lingre with a bag of salt and conversed with him for some time. His interest and faith awakened, he asked and received permission to study with the venerable repa at Napu. After receiving the precepts of the Six Dharmas of Naropa, Tsangpa made quick progress, but an obstacle was to befall him:

After seven days, he was able to wear a single cotton garment. Then for a long time he fell ill with small-pox. On his recovery, he offered his teacher a mare called "The Queen of Beasts". He also offered him some tea and brown sugar<sup>49</sup>.

The presence of plague in premodern Tibet must have weighed on the minds of aspiring religious specialists like Tsangpa Gyare: sickness is mentioned often in the biographies of the renaissance period. It might be surmised that this early brush with a serious illness motivated the driven young man to use his remaining days to their fullest. This passage also introduces the theme of gift-giving and reciprocity that is remarkably prevalent throughout these two biographies, perhaps partly symptomatic of the period of explosive economic growth in the religious milieu of the renaissance period.

At about this time, Ling Repa was recruiting monks to help with the building of a temple at Napu. Novitiates who arranged to enter retreat in order to shirk this drudgery were fined one coin each. Tsangpa, who was not himself inclined towards manual labor, endeavored to join the exodus and offered a coin to Lingre, submitting the excuse that he needed to copy over some texts<sup>50</sup>. Lingre, seeing his disciple's ignoble motivation,

<sup>49</sup> 'gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, *deb ther sngon po*, pages 780-781. *zhag bdun nas ras thub pa byung/ der 'brum pas yun ring du bsnyung/ de dwangs nas rta rgod ma byol song gi rgyal mo blangs nas bla ma la phul/ ja bur yang drangs*.

<sup>50</sup> It is mentioned in more than one place that Tsangpa acted as a scribe while at Napu. Because his grammar and spelling were good, he sometimes helped other young scribes in correcting their copy errors. He also was employed by Lingre to copy-edit some of the old master's own compositions.

dismissed him. But the tone in which his teacher spoke alarmed Tsangpa who wilted with contrition.

He thought that if the lama was displeased, how can the precepts be kept? “Look what I’ve come to!” He exclaimed and shed tears. He then placed a plate full of brown sugar in front of the teacher and said: “I made a mistake!” and confessed. [Lingre] replied: “Ah! Only one who understands the doctrine acts like this!” and was pleased<sup>51</sup>.

Tsangpa worked on building the chapel for five months, and by the end of his apprenticeship had developed an ability to concentrate one-pointedly on any task at hand. This skill allowed him to make up for the time lost in his compulsory tenure: After building the chapel, he finished copying the text he was working on in a mere four days. Furthermore, in exchange for his devoted labor, Lingre bestowed on him the remaining Kagyu precepts<sup>52</sup>.

Although Lingre himself did not teach or compose texts on philosophical discourse, interactions depicted in Tsangpa’s biography depict him as stimulated and challenged by the intellectual acuity of his young disciple. One passage in the bio accounts a moment where Ling Repa rouses Tsangpa to a debate, demanding,

“Propose a religious conundrum!”

“I shouldn’t. How could I expose a contradiction existing in my teacher’s mind? It’s inappropriate!” Tsangpa replied.

“Did I not just give you permission [to do so]?” Lingre cajoled.

“Then propose a definition for the state of the Dharmakāya<sup>53</sup>,” ventured Tsangpa.

“It is that which is devoid of origination, destruction, and existence,” replied Lingre.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, page 781. *bla ma ma mnyes na gdams ngag gis ci btub nga ‘dra ba ‘ong ba byas nas bshags pa phul bas/ ‘o chos go ba bya ba de tsug ‘ong ba yin gsung nas mnyes.*

<sup>52</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Tsangpa also received precepts from other teachers while he was at Napu, including instruction on Hevajra and Mahamaya tantras.

<sup>53</sup> The “truth body”. Its meaning is generally associated with Buddhist conceptions of ultimate truth. It is often glossed as consisting of a subjective aspect (dharmakāya as wisdom, or realization of truth) and an objective aspect (dharmakāya as the ultimate nature of phenomena which is emptiness).



"If so," declared Tsangpa, "The sky would be considered an absolute truth [but this is clearly erroneous]."

Ling Repa could not reply, but he was pleased with Tsangpa's acumen<sup>54</sup>.

Tsangpa spent a total of five years at Napu Monastery with Ling Repa. During this time, Tsangpa alternated study and meditation practice, a pattern that he was to establish as normative for his lineage. He excelled especially at the practice of somatic yogas. As his biography says:

He acquired the ability to merge the outer air and inner breath, and could pass through walls. He manifested signs mentioned [in the sacred texts], such as victory in the battle with emotional afflictions. When he reported [these experiences] to his teacher, Lingre responded, "The Venerable Milarepa had the same experience! It is very wonderful!"<sup>55</sup>

Clearly, Ling Repa's definition of religious success was closely tied to the perfection of these physical yogas, a tendency that strongly echoed the *repa* legacy and heralded an emphasis that would continue in the Drukpa Kagyu lineage for generations. This passage also gives us the impression that Tsangpa was devoted to reclusive practice. But as much as the young ascetic seemed to thrive in the arts of yoga, he is also portrayed as having strong leanings towards communal life as we are informed: "He also acted as an assistant preacher, and never absented himself from the assemblies, and the daily work."<sup>56</sup> The biography suggests that Tsangpa's devotion to community, fostered in the intimate enclave of Napu, would eventually sustain his energy throughout birthing a massive and thriving religious complex. Ling Repa is represented as an interlocutor: he senses his disciple's calling, and shown (at least twice in Tsangpa's biographical account) refusing Tsangpa's entreaties to enter meditative retreat and instead grooming him as a successor.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p.781. *bla ma'i zhal nas/ nga la chos shig dris dang gsung/ de mi mchi bla ma la thal 'gyur phog na mi rung zhus pas/ ngas ghang ba byin pa yin mod gsung/ chos sku'i mtshan nyid cig bzhag par zhu zhus pas/ skye 'gag gnas gsum dang bral ba yin gsung pa lal 'o na nam mkha' yang chos skur thal lo gsungs pas lan med cing mnyes par gyur/*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 781-782. *rlung phi nang bsre nus pa dang rtsig pa la thogs pa med pa/ nyon mongs pa'i gyul las rgyal ba sogs bshad tshod tang mthun par byung nas bla ma la zhus pas/ rje btsun mi la la'ng 'di ltar byung ba yin/ bho mtshar che gsung/*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 782. *zhar chos gsungs/ gro 'dun dang spyi las ma chag/*

Nevertheless, his support of Tsangpa's tantric practice is occasionally evidenced. For example, at one point in the biography, he senses Tsangpa's practice would be benefited by a consort and sends Tsangpa to a woman named Kalzang with instructions to train in the "path of methods"<sup>57</sup>. When Tsangpa arrives at Kalzang's residence, he tells her of his teacher's suggestion.

Kalzang replied, "I'm willing serve you. I have had many good dreams about you. They portend that if you become a monk, it would benefit many beings. The realization of this teacher of mine [Ling Repa] is the greatest this side of the river Ganges, but he attracts [women] like myself."<sup>58</sup>

So Tsangpa apparently returned to Napu a single man. This incident in the biography indicates the first clear rhetorical turn away from the hermetic ideals to monastic ones. Not long after this incident, when Tsangpa was twenty-six, Ling Repa passed away.

After his teacher's death, Tsangpa inherited a number of disciples. To some of these, he assigned the task of sustaining Napu and he brought a chosen few with him to Karchu (*mkhar chu*) where he began a three-year meditative retreat. While he was at Karchu, he would discover the treasure text (*gter ma*) that would, for the first time, make a prominent Kagyu teacher into treasure-finder. This event may have enormously boosted the young scholar's personal cache and grown the popularity of the fledgling Drukpa sect. The text was *The Six Cycles of Equal Taste* (*ro snyoms skor drug*), ostensibly a text that Rechungpa brought back from one of his trips to India and later hid at Karchu. The stay at Karchu would also occasion the composition of some of Tsangpa's most evocative and popular songs (*mnyam mgur*), that would eventually earn him a cherished place in the libraries of many institutions.

After his stay at Karchu, Tsangpa spent some time traveling around Tsang visiting various Kagyu centers, gathering disciples and amassing

<sup>57</sup> *thab lam*, an unambiguous code-word in this context for the practice of tantric sexual yoga with a consort.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 782. *skal bzang na re/ ngas dang kyed kyi zhabs tog bsgrubs pas chog ste/ nga la khyed la brten pa'i rmi lam bzang po mang po byung/ khyed rang rab tu byung ba mdzod la 'gro don skyong ba 'thad/ ngad rang di bla ma 'di'ang chu bo gang'a tshun na rtogs pa mtho ba cig yin tel pho rang du 'dus pa 'di nga la sogs pa yod pas yin mod gsung/*

wealth. Eventually, he met Lama Zhang, who instructed him in the practice of compassion, and encouraged him to take monastic ordination. When Tsangpa was thirty-three years old, he complied. After taking ordination, Tsangpa traveled widely in Western, Central and Northern Tibet, establishing centers and raising funds (a job at which the biography portrays him as particularly adept) which he sent back to Napu.

By the time he returned to Tsang, he had amassed such wealth and such a huge following that he was able to quickly establish a monastic complex at Druk ('brug), where the biography says a thousand huts were built in the first year alone. While acting as abbot of Druk, Tsangpa would continue to make forays into the neighboring landscape, attracting disciples and making connections with wealthy patrons.

One of Tsangpa's greatest strengths it would appear from the account in *Deb ther sngon po* and evidence found in the biographies of his disciples Urgyenpa, Lorepa and Gotsangpa, was his apparent perception that people were his lineage's greatest resource. He sent his disciples on missions not only to every corner of Tibet, but even to India, Kashmir and Bhutan. It was his adamant wish that every one of his disciples would cover ground, a tendency that eventually earned the Drukpa Kagyu the reputation for being almost everywhere. By the fourteenth century, this reputation had taken hold as Go Lotsawa states: "It is said there was no place in Tibet within a distance that could be covered by a vulture in eighteen days, where disciples belonging to the Drukpa sect could not be found."<sup>59</sup> It also says in the Annals that Tsangpa emphasized three main points to his disciples: "to have disgust for worldly matters, to mentally abandon concern for this life and to cultivate devotion to the lama"<sup>60</sup>. These three admonitions were strongly reflective of the core Kagyu values of asceticism and devotion, and would set a tone for Drukpa lineage's general suspicion of scholastic agendas.

Tsangpa passed away in 1211. The biography states that his cremation was accompanied by miraculous signs and the twenty-one joints of his

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 785. *bya rgod kyi nyin lam bco brgyad du 'brug pa'i bu slob kyi ma khyab pa med bya ba byung.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 784. *slob ma rnams la 'jig rten gyi zhen log/ tshe blos btang gi sgrub pa/ bla ma'i mos gus gsum gtso bor 'dzin du bcug...*

spine turned into twenty-one images of Tara, most of which were said (at Go Lotsawa's time) to be preserved inside a stūpa at Ralung.

## V. Content and Themes

If the reader is left with one impression from reading these two biographical accounts, it is that Ling Repa Padma Dorje and Tsangpa Gyare Yeshe Dorje are rhetorically divergent personalities. Ling Repa, on the one hand, was a wandering bard, with only vague commitments to the concept of establishment. His interest in women and his composition of tantric commentaries without having so much as read the tantras paint him as a bit of a wild card. But his unconventionality finds expression as the normative Kagyu outlet of ascetic existence on the fringe of religious society. Tsangpa Gyare, on the other, was a consolidator and invested some value in scholasticism and institutions. His efforts at composing original treatises for the incipient Drukpa sect and his amassing of disciples and wealth indicate a concern with establishment. In this respect, these founders embody the dual impulses in the Kagyu lineage: impulses towards iconoclasm and civility, towards wildness and tamedness, towards ascetic practice and community. To fully explore the web of tensions and ideological enigmas stemming from these impulses would be an extensive project. In the remainder of this essay, I will touch lightly on a few topics that emerge organically from a reading of these biographical accounts, as a gesture towards more in-depth study in the future. I have selected three themes that reflect some version of the tensions mentioned above: the theme of solitude, the theme of poetic composition and the theme of travel.

### *Bringing the Mountains to Town*

The Kagyu lineage's self-declared emphasis has always been on devotion to the teacher, undergoing long-term retreat, and the practice of intense yogic exercises, to some degree uncomplicated by textual study. The Kagyu disciple's tasks, then, requires intensive apprenticeship with a guru and years in solitary retreat, not necessarily affiliation with an institution (at least ideally). In Lingre and Tsangpa's biographies, there is ample evidence of devotional gestures (such as Tsangpa's indenture-

ship to build Lingre's temple), and—as is typical for Kagyu disciples—Lingre and Tsangpa both spend a period of apprenticeship with their teachers. After that, the protagonists follow the lineage template for entering a period of solitary (or semi-solitary) retreat in the mountains, a living situation that is considered most noble and efficacious for the practice of intensive yogic exercises.

However, if mountain solitude was so ideal for the attainment of the most cherished of Kagyu aims, why did individuals like Ling Repa—who seemed so interested in his youth in following Rechungpa's ascetic example—and Tsangpa Gyare—who poured such energy into yogic practice—bother with the establishment of centers? While this is a complicated question that could really only be investigated by thoroughly reading all the primary literature available, I would suggest that the content of these biographies indicate two reasons may have been of primary concern. First, there was the simple fact of economic practicality: even yogis have to eat, and the acquisition of supplies is easier for a group. Second, these early patriarchs recognized that the survival of their brilliantly developed soteriology of ascetic practice ironically depended on enclosing it in the walls of scholastic synthesis.

As to the first reason: life is harsh on the Tibetan plateau. The laity in the 12th century eked out a living through animal husbandry and some agriculture at low elevations. The role of the wandering yogi, a part intermittently adopted by Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare, required begging for food from already poor farmers and nomads. There are a number of references in these accounts to the mendicant's livelihood. Ling Repa, for instance, first meets Menmo on a begging round. We are also told that Tsangpa Gyare relied exclusively on the generosity of lay patrons while he was traveling in his early years around central Tibet. The most direct reference to the economic hardships of yogic life is made when Sumpa Repa sends Ling Repa away with the invective, “Now go! In our country of Nyal, even ogres die from hunger!”<sup>61</sup> Clearly, death by malnourishment or starvation was never a distant possibility for yogis who lived alone or in small groups on the arid plateau. In this light, it is easy to

<sup>61</sup> “Grub thob chen po gling chen ras pa padma rdo rje'i nam par thar pa”, Volume I, folio 377. *gzhen du song/ nged kyi dmyal 'di srin po rtogs ris shi ba'i lo rgyus mang po bshad/*

understand how individuals such as our two protagonists would be attracted to and concerned with consolidation of resources and the economic security it could provide for religious specialists.

As to the second reason: concern for independent survival of the Drukpa lineage and soteriology must have been a prime motivator for the institutional push. The religious fecundity of the renaissance period, especially in the regions of Central, Western and South-western Tibet, bred stiff competition between lineages. All around them, according to accounts in the Blue Annals and Institutional Histories of the time, lamas and their disciples were consolidating and building institutions, attracting lay patronage and amassing wealth. The trajectory of Ling Repa's life (and a number of specific references in the biography) suggests he was at least suspicious of monastic agenda. For example, after his hermitage is robbed by a monk, he declared "Just by shaving everyone's heads, religion does not occur!"<sup>62</sup> But even Ling Repa must have felt concerned for the survival of his incipient repa legacy, as he invested energy in building a temple at Napu and, according to the biographical account, commanded Tsangpa to "Take care of my Napu!"<sup>63</sup> Still, there is no evidence in the biographies that Lingre's original vision for his center and Tsangpa's eventual conversion to a monastic model were congruent. Tsangpa's biography states that he did not take vows until relatively late in life, long after Lingre's death, a decision perhaps delayed by fidelity to his teacher's preferences.

Despite Tsangpa's eventual reluctant conversion to the monastic agenda (we are told in Tsangpa's biography that Zhang Rinpoche did not convince him of the merits of monasticism easily), he attempted to affect a kind of synthesis of the yogic ideal with the realities of institutional projects. One way in which he actuated this uneasy marriage is to disperse his disciples physically to the far corners of the Himalaya. In this way, he bred disciples who were hybrids of the peripatetic yogi and the zealous missionary. One such disciple, whose embodiment of this ideal was legendary, was Lorepa who lived a brilliantly ascetic life but managed also to travel to Bhutan, convert many followers to the Kagyu way and found

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol.I, folio 387. *tham cad kyi skra bregs phyis chos ni ma byung gsung.*

<sup>63</sup> 'gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal, *deb ther sngon po*, page 782. "nga'i sna phu gzung."

a community there that still exists. Tsangpa also invested the solidifying Drukpa sect with yogic ideals through his compositions, which will be discussed below.

### *The Power of Poetry*

There is no distinctly Kagyu genre more widely read, quoted and appreciated by Tibetan religious specialists and laity (regardless of their sectarian affiliation) than spiritual “songs of experience” (*mnyam mgur*), a literary form in which the tensions of wildness and tameness converge. The appeal of these songs probably comes from the nature of their authorship, as well as their content. Unlike most forms of literary expression in the 12th century, spiritual songs did not derive their authority from other texts (such as the blooming exegetical literature), from prophesy (such as *terma*) or from ostensible ties to exalted places or individuals. Spiritual songs, in fact, did not claim authority from any other source than the inspiration of a vagrant poet. While this form of melodic expression lent credibility to its author and derived clout from its author’s celebrity, it was nevertheless “democratic in impulse”. Kagyu songs convey a strong message that exalted states of mind and insights are accessible to anyone, given the right circumstances, and the liberty to express these insights is universal.

As for their content, spiritual songs are wholly rooted in the Tibetan landscape and are therefore an expression of the renaissance passion to create a distinctively Tibetan form of Buddhist literature. In the case of songs, this form is a compelling mix of non-elaborate (almost zen-like) instructions and evocative natural metaphors: it would not be too simplistic to say that spiritual songs are couched in a rhetoric and rhythmic form of naturalness. They commonly refer to images such as the stunning vastness of Himalayan valleys, a snow mountain at sunrise, or the distinctive warble of a local bird. Even as early as the 7th century, as evidenced in the Dun Huang manuscripts, poetry was rife with natural and local imagery<sup>64</sup>. These poems were composed in the vernacular and use imagery

<sup>64</sup> See excerpts from Dun Huang poetry in rGyal, Don grub, *Bod kyi mgur glu byung ‘phel gyi lo rgyus dang khyad chos bsduṣ par ston pa rig pa’i khe’u rnam par rtsen pa’i skyed tshal*, in *dPal don grub rgyal gyi gsung ‘bum*. Peking: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1997.

of objects familiar to ordinary Tibetan people, not the rarified language of academic discourse and metaphors associated with Indian precedents. An excerpt from Tsangpa Gyare's *Eight Flourishings of a Lance*, written during his immurement at Karchu, provides us with an example:

Having determined just how things really are,  
I don't prefer nirvana over samsara.  
Certain, without the fluctuations of discursive mind,  
My view is like a lance, spinning free in the open sky!

Stable since the root is cut,  
My six aggregates rest without fabrication.  
Without the effort of mindfulness and grasping,  
My meditation is like a lance, spinning free in the open sky!

Experiences arise unhindered.  
I am free of anxiety, timidity and reserve.  
Victorious over fixation and grasping,  
My conduct is like a lance, spinning free in the open sky!<sup>65</sup>

Tsangpa's song is typical of Kagyu songs of experience in its evocation of a sense of freedom and ease—the kind of words that express the unencumbered lifestyle of the wandering ascetic. But his use of the man-made lance as the central positive metaphor of his poem is a most compelling literary device. The lance is both an artifact of civilization and a symbol of man's most savage instincts. Is the message that the tools of war are not without good use? Lama Zhang, after all, who was living in the same region and was of the same lineage (and would later ordain Tsangpa), was at the height of his military escapades to compel his neighbors to accept certain religious affiliations. But just as easily, it might be possible to interpret the metaphor as pacifist—throw up your weapons (and your civilized affiliations) and let everything go. In any case, Tsangpa was adept at finding ways to adapt the soteriological messages of his lineage to the material culture of his day.

Examples of the direct and non-elaborate practical instructions are found everywhere in the genre of spiritual songs. These terse and clear invectives were intended to communicate the essence of mahāmudrā, the

<sup>65</sup> Tsangpa Gyare, "*Eight Flourishings of a Lance*", taught by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso at Kagyu Thubten Choling in Wappinges Falls, 1997.



non-dual and non-conceptual realization of the nature of mind. Ling Repa sings:

If you do not rest in mind just as it is  
 No other remedy will make things right.  
 So all my doubts about whether it's like this or not  
 Have vanished into thin air.

Following the same style of composition, Tsangpa sings:

Hey! Hey! Do you know what dharmakāya is?  
 It's letting mind relax just as it is.  
 Discursive thought is free, just like it is—  
 Getting your mind around it is impossible!<sup>66</sup>

These mahāmudrā songs were intended to convey the direct experience of the yogi looking at his own mind for the benefit of his listeners. This kind of versified format augmented the more formal Kagyu precepts, and the colloquial style of expression had the advantage of being easy to memorize and access for the average Tibetan. Making direct instruction available through song is a strong support for individual empowerment.

Nevertheless, despite the impulse of these founders towards a rhetoric of naturalness, they were pragmatists who saw the value of developing an exegetical tradition, composing ritual manuals and writing practice texts. Yet, within this more scholastic and ritual vein, both Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare were clearly concerned with prioritizing meditative experience and individual practice over complicated academic exegesis. This apparent contradiction is resolved in part both in the circumstances of composition and their content. For example, the vision a blue muse-like female that inspires Ling Repa to compose commentaries on tantra is reminiscent of prajñāpāramitā, the mahayana symbol for emptiness, the natural state of things expressed in Kagyu sources as a synonym for mahāmudrā. The mediator of Ling Repa's composition of scholastic exegesis was, it may be possible to surmise, a natural impulse, symbolized by the blue dakini. Similarly, the most brilliant accomplishment of Tsangpa's lifetime, his discovery of the Rechungpa terma, resulted in a

<sup>66</sup> Both quotes from Khenpo Tsultrim Gyatso, *Songs of Realization by Milarepa and Other Buddhist Masters*, trans. Ari Goldfield (Unpublished).

text that traced its pedigree both to the repa tradition (associated with solitary life) and to the motherland of India (the original land of institutional Buddhism). The prestige of this discovery was rightly timed to identify Tsangpa as the rising representative of the repa tradition. But the identification of the terma with Indian origins can also be interpreted as a sign that the incipient Drukpa lineage was poised to compete in the religious landscape of central Tibet.

### *The Cache of Travel*

It can perhaps safely be said that no inchoate lineage of the Renaissance period was more aware of the oblique power of quiet expansion over distance than the Drukpa Kagyu. As mentioned before, Tsangpa instigated the model of the peripatetic missionary who, in the guise of the ascetic, moves into territory and claims it for his disciples. This was the Drukpa's signature pattern for centuries. However, in these two biographies, there is evidence that local travel was an important aspect of consolidation. Both Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare travel extensively around Central and Western Tibet. In the accounts of Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare, travel is portrayed as a way of (1) gathering students, (2) amassing wealth, (3) consecrating places, (4) networking. In the case of Ling Repa, the *'ba ra* biography portrays him as reticent to let his missions turn into financial ventures. While traveling from Nyangpo (*myang po*) to Nagsho (*nags shod*), a geshe and his students approached Lingre asking for empowerment:

[The Geshe said], "Each person taught will offer you one cow. Accept our property!" Lingre replied, "I will not sell the thigh bone of the Kagyus. I don't need your wealth!"<sup>67</sup>

Despite his depicted integrity, however, Ling Repa is later seen accepting wealth and property in quantity for the construction of Napu. Tsangpa Gyare, for his part, is depicted as unabashed about embarking on fundrais-

<sup>67</sup> "Grub thob chen po gling chen ras pa padma rdo rje'i nram par thar pa", Volume I, folio 389-390. *ston mi res 'dzo mo re 'bul ba yin/ ka cha zhad gcig snoms zer ba la/ bka' brgyud kyi bla 'tshong mi byed nor gyis dgos pa med gsungs...* / To sell the thigh bone of someone after death (for use in making a trumpet for the ritual practice of *chod*) is considered disrespectful to the deceased. Similarly, if Ling Repa were to keep offerings made in reciprocation for his religious services, it would be disrespecting his lineage.

ing missions, since he quickly spent the money on building Druk, Napu and Ralung.

Resources of other kinds could also be accessed through travel. In order to receive teachings from Sumpa Repa and Pagmo Drupa, Ling Repa is portrayed as traveling for days (perhaps weeks) to neighboring provinces. Tsangpa collects Kagyu texts and transmissions wherever they can be found on the road. A reader gets the impression from the whole of Chapter VIII in the *deb ther sngon po*, that teaching exchanges and books were a major factor of the religious economy during the Renaissance period. Not only were they fodder for reciprocity, they also lent prestige to the individual who possessed the teaching. For these two protagonists, these social, economic and religious exchanges were especially important, although Tsangpa Gyare seems to have been the founder who recognized the lasting impact this prestige would lend to the lineage. Hence, education and textual transmission were a driving force behind travel for these two hierarchs.

Travel was also a way of appropriating place for the express purposes of validating the lineage. One way place was appropriated was through consecration, the construction of sacredness through a ritual event. The most dramatic example of the construction of sacredness in these biographies is Tsangpa's discovery of terma at Karchu. The discovery of a terma at a Kagyu meditative site might well have changed that place forever in local imagination, and in the eyes of the lineage, if examples of terma discovery in Tibet in general are any indication. We also see the construction of sacredness in a more concrete way with the construction of temples and stupas. For example, we are informed that Tsangpa Gyare's remains were placed in a stūpa at Ralung. The construction of stupas around prominent Tibetan gurus immortalized them in the imagination of their followers, transforming an ordinary piece of ground into a pilgrimage spot, a literal abode of a Buddha.

In the relationship of these two founders with place, we can see something of the tension between wishing to retain a connection with the lifestyle of the mountain hermit with an awareness of the necessity of pinning their lineage to *one* place. Ling Repa's biography informs us that

It was unanimously agreed that from Amdo and Kham to China and Mongolia, in the five upper regions and the three districts, among people who practiced listening, contemplating and meditating on the Dharma, there was

not one [place] where people had not been made beggars by listening to his songs<sup>68</sup>.

Although a critical reader might suspect a degree of exaggeration in this passage, he or she might concede that it expresses the lineage's recognition that Lingre's particular message to take up the solitary life of a wandering mendicant reached a wide swath of the Himalayas. Ling Repa's interest in travel, however, is augmented by his interest in centralizing a legacy in one place: the hermitage of Napu. He selects Napu's location for its isolation, but gradually allows its expansion into a community. Tsangpa's way of reconciling his dual affiliation was to design Ralung as a neighborhood of hermits. Instead of building one or several large structures to house his monks, he insists on making 1000 individual huts where each meditator could maintain some measure of solitude. He designed his place to allow for close interactions without giving in wholly to the design of a single establishment.

## VI. Conclusion

As mentioned above, it is assumed, and sometimes even explicitly stated in indigenous Tibetan sources, that many founders of lineages are only seen as such in retrospect. Examining compositions, biographical and autobiographical accounts that are contemporary with the lives of founders often reveals little or no clear evidence that a given individual or his contemporaries identified him as sire of a religious order. So what eventually uplifts a man to the heights of founder-hood? What is it that legitimates his status? Is it his cultural cache? The texts and practices he has inherited? The monasteries he built? His activities? His charisma? His compositions? Looking at stories of Ling Repa and Tsangpa Gyare yields evidence that it may be all of these things to some degree. The emphasis in these stories on hermetic ideals, poetic composition and itinerate activities suggest that the founders of the Drukpa lineage were in part defined by these parameters and skills.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, folio 402. *bsnyan pa ni...smad mdo khams rgya so yan chad nas stod snga ris bskor gsum man chad kyi thos bsam sgom gsum mdzad pa'i chos pa rnams 'gur la sprang po mi byed pa ni gcig kyang med!*

More broadly, however, I would suggest that the genre of *nam thar* (biography or hagiography) and the representations found therein are largely responsible for defining the parameters of “founderhood”. Those parameters are fraught with ambiguity, tensions and paradoxes that become a part of the fabric of lineage self-identification, so that the complex interplay of events, personality traits and interactions found in biography become a part of the defining traits of lineage, and provide suggested models and behavior patterns for the followers of that lineage to reflect on and sometimes emulate either wittingly or unwittingly. Some details in the biographies suggest that the personas of these founders were in part retrospective constructions consciously created by later biographers. For example, the past-life digression found in Ling Repa’s biography, even if its inclusion was orchestrated by Ling Repa himself, seems to serve a function of constructing a sutric ethos around the protagonist. However, some details in the biographies seem to lack a necessarily constructive agenda. Merely the diachronically and geographically local atmosphere in which the events of the biographies take place are in large part responsible for creating the persona of these founders. The idiosyncratic personalities of the founders themselves, while doubtless subject to construction by the biographies’ authors, were also to some degree responsible for the flavor of the biographical tales woven around them. Therefore, I submit that the “founderhood” created by biography emerges from a complex set of sources and materials: some rhetorically constructed and some historical, social, regional, and personal.

There are numerous examples of the ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes—some already mentioned earlier in this paper—that emerge from such the complex rhetorical portraits in biography. To provide one more example will illustrate an ambiguity that becomes a cornerstone on which founderhood rests. Even while biography is certainly composed as an ode to a saint’s greatness, this ode is not complete without the overcoming of weaknesses to become great. Both Ling Repa and Tsangpa’s biographies make specific mention of their human weaknesses. Ling Repa’s inability to resist Menmo’s charm, and his loss of faith in his teacher Khyung Tsangpa (later resulting in his failure in yogic practice) depict Ling Repa as facing human challenges familiar to most readers. Similarly Tsangpa experiences shame and embarrassment for his own laziness, when he

attempts to evade the physical work of building Ling Repa's temple. This element of human weakness is, throughout Tibetan biographies, an important theme and it may be possible to conclude that encountering and overcoming personal weaknesses is an element of founderhood, at least in the Kagyu lineage, so that even after centuries of transmission Lingre and Tsangpa's "weaknesses" have still not been edited out.

But it cannot be overlooked that the status of "founders" may be due to other—seemingly arbitrary—factors. It is difficult not to suspect that while some individuals were posthumously elevated to the level of sainthood due to the alignment of successful patron relationships for example, a great many extraordinary stars of the plateau died with their names lost to history due to such chance happenings as stormy weather, disease, fire and so forth. Ling Repa too might well have sunk into obscurity if it had not been for a few serendipitous circumstances. Two factors in particular stand out as *moiras* that would situate him at the head of the Drukpa Sects. First was simply legitimacy by relationship: he was the disciple of Pagmo Drupa, one of the most prominent and popular monastic teachers in the Tsang region in the 12th century. He was also luckily the teacher of Tsangpa Gyare, who consciously accepted the burden of creating a legacy and therefore was perhaps more deserving of founder status. Second, Ling Repa co-founded Ralung, a center that would become the seat of the Drukpa Kagyu abbatial succession for 400 years. He was literally the brick-layer of a structure that would house future generations of Drukpa adherents. What began during his lifetime as a small hermitage would blossom into a cosmopolitan center of learning, a repository of wealth and texts, a political corporation—in short a sectarian establishment of the kind mentioned earlier by Snellgrove. Therefore, Ling Repa's status as a founder is largely based on relationship and his identity as the architect of Ralung.

While Ling Repa may be seen as the physical builder of place, Tsangpa Gyare was the Drukpa Kagyu's first soteriological, hermeneutical and textual architect. His most brilliant accomplishments in this area were undoubtedly his discover of the Rechungpa terma that would transform a struggling tradition into the gem of Tsang, and his composition of a number of a number of texts that would become the defining exegesis of the Drukpa Kagyu. He showed the characteristics of a great synthesizer,

embedding his compositions in Kagyu hermeneutics. He also integrated his lineage into the monastic establishment, a move that would ensure its long-term survival in the increasingly institutional environment of central Tibet.

While their status as founders was *originally* linked to place and composition, their elevation was likely due in part to the value placed by Tibetans on narratives. While this essay was primarily concerned with the Tibetan biography as a semi-historical document with rhetoric communicating the tensions inherent in the concept of “lineage” and “founderhood”, it can be read in numerous other ways. These narratives are also, in a sense, myths that embody an interplay between humanity and sacredness that communicates meanings in ways more allusive and profound than many other indigenous forms of literary expression. As Matthew Kapstein, discussing narrative in the Tibetan context, observes:

...mythic matters seem to be more subtle than the facts of the matter, so that the truth in myth may be thought to be expressed allegorically, metaphorically or approximately; or myth may be thought just to orient us towards truth so buried in mystery that no human discourse can disclose it directly<sup>69</sup>.

While the actual activities of these founders were constrained by time and circumstance, their stories became important templates on which ideals of the lineage were modeled. And while these stories were also sometimes elaborated on over the centuries and reconstructed to reflect the agendas of given time periods and authors, perhaps the rewriting—instead of irking the historian in all of us—may turn out to be the very recipe that allows us to evaluate meanings pertinent to time and place, and transcendent of time and place, encoded therein.

## Reference Bibliography

- Cabezón, Jose Ignacio and Roger R. Jackson. *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.
- Davidson, Ronald M. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>69</sup> Matthew Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 142.

- Gampopa. *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, trans. Khenpo Konchog Gyaltsen, ed. Ani K. Trinlay Chodron. Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 1998.
- Gyatso, Janet. *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Gyatso, Khenpo Tsultrim. *Songs of Realization by Milarepa and Other Buddhist Masters*, trans. Ari Goldfield (Unpublished).
- Kapstein, Matthew. *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Kagyü Thubten Choling Translation Committee. *Karmapa: The sacred prophesy*. Wappingers Falls, NY: Kagyü Thubten Choling, 1999.
- Lopez, Donald S., ed. *Religions of Asia in Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002.
- Roerich, George N. trans. *The Blue Annals*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1949; reprint, 1996.
- Snellgrove, David. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan successors*. Boston: Shambala Publications, 1987.
- Thayé, Jampa. *A Garland of Gold: The early Kagyü masters in India and Tibet*. Bristol: Ganesha Press, 1990.

## Other References

Websites:

[www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org)

[www.thdl.org](http://www.thdl.org)

[www.drukpa.org](http://www.drukpa.org)

Tibetan Texts:

- ‘Gos lo tsa ba gzhon nu dpal. *deb ther sngon po*. Chengdu: Si-khron mi-rigs dpe-skrun-khan, 1984.
- “Grub thob chen po gling chen ras pa padma rdo rje’i nam par thar pa” in *’ba’ ra bka’ brgyud gser ’phreng chen mo*. Dehradun: Ngawang Gyaltzen and Ngawang Lungtok, 1970, Volume I.



### Appendix I: The Kagyu Lineage

(Simplified outline including some individuals mentioned in this paper)



