

INDIAN SIDDHAS AS TIBETAN GODS

In the following paper I shall present a problem of religious syncretism within Tibetan Buddhism I met with while preparing a study on the beliefs and practices of Tibetan spirit-mediums (*dpa' bo*). This study is based on material collected during field-work among Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal and seeks to give as detailed a picture of spirit-medium activities as possible and also to place them in the context of Tibetan folk-religion<sup>1</sup>.

The material, however, also raises many questions of a more general nature, connected with the relationship between popular religion and textual, with the study of how Indian Buddhist traditions were spread and interpreted on Tibetan village level, that is, in short, with problems of religious syncretism in a Buddhist country<sup>2</sup>. This modest contribution discusses, naturally, only a small part of these difficult problems and takes as its only theme the fact that in the pantheon of the above-mentioned spirit-mediums we find an important group called *rGya gar grub chen bryad cu*, the « Eighty Indian Mahāsiddhas ».

As an introduction a few words about the spirit-mediums and their séances might perhaps be said. The information relevant in this case was received from mainly three *dpa' bos*, all living in the same refugee-community in Nepal. They were all laymen and did not possess any

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1. For further details on this type of spirit-mediumship and for background-material, see P.-A. BERGLIE, *Preliminary Remarks on Some Tibetan Spirit-Mediums in Nepal*, in « Kailash », 4 (1976), pp. 85-108, P.-A. BERGLIE, *On the Question of Tibetan Shamanism*, in « Tibetan Studies », ed. by M. Brauen and P. Kvaerne, Zürich, 1978, pp. 39-51, and P.-A. BERGLIE, *Spirit-possession in Theory and Practice - Séances with Tibetan Spirit-Mediums in Nepal*, in « Religious Ecstasy », ed. by N. G. Holm, Stockholm, 1982, pp. 151-66.

2. For interesting studies of related problems, see the articles published in *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries*, ed. by H. Bechert, Göttingen, 1978.

religious authority outside their séances. They did, however, stand in the centre of the religious life of the village through their frequent contacts with various personal problems of the villagers.

All three of them had a *dpa' bo* heritage, that is, had a longer or shorter line of spirit-mediums in the family and this hereditary predisposition had, furthermore, been confirmed by divine election. This call from the gods is characterized by visionary experiences: the gods appear to the spirit-medium candidate and take him away to unfamiliar and often distant places. When the candidate finally accepts the call from the gods, he can turn to a lama or an older spirit-medium in order to be tested, or initiated. This ritual, or series of rituals, aims at identifying the gods to the candidate and to teach him the necessary ritual techniques and proceedings.

The *dpa' bos* are, without comparison, mostly consulted as healers in cases of illness. To a far less extent they are asked to reveal the future, locate lost objects, catch thieves etc.

To carry out his task, the spirit-medium holds a séance, which may vary in length and content, but which always has the same structure. Thus it is always opened with invocations sung to the gods, inviting them to come to the place, or more specifically, to the mirror, or mirrors, placed on the altar built for the occasion. In this introductory part, a large number of gods, sometimes about a hundred, are mentioned by name. The medium is now able to see them arriving and arranging themselves according to rank in the mirrors. When all the gods have arrived, the *dpa' bo* sends away his own consciousness, *rnam shes* (Skt. *vijñāna*), to be taken care of by a special deity during the rest of the séance. When his body is thus emptied the god, chosen for the evening, enters and takes possession of it. Thereafter, it is the god who talks, sings and acts. If it is a healing séance, however, the actual curing, the removal of the illness, is effected by a supernatural animal, usually a wolf, wild dog, or a bird, who for a short time then occupies the body of the *dpa' bo*. At the end of the séance, all the gods are again mentioned by name and each of them is thanked with a few drops of tea.

Then the gods, including the possessing deity, leave riding on their mounts, the spirit-medium's consciousness returns and the séance is over. Of what has happened during the greater part of the séance, the *dpa' bo* has afterwards no recollections whatsoever. This is, in a few words, how a spirit-medium séance is structured. To ritual details there will be occasion to return later.

With the help of the name-lists given at the beginning and the end of the séances a rather large pantheon can be delineated. The pantheon is divided into three hierarchically ordered classes. The uppermost is that of the *lha*, the middle is that of the *btsan*, mostly deities connected with mountains in Tibet, and the lowest, finally, is that of the *klu*, deities connected with lakes and waters. As a parallel to this horizontal

partition of the pantheon, there is a vertical, oriented from west to east. Here the *lha* class is placed at *sTod rgya gar gangs ri*, the « Upper Indian Snow-Mountains », the *btsan* in the central provinces of Tibet, *dBus* and *gTsang*, and the *klu* in *A mdo* and *Khams*, the eastern provinces. This agrees with the traditional Tibetan concept of the orientation of their country as sloping from India in the west to China in the east. The connection of the *lha* with India was further stressed by their designations as *rGya gar lha*, the « Indian Gods » or, as their number was eighty, as *rGya gar lha rab brgyad cu*, the « Eighty Excellent Indian Gods » and as *rGya gar grub chen brgyad cu*, the « Eighty Indian Mahāsiddhas ». Before discussing the conceptions of these gods and Siddhas of the spirit-mediums, a few general remarks are needed.

Among the gods mentioned, one may distinguish between gods more closely connected with and actively participating in spirit-medium activities and gods more loosely connected with them. Most active might, of course, the gods be called, who took possession of the *dpa' bos*. In the cases I witnessed, it was always a *btsan*, but as we shall see, also members of the *lha* class could enter the impure human body in spite of their higher status.

During the séances there are still more gods actively involved in various capacities. For the duration of the possession the body of the spirit-medium is, thus, protected by five gods residing on the top of his head, on his shoulderblades, and at points in the middle of his back and chest. A member of the *lha* class is always guarding the top of the head and often the right shoulder. It may further be mentioned, that at one séance the whole of the spirit-medium's body was said to be protected by the *rGya gar lha*.

Other gods protect the entrances to the body of the *dpa' bo*, the *rtsa sgo*, the doors to the *rtsa*, the three channels leading from the top of the skull and from the tips of the fourth fingers on each hand respectively, to a point in the middle of the chest and through one of which the possessing god enters. These doorkeepers will prevent demons from entering and disturbing the proceedings. The one protecting the *rtsa sgo* at the top of the head is always a *lha*.

Members of the *lha* class are, moreover, linked to specific ritual procedures. Thus, at healing séances a group of three *lha* was always called for when the removal of the illness was to take place. They were *rGya gar sman pa gsum po*, the « Three Indian Healers », and they were asked to guide at and supervise that critical moment.

A second ritual, which was performed at nearly every séance, was the drum divination, *rtsis*. For this the small sand-glass-shaped hand-drum was used. It was put with one of its skins upwards, on which then one or more grains of rice were placed. Then a group of *lha* called *rGya gar rtsis pa gsum po*, the « Three Indian Diviners », was asked to move the grains, or make them rotate, thus giving the answer to the question.

Accordingly, there were three possible outcomes of this procedure: the grains could move upwards to the altar or rotate clock-wise, they could remain motionless on the drumskin, or, finally, move away from the altar or rotate counterclockwise. If a question has been asked, for instance, about the prognosis of an illness, the movements of the grains in the first case mean that everything is going to be well, the lack of movement in the second means that the prognosis is uncertain, and the direction of the grains in the last case makes it look bad for the patient.

The third ritual I want to mention in this brief survey of the activities of the Indian gods is intended to cure men and animals suffering from difficulties in breathing. The procedure is as follows. The *dpa' bo*, when possessed, heats a bowl filled with white stones. He then stirs the red-hot stones with his bare feet. If he now sees the colours of the rainbow in the glow, all is going to be well, but if he instead only sees smoke, the illness might be fatal.

This procedure is supervised by *rGya gar me ri dmar po*, the « Indian Red Fire-Mountain ».

This Indian god also has a role to play in the last ritual I will mention. This ritual is called *bla 'khug*, the « calling of the *bla* ». According to the *dpa' bos*, a man can lose his *bla*, « soul », for many reasons. Demons may, for instance, steal it and carry it away. They, however, do not keep the *bla* for very long but throw it away. The aim of the *bla 'khug* ritual is, therefore, to locate the lost *bla* and bring it back to its owner, who otherwise will slowly languish and finally die. In this ritual members of the *lha* class will take possession of the *dpa' bo* and try to bring the *bla* back, namely *rGya gar me ri dmar po*, *rGya gar ri bkra mchor bo*, or *rGya gar a tsar nag po*. Then the *dpa' bo* will speak, I was told, in a language impossible for the ordinary Tibetan to understand. This language was, however, identified by a Tibetan who had stayed for a time in India, as « the language of India ». All the *lha* are conceived of as being of a mild, benevolent nature, and if they prove unable to bring the *bla* back, they will leave the *dpa' bo* and make room for one of the more ferocious Tibetan mountain-deities of the *btsan* class, who will then take possession of the *dpa' bo* and bring the séance to a happy end.

Several other examples could have been given to stress the fact, that these Indian gods, far from being loosely integrated in spirit-medium practices, actively participate in central rituals at the core of spirit-mediumship.

Although the number of the *lha* is eighty, only about thirty or forty names could in fact be heard at the séances. Within the class there were, however, smaller groups, each consisting of gods with similar specialities. In total eight such groups could be recorded: *dran mchog*, *grub thob*, *sman pa*, *mingon shes*, *me ri*, *a tsar*, *rtsis pa*, and *mkha' 'gro*. The meaning of these terms was not always clear to the informants.

The first, *dran mchog*, referred, according to the *dpa' bos*, to gods who guided men after death, or more specifically, lifted them up from a lower destiny to a higher, preferably to a heaven. The members of this group were held to be the foremost among the *lha*. Here *rGya gar dran mchog dkar po* and *rGya gar +yardren bla ma* may be mentioned. The second group, *grub thob*, Siddhas, counted among its members *Grub thob ma dbang ring mo* and *Thang stong rgyal po*. The latter is the famous Tibetan fifteenth-century bridge-builder and Siddha. The members of the third group, *sman pa*, the « Healers », are three in number, one of whom is *rGya gar sman pa dkar po*, the « White Indian Healer ». The fourth group consists of gods with the gift of clairvoyance, *mngon shes*. Mentioned among these was *mNgon shes mkha' 'gro dkar mo*. The only member of the *me ri*, was the already mentioned god *rGya gar me ri dmar po*, as the only member of the *a tsar* was *rGya gar a tsar nag po*. Among the *rtsis pa*, the seventh group, three gods were the foremost, namely *rGya gar rtsis pa dkar po*, *rGya gar rtsis pa khra bo*, and *rGya gar rtsis pa nag po*, that is, the « White Indian Diviner », the « Piebald Indian Diviner », and the « Black Indian Diviner ». To their respective colour, the three possible results of the divination procedure obviously correspond. Coming to the last group, *mkha' 'gro*, that is, *mkha' 'gro ma*, the five *rGya gar mkha' 'gro +dernga* may be mentioned, as well as the female consort of Padmasambhava, *mKha' 'gro ye shes mtsho rgyal*.

Several names were recorded, which the informants could not place in any of these groups and whose names give no clues. *rGya gar bum pa'i bla ma* and *rGya gar rong lha dkar po* are examples of such gods.

The picture of the land of these gods, *rGya gar yul*, « India », given at the séances was rather vague, containing stereotyped phrases. Thus, one of the *dpa' bos* described it as a land where nothing was lacking, whose inhabitants were clothed in white and constantly working for the benefit of dharma.

There were also to be found various objects, such as cymbals, conch-shell trumpets, and a golden drum, which when beaten sounded like a sow. A cold rain of flowers is falling and rainbows are forming vaults like tents. Books high as heaven are also to be found, whose wrappings flutter in the wind. All this is perhaps to be seen as a traditional set of symbols quite in harmony with the Tibetan view of India as the land of dharma, religion.

*rGya gar yul* is not the land of origin of the gods, however, and the gods have not always been gods and Mahāsiddhas.

In the beginning of time they were *Gling gi dpa' rab*, the « Excellent Heroes of *Gling* », serving and assisting king Gesar in his wars against enemies and demons<sup>3</sup>. They were then known under other names and

3. For the view that the heroes of *Gling* were the reincarnations of the Indian Mahāsiddhas, see PEMA Tsering, *Historische, epische und ikonographische Aspekte des Glin Gesar nach tibetischen Quellen*, in « Die mongolischen Epen », hrsg. von W. Heissig, Wiesbaden, 1979, p. 159.

had used horses as their mounts, while they nowadays use *thang dkar* birds. The informants could give the previous names of only two beings: a *lha* and a dog belonging to the *lha*. It was *rGya gar + yardren bla ma*, who in *Gling* had been *lHa chen tshangs pa dkar po*. The dog was *rGya gar dung khyi dkar po*, the « White Indian Conch-shell Dog », who previously had been known as *lHa khyi dom bu thod dkar*, the « White-Headed Divine *Dom bu* Dog ».

According to this view of the *dpa' bos*, the eighty Siddhas are thus provided with a Tibetan origin.

We know of the affinities between the Tibetan epic-singing bards on the one hand and spirit-mediums on the other, as well as of heroes of the epic taking possession of spirit-mediums<sup>4</sup>. We have information to that effect in a letter from the Tibetan historiographer *Sum pa mkhan po* to the Panchen lama in 1779<sup>5</sup>. We also know that there are connections between the Siddha-traditions and the epic, but nothing that can explain the actual beliefs as presented here<sup>6</sup>. Still another problem concerns the relationship between the eighty *lha*/Siddhas of the spirit-mediums and the eighty, eighty-four, or more, Siddhas of the Indo-Tibetan Siddha-traditions, both *chos* and *bon*<sup>7</sup>. As far as can be judged, no names seem to be identical. As to the *bon* lists, there is a division of the Siddhas into groups, one of which is that of the *grub thob* and according to the text *Legs bshad mdzod*, the Siddhas are placed in *Zhang zhung* and Tibet, not in *rGya gar yul*<sup>8</sup>.

The more far-reaching conclusions will thus have to wait until more is known of how the Indian Siddha-traditions and -stories were spread and interpreted in Tibet on the local level. Interesting studies are in progress on Indian and Tibetan Siddhas like *Pha dam pa sangs rgyas*

4. Cf. R. STEIN, *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet*, Paris, 1959, pp. 335-40.

5. Cf. Ts. DAMDINSUREN, *Istoričeskie korni Geseriady*, Moscow, 1957, p. 190.

6. Cf. M. HERMANN, *Das National-Epos der Tibeter Gling König Ge Sar*, Regensburg, 1965, pp. 836, 937 n. 35, R. STEIN, *L'Épopée tibétaine de Gesar* (Annales du Musée Guimet, Bibl. d'Ét. 61), Paris, 1956, p. 324 f. (transl. on p. 120 f.).

7. For the Buddhist Siddhas, see, for example: P. C. BAGCHI, *The Cult of the Buddhist Siddhacaryas*, in « The Cultural Heritage of India », vol. 4 (2nd ed.), Calcutta, 1956, pp. 273-79, A. GRÜNWEDEL, *Die Geschichten der vierundachtzig Zauberer*, in « Baessler-Archiv », vol. 5, Leipzig und Berlin, 1916, pp. 137-228, J. ROBINSON, *Buddha's Lions*, Berkeley, 1979, R. SĀṆKṚTYĀYANA, *Recherches bouddhiques II: L'Origine du Vajrayāna et les 84 Siddhas*, in « Journal Asiatique », t. 225 (1934), pp. 209-30, T. SCHMID, *The Eighty-five Siddhas*, Stockholm, 1958, G. TUCCI, *A Sanskrit Biography of the Siddhas and Some Question Connected with Nāgārjuna*, in « Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal », vol. 26 (1930), p. 125 ff. (repr. G. TUCCI, *Opera Minora*, p. I, Roma, 1971, pp. 209-24), G. TUCCI, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, vol. I, Roma, 1949, pp. 226-32.

For *bon* Mahāsiddhas, see S. G. KARMAY, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, London, 1972, pp. 224 f., 231, 234 f. (transl. pp. 42, 51, 58).

8. S. G. KARMAY, *op. cit.*, p. 231 (transl. p. 51).

and *Thang stong rgyal po*<sup>9</sup>. The legends of the former, an Indian Siddha who obviously became very popular as a folk-hero in Southern Tibet and who also appears at the séances of the *dpa' bos*<sup>10</sup>, and the position of the latter in Tibetan folk-religion as a Siddha, bridge-builder, and God of drama may turn out to be the products of similar syncretistic processes as the one which made the heroes of the epic into Indian Mahāsiddhas and Tibetan spirit-medium gods.

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9. Cf. B. N. AZIZ, *Indian Philosopher as Tibetan Folk Hero, Legend of Langkor: A New Source Material on Phadampa Sangye*, in « Central Asiatic Journal », vol. 23 (1979), pp. 19-37, B. N. AZIZ, *The Work of Pha-dam-pa Sangs-rgyas as Revealed in Ding-ri Folklore*, in « Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson », ed. by M. Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, Warminster, 1980, pp. 21-29, J. GYATSO, *The Teachings of Thang-stong rGyal-po*, in « Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson », ed. by M. Aris and Aung San Suu Kyi, Warminster, 1980, pp. 111-19.

10. At one séance with one of the spirit-mediums *Pha dam pa sangs rgyas* thus appeared as guardian of the chest of the *dpa' bo* and of the back of a help-seeking sick man.