

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

TALES OF INTRIGUE FROM TIBET'S HOLY CITY:
THE HISTORICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF A MODERN BUDDHIST
CRISIS

By

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A Thesis submitted to the
Department of Religion
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:
Spring Semester, 2007

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To my grandfather, Stanley Russell,
for teaching me the importance of dreams and
for inspiring me to follow mine.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Perhaps there will come a day when I will reflect upon this endeavor with a knowing smile, thinking how naïve I was to consider an M.A. thesis a difficult task. Nevertheless, that time has not yet arrived. At present, I am still recovering from what is, to date, the most extensive academic endeavor upon which I have embarked. But this arduous path would have been infinitely more challenging were it not for the encouragement and assistance of my teachers, my friends, and my family.

I must begin, then, by thanking my supervising professor, Dr. Bryan Cuevas. Naturally, I am grateful for the education I have received from Professor Cuevas and for his input in my research. I am endlessly thankful for his willingness to examine countless drafts and inspect numerous translations. But I am most indebted to him for working tirelessly to impart upon me an appreciation for the field of Tibetan Studies and a desire to strive for excellence in all of my academic endeavors.

I thank Dr. Kathleen Erndl for her kind support and encouragement throughout my career at Florida State and especially for her patience as a teacher of Sanskrit. I would also like to acknowledge Professor Martin Kavka for his dedication to his students, for his sense of humor, and most of all for his belief in my abilities. I must also thank Dr. John Corrigan for introducing me to the field of Religious Studies in one of the most challenging courses I have ever taken and for his continuing interest in my academic career.

In addition, I recognize the invaluable input Mr. Gene Smith and Professor Kurtis Schaeffer have contributed to my efforts. I owe a debt of gratitude to Mr. Smith for helping me to establish a foundation upon which to construct the present argument. I thank Dr. Schaeffer for his suggestions and insights into some of the more interesting anomalies of this controversy.

I must also thank my friends, Michelle Bryan, Chris Bell, Christina Stoltz, Thich Minh Quang, Caleb Simmons, and John Carbone, for making my time at Florida State enjoyable; for the conversations, the laughs, and camaraderie. I am especially grateful to Michelle Bryan for her enduring support, her exuberant smile, and her spectacular

culinary skills. I must also express appreciation for Chris Bell because of his enthusiasm and willingness to offer assistance at all times.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support of my family. Since I find it difficult to adequately express my gratitude for their enduring love, I will simply say that I cannot imagine my life without them and that I consider myself unfathomably fortunate to have them. Furthermore, because they are also a part of my family, I feel compelled to give thanks for the truly unconditional love and kind companionship I have received from my dogs: Finn, Isabella, Sam and Yama (alphabetically listed so as not to show favoritism). Of course, I thank my loving fiancé, Arnoud Sekrève, for knowing me better than anyone else does and loving me in spite of that fact; for assisting me in countless ways, with love, support, and most of all patience. There were times during the process of this project that I became quite stressed. I owe my present sanity to him. Finally, I must thank my mother, who gave up so much to give me the kind of life she believed I deserved. It is strange that I find it most difficult to thank the woman to whom I am most deeply indebted, but I hope that she will be satisfied to know that I love her and I could not have done any of this without her.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Abbreviations	viii
Abstract	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
What Tradition Tells Us: An Abridged Introduction to Drakpa Gyeltsen	2
The Field of Shukden Scholarship	3
Objectives	13
1. DHARAMSALA’S CELESTIAL SERIAL KILLER: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SHUKDEN AFFAIR	17
“Praise to You Violent God of the Yellow Hat Teachings”: the Rise of Dorjé Shukden	17
“‘The Taming of the Shrew’”: The Conversion of Tibet’s Indigenous Demons	25
Getting Away with Murder: Buddhism and the Activities of the Dharma Protectors	29
2. OF LAMAS, DEMONS, AND CELESTIAL BUDDHAS: A SURVEY OF POLEMICAL MATERIALS CONCERNING THE SHUKDEN AFFAIR	34
3. BREATHING LIFE INTO THE DEATH OF DRAKPA GYELTSEN: SOME THEORIES ON THE LIFE OF A TIBETAN LAMA	46
The Life of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen	46
The Death of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen	57

CONCLUSION	64
Smoke from the Funeral Pyre: Drakpa Gyeltsen and his Legacy	65
Going Beyond Polemics: The Future of Shukden Research	68
REFERENCES	73
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	86

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS¹

- 5DLPT = Blo bzang rgya mtsho. 1991-1995. “Thogs med drag rtsal nus stobs ldan pa’i dam can chos srung rgya mtsho’i mngon rtogs mchod ‘bul bskyang bshags bstod tsogs sogs ‘phrin las rnam zhi lhun drub ces bya ba bzhugs so” in *Tham cad mkhyen pa rgyal ba lnga pa chen po ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho’i gsung ‘bum*, 25 vols. Gangtok, Sikkim: Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology.
- 5DLNT = Blo bzang rgya mtsho. 1989-1991. *Za hor gyi ban de ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho’i ‘di snang ‘khrul ba’i rol rtsed rtogs brjod kyi tshul du bkod pa du ku la’i gos bzang*, Vol. I. Lhasa: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang.
- SD 1998 = Department of Religion and Culture, Central Tibetan Administration, 1998. *The Worship of Shugden: Documents Related to a Tibetan Controversy*. Dharamsala, India.
- DK = *Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo*. 2002. Beijing: Krung go’i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang.
- MW 1996 = “His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s address to the Buddhist Society: 16 June 1996.” *Middle Way* 71.3 (November 1996): 147-50.
- TN = Ko zhul grags pa ‘byung gnas and Rgyal ba blo bzang mkhas grub. 1992. *Gnas can mkhas grub rim byon ming dzod*. Kon su’i mi rigs dpe sbyan khang.
- VDS = Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho. 1989. *Dga ldan chos ‘byung vai dūrya ser po*. Lhasa, Bod kyi shes rig dpe skrun khang.

¹ The abbreviations are used mostly in my footnotes as opposed to within the body of the text.

ABSTRACT

In 1976, the Dalai Lama publicly denounced the Tibetan Buddhist deity, Dorjé Shukden, urging his followers to discontinue their worship of him. This disavowal sparked an onslaught of negative publicity for the Tibetan leader within his community. Division lines were drawn between those who supported the Dalai Lama and those who were angered and offended by his change of sentiment. In 1997, the resentment came to a head with the deaths of three of the Dalai Lama's supporters.

Not surprisingly, the so-called "Shuken Affair," or "Shukden Controversy," has become an object of fascination for many westerners who are baffled by this Buddhist display of political strife. In recent times, a small, but noteworthy, body of scholarship has arisen, which attempts to understand this dilemma. Most of these works have been aimed at explicating the opinions and claims of each side of the disagreement within the framework of Tibetan Buddhist understandings of protective deities. In order to do so, these endeavors rely on the origin myth of Dorjé Shukden as the foundation of their understandings of the history of this affair.

However, it is my contention that these works have been inadequate in their discussion of the historical bases of this controversy because they have leaned too heavily on the origin tale without satisfactory reference to other historical materials. While some scholars have attempted to follow the schism back to its roots in seventeenth-century Lhasa, I believe that their use of primary materials has been myopic. Because they take for granted the historicity of the events detailed in the origin myth, they fail to ask truly innovative questions about the individuals portrayed therein. In particular, they express little fascination with the man who is said to have become Dorjé Shukden, the incarnate lama, Drakpa Gyeltsen.

The object of the present endeavor is to transcend these commonly held notions in order to attempt some real understanding of who this man was and why he might have become associated with Dorjé Shukden. In the process, I will enumerate some Tibetan understandings of protective deities: their function and their mannerisms. I will also offer

a survey of some of the recent polemical works produced by both sides, so that the reader may more fully understand the controversy in its modern context. As a means of explicating the historical circumstances of the quarrel, I will examine the various sources related to the life of Drakpa Gyeltsen. Finally, I will offer some personal insights into several opportunities for further studies in this area.

INTRODUCTION

In February of 1997, a London newspaper announced: “a wrathful deity is the main suspect for three murders in Dharamsala, the Himalayan ‘capital’ of Tibet’s government in exile.”² The murder to which the article referred had been perpetrated against Geshé Lozang Gyamtso, who was the principal of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, and two of his students.³ The victims were found stabbed to death in an apparently ritualistic manner. Up to the present, the person or group responsible for this violent crime has managed to elude Indian authorities and bystanders continue to speculate as to whether or not it could have been a divine homicide carried out by the Gelukpa protective deity, Dorjé Shukden. At the very least, there seems to be a distinct possibility that Shukden supporters may have been involved.⁴

These murders were only part of a controversy that has plagued the Tibetan community in exile since 1976 when the Dalai Lama first announced his disapproval of Dorjé Shukden. In addition, he discouraged those associated with him from worshipping the deity.⁵ Following his proclamation, factions began to arise within the exile community. The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT) took root in England in 1991 under the leadership of Geshé Kelsang Gyamtso. Under his tutelage, the NKT ardently opposed the Dalai Lama and his camp, accusing him of religious intolerance.⁶ In 1996, Kelsang Gyamtso’s disciples picketed against the Dalai Lama during his visit to Britain.⁷

Like the mysterious murders of Lozang Gyamtso and his students, the conflict between the Dalai Lama and the NKT has remained unresolved. It throbs and festers like an infected wound. However, for the purposes of this thesis endeavor, my primary

² Batchelor 1998, p. 60.

³ For more information about the life of Geshé Lozang Gyatso see: Lobsang Gyatso 1998.

⁴ This controversy continues to make headlines to this day. Some of the various media reactions to the murders of Gyamtso and his students as well as to events related to the Shukden controversy in general can be found in: Clifton 1997, p. 43; Van Biema, 1998, pp. 70-71; “Paying the Ultimate Price (Hunger strike by six Tibetan refugees).” *Time International*. 150-34 (20 April 1998): 25; Chamberlain 1998, p. 4; “Dalai Lama ‘behind Lhasa unrest.’” BBC News (Wednesday 5 May 2006); Mitra 2002, pp. 47-58.

⁵ Lopez 1998b, p. 68.

⁶ For more about the NKT and other forms of “engaged Buddhism” see: Queen 2000 and Kay 2004.

⁷ Lopez 1998b, p. 69.

concern does not involve the lurid details of the contemporary controversy. While it is certainly interesting to consider this multivalent Buddhist dilemma, it is perhaps equally intriguing to study the individuals at its source. In other words, I am primarily interested in tracing this problem back to its roots in seventeenth-century Tibet in order that we might more clearly comprehend the historical concerns that underlie, and therefore continue to shape, the modern dispute. In particular, I will examine the lives of some of the seventeenth-century figures who were most central to the historical occurrences that would lead to the formation of the cult of Dorjé Shukden: Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso (1617-1682), and his contemporary, Drakpa Gyeltsen (1618-1655). In order to begin this study, we must first briefly acquaint ourselves with these two figures. Furthermore, we must survey some of the work that has already been done on this topic so that we might more clearly recognize the value of further exploration.

What Tradition Tells Us: An Abridged Introduction to Drakpa Gyeltsen

For almost anyone who has ever read about Tibetan religion, culture, or history, the Fifth Dalai Lama, or the “Great Fifth” (*Lnga pa chen po*) as he is often called, is a figure that requires no real introduction. Drakpa Gyeltsen, on the other hand, is an individual who needs some familiarization. He was born in 1618 and, as a young boy, was identified as a potential incarnation of the recently deceased Fourth Dalai Lama, Yönten Gyamtso (1589-1617).⁸ As one can deduce, the boy was not installed as the Fifth Dalai Lama. Nevertheless, the Gelukpa authorities agreed that there was still something quite unique about this young boy and it was eventually determined that he was the incarnation of another important Gelukpa figure: Sönam Gelek Pelzang (1594-1615), the fourth incarnation, or trülku, in the Drepung Zimkhang Gongma line.⁹

By all accounts, Drakpa Gyeltsen performed his duties as the Drepung Gongma with an impressive degree of aptitude and finesse. Apparently, however, a number of other incarnate lamas and government officials became envious of his popularity. One of these lamas may have been the Dalai Lama himself; however, details on this point are

⁸ Born in Mongolia, Yönten Gyamtso was recognized as an infant to be the Fourth Dalai Lama. He was brought to Tibet for formal monastic training at the age of fourteen. He died at the age of twenty-seven and his relics were then enshrined in the domains of the Khalkha and Tümed Mongols. Kapstein 2006, p. 134.

⁹ This line and its function will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

unclear and, therefore, difficult to verify. Whoever his enemies were, it is clear that they must have been influential because, distorted though the precise facts may be, it is certain that his untimely death was in some manner the result of the ridicule he received from them. Various stories abound about the nature of Drakpa Gyeltsen's mysterious death. Some postulate a sinister assassination, while others report a woeful suicide.

One point upon which all of these narratives agree is that the lama did not, as they say, go quietly. Instead, he is said to have willed himself to become a sort of vengeful ghost so that he could haunt his foes. In particular, the stories reveal that his "spirit" was especially fond of antagonizing the Dalai Lama. The deceitful trickery of the angry spirit was, however, eventually quelled by means of a series of rituals resulting in his being given the name Dorjé Shukden, "Powerful Thunderbolt."¹⁰ He also became associated with the Sakya deity, Dölgyel.¹¹ Thenceforth, he gained notoriety as a fierce protector who guarded the Geluk teachings against pollution, especially of the Nyingma sort.¹²

¹⁰ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, pp. 134-135.

¹¹ This connection will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapters.

¹² The Nyingma school is one of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Nyingmapa (*rnying-ma-pa*) literally means "old ones." This is a reference to the school's original doctrinal opposition to newer schools that were forming around the late tenth- and early eleventh-centuries, which were called Sarma, or "new." The Gelukpa school was one of these new schools. The Nyingma sect traces its lineage back to the Indian exorcist, Padmasambhava. According to tradition, Padmasambhava came to Tibet around the eighth-century at the behest of Tri Songdetsen. Padmasambhava, a tantric master, is said to have transmitted his teachings to several close disciples, who, in accordance with Tibetan tradition, then passed the teachings on to their own disciples; thus ensuring the vitality of the tradition throughout the ages. The Nyingma school holds claim to several unique features. The first of these is its ownership of the teachings of the "Great Perfection," or Dzokchen (*rdzogs chen*). While the teachings of this tradition are, as they say, "vast and profound," we might simply say that this system professes to hold the secret to the swiftest possible path to enlightenment. Another unique feature of the Nyingma school is its rather creative means of introducing new teachings. This is a system known as the "treasure," or Terma (*gter ma*), tradition. Within this tradition, it is believed that Padmasambhava "hid" teachings in order that they might be discovered at a later, more appropriate date. These new/old teachings are discovered by individuals known as Tertöns ("Treasure Revealers") and may be found in any number of geographical locations dotting the landscape of Tibet or even within the consciousness of the revealer himself. For more information about the diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet see: Dargyay 1998; Kapstein 2000; Wangdu and Diemberger 2000; and Davidson 2005. For more information about the formation and development of the Nyingma school see: Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 and Bradburn 1995. For more information concerning the Dzokchen tradition see: Thondup 1989; Germano 1994; Guenther 1994; Tayé 1995; Karmay 1988b; and Cuevas 2003. For more information about the Treasure tradition see: Gyatso 1996 and 1998; Germano 1998; Germano and Gyatso 2000; and Doctor 2005.

The Field of Shukden Scholarship

To be sure, the so-called Shukden controversy offers a variety of fascinating angles from which to approach scholarly endeavors. Dorjé Shukden himself is, in point of fact, a little studied deity. Still, the aspect of this research that most interests me here is its historical origins. In expressing this fascination, I am simply taking my place in a line (albeit a rather short one) of several other, more highly esteemed scholars. There has not, as yet, been a great deal of work done on the origin of the Shukden controversy. Certainly, polemical texts and scandalous newspaper articles abound, but very little serious scholarly work has emerged regarding this topic. Nevertheless, a few inquisitive individuals—including Georges Dreyfus, Donald Lopez, and Stephen Batchelor—have struggled to understand this Tibetan Buddhist conundrum.¹³ However, while these “historical” endeavors may have, at one point, proven somewhat innovative, I do not believe I am amiss in asserting that they have come up lacking in a number of ways. First, this scholarship assumes that the Shukden origin myth represents the final word regarding the events surrounding Drakpa Gyeltsen’s death. In addition, it neglects the fact that we know almost nothing about how he became associated with Dorjé Shukden. In the following paragraphs I will analyze the works of the three above-mentioned authors, detailing their merits and weaknesses.

Of these individuals, Dreyfus’s work has been the most thorough. It asks the most insightful questions and employs the most diverse means of answering these queries. The article to which I am referring appeared in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (JIABS) in 1998. The piece, titled “The Shuk-den Affair: History and Nature of a Quarrel,” aims at understanding the most fundamental aspects of the Shukden affair. And, because of its proposed goal and relative success in accomplishment of that goal, the text has become the cornerstone of most subsequent Shukden-related scholarly quests (though most of these quests remain theoretical and have not, therefore, been put

¹³ E. Gene Smith has also studied the history of Dorjé Shukden and his cult, but his work remains unpublished. Interestingly, however, his work appears to be the earliest scholarship on Shukden and his cult, predating not only the murders of Lozang Gyamtso and his students, but also the current Dalai Lama’s first public disavowal of the deity, which, as we have seen, occurred 1976. A reference to this work can be found in Jackson 2003, p. 729. The work itself is a paper presented to the Inner Asia Colloquium at the University of Washington on July 25, 1963.

to print). Indeed, it is where the present endeavor began and is a source for a great deal of the information included herein.

Donald Lopez is another scholar who has done relatively extensive research regarding the Shukden debate. However, most of Lopez's efforts have been directed at understanding and explicating the issues surrounding the modern controversy. The bulk of this information appears in *Prisoners of Shangri-la: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, which was published in spring of 1998. Lopez also composed a brief article for *Tricycle* magazine in that same year titled "Two Sides of the Same God" and, in the same issue, conducted an interview with Geshé Kelsang Gyamtso.

Stephen Batchelor wrote another article that appeared in the spring edition of that magazine. The article, titled "Letting Daylight Into Magic: The Life and Times of Dorje Shugden," is aimed at stripping the controversy of its "superstitious" aspects. It is a short overview of the disagreement that includes a brief historical survey.

It is important to recognize before we begin this critique that the assorted works of these authors are directed at a variety of audiences. Dreyfus's article appears in a Buddhist studies journal, while Lopez's books and articles might be understood as bridging the academic/layperson gap. This is especially true of *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, which, though its intended audience is certainly the academia with which it takes issue, has undoubtedly enjoyed some recognition among non-academics. Batchelor's article is clearly intended for the mostly non-academic readership of *Tricycle* magazine. Furthermore, I would also like to acknowledge the fact that most of these works, with the exception of Dreyfus's article, do not expressly aim at thorough comprehension of the historical foundations of the controversy. Nevertheless, all of these scholars do, in some measure, concern themselves with explaining the origin of Shukden, which we know requires at least some discussion of the seventeenth-century, the Fifth Dalai Lama, and Drakpa Gyeltsen. It is therefore, with these analyses that I will deal.

Let us begin, then, with the study that most explicitly aspires to discover the historical underpinnings of this situation: Dreyfus's "The Shuk-den Affair." In his introductory remarks, Dreyfus asserts that the primary goal of his efforts is to explicate "some of the events leading to the present crisis...[and to]...examine the narrative of Shuk-den's origin, focusing on the meaning of the hostility toward the Dalai-Lama which it displays and which is confirmed by recent events." He sets out to discover the historical

development of Shukden practice in an effort to better understand how there can be “a practice in the Ge-luk tradition opposed to it’s own leader.” He hopes that by answering these questions he will be able to offer the reader some explanation as to why Shukden is a controversial figure, how his practice is different from those of other protectors, and finally why the current Dalai Lama is opposed to that practice.¹⁴

Dreyfus sets out on his scholarly quest armed with information culled from a series of seventeenth-century materials, but he also utilizes evidence extracted from the more recent works of authors who were active between the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries. Some of his more notable sources are the *Collected Works* of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Desi Sangyé Gyamtso’s *Vaidūrya Serpo*, Sumpa Khenpo’s *Chronological Table*, several of Pabongkha’s propitiatory texts, as well as works by Trijang Rinpoché.¹⁵ Having inspected these texts, Dreyfus claims that, within the traditional Shukden narrative, one is able to uncover two distinct threads. The first of these is primarily concerned with the story of Drakpa Gyeltsen, to whom Dreyfus refers as “a seventeenth century victim of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s power.” The second explicates the tale of the deity Dorjé Shukden. He writes: “The former story is clearly political but it is not about Shuk-den. It concerns the nature of the Dalai-Lama institution and its relation to the Ge-luk hierarchy in the seventeenth century.” The latter, he contends, is most certainly about the deity, but does not concern the institution of the Dalai Lama in any discernible way.¹⁶

I believe that Dreyfus is quite astute in pinpointing these two distinct directives. Any critical analysis of this narrative must lead the reader to this assessment, for, at present, no clear and historically identifiable link between Drakpa Gyeltsen and Shukden has been uncovered. Of course, Dreyfus does not argue that Drakpa Gyeltsen did not become Dorjé Shukden. In fact, his answers to this conundrum remain understandably vague. What he does tell his reader is that he feels certain that the connection between the two had as its historical basis a bitter feud between Drakpa Gyeltsen and the Fifth Dalai

¹⁴ Dreyfus 1998, pp. 227-28.

¹⁵ Desi Sangyé Gyamtso (1653-1705) was the third Regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama. For more information about his individual see, Lange 1976. Sumpa Khenpo (1704-1788) was a Gelukpa scholar known best for his work chronicling the history of Buddhism in India, Tibet, China and Mongolia. More information about his life and works can be found in: De Jong 1967 and Das 1889. Pabongkha will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Trijang Rinpoché (1901-1981) was the junior tutor of the present Dalai Lama. He also taught many other important lamas, including Kelsang Gyamtso.

¹⁶ Dreyfus 1998, p. 233.

Lama. This feud, he claims, was fueled by resentment against the powerful Fifth whose primary catalyst was, as Dreyfus says, “the desire of some of the more sectarian Ge-luk hierarchs to set up a purely Ge-luk rule.”¹⁷ He contends that Drakpa Gyeltsen must have been among the foremost of these spiteful hierarchs. Thus, Drakpa Gyeltsen, embittered by not having ascended the throne of the Dalai Lama as a youth, developed a significant dislike for the Fifth, which was strengthened by his own sectarian sentiments.

This version of the account renders Drakpa Gyeltsen as a high-ranking religious official with a serious gripe against the Dalai Lama. It puts him into a boat with those Gelukpa hierarchs who were offended by the Fifth’s strong-handed political tactics and spiritual eclecticism and sends him sailing across a churning sea of sectarian friction. And it is here that I believe we encounter the first weakness of Dreyfus’s argument. This is because, while it is not utterly inconceivable that Drakpa Gyeltsen would have minded being—to continue the metaphor—aboard that vessel, it is also not clear to me that he was, in fact, a vocal opponent of the Fifth. As I will argue in later chapters, I have been unable to find any evidence for this in the primary sources available on the subject. None of the texts I have surveyed mention Drakpa Gyeltsen’s political leanings. On the contrary, they emphasize his spiritual virtuosity and discuss politics only with reference to the animosity this talent engendered in members of the Dalai Lama’s government.

In order to further unpack this point, let us appraise the assessments of two of the period authors Dreyfus cites in his article. To begin, we should go directly to the Fifth Dalai Lama himself. Throughout the Fifth’s autobiography, his tone concerning Drakpa Gyeltsen is, not surprisingly, cordial; however, his attitude towards the lama shifts in *Spontaneous Achievement of the Four Enlightened Activities*,¹⁸ where he refers to Drakpa Gyeltsen as a *damsi*, or vow-breaker. In particular, the Dalai Lama tells us that:

The incarnate lama [who was the son]¹⁹ of La Agyel of Gekhasa was a fake emanation of Trülku Sönam Gelek,²⁰ who was real, and he became a vow-breaker who [uttered] perverse prayers.²¹

¹⁷ Dreyfus 1998, p. 234.

¹⁸ This is an abbreviated translation of the title of this text. For the full translation, see p. 15 below.

¹⁹ The Tibetan reads “*Gad kha sa’i lags a rgyal gyi ‘phrul*” which literally means something like “the incarnation of La Agyel of Gekhasa.” I have interpreted this to mean the incarnate lama who was the *son* of La Agyel based on a passage from the Fifth’s autobiography in which he is discussing the young boy who

This particular passage is noted in Dreyfus's article (though his interpretation differs slightly from mine) and clearly illustrates a certain level of distaste on the part of the Fifth for the expired lama. It does not, however, explain precisely what vows were broken. It also does not express any political/sectarian motivations for the discord. It simply does not address politics at all.

Desi Sangyé Gyamtso is another author that clearly harbors disdain for Drakpa Gyeltsen. In the *Vaidūrya Serpo*, the regent refers to the lama as the “pot-bellied official” (*nang so grod lhug*) and states that, following his death he had an inauspicious rebirth. This, the Regent suggests, was primarily the result of his disappointment over not having been recognized as the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama.²² Here again, we have an unfavorable reference to Drakpa Gyeltsen that mentions nothing of his sectarian leanings.

In point of fact, it is rather difficult to determine exactly why Dreyfus assumes the relationship he does. He avers no real hypothesis about the nature of Drakpa Gyeltsen's life prior to his death. He aptly points out that very little is known about it, yet seems uninterested in discovering more. It appears evident to me that, while it may not have been his intention, in ignoring the interesting and important question of who Drakpa Gyeltsen really was, Dreyfus has simply taken for granted that the account found in the origin myth of Dorjé Shukden is sufficient. This, I think, is a mistake and is regrettable in light of the fact that he, early on, notes the distinction between the life story of the lama and the origin account of the deity. I believe that further explanation of why these parallel

was his primary rival for the throne of Dalai Lama (Drakpa Gyeltsen, that is). He mentions that a person called La Agyel, in thinking of this young boy, refers to him as “this son of mine” (*nga'i gzhon pa 'di*). I have understood La Agyel as Drakpa Gyeltsen's mother, but it is also possible that this might have been the name of his father. In any case, this passage lends credibility to the assumption that La Agyel must be either the mother or father of Drakpa Gyeltsen and that it is therefore suitable to translate the above phrase as I have done. The passage reads: “*Gad kha sa'i lags lags a rgyal rgyis na'i gzhon pa'i mngal du chags gdong thams cad mkhyen pa yon tan rgya mtsho phebs nas...gnas tshang gyar po thongs gsungs pas mtshon pa'i sgrub phyogs kha yar... 'jam dbyangs dkon cog chos 'phel sogs mang dag la zhus.*” See, 5DLNT, p. 52.

²⁰ Trülku Sönam Gelek, or Sönam Gelek Pelzang, was the third incarnation in the Panchen Södrak line.

²¹ 5DLPT, f. 423. *Gad kha sa'i lags a rgyal gyi 'phrul la brten sprul sku bsod nams dge legs dpal bzang gi sku skye brdzus ma lam du song ba smon lam log pa'i dam srir gyur te.*

²² VDS, p. 82. *De'i rjes su gang (sic) kha sa pa'i nang so gro(d?) lhug thog mar thams cad mkhyen pa yon tan rgya mtsho'i sprul sku yong du re yang rjes su ngag dbang dge legs kyi sprul sku byas pas mthar skye gnas kyang mi dbang bar gyur to.*

tales emerge within the myth is key to a clearer understanding of the origin of the Shukden affair.

If we truly desire to understand “the events leading up to the present crisis,” mere supposition is inadequate. While it is extremely difficult to determine precisely who Drakpa Gyeltsen was, it is not impossible to construct a hypothesis that can be substantiated by primary sources (as I have done in this study). Dreyfus, however, seems to simply assume that “it is not unlikely that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was the focus of the opposition to the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his prime minister within the Ge-luk hierarchy.”²³ We are not made privy to the premises of this assertion; that is, we do not know upon what documentation it is based. The references are simply lacking. The dearth of textual evidence presented in support of this claim leaves the reader wondering if perhaps it has been inordinately influenced by the sectarian flavor of modern-day Shukden practice and of other issues surrounding the deity. In other words, one wonders if perhaps Dreyfus has presupposed that anything or anyone connected to Shukden must necessarily be colored by disdain for the other schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Another area in which I believe Dreyfus has been slightly presumptuous is in his analysis of the early origins of the Shukden cult. He begins this investigation by calling attention to the fact that many of the authors who witnessed the events surrounding Drakpa Gyeltsen’s death indicate that the lama became a spirit following that occasion. However, he explains, these writers were not the earliest proponents of Shukden practice, but rather the members of the Dalai Lama’s government who wished to discredit Drakpa Gyeltsen.²⁴ Only much later did Shukden’s devotees reinterpret the tale. Indeed, it seems that this conclusion is correct. The problem arises, however, in Dreyfus’s interpretation of those texts that he uses to defend his thesis.

For example, we know that, in the above-mentioned excerpt from the Fifth Dalai Lama’s *Spontaneous Achievement of the Four Enlightened Activities*, the Fifth refers to Drakpa Gyeltsen as a vow-breaker, or *damsi*. This term *damsi* can also be translated as “spirit” and this is how Dreyfus interprets it. There is, of course, nothing shameful in that translation. It is quite legitimate, but it is not the translation of the term that concerns me. Rather, it is with the fact that Dreyfus infers synonymy between the word *damsi* and the

²³ Dreyfus 1998, p. 230.

²⁴ Dreyfus 1998, p. 239.

deity Dorjé Shukden that I take issue. He presumes this correlation but he does not explain upon what basis.

Is this a legitimate assumption? Is *damsi* simply an epithet of Dorjé Shukden? I cannot say for certain that it is not, but it seems unlikely. That term is, in my opinion, far too general to be indisputably linked with Shukden. Indeed, *damsi* is simply a class of demons and, as we will see below, there are many demon classes in Tibetan Buddhism. Shukden is categorized in a variety of ways depending upon who is doing the categorizing. But this term is generally understood as descriptive of a class of beings rather than of a specific individual. Therefore, it would seem that, whether we translate the term as “spirit” or “vow-breaker,” it could be applicable to just about anyone. Furthermore, while research into Shukden practice has been minimal, I have been unable to find this term used as an epithet for Shukden in any of the texts consulted during my research. That is, though Shukden has a number of aliases—“chief protector of the teachings of Manjushri Tsongkhapa,” “war deity of the Gandenpa doctrine,”²⁵ “great king of the warrior spirits,”²⁶ and others—I have yet to see *damsi* listed as one of them.²⁷

Dreyfus makes a similar leap in his analysis of a passage from Sumpa Khenpo’s *Chronological Table*. Here, Sumpa Khenpo (1704-1788) tells his audience that the idea that the “Tibetan spirit,” or Pödé Gyelpo, in question is none other than Drakpa Gyeltsen reborn is preposterous and prejudicial.²⁸ Dreyfus claims that this excerpt “confirms the fact that there were stories of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen becoming Shuk-den quite early on.”²⁹ Other scholars—most notably Gene Smith³⁰—have also made this connection, so it is possible that Dreyfus is correct; however, I have been unable to find Pödé Gyelpo mentioned among the many epithets of Shukden. Of course, it seems perfectly acceptable to refer to Shukden as a “Tibetan spirit,” but it seems just as logical to use this soubriquet for other of Tibet’s protectors (like, for example, Pehar).

²⁵ Dhongtog 1996, pp. 16-17.

²⁶ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, p. 134.

²⁷ Dongtok does claim that Drakpa Gyeltsen “broke his commitment with his Vajra masters,” but he does not list *damsi* as an alias of Shukden. Thus, the breaking of the commitment refers to Drakpa Gyeltsen himself rather than to Shukden. Dhongtog 1996, p. 15.

²⁸ Sum pa Khan po 1959, pp. 70-71. *Bod de’i rgyal po ni gzim khang gong ma sprul sku grags rgyan dzer ba ni chag(s) sdang gi tam kho nar zad do des nab sod nams shos ‘phel ni lo ‘dir ‘das nas khong dge lugs la thugs dzen ches pas chos bsrung ba’i tshul bzung nas dge lugs pa skyong dzes grags pa bden nam snyam mo.*

²⁹ Dreyfus 1998, p. 236.

³⁰ Smith 2001, p. 305 n. 423.

The point of all of this is not simply to mince words, but rather to suggest that Dreyfus has overlooked what I believe to be a noteworthy historical discrepancy. As we have seen, it is difficult to pinpoint within these period texts any reference to a clear connection between Shukden and Drakpa Gyeltsen. Undoubtedly we can be almost entirely certain that his enemies—who were, most likely, also his murderers—concocted a story of his having become a spirit following his death in order to discredit him and turn Lhasa’s attention away from the mysterious circumstances of his demise. What is less clear, from my perspective, is precisely when this spirit became associated with Shukden. The simple fact that these texts agree on the point of Drakpa Gyeltsen’s having become a spirit does not necessarily give assurance, as Dreyfus believes, that “there were stories of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen becoming Shuk-den quite early on.” Rather, I would say that academic studies have thus far failed to prove this assertion definitively. Furthermore, and more disappointingly, they have completely neglected to delve into the matter of when the connection became solidified.

In short, then, the grievances I have with Dreyfus’s work relate primarily to the author’s uncritical treatment of the relationship between the Fifth and Drakpa Gyeltsen as well as to his lack of interest in how and when the latter became associated with Shukden. The issue is not that Dreyfus’s assumptions are entirely wrong (in fact much of his work seems to be spot on), but rather that the questions he asks do not delve deeply enough into the problematic issues found in the origin narrative. It is very possible, for example, that Drakpa Gyeltsen held political views that were contrary to those of the Dalai Lama or that the earliest chroniclers of the events surrounding his death understood the terms *damsi* and Pödé Gyelpo to mean Dorjé Shukden. However, I believe that Dreyfus fails to adequately substantiate these assumptions. Instead, I think he simply accepts that, as the origin myth conveys, Drakpa Gyeltsen has always been associated with sectarianism as well as with Shukden.

But Dreyfus is not alone in making such generalizations. Both Lopez and Batchelor also fall victim to this tendency, albeit in somewhat different ways. As we have noted, neither of these authors explicitly seeks to explain the historical origin of the Shukden controversy. Both do, nevertheless, use versions of the traditional founding myth as the basis for their assumptions about Drakpa Gyeltsen and his transformation into a spirit. For example, in his work *Prisoners of Shangri-la*, Lopez reports that Trülku

Drakpa Gyeltsen was born into an aristocratic family, passed over for the position of Dalai Lama, recognized instead as the incarnation of Pañchen Sönam Drakpa, skilled in debate and scholarship, and killed because of a rivalry with the Fifth. All of these details follow the founding myth very closely except that Lopez grants that the rivalry was primarily between the followers of the two lamas rather than between the lamas themselves.³¹ This, then, represents at least some measure of innovation in Lopez's work because it acts to correct Dreyfus's lack of consideration for the possibility that the difference of opinion could have been between two groups rather than between two individuals. This, however, seems to represent the apex of Lopez's criticism of the events of Drakpa Gyeltsen's life. Beyond noting the various explanations traditionally given of the details of his death, Lopez offers no new ideas about who this man was. Like Dreyfus, he seems not to wonder.

Batchelor is even less curious, limiting his discussion of the lama to two sentences. Furthermore, like Dreyfus, Batchelor attributes Drakpa Gyeltsen's death to sectarian motivations. He explains the scenario as follows:

The Fifth Dalai Lama's assumption of this long and complex historical identity [that is, his affiliation with other schools of Tibetan Buddhism] would not have sat easily with the ambitions of a Gelugpa hierarchy intent on creating a buddhocratic state founded explicitly on the teachings of Tsongkhapa. It seems that this conflict led to the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rival Drakpa Gyeltsen, shortly after the Dalai Lama's return from a state visit to China (suggesting the possibility of a palace revolt during his prolonged absence). Thereafter, Dorje Shugden was recognized by those Gelugpas who opposed the Dalai Lama's involvement with the Nyingma school as the reincarnation of Drakpa Gyeltsen, who had assumed the form of a wrathful protector of the purity of Tsongkhapa's teachings.³²

³¹ Lopez 1998a, p. 188-190.

³² Batchelor 1998, p. 62.

Thus Batchelor tells us almost nothing about Drakpa Gyeltsen. All we know is that he was a rival of the Fifth and that the rivalry was based on issues involving sectarian identity. Furthermore, this assessment has several other problems.

The most obvious of these is that it suggests that the Fifth Dalai Lama's opponents were the primary promulgators of the Shukden myth. Yet, Dreyfus proved rather satisfactorily that this was probably not the case. Moreover, Batchelor's claim implies an almost immediate connection between Shukden and Drakpa Gyeltsen, a proposition about which I have already expressed my misgivings. A final problem with this portrayal is that it is entirely unsubstantiated by primary resources. That is, Batchelor neglects to inform the reader of the basis upon which he makes these claims, thereby leading the critical examiner to surmise that he too is relying on the traditional origin myth as the foundation of his understanding of the historical bases of the Shukden affair.

This then seems to be the common factor linking most recent Shukden scholarship. These studies are not particularly wrong, but rather they are uncritical. They accept (or at least appear to accept), as do Tibetan Buddhists themselves, the essential authority of the tale recounted in the origin myth. But we must keep in mind that the details of these episodes fluctuate depending on who is recounting them. Certainly there *is* a sense in which the founding narrative must always be the starting point for scholarly efforts involving the Shukden issue. Even this endeavor, whose aim is not to discuss Shukden in his own right, will begin with a recounting of the mythical tale. Nevertheless, if

'there was, in the beginning, a place for studies that do not criticize the events of the founding myth, that place exists no longer. The narrative has been told and retold. Certainly it undergoes slight variation depending upon who is sharing it, but it is nevertheless by now a well-known anecdote within the field of Tibetan studies.

Objectives

The task of this thesis is to make a first attempt at moving beyond the origin narrative of Dorjé Shukden. In an effort to expand upon the findings of the scholars mentioned above, I have taken several questions into consideration. For example, Lopez mentions that Drakpa Gyeltsen was from an aristocratic family, but he does not give that

family's name or origin. Thus, I became curious about this group, wondering, in particular, if learning more about them might aid in the discovery of who this man was and why he died such a mysterious death. By consulting various sources, I found out that Drakpa Gyeltsen's family name was Gekhasa.³³ Thereupon, I set about trying to uncover facts that might lead me to a fuller understanding of who this family was, where they were from, and what their role in seventeenth-century Tibetan affairs might have been. I have also been concerned, unlike the above-mentioned scholars, with determining the identity of Drakpa Gyeltsen as an individual. Furthermore, instead of simply assuming that the origin myth is correct in asserting that the relationship between the Fifth and Drakpa Gyeltsen was marred by sectarian disagreement, I have tried to delve more deeply into what the nature of that relationship might actually have been. Specifically, I have attempted to discover why Drakpa Gyeltsen would have been considered a threat to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Finally, I want to consider why Drakpa Gyeltsen became associated with Dorjé Shukden, a deity whose existence (as the less-well-known Dölgyel) and propitiation may even predate the lama's death.

Answering these questions has been no small task. In order to do so, I have utilized both primary and secondary resources. Some of the primary Tibetan texts of which I made use were composed during the seventeenth-century, while others are significantly more modern. These are as follows:

- The First Pañchen Lama's (1567-1622) *Autobiography of Pañchen Lozang Chökyi Gyeltsen (Chos smra ba'i dge slong blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan gyi sphyod tshul gsal bar ston pa nor bu'i phreng ba zhes bya ba zhugs so)*
- Desi Sangyé Gyamtso's (1653-1705) history of the Gandenpa tradition, the *Vaidūrya Serpo (Dga' ldan chos 'byung vai dūrya ser po)*
- Dungkar Lozang Trinlé's (1927-1997) *Dungkar's Encyclopedia (Dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo)*
- Koshül Drakpa Chungné (b. twentieth-century) and Gyelwa Lozang Khedrup's (b. twentieth-century) *Treasury of Names (Ming dzod)*

³³ Alternate spellings include: Gekhepa and Gepakha.

- Ngawang Lozang Gyamsto's *Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Za hor gyi ban de ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho'i 'di snang 'khrul ba'i rol rtsed rtogs brjod kyi tshul du bkod pa du ku la'i gos bzang)*
- Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso's *Spontaneous Achievement of the Four Enlightened Activities: [Rites of] realization, offerings, expiation, praises, feasts, and so forth for the ocean of loyal dharma protectors who possess unhindered strength and power (Thogs med drag rtsal nus stobs ldan pa'i dam can chos srung rgya mtsho'i mngon rtogs mchod 'bul bskyang bshags bstod tsogs sogs 'phrin las rnam zhi lhun drub ces bya ba bzhugs so)*
- Sumpa Khenpo Yeshé Peljor's (1704-1788) *Chronological Table (Dpag bsam ljon bzang)*

The secondary materials I consulted have also been of great benefit and range from polemical materials related to the modern controversy to contemporary sources on Tibetan history. These sources, while sometimes helpful in my quest to unearth the life story of Drakpa Gyeltsen, have primarily served as treasure troves of supplementary information. That is they have helped to enrich the data I found in the primary sources. They have provided the necessary foundation upon which I was able to paint a satisfactory portrait of this man, his life, and his legacy. Nevertheless, I believe that there is still a great deal more primary material left to be probed and I plan to continue my efforts in the future.

That said, it seems prudent at this point to explain the organization of this work. In Chapter One, I will give an explanation of who Dorjé Shukden is, how he is believed to be associated with Drakpa Gyeltsen, and why his propitiation has become such a divisive issue. I will do this by presenting several versions of the Shukden origin myth and briefly describing the origins of his cult. Next, because the mannerisms of this deity are key to much of the argumentation that has been produced in favor of or against him and because those behaviors seem quite striking in light of his association with Drakpa Gyeltsen, I will give an abridged explanation of Tibetan views concerning the nature and activities of protective deities. Here, I will also offer some explanations concerning the various ways in which the activities of protectors like Shukden are reconciled with Buddhist moral constructions.

Though a consideration of the modern controversy is not the express purpose of the following enterprise, I think it is nevertheless important to explicate some of its details. It is my hope that the brief survey of the controversy and the polemical materials it has produced presented in Chapter Two will help to familiarize the non-specialist with the manifold concerns involved in a study of this kind.

In Chapter Three, which I consider to be the very heart of my efforts, I will attempt to reconstruct the life story of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen. Here, I will address many of the questions detailed above, taking into consideration the circumstances of the time period into which he was born, his place of birth, his mentors, his disciples, his role in the Gelukpa monastic world, as well as the events surrounding his mysterious death. This then will lead nicely into the subject matter of the Conclusion, where I will address the issue of how Drakpa Gyeltsen might have become associated with Dorjé Shukden. Here, I will reconsider how modern scholarship has dealt with this issue or rather has fallen woefully short of doing so. As I have already noted, I believe that much of the scholarship involving this topic—and specifically the question of who Drakpa Gyeltsen was and what the nature of his relationship to the Fifth Dalai Lama might have been—while informative, often comes up lacking in several important ways. Because of this, I would like to offer, as a means of concluding this study, some insights into possible Shukden-related matters for further consideration.

DHARAMSALA'S CELESTIAL SERIAL KILLER: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SHUKDEN AFFAIR

As we have seen, the Shukden affair traces its roots back to the seventeenth-century and the relationship between the Fifth Dalai Lama and Drakpa Gyeltsen. We also know that, following his death, Drakpa Gyeltsen is said to have become associated with Dorjé Shukden. This deity is known for his particularly fierce treatment of those Gelukpa practitioners whose spiritual routines he considers impure. Even his staunchest supporters proudly acknowledge the ferocity with which he punishes the enemies of the Dharma. In later chapters, we will attempt some theories concerning how Drakpa Gyeltsen, a distinguished scholar and spiritual leader, might have become associated with this violent god. At present, however, I believe it prudent to address some concerns that have by now, no doubt, occurred to the reader. Namely, the idea that the violent activities of the dharma protectors are somehow considered acceptable within Tibetan Buddhism. Thus, in the ensuing paragraphs I will present a more detailed sketch of the origins of this deity and the development of his cult. I will then enumerate, albeit in a very brief manner, some Tibetan conceptions of the nature of the protectors. Finally, I will show that there are indeed ways in which Buddhists have been able to reconcile the activities of these beings with Buddhist notions of morality. Understanding these deities and their role is vital if we desire to fully comprehend the Shukden debate because their propensity towards violence and retribution is precisely what makes them controversial entities.

“Praise to You Violent God of the Yellow Hat Teachings”³⁴: The Rise of Dorjé Shukden

There are a variety of stories detailing the origin of the fierce Gelukpa protective deity, Dorjé Shukden. This is primarily because, in modern times, those who tell this tale

³⁴ From “Praise of Dorje Shugden,” quoted by Dzémé Rinpoche (1927-1996) cited in: Batchelor 1998, p. 60.

have a vested religious and political interest in how it comes together. For this reason, it is difficult to surmise the precise circumstances that brought about the veneration of this deity by Gelukpa monks. The following origin account has been pieced together from a handful of the more popular tales of the birth of Dorjé Shukden. Some of these renderings represent the opinions of Shukden supporters, while others depict those of his foes. Still others are derived from sources that are apparently neutral concerning the issue.

It seems to be generally accepted that the story begins during the administration of the Fifth Dalai Lama. At this time, there was a trülku (an incarnate lama) named Drakpa Gyeltsen, who acted as a priest and resided in the “upper chamber” (Zimkhang Gong) at Drepung monastery. As Nebesky-Wojkowitz reports, Drakpa Gyeltsen was a well-regarded monk with a significant following. However, as we know, a number of other incarnate lamas became envious of his popularity and conspired to end his life.³⁵ According to the account of a modern Shukden devotee named Dawa Tsering—retold in Mumford’s *Himalayan Dialogue*—Drakpa Gyeltsen’s enemies even tried to burn him with fire.³⁶ Nevertheless, he was far cleverer than the other lamas had estimated and was able to foil every attempt on his life. Still, the crafty monk soon became weary of fending off attacks and decided to willfully end his life.

In Nebesky-Wojkowitz’s version of the tale, the lama informed his chief disciple of his plans and gave him instructions for cremating his body. In addition, he told his pupil that, if the various accusations that had been raised against him were false, a pillar of smoke would rise from his funeral pyre forming into a black cloud in the shape of an open hand. This event took place just as the trülku had predicted. His disciple was so overwhelmed that he begged the spirit of his master not to forsake the world, but to remain and take revenge on his enemies.³⁷ Dawa Tsering tells Mumford a somewhat altered story. He recounts that Shukden “called his enemies before him and said: ‘You want me to die. All right, I will.’ Then he stuffed a scarf down his own throat.”³⁸

As we have already seen, other versions of this story claim that Drakpa Gyeltsen was the Fifth Dalai Lama’s bitter rival. According to this tale, he had been born into an aristocratic family and was, as a young child, one of the candidates for the position of

³⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, pp. 134-135.

³⁶ Mumford 1989, p. 125.

³⁷ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, pp. 134-135.

³⁸ Mumford 1989, p. 125.

Dalai Lama. Another child was chosen, sparking a most unkindly rivalry. In fact, so acrimonious was this feud that it apparently led to the murder of Drakpa Gyeltsen by associates of the Fifth.³⁹

However events may have actually unfolded, it is clear that, following his untimely death, Drakpa Gyeltsen felt he had unfinished business with his enemies. Indeed, Dawa Tsering tells Mumford that:

The spirit of the dead lama became a demon. He attacked his own former enemies and they died. The people asked the Dalai Lama to send a lama to exorcise the demon. A Jinseg (*sbyin-seg* [sic]; “fire exorcism”) was prepared. But when the fire was lit, it burned the lama instead of the demon. The people called another lama. Chanting mantras, the lama tricked the demon into entering his body. Then the lama himself entered the fire and died. The demon part of Shugs-ldan [Shukden] was destroyed, so Shugs-ldan became a god.⁴⁰

Other versions report a slightly different course of events. According to one account, at the time of his death Drakpa Gyeltsen “prayed in a contrary manner.” Because of this, “his rebirth was in the form of a powerful, fierce spirit and there was a display of several frightful miracles.” After this, the Upper Chamber was razed and the reliquary stūpa that had been erected to house his remains was demolished. His corpse was then packed into a box and deposited into a river whose current carried the box to a southern area of Lhasa called Döl. After some years of wandering about in that vicinity causing trouble of various kinds, the spirit found its way to Sakya monastery, in western Tibet. There he became acquainted with Sakya Dakchen Sönam Rinchen who “decided that the time was not right to annihilate him because his very bad karma, associated with the wicked prayer he had uttered on his deathbed, was not yet resolved.” Instead, the lama decided to bind the spirit and to compel him to stop his mischievous activities. Thus, the spirit by then known as Dölgyel, was held in custody by the Sakyapa protective deities.

³⁹ Lopez 1998a, p. 188.

⁴⁰ Mumford 1989, pp. 125-126.

Many years later, the Dalai Lama and other Nyingma lamas tried with minimal success to destroy the spirit.⁴¹

Yet another retelling recounts that, following Drakpa Gyeltsen's death, calamities began to occur throughout central Tibet, and especially within the government. Even the Dalai Lama was not immune to the trickery of the begrudged spirit. Stories abound of the spiteful spirit turning over the Dalai Lama's lunch plates, thus ruining his meal. Several attempts were made at scaring the ghoul away, but all were fruitless. The harassment continued until a group of astrologers and oracles were able to deduce the source of the mischief. Having discovered the cause of these annoyances to be an angry spirit, "many experienced lamas and magicians tried to destroy this evil force or to avert at least its harmful influence."⁴² Nothing seemed to work. It appears that Drakpa Gyeltsen was as cunning in death as he had been in life. Eventually, however, the Dalai Lama called on several renowned Nyingma lamas to assist in the disposal of the spirit. Among these was the trülku of Dorjé Drak monastery as well as Terdak Lingpa (1646-1714), the head of Mindroling monastery.⁴³ These lamas assembled a wrathful fire ritual, the results of which vary from tale to tale. Some say that the spirit was annihilated, but later returned as Dorjé Shukden, while others insist that the deity Setrap rescued him from what would have been his blistering end.⁴⁴ Supporters of this version say that Terdak Lingpa lured the spirit into a ladle whereupon Setrap rescued him just as he was about to submit to the flames. In any case, this attempt, too, was unsuccessful, thus Nebesky-Wojkowitz tells us that "the Tibetan Government and the spiritual leaders of the *dGe lugs pa* [Gelukpa] sect, who by now had discovered that the cause of all the misfortune was the injustice they had done to *bSod nams grags pa* [or rather Drakpa Gyeltsen], decided to request his spirit to make peace with them."⁴⁵ The Gelukpas admitted their guilt and, in return, the angry

⁴¹ Dongthog 2000, pp. 15-16

⁴² Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, p. 135.

⁴³ 5DLPT, folios 423-24.

⁴⁴ The protective deity Setrapchen, whose name means something like "one who has a corselet of leather," is associated with the Tibetan form of the Indian god Brahmā, Tsangpa. According to Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Tsangpa is, in turn, understood to be an emanation of Pehar. Thus we see that Setrap can be understood as a form of Pehar, which is interesting because Dorjé Shukden is said to be next in line for the position of state oracle. It is fascinating, then, that Setrap saved the spirit who would become, in a manner of speaking, his rival. Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, pp. 145-151.

⁴⁵ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, p. 135.

spirit agreed to become a protective deity of their sect. He was given the name Dorjé Shukden.

In the years following these events, several of the Throne Holders, or abbots, of Ganden (*Dga ldan khri thog*) propitiated the deity (at the very least they are said to have propitiated Dölgyel), but the practice became less popular as time passed.⁴⁶ It was not until the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries that Shukden worship truly began to flourish. The success of this movement is credited in large part to a Gelukpa monk from Sera Mé college called Pabongkha (1878-1941).⁴⁷

In order to fully comprehend the influence Pabongkhapa Dechen Nyingpo had on the spread of this tradition it is necessary that we take a brief journey back in time to the founding of the Gelukpa sect by Jé Tsongkhapa Lozang Drakpa (1357-1419). Tsongkhapa was born in northeastern Tibet in the province of Amdo (present-day Qinghai) in a district called Tsongkha. As a teenager he traveled to central Tibet in order to pursue spiritual studies. Among his teachers were masters from all of the influential schools of the day including the Kadampa school of the Indian paṇḍita, Atiśa, as well as the Sakyapa and Kagyüpa schools. However, despite his interaction with a variety of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, as time passed Tsongkhapa became increasingly enamored of the Kadampa school, which emphasized scholastic discipline and monastic order. In fact, because of his dedication to Atiśa's teachings, the tradition Tsongkhapa would later found was often known as the "new Kadampa" school. The young monk was also particularly affected by the wisdom imparted upon him by his Sakya teacher, Remdawa Zhönu Lodrö (1342-1412). Like Atiśa, Remdawa believed in reestablishing monastic order, which in recent times had fallen into disrepair in central Tibet. In particular, many monks had taken up such unwholesome pastimes as drinking and consorting with women. As Kapstein writes, Tsongkhapa sought to revive the ideals of monastic virtue by formulating a unique fusion of "the Indian Buddhist legacy, strongly emphasizing careful textual study and the demands of logic, as well as close adherence to the ethical precepts governing the life of a Buddhist monk."⁴⁸ Out of this fervent desire was born the

⁴⁶ Dhongthog 2000, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Sera Mé was constructed in 1419 during the time of the founding of Sera Tekchenling monastery, outside of Lhasa. It was established as an institution for the promotion of elementary Buddhist studies. Gyurmé Dorjé 2004, p. 118.

⁴⁸ See Kapstein 2006, pp. 119-120.

Gandenpa tradition, which later became known as the Gelukpa school, or the school of the “virtuous ones.”

While the primary emphasis of Tsongkhapa’s teaching concerns a strong background in Buddhist philosophy as well as strict vows of monastic discipline, its more esoteric elements should not be overlooked. Indeed, for the purposes of the present argument, it is essential that they be enumerated in at least some detail. Primarily, we must take into consideration Tsongkhapa’s designation of meditational and protective deities if we wish to understand why Pabongkha’s own views were particularly radical. In all schools of Tibetan Buddhism certain deities are understood to have particular efficacy when contemplated, while others are revered for their protective capacities. Meditational deities are those whose qualities or virtues the practitioner wishes to emulate or embody. By means of intense contemplation of these beings and through identification with them, it is believed that the meditator can transform his or her own negative qualities into the enlightened virtues of these beings. Tsongkhapa suggested three primary meditational deities for his disciples: Guhyasamāja, Yamāntaka, and Cakrasaṃvara.⁴⁹ The foremost of

⁴⁹ Dreyfus 2003, p. 118. Guhyasamāja, whose name means “secret assembly,” is often referred to as the King of Tantras. The texts surrounding this deity are quite antique, in some cases dating as far back as the fourth century C.E. Among those Buddhist scholars who have written on his tantra are Narājuna, Āryadeva, and Candrakīrti. His tantra describes him as dark blue in complexion having three faces and six arms. His three countenances are meant to symbolize the afflictions of anger, ignorance, and attachment transformed into enlightened awareness. Yamāntaka, the so-called “destroyer of the Lord of the Dead,” has a rather interesting origin myth. I offer here Jonathan Landaw and Andy Weber’s interpretation of the myth:

There was once a powerful yogi who went into a cave to pursue his practices of deep meditative absorption. He sat down in the unshakeable vajra position and soon his consciousness was soaring to elevated planes far beyond this ordinary worldly existence. Night fell and into the apparently abandoned cave hurried a band of poachers driving before them a water buffalo they had stolen. They immediately slaughtered the beast and set about devouring their ill-gotten prey. Suddenly, by the light of their fire they caught sight of the yogi’s silent form seated in the shadows. Fearful of what would happen to them if this witness to their misdeeds were left alive, they leapt up, cut off his head, and returned to their feast.

Soon thereafter the meditator’s consciousness returned from its travels and reentered his body, only to discover that it was headless! Frantically he felt around the floor of the cave, searching for something to place upon his shoulders, but all he could find was the buffalo’s severed head, so he put that on. Then, wild with anger at what had befallen him, he set out to wreak his revenge on the poachers who had so cruelly disfigured him. With his psychic powers he not only destroyed them but vented his boundless fury on whomever he met. Soon he became the scourge of the countryside, a hideous monster who left behind him a ghastly trail of destruction—a veritable Lord of Death.

In hopes of putting an end to this carnage a group of holy men set about making prayers and offering to Manjushri, beseeching his aid to protect them all from the deformed yogi’s rage. Out of his great compassion Manjushri responded to their entreaties. Realizing that

these, and therefore the one around whom most meditative practices center, is Cakrasaṃvara. In fact, he is often considered the primary meditational deity of the Gelukpa sect. Furthermore, traditionally, the primary Gelukpa protectors were Penden Lhamo (the Glorious Goddess), Bektsé, Mahākāla, and the State Oracle (Nechung/Pehar).⁵⁰ Of these, Lhamo is usually considered to be the most powerful. Thus, many Gelukpa schematizations list Cakrasaṃvara as the meditational deity (*yi dam*), Lhamo as the protector, and Jé Tsongkhapa as the guru.

For his part, Pabongkha saw fit to adjust Tsongkhapa's specifications. He created an entirely new schematization of the Gelukpa tradition, in which Vajrayogini was the main meditational deity, Shukden the protector, and Pabongkha the guru. This is a particularly pioneering schematization because it differs significantly from Tsongkhapa's original vision. Thus, as Dreyfus notes, "whereas previously Shuk-den seems to have been a relatively minor protector in the Ge-luk tradition, Pa-bong-ka made him into one of the main protectors of the tradition."⁵¹ Moreover, whereas Tsongkhapa had always been looked to as the central holder of the Gelukpa teachings, Pabongkha had elevated himself to that position.

only an extremely wrathful emanation would be suitable for overcoming such a powerful force, he manifested himself as Vajrabhairava, the Diamond Terrifier, otherwise known as Yamantaka, Destroyer of the Lord of Death. The central face of this terrifying emanation took on the aspect of an enraged buffalo to match the fury of the yogi, but it was crowned with the head of Manjushri himself as a sign of Yamantaka's fully enlightened nature. In this form, then, Manjushri subdued the yogi so completely that he was converted from a malevolent force into a protector of dharma practitioners. As such he is invoked by followers of Yamantaka's tantric path and given the name Dharmaraja, King of the Dharma.

Thus, we see that Yamāntaka's history is quite similar to that of Dorjé Shukden. In fact, we will learn in later chapters that, like Yamāntaka, Shukden is believed to be a wrathful emanation of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Cakrasaṃvara is considered to be the wrathful manifestation of the Buddha Vajradhāra. He is particularly well known as the subduer of Bhairava (or Íśvara, a form of the Hindu god, Śiva). According to Buddhist lore, Bhairava once controlled the world, but exercised his influence in particularly unseemly ways, thus causing great suffering to worldly beings. Having been beseeched by the deity Vajrapāṇi and out of his great compassion, Vajradhāra manifested himself as Cakrasaṃvara and slayed the celestial tyrant. Landaw and Weber 2006.

⁵⁰ Penden Lhamo, known in Sanskrit as Śrī Devi, is a fierce protectress of the doctrine. She is typically depicted with an emaciated form and frightening expression. She is known the personal protector of the Dalai Lamas, and, as such, the Second Dalai Lama, Gendün Gyamtso, is said to have played a major role in the development of her cult, which up to the present remains significant. Mahākāla, the "great black one," is the guardian of the law. According to Heller, Bektsé is commonly represented as a fierce warrior. Throughout time, he has been popular in several Tibetan Buddhist schools including the Sakya and Kagyü. His worship also has strong ties to the enumerations of the Second Dalai Lama. For more see: Heller 2003, pp. 82-97.

⁵¹ Dreyfus 1998, pp. 245-246.

Like Tsongkhapa, Pabongkha had been educated in the teachings of several schools, particularly in those of the Nyingma, Sakya, and Kagyü. In his youth, however, he communicated with Dorjé Shukden, by way of a spirit medium and received a message assuring him of success in all his endeavors if he practiced only pure Gelukpa Buddhism. This then became Pabongkha's primary *modus operandi*. He spent the rest of his life promulgating what he believed to be the purest form of Gelukpa Buddhism. According to Karmay, he began to compose propitiatory texts to Shukden in 1920. All of this was against the wishes of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama who, like the present Dalai Lama, opposed the worship of Shukden. He continued, in spite of the Dalai Lama's disapproval, to compose the texts over the years and, in doing so, gained for himself a significant following. Among his most notable disciples was the late Trijang Rinpoché, the tutor of both the present Dalai Lama and Geshé Kelsang Gyamtso.⁵²

In truth, the controversial nature of the deity Dorjé Shukden has not faded since his "resurrection" at the hands of Pabongkha in the last century. Nevertheless, the situation became particularly inflamed when the current Dalai Lama, on the advice of the Nechung oracle, discouraged the propitiation of that deity.⁵³ In 1996, he publicly renewed his denunciation of the Shukden. According to him, Shukden was not an incarnation of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen, but rather "an evil spirit whose worship promoted sectarianism in the refugee community and thus was inimical to the greater cause of Tibetan independence."⁵⁴ According to the Dalai Lama's opponents in the NKT, however, not

⁵² Karmay 2005, pp. 196-197.

⁵³ The worldly dharma protector, Nechung or Pehar, was among the many Tibetan deities to ascend to the region's Buddhist pantheon during Padmasambhava's famous exorcism of Tibet's demons. According to Tibetan lore, he forsook his animalistic and vengeful ways in order to obtain a position among the nation's many protector deities. Among these deities, Pehar's status is remarkably elevated. Over the centuries, the storehouse of myths regarding the origin of this deity has become expansive. According to one tradition, Pehar is said to have originally resided in Bengal, which is also believed to have been Padmasambhava's birthplace. Another version reports that he once dwelt in Mongolia. It was thus to this location that Padmasambhava is said to have traveled in search of a deity to guard the treasures of Samyé monastery. He is believed to have held this post at Samyé for nearly seven centuries until, under the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama, he relocated to Nechung. Eventually, the deity began to manifest himself, taking possession of a human oracle. The Fifth Dalai Lama later appointed this oracle to the office of state oracle. Having been appointed to this post, Pehar's renown increased and he became known as chief among all Dharma protectors. In exchange for reverence and tribute, Pehar offers blessings, predictions, and perpetual defense of the Three Jewels. Nebesky-Wokowitz 1996, pp. 97-105. For more on Pehar/Nechung see: Hummel 1962; Rinzin 1992; and Martin 1996.

⁵⁴ Lopez 1998b, pp. 68-69.

only was Shukden indeed an incarnation of the revered lama, but also a bona fide Buddha.

The essence of this disagreement is embedded deep within Tibetan notions concerning the relationship between the mundane and supramundane realms. In order to deconstruct the quandary, we must first scrutinize some of these claims. To begin, it is important that we attempt to understand the duties of Tibet's dharma protectors. Where does this concept come from? What are the activities prescribed to these entities? And, finally, how are these activities reconcilable with Buddhist notions of morality? By answering these questions we will be able to see more clearly why their propitiation can easily become a source of contention. This, then, will lay the groundwork for a well-informed discussion of modern perspectives on the status of Dorjé Shukden within the Tibetan cosmological framework (which we will survey in the following chapter). This is particularly important because so much of the polemical material that has come about as a result of the current Dalai Lama's statements has concerned the nature of Shukden. That is, most polemicists have been compelled, at least to some extent, to discuss whether Dorjé Shukden is a simple spirit or a fully-fledged Buddha.

“The Taming of the Shrew”: The Conversion of Tibet's Indigenous Demons

According to traditional Tibetan historical narratives, in 779 CE, the Tibetan king, Tri Songdetsen (r. 755-797), charged the Indian monk, Śāntaraṣita, with the task of helping to establish the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet.⁵⁵ Construction was halted, however, when the ardent monk found himself in a most unusual predicament. It seems that the local deities and demons were less than enthusiastic about the project. After several failed attempts to expel the angry spirits, Śāntaraṣita was forced to confess to the king that this task was beyond the scope of his abilities. He suggested that the king request the assistance of the tantric master, Padmasambhava. Thankfully, Padmasambhava answered the king's desperate plea, arriving in Tibet just in time to subdue the unruly indigenous ghouls. They were given a not-so-subtle ultimatum: convert

⁵⁵ More on this monastery, called Samyé, can be found in: Chandra 1961; Houston 1974; Wayman 1977; Jackson 1982; Van der Kuijp 1984 and 1986; Gyurmé Dorjé 1994; and Richardson 2003.

to Buddhism or get out. In the end, as the legend goes, they chose the former, promising to protect Tibet and, above all, the Dharma with the same ferocity with which they had once opposed the Buddhist teachings.

If it was not enough that Padmasambhava had forced these local deities and demons to submit themselves to the Buddhist law, the advent of tantra in Tibet also meant that many of them were demoted—so to speak—in order to make space in the Tibetan pantheon for Indian Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The latter, referred to as world transcending deities (*'jig rten las 'das pa'i lha*), were deities like six-armed Mahākāla (*dgon po phyag drug*) and the Great Goddess (*dpal ldan lha mo, Mahādevi*), who possessed the capacity not only to protect Tibet and the Dharma, but also to assist in their devotees' progress towards realization. The recently converted indigenous spirits, were now known as this-worldly deities (*'jig rten pa'i lha*), and were believed to possess none of the tantric deities' transcendental powers. Yet, inferior though they in some ways may have been, the mundane deities were and still are believed to be more efficacious in day-to-day protection than those gods and goddesses of the supramundane variety.⁵⁶ Because these beings have not transcended the world, they are able to temporarily possess the bodies of humans. Thus they are able to become visible to beings inhabiting the mundane realm, offering advice and protection. The ability to manifest in the form of an oracle is a unique quality of the worldly deities.⁵⁷ There are many such oracles in Tibetan Buddhism, including Nechung and the Shukden oracle.⁵⁸

The efficacy of these deities in the mundane world is often explained as the product of their actually inhabiting it rather than abiding in some distant pure realm. According to legend, the first rulers of the Tibetan people were the nine Masang (“unclean”) brothers: Nöjin, Dü, Sinpo, Lu, Tsen, Lha, Mu, Dré, and Gongpo.⁵⁹ As worldly rulers of Tibet, these native spirits were fierce and relentless and Beyer suggests that their sovereignty, though constrained by Buddhist law, has not entirely diminished with time. Later classificatory schemes of native Tibetan deities and spirits closely

⁵⁶ Dreyfus 2003, pp. 298-299.

⁵⁷ Stein 1972, p. 187.

⁵⁸ Accounts of the Shukden oracle can be found in: Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996 and Avedon 2005. For more on Tibetan oracles in general see, Rock 1935; Berglie 1976; Peter 1978a and -b; Tewari 1987; Day 1989 and 1990; Schenk 1993; Stuart 1995; Havnevik 2002; Bellezza 2005; and Diemberger 2005.

⁵⁹ Beyer 2001, p. 293.

parallel the names of the nine brothers.⁶⁰ Beyer cites Lama Ngawang Lozang's *Enumeration of the Names of the Oath-bound Guardians* as containing the following list:

(1) The class of *lha* who are white, (2) the class of *dü* who are black, (3) the class of *tšen* who are red, (4) the class of *za* who are vari-colored, (5) the class of *mu* who are brown, (6) the class of *sinpo* who are eaters of flesh, (7) the class of *jepo* [or, more commonly, *gyelpo*] who are lords of treasure, (8) the class of *mamo* who are bringers of disease.⁶¹

The lists vary somewhat depending upon the source from which they are derived, but each generally refers to a grouping of deities and spirits whose tendencies and temperaments are unique to their particular breed.

The *lha*, for example are usually understood to reside in the heavens and to possess basically benevolent characteristics. The *tšen* are sometimes said to result from an individual's violent or untimely death. Often these entities are adopted as familial protectors (*pho lha*).⁶² The *gyelpo* (which Beyer renders *jepo* as a reflection of the Khampa dialect of Eastern Tibet), or king demons, on the other hand, are perceived as mischievous troublemakers. A powerful magician who uses his magical gifts for evil rather than good risks being reborn as such a creature as does a monk who becomes "god-like" without attaining a realization of emptiness. Beyer reports that these spirits "often come in the guise of monks or royalty to instigate anger and fighting." Wherever these spirits travel, anger, fighting, and disease follow. Many such demons, including Pehar, the "mundane protector" of the Gelukpa sect, were among those converted by Padmasambhava.⁶³ Dorjé Shukden is alternately recognized as either a *tšen* or *gyelpo* spirit by those who do not believe him to be a fully-fledged Buddha.

Though sworn to defend the Buddhist teachings, these dharma protectors (*chos skyong*, *dharmapāla*) retain their unruly and volatile nature and are often, as Dreyfus suggests, "prone to quasi-human emotions such as anger, jealousy, and so forth."⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Gibson has chronicled this interesting shift in his dissertation. See, Gibson 1991

⁶¹ Beyer 2001, p. 294.

⁶² Gibson 1991, pp. 177-78.

⁶³ Beyer 2001, pp. 294-297.

⁶⁴ Dreyfus 2003, p. 299.

Moreover, Tucci warns that “if they are offended in some manner or are discontented, their violent nature wins the upper hand.”⁶⁵ For example, Mumford’s informant, Dawa Tsering, told him that if he forgets to make his monthly offering to Shukden, “then he’ll make me sick...If I do not serve Shugs-ldan [Shukden] he will get angry. He will kill my animals and I will lose my wealth and the members of my household will fight.” On the other hand, when Tsering remembers his obligation to the deity, he is rewarded with protection and good fortune.⁶⁶

Because of their precarious temperament, these deities may easily be lured away from their protective duties and enlisted in dark tasks. In fact, while protection is their primary responsibility, they are also quite adept at other of the so-called four mundane activities. These activities—generally listed as pacifying (*zhi*), increasing (*rgyas*), subjugating (*dbang*), and destroying (*drag*)—are variously applied toward what might be perceived as benevolent, selfish, or even vengeful ends. The protectors, and particularly the *tsen*, are often invoked “to subjugate three kinds of enemies: enemies of religion in general, a specific person who wishes to harm the religious community, or obstacles which interfere with religious practice.” Traditionally, it is said that these beings do this, not by committing the “subjugation” themselves, but rather by causing various fatal maladies or by inciting an individual or group who is not involved in the ritual to murder the enemy.⁶⁷

Because of their propensity for anger and their aptitude in the art of annihilation, it is often thought that protective deities must be regarded with a certain amount of heedfulness. And indeed, their temperaments are volatile, but within the domain of their efficacy—that is this world—these deities exercise considerable (though not supreme) authority. But is it really possible to reconcile their wrathful mannerisms with Buddhist notions of ethical behavior and salvation? As we will see, there are some—including the current Dalai Lama—who claim that excessive reliance on these beings is not only irreconcilable with the Buddha’s teachings, but that it can actually cause serious damage to the Dharma. Nevertheless, there do exist, within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, various means of legitimizing the activities of the dharma protectors.

⁶⁵ Tucci 1980, p. 164.

⁶⁶ Mumford 1989, p. 126.

⁶⁷ Gibson 1991, p. 171. This, then, is why some have concluded that Shukden was involved in the murders of Lozang Gyamtso and his students.

Getting Away with Murder: Buddhism and the Activities of the Dharma Protectors

Alexandra David-Neel once wrote with reference to magical rites in Tibet that “this repugnant mysticism has nothing at all in common with Buddhism.”⁶⁸ Though her assessment was incorrect, it does illuminate an interesting consideration with regards to the nature of the four mundane activities—those activities performed primarily by protective deities—and their relationship to Buddhism. How, for example, can actions aimed at accumulation of wealth or at destroying one’s enemies be reconciled with a religion whose clergy are required to renounce the quest for worldly success and are bound by oath never to kill?

Buddhism at its very core upholds what Gellner has called a “conceptual separation” between soteriology and this-worldly religion and understanding this concept is the key to articulating an answer to the above question. At its heart, Buddhism (of all varieties) is diametrically opposed to murder.⁶⁹ In fact, one might argue that it is opposed to all of the goals sought by those who perform the four rites. After all, each of them at its most basic level represents an attempt to fulfill a desire of some kind, whether it is for wealth or for revenge. And it is *desire*, according to Śākyamuni and the Buddhist sages that followed in his footsteps, that is at the root of the suffering of sentient beings. Even the most novice student of Buddhism knows this to be the second of the Four Noble Truths. Considered in this light, it is difficult to see how the four activities could possibly be understood to have *any* transformative power at all. Therefore, we must shift our perspective slightly and consider some alternative ways of analyzing Buddhist attitudes toward the mundane world.

In the 1970s, Spiro popularized one such method.⁷⁰ He posited the existence of three kinds of Buddhist practice: nibbanic, kammatic, and apotropaic. In other words, within any given Buddhist community, there arises one strain of religious activity oriented around the goal of attaining *nirvāṇa*, another centered on improving one’s

⁶⁸ David-Neel 1971, p. 131.

⁶⁹ Gellner 1992, p. 100.

⁷⁰ See Spiro 1982.

karma, and yet another concerned primarily with magical and protective activities (apotropaic). While Spiro's categories are insightful and often helpful, they are sometimes problematic. First, as Gellner has noted, they are etic and thusly not recognized by Buddhists themselves. This is less of a problem, however, than the fact that, in nearly all Buddhist communities, the lines that divide these groups are extremely fluid. Indeed, in Tibet, it is very difficult to determine "nibbanic" Buddhist practices from apotropaic practices because much of the liturgy is rife with magical elements.

Gellner offers an alternative and perhaps slightly more helpful schematization. In his study, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest*, he identifies several distinctions within the Newar Buddhism that he studied. First, he notes a division—which he claims is understood by Buddhists themselves—between soteriology and "this worldly" religion. Within the realm of "this worldly" religion one finds a further distinction between what he calls social religion and instrumental religion. According to him, social religion involves predictable patterns of religious behavior. This includes events such as festivals, life-cycle rites, and the recurrent obligations of socio-religious organizations. Instrumental religion, on the other hand, is characterized by spontaneity. It is sporadic, self-interested, and often involves the use of magic.⁷¹

Certainly it is difficult to categorize Buddhism in the manner in which Spiro, Gellner and others have attempted. Because Buddhism is not only an intellectual concept, but also a living organism, any such attempt is bound to be flawed in some way or another. Nevertheless, I believe Gellner's schematization has several merits and can be used quite successfully as a means of explaining Tibetan Buddhist understandings of the relationship between mundane and supramundane activities. Part of the reason for this is that his scheme recognizes from the outset that Buddhism accepts that not all Buddhists are concerned with its soteriological goals and that, even if they were, not all of them would be successful in their attempts at attainment. For this reason, as we have seen, Buddhism has never denied altogether the importance of the mundane world.

The Mahāyāna doctrine of "skillful means" (*upāya*) provides the perfect basis for Buddhism's acceptance of the mundane. The belief that a Buddha may offer any of a variety of teachings to his disciples depending upon their capacity for understanding

⁷¹ Gellner 1992, pp. 6-7.

allows the Mahāyāna and its subsidiaries to argue that certain individuals simply are not able—at least not in this life—to comprehend the deepest Buddhist teachings and must therefore resort to the life of a devout layperson. Devout laypeople, though faithful, are primarily concerned with this world. In the Tibetan case, this means that they are most interested in protective rites—those that shelter them from hail storms or ward off illness and evil spirits—and rites of increase that promise this-worldly fortune. In some cases, they may even be interested in rites that promise the most mundane result of all, revenge.

In Gellner's scheme, all of these activities—but especially revenge—can be understood to fall under the category of instrumental religion. When these actions are taken at face value, it would certainly seem that the purposes they serve are almost entirely instrumental. At the same time, we know that this is clearly not how they are understood in the tantric context. In fact, mastery of these rites is often understood as a crucial stepping-stone on the path to enlightenment, the soteriological goal of Buddhism. This means that the four rites could also be said to serve soteriological purposes, albeit tangentially. In another sense, they also have socio-religious functions because they are ingrained in Tibetan religious and cultural mythology. Because of their association with the dharma protectors, they play a critical role in the predictable day-to-day activities of the clergy whose job it is to propitiate these deities.

All of this, therefore, helps only slightly in our efforts to understand the relationship between the activities of the protectors and Buddhist doctrine. We know that there are ways of conceptualizing this relationship and that Gellner's scheme is helpful in this regard. But there must be something more. After all, dharma protectors such as Shukden are said to be capable of murder in the name of the Dharma. Even these understandings are not satisfactory explanations of how murder could possibly be reconciled with Buddhist thought. Nevertheless, Buddhism's elasticity and especially its notion of "skillful means" has allowed the Tibetans to provide a somewhat satisfactory elaboration: liberation killing.⁷²

Even in its esoteric context, Buddhism condemns acts of violence such as murder. At the same time, however, it recognizes that there are certain contexts in which homicide is justified. In particular, killing an individual is sometimes seen as the most

⁷² Cantwell has written an elaboration of this doctrine within the Nyingma school. See: Cantwell 1997.

expedient way of releasing him from the depraved circumstances of his existence. For example, in the popular Tibetan epic of King Gesar, the king is instructed as follows:

These demons and hordes of others like them
Are the ancient weaknesses of race and realm,
And, for all their innumerable forms,
They are the many-twisted branches of a single root.
They are the perverted face of liberation.
They are the belief that freedom can be possessed
As an experience, as power, intelligence, lust or wealth.
They are the rapacious struggle of the deluded mind
To expand the domain of its own projections.
Thus they undermine the true merit of men and nations,
Which is confidence in the power of egoless action.
The blazing sun of unbiased wakefulness
Becomes the shifting half-light of craving.⁷³

Thus Gesar is counseled that his enemies are so corrupt in their understanding of reality that they must be destroyed. But their destruction is carried out not only for the welfare of the sentient beings upon whom they wreak mayhem, but also for their own karmic wellbeing. Because the demons' views with regards to the Dharma are so perverted, Gesar's destruction of them is seen as a liberation murder. That is, he releases them from their suffering so that they can be speedily reborn in a pure realm where they will be able to hear the true Dharma.

Of course this business of liberation homicide has the potential to become somewhat of a slippery slope and the Tibetans are not unaware of the possibility for manipulation of this rule. For this reason, such murders are supposed to be carried out only by people of exceptional ability. Dūjom Rinpoché offers a parable of Guru Chöwang (1212-1271) as a means of exemplifying the spiritual abilities of such a person.⁷⁴ One day, a young Nepalese man asked the guru to demonstrate the power of killing. In

⁷³Penick 1996, p. 51.

⁷⁴A different version of this tale can be found in Dargyay 1998, pp. 114-115

response to this request, he chose a small rabbit, drew its likeness in the dirt, repeated a mantra seven times over a needle, and stabbed the drawing with that object. Having killed the creature, he ordered the man to bring him the corpse, saying, “Now, we must purify its obscurations.” He then guided the rabbit’s consciousness by offering sacrificial cakes and dedicating merit. The lama’s curious companion then asked, “If such sorcery were used on me, would it not be terrible?” The lama replied, “Men and marmots are similar.” He then performed the same action on a marmot and recovered the corpse. Reflecting upon this activity, the lama told the man: “This is the outcome of such practice. I will teach no one because it is harmful to sentient beings.” Furthermore, he warned the awestruck on-looker, “Even against an enemy one should not utilize any power that does not conduce to buddhahood.”⁷⁵

Thus one who wishes to kill another being must also be capable of liberating his consciousness. Such liberation may mean either that the being’s awareness will be sent to a pure realm, as noted above, or completely out of the cycle, as we witness in the above example. Whatever the case, we see that such murders must be premeditated in a most sophisticated way. This, then, is the domain of the dharma protector. These worldly deities are charged with rooting out and annihilating enemies of the Dharma. This concept of ridding the world of enemies of the faith is particularly important in the case of Shukden since, as we will see, he is believed to be particularly adept at purging the Gelukpa school of those practitioners, lay and monastic, who taint their routines with the practices of other schools.

⁷⁵Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 767.

**OF LAMAS, DEMONS, AND CELESTIAL BUDDHAS: A
SURVEY OF POLEMICAL MATERIALS CONCERNING
THE SHUKDEN AFFAIR**

When the Dalai Lama made his first public denunciation of Shukden worship in the late 1970s, he could not have foreseen the mayhem that would ensue as a result of that statement. But the violent murders of Geshé Lozang Gyamtso and his students represent some of the most extreme reactions. While there have been reports of violence from both sides, most of the argumentation that has resulted from the Dalai Lama's disavowal of Shukden has been of the ink and paper variety. In the following paragraphs, we will examine the polemical perspectives that have emerged in the wake of this Tibetan Buddhist crisis.

The murders of Geshé Lozang Gyamtso and his students were not the primary catalyst for the Shukden affair, so the purpose of the above commentary has not been to prove Shukden's guilt or innocence in this matter. Rather, I hope that this has provided a backdrop against which we can begin to comprehend the complexity of this situation. Understanding Shukden's place within the Tibetan cosmological framework is important because it is a significant aspect of the polemical debates that have arisen as a result of the Dalai Lama's denunciation of this being. Furthermore, I hope that now we can better understand, on the one hand, why the Dalai Lama is suspicious of this figure (and others like him), and on the other, why the being's supporters are so staunchly dedicated to him. We now know a little bit about how Tibetans categorize these beings based upon their origins. Furthermore, we have seen what they are believed to be capable of accomplishing. We know that protective deities are considered to be highly efficacious in this world, providing both protection and the promise of good fortune. At the same time, we know that these beings are capable of severe acts of retribution (which, as we have seen, are often reconciled with Buddhist beliefs in a variety of ways). At this point, we can begin to examine exactly how proponents of each of the opposing sides of this issue view Shukden.

In 1973, three years before the Dalai Lama made his public condemnation of Shukden, a senior Gelukpa monk named Dzemé Trülku Lozang Penden (1927-1996) published an account of Dorjé Shukden called “Oral Transmission of the Intelligent Father” (*Pha rgod bla ma'i zhal lung*).⁷⁶ In recent times, this text has simply become known as the “Yellow Book.” In it, Dzemé Trülku details various acts of retribution perpetrated by the deity against those monks and laymen who have offended him. One example of this is the case of Fifth Pañchen Lama, who Dzemé Rinpoché claims incurred Shukden’s wrath by adopting Nyingma practices.⁷⁷ The author attributes these anecdotes to the oral teachings of his and the Dalai Lama’s tutor Trijang Rinpoché (1901-1981), the “intelligent father” of the text’s title. Many of the monks and laymen mentioned as victims of Shukden’s wrath were Gelukpa practitioners who “tainted” their practice by adding to it various rituals of the Nyingma variety.

Most of the Dalai Lama’s supporters have interpreted Dzemé Trülku’s publication of the “Yellow Book” as an underhanded affront to the Dalai Lama himself, who had recently begun taking teachings from various masters of the Nyingma sect. According to one of those supporters, Tenpé Gyeltsen Dongtok of the Sakya school, “there can be no doubt that Dzemé’s intention was to express ill will concerning His Holiness’ nonsectarian activities.”⁷⁸ Whatever the monk’s intentions may have been, it is clear that the text sparked some controversy. Three years later, having abandoned his own propitiatory practices, the Dalai Lama announced his disapproval of the deity.

Naturally, there are many Shukden proponents who claim that he made his disavowal out of fear of incurring the deity’s wrath. According to this line of reasoning, the Dalai Lama gave up Shukden worship and began to defame the deity as a kind of cowardly way of distancing himself from the being. And there has indeed been some concern among his followers for the well-being of the Dalai Lama following his denunciation and subsequent ban of Shukden worship. But they maintain that their fear is

⁷⁶ The full title of this text is *Mthu dang stobs kyi che ba'i bstan srung chen po rdo rje shugs ldan rtsal gyi byung ba brjod pa pha rgod bla ma'i zhal lung gi bdud rtsi'i chu khur brtsegs shing 'jigs rung glog zhags 'gyu ba'i sprin nag 'khrugs pa'i nga ro*. It can be found in volume two of Zemé Rinpoche’s collected works, which is called *'Jam mgon snyan brgyud kyi bstan pa'i mdzod 'dzin skyabs rje dze smad rin po che rje tsun blo bzang dpal ldan bstan 'dzin yar gyas sam blo gter dgyas pa'i lang tsho dpal bzang po'i gsung 'bum*.

⁷⁷ Dreyfus 2003, p. 300-301

⁷⁸ Dongthog 2000, p. 5.

not of the deity himself, but rather they believe that “there is a danger when a disciple enters a spiritual relationship with a lama, but fails to heed, or defies his advice.”⁷⁹ That is, they believe ill occurrences will befall the Dalai Lama if his disciples do not cease their propitiation of Shukden. Thus it is unclear whether the Dalai Lama actually fears Shukden. What is certain is that he continues to insist that his misgivings are entirely benevolent.

For one thing, the Dalai Lama, as the Tibetan exile community’s most well-known leader, seems not to want to associate himself with a figure who he claims represents sectarian viewpoints. In a talk given to Western Buddhists, the leader explained this sentiment as follows: “Among Buddhists, there are different schools, different systems of practice, and we should not feel that one teaching is better, another teaching is worse, and so on. Sectarian feeling and criticism of other teachings or other sects is very bad, poisonous, and should be avoided.”⁸⁰ Indeed, since his escape to India in 1959, the Dalai Lama has made non-sectarianism his policy. In keeping with this theme, he told a group of onlookers at a gathering of the Buddhist Society in London, that:

It is well known that my whole approach is non-sectarian and in the Tibetan tradition I am particularly trying to promote simultaneously the practices of Sakya, Nyingma, Kagyu and Gelug. One person can embrace all the teachings. However, in following Dorje Shugden there is a tendency towards sectarianism which does not work well with my non-sectarian approach.⁸¹

Furthermore, the Dalai Lama argues that, besides being a source of division within the exile community, Dorjé Shukden is of dubious origin. Official documents released in support of the Dalai Lama’s stance report that Shukden is not a manifestation of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen, but rather that of an angry spirit masquerading as the emanation of an aggrieved lama.⁸² In support of his claim, the Dalai Lama points out that many of the masters of the other Tibetan schools have denounced Shukden as an evil spirit. Moreover,

⁷⁹ SD 1998, p. 6.

⁸⁰ Piburn 1990, p. 87.

⁸¹ MW 1996, pp. 147-50.

⁸² SD 1998, p. 2

he believes that propitiation of such beings may cause, “a degeneration of the Buddhadharma through relying increasingly on external deities to such a point that the profound Buddhist tradition could be reduced to spirit worship.”⁸³ In more precise terms, he explains that:

In the Tantrayāna system there are many different deities, wrathful and peaceful; and in one mandala there are many deities. The practitioner in meditation visualizes him or herself as a deity and utilizes the energy or activities from the wrathful deity or spirit. However, eventually the practitioner may neglect his or her own practice to rely more and more on a so called protector. To rely on a protector is actually a degeneration of Buddhist principles. For according to the Buddha, ‘you are your own master’—Buddhism relies heavily on oneself.

It is therefore more difficult to practice discipline in *samādhi* (concentration) or *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, than it is to rely on a protector. You see, you are your own master and the real protector is not even the Buddha—it is the Dharma. Dharma is not outside but inside; only Dharma protects by increasing positive emotion and weakening negative emotion until it is eventually eliminated and the person is liberated. This is the way of the protector: not as an external power, for no matter how ferocious-looking he is, he is no protector at all if he is against Buddhist principles.

Some people through lack of knowledge prefer to rely on external things. This even includes the state oracle of the Tibetan government; although this spirit is of course not controversial: all schools of Tibetan Buddhist thought accept that this and other oracles are reliable worthy local spirits. But if a person trusts wholeheartedly in and takes refuge in these spirits, he or she is in reality no longer a true Buddhist.⁸⁴

⁸³ MW 1996, p. 149.

⁸⁴ MW 1996, p. 148.

Thus, the Dalai Lama believes that protectors like Shukden and even Pehar—the deity who possesses the state oracle—are efficacious only up to a certain point. They may indeed possess the positive qualities discussed in the previous chapter, but those qualities are, from the Dalai Lama’s perspective, to be utilized with a certain measure of discretion. This is because they also possess those potentially negative qualities about which we have just learned, because they do not have the ability to lead the practitioner to liberation. According to him, investing too much energy in their propitiation or, worse, taking refuge in them can be extremely harmful, even heretical.

The Dalai Lama and his supporters also believe that the Fifth Dalai Lama denounced the worship of Dorjé Shukden.⁸⁵ They claim that the Fifth expressed distaste for the spirit because of the ill treatment he received from it and because of the havoc it wreaked throughout central Tibet. They also cite the Thirteenth Dalai Lama’s denunciation of Shukden worship as a reason for which to avoid the deity and the practices surrounding him.⁸⁶ Indeed, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama did take issue with some aspects of this deity. He placed restrictions on Shukden’s oracle, who was allowed to appear only in certain locations and never at the large monasteries. He allowed Gelukpas to propitiate this deity as long as he was worshipped in his correct place in the hierarchy of deities—that is, as a minor worldly god. Finally, the Dalai Lama also strongly urged Pabongkha to cease his propitiation of Shukden. Specifically, the Dalai Lama and his associates were concerned about the diffusion of Shukden worship at Drepung, which, according to Dreyfus, they interpreted as an attempt to undermine the state oracle, Nechung.⁸⁷

The current Dalai Lama has made no secret of his admiration of both the Fifth and the Thirteenth Dalai Lamas. In particular, he claims to respect what he sees as the non-sectarianism of their administrations.⁸⁸ Moreover, both of these Dalai Lamas were

⁸⁵ This may refer to the issues the Fifth is said to have had with the spirit Dölgyel.

⁸⁶ MW 1996, p. 149.

⁸⁷ Dreyfus 1998, p. 244

⁸⁸ In reality, the Fifth Dalai Lama’s religious eclecticism and “tolerance” may not have been all that innovative during his lifetime. This is because, at that time, the seeds of sectarian division were only just beginning to be sewn. Religious eclecticism was and still is a fairly common aspect of the practices of individual Tibetan Buddhists. In fact, there seems to be a tendency on the part of many students of Tibetan history to assume that clear boundaries have always existed between the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. As Kapstein notes: “It is one of the unfortunate illusions of Tibetan history that religious tension has too often been taken as the cause, rather than as a symptomatic ideological projection, of the underlying

sympathetic to the Nyingma school, taking teachings from its various masters. Thus, it makes a great deal of sense that he would look to their reactions to this deity as examples of how to handle this issue.

Throughout this ordeal, the Dalai Lama has had several high-profile, vocal supporters. Some of these have been members of his own sect, such as Geshé Lozang Gyamtso, who, as we have seen, paid the ultimate price for his outspoken involvement. Other of the Dalai Lama's proponents have been more fortunate, living to compose pages and pages of refutations of Shukden worship. One of these supporters is Sangyé Dorjé who has composed a refutation of Dzemé Rinpoché's "Yellow Book." In this text, titled "The Rain of Adamant Fire: A holy discourse based upon scriptures and reason, annihilating the poisonous seeds of the wicked speech of Dzeme Trülku Lobsang Palden" (*Dze smad gyo rdzun klan ka'i lan lhun rigs rdo rje'i me char...*), Sangyé Dorjé reprints the "Yellow Book" and subsequently contests it point by point.⁸⁹

Another proponent of the Dalai Lama's decision is the Sakya lama and former librarian at Tibet House, Tenpé Gyeltsen Dongtok. He has authored a number of texts that argue on behalf of the Dalai Lama's cause. The first of these, titled "The Timely Shower, a Genuine Statement" (*Ma bcos dngos brel brjod pa dus kyis sbrang char*) was a direct rejoinder to Dzemé Trülku's "Yellow Book." Many of his rebuttals have since been in response to the polemical writings of the Shukden advocate, Yönten Gyamtso.⁹⁰ These texts were composed in Tibetan and have not been translated into English. However, he and Lucjan Shila have translated one of his most recent refutations so that it may be available to Western audiences. The rejoinder, entitled "The Earth Shaking Thunder of True Word: A refutation of attacks on the advice of H.H. the Dalai Lama regarding the propitiation of guardian deities" (*Gong sa skyabs mgon rgyal ba'i dbang po mchog gi lha srung bsten phyogs bka slob rgo ba'i rtsod zlog bden gtam sa gzhi dar ba'i brug sgra*), is a response to several statements made by one of the Dalai Lama's most vocal opponents, Geshé Kelsang Gyamtso.

fissures that have often afflicted Tibetan society." Thus, even the various Tibetan wars, which have often been seen as religious in nature, are perhaps more indicative of other kinds of tension—desire for land, wealth, or political power—than of any true animosity between the schools. Kapstein 2006, p. 128.

⁸⁹ Sangs-rgyas rdo-rje 1979. While the preface to this text is in English, the body of the work remains untranslated.

⁹⁰ This contemporary figure should not be confused with the Fourth Dalai Lama, with whom he shares a name.

Here, he defends the Dalai Lama's position against accusations of partiality and religious intolerance. He writes: "Everyone can see for himself that he has been practicing, preserving and disseminating all the Tibetan Buddhist traditions impartially as a sign of inner confidence."⁹¹ Furthermore, he asserts that the promotion of Dorjé Shukden to the status of a "chief protector of the teachings of Manjushri-Tsongkhapa" is an overt insult to the memory of Drakpa Gyeltsen's teachers, Pañchen Lozang Chögyen (1570-1662) and the Fifth Dalai Lama. He writes:

Among the Gadenpa tradition holders Penchen Lobzang Chogyen (1570-1662) was the most outstanding and is described as the second Je Rinpoche.⁹² The Great Fifth Dalai Lama was also very kind to the Gadenpa tradition. The promotion of the wrathful incarnation of Tulku Dragpa Gyaltsen, who broke his spiritual commitment with these two kind lamas, to the high level of chief guardian of Manjushri-Tsongkhapa's doctrine is nothing less than perversity. It is amazing that Phawong Khapa said that even putting other Tibetan Buddhist books together with Gadenpa books is prohibited (his collected works, vol. Cha) and yet a spirit, rebirth of a Gadenpa pledge breaker, can be assigned to the rank of a Gadenpa chief guardian deity.⁹³

Interestingly, not only does Dongtok uphold the Dalai Lama's assertion that Shukden is an angry spirit, but he also takes the statement a step further, asserting that Drakpa Gyeltsen broke his vows with both the Pañchen and Dalai Lamas. To my knowledge, this is not necessarily the opinion of the Dalai Lama himself, but it is fascinating that Dongtok characterizes Drakpa Gyeltsen in this manner. Here Dongtok, unlike the Dalai Lama himself (and probably unlike other polemicists) makes a judgment about Drakpa Gyeltsen himself rather than simply about the nature of the deity. For him, the lama and the deity are one and the same.

Far from calling Drakpa Gyeltsen a "pledge breaker," Shukden supporters uphold him as a symbol of Gelukpa virtue. Some of the most prolific of Shukden's advocates

⁹¹ Dhongthog 2000, p. 13.

⁹² That is, the second Je Tsongkhapa.

⁹³ Dhongthog 2000, p. 17.

have been individuals like Yönten Gyamtso, who has composed a number of texts in support of Shukden worship. Yet, while Yönten Gyamtso may have been widely read amongst Tibetans, it is the musings of Geshé Kelsang Gyamtso—a Gelukpa monk from Sera monastery—that have been most extensively disseminated in the West. As we know, following the Dalai Lama’s denunciation of Shukden worship, Kelsang Gyamtso and a number of his disciples banded together in 1991 to form what they called the New Kadampa Tradition (NKT). The name of this organization is as deliberate as its directives. The term “Kadampa” is a clear reference to the Tibetan Buddhist school founded by the Indian Paṇḍita, Atiśa. As we know, Atiśa’s teachings were among the strongest influences on Tsongkhapa’s formulation of his own school, the Gandenpa or Gelukpa school—which was itself often referred to as the New Kadampa school. Thus, we see that the NKT appears to be asserting itself as a purer form of Gelukpa Buddhism.

Kelsang Gyamtso was born in Tibet in 1932 and presently resides, as do many of his disciples, in England. Like the Dalai Lama and Dzemé Trülku, Gyamtso was a student of Trijang Rinpoché.⁹⁴ For this reason, Shukden practice had always been an important aspect of his spiritual routine; therefore, when the Dalai Lama censured the deity, Gyamtso refused to conform to what he perceived as an unreasonable denunciation of a transcendental being. Indeed, for members of the NKT, Shukden worship is a central component of their daily practice. Because of this, Kelsang Gyamtso and his disciples have openly accused the Dalai Lama of religious intolerance. In 1996, the group picketed the Dalai Lama’s visit to London, but as Lopez reports, “the demonstrations were a public relations disaster for the NKT.” This is primarily because, “the NKT’s allegiance to Shugden appeared to Westerners to be an aberration on the landscape of the Tibetan Diaspora rather than an issue at the center of Tibetan national identity.”⁹⁵

Indeed, the Dalai Lama’s denunciation has divided the Tibetan exile community. One important aspect of this issue is the way in which each side understands dharma protectors. While the Dalai Lama and his camp uphold a distinction between worldly and supramundane dharma protectors, the NKT believes that “a dharma Protector is an emanation of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva whose main functions are to avert the inner and outer obstacles that prevent practitioners from gaining spiritual realizations, and to

⁹⁴ Lopez 1998b, p. 69.

⁹⁵ Lopez 1998b, p. 69.

arrange all the necessary conditions for their practice.” According to them, while worldly deities mean well, they “lack wisdom and so sometimes the external help that they give actually interferes with the attainment of authentic dharma realizations.”⁹⁶ In other words, a being who acts as a dharma protector must necessarily also be transcendental. As we have seen, this view is slightly different from traditional viewpoints, which recount the tale of Padmasambhava’s conversion of the local deities to Buddhism, and thereby to the post of Dharma protector.

In an interview with Donald Lopez published in *Tricycle* magazine, when asked where Shukden fit into this scheme, Kelsang Gyamtso responded as follows:

We believe that Dorje Shugden is a Buddha who is also a dharmapala. Problems have arisen because of someone’s view. So although we say the ‘Dorje Shugden problem,’ in reality this is a human problem, not a Dorje Shugden problem. This is not a fault of Buddha-dharma, not even a fault of the Tibetan people in general. This is a particular person’s wrong view. He can keep this view, of course, but forcing other people to follow this is not right. For this reason, nowadays we [Tibetan Buddhists] are showing many problems to the world. We are ashamed and sorry that this causes the reputation of Buddhists in general to be damaged. It is not a general Buddhist problem, but a specific problem within Tibetan Buddhism.⁹⁷

In the same interview, Lopez asked Gyamtso how his readers should decide which view is correct. In response the lama said:

The Dalai Lama needs to say publicly what evidence he has for saying that Dorje Shugden is an evil spirit who is harming Tibetan independence and his life. Just saying Dorje Shugden is bad is not enough. He needs to say why, so that people can understand. Of course we have many good reasons why we think Dorje Shugden is a Buddha.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Gyatso 1991.

⁹⁷ Lopez 1998c, p. 71.

⁹⁸ Lopez 1998c, pp. 71-72.

Thus, we see that Gyamtso blames the Dalai Lama for the trauma that has befallen the Tibetan exile community and charges him with indecisiveness. He believes that one man's "wrong view" is the source of the Shukden controversy rather than Shukden himself. Nevertheless, in order to more fully understand his and the NKT's perspective, we must return briefly to their understanding of the deity.

We have established that the NKT believes Shukden to be a transcendental deity, a dharma protector. He is considered to be an emanation of a Buddha. Furthermore, like all Buddhas, Dorjé Shukden has manifested in many different forms in order to "help living beings." It is said, for example, that during the time of Śākyamuni Buddha, Shukden appeared as Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of Wisdom and one of the Buddha's foremost disciples. Moreover, "although Manjusri showed the aspect of being a disciple of Buddha, he had great power to help sentient beings." He had, in fact, many lives ago, completed the Bodhisattva path and attained awakening. Among Dorjé Shukden's other manifestations are the Mahāsiddha Biwawa, the great Sakya scholar Sakya Paṇḍita, Bütön Rinchen Drub, Düldzin Drakpa Gyeltsen, Paṇchen Sönam Drakpa, and, of course, Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen.

Regarding Dorjé Shukden's last human emanation, Kelsang Gyamtso writes:

Ngatrul Dragpa Gyaltsan was the reincarnation of Paṇchen Sönam Dragpa. He lived at Drepung Monastery at the same time as the fifth Dalai Lama, and both these Lamas were disciples of the first Paṇchen Lama, Losang Chökyi Gyaltsan. There is further connection between these two because Paṇchen Sönam Dragpa had been the main Guru of the third Dalai Lama, and the fifth Dalai Lama was in the same mental continuum as the third Dalai Lama. Both Ngatrul Dragpa Gyaltsan and the fifth Dalai Lama were highly respected and considered to be very pure and precious Teachers.

Ngatrul Dragpa Gyaltsan studied both Sutra and Tantra, mainly under the first Paṇchen Lama, and became a great scholar and meditator. He went to over a hundred caves to meditate, and received many direct visions of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Deities. He made a number of predictions,

including one that he would become Dorje Shugdan. Ngatrul Dragpa Gyaltsan died at a relatively young age.⁹⁹

Elsewhere he describes the situation as follows:

At that time [in the seventeenth century], in Drepung monastery there were two groups, called the Upper House and the Lower House. The Fifth Dalai Lama was in the Lower House, the lama called (Ngatrul) Drakpa Gyaltsen lived in the Upper House. Both these lamas were very famous, and there was rivalry between their followers. In particular, the Fifth Dalai Lama's ministers opposed Drakpa Gyaltsen and according to many history books, and even some prayer books, they killed Drakpa Gyaltsen. The Fifth Dalai Lama then thought that Drakpa Gyaltsen had appeared as Dorje Shugden. Initially the Fifth Dalai Lama was afraid that Dorje Shugden was a harmful spirit trying to destroy him. Then he requested some Nyingma lamas to destroy Dorje Shugden. Then later, after realizing that he had made a mistake, the Fifth Dalai Lama wrote a special prayer to Dorje Shugden of apology and confession. Then, after Drakpa Gyaltsen passed away he appeared in the form of Dorje Shugden. Because the lamas in Drakpa Gyaltsen's lineage of incarnations are manifestations of the wisdom Buddha Manjusri, and because Drakpa Gyaltsen appeared in the form of Dorje Shugden, we believe without doubt that the very nature of Dorje Shugden is that of a wisdom Buddha.¹⁰⁰

As we see, the Shukden issue is far more complex than it appears at its surface. Both sides offer seemingly convincing arguments in favor of their respective points of view. Regardless of which is correct, we are now able to see that, at its core, this issue is one that involves two major themes: 1) the nature and function of dharma protectors in Tibetan Buddhism; and 2) the identity of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen. We have already

⁹⁹ Gyatso 1991, pp. 86-87.

¹⁰⁰ Lopez 1998c, p. 72.

discussed the former at some length, so it would seem appropriate at this juncture to address the latter, which is, after all, the primary function of this study.

BREATHING LIFE INTO THE DEATH OF DRAKPA GYELTSSEN: SOME THEORIES ON THE LIFE OF A TIBETAN LAMA

To tell the life story of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen is to tell a tale which has rarely if ever been told. To be sure, the events of his peculiar death have been detailed time and again in the manifold origin myths of the Gelukpa protective deity Dorjé Shukden, but an extended account of his *life* (*rnam thar*) seems not to exist. If extant, it is, at present, unavailable to western scholars. The few aspects of Drakpa Gyeltsen's life that have been made known to a wide audience come primarily from the above-mentioned myths and, due to the sectarian nature of these legends, it is difficult to discern which elements are factual and which are contrived. While it is possible to glean some valuable information from these tales, it is virtually impracticable to construct from them a coherent biography. For this reason, it has been my task in what follows to look elsewhere for details of this man's life. Most often, those particulars have been found in the life stories of other individuals with whom he had some kind of interaction: his teachers, his rivals, his assassin. Of course, this is a less than ideal manner of constructing a biography, but given the paucity of information available on this man, and given the controversial nature of his death—and perhaps his life—this account will have to suffice until further investigation can be done concerning the existence or non-existence of a formal autobiography.

The Life of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen

The man who became known as Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen was born between the years 1618 and 1619 in the Tölung valley, which lies slightly northwest of Lhasa. Though the valley was home to several Kadampa monasteries, including Gadong and Kyormolung,¹⁰¹ it was dominated by those of the Karma Kagyü school. In fact, the

¹⁰¹ Gadong Monastery was founded in the eleventh-century by Zingpo Sherapa and later became the seat of an important Kadampa oracle. The monastery is also home to one of Tsongkhapa's meditation caves.

Tölung valley was recognized as the stronghold of that organization, encompassing within its bounds the important monasteries of Nenang and Tsurpu.¹⁰² It is as yet unclear what the religious prerogative of Drakpa Gyeltsen's family might have been, but it seems safe to venture that they were partial to the former rather than the latter sect.

This is primarily because the noble family Gekhasa, into which Drakpa Gyeltsen was born, had previously produced another very important religious leader: the twenty-fifth abbot of Ganden, Peljor Gyamtso (1526-1599).¹⁰³ Beyond its proclivity for producing high lamas, little is known of this family and even less is known about Drakpa Gyeltsen's parents. As we know, based on a few passing references contained in the *Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama* and *Spontaneous Achievement of the Four Enlightened Activities*, it seems feasible that one of his parents—likely his mother—was called La Agyel (or Lala Agyel).¹⁰⁴ It is also known that this family, at some point during Drakpa Gyeltsen's lifetime, experienced an utter depletion of its male progeny and was forced to solicit the joining of a matrilocal bridegroom called a *makpa* (*mag pa*) with one of its daughters.¹⁰⁵ The Fifth Dalai Lama's autobiography, reports that:

Kyormolung monastery, which also has a very strong association with Tsongkhapa, was founded by Balti Wangchuk Tsültrim (1129-1215). Over time, three monastic colleges were there, thus making it an important center of Kadampa/Gelukpa monastic education. Gyurmé Dorjé 2004, p.138.

¹⁰² Together with Yangpachen (c. 1490), Nenang and Tsurpu constitute the three great Karma Kagyü monasteries. All are located in the Tölung valley. Nenang was founded in 1333 by the First Zhamarpa, Tokden Drakpa Sengé. Gyurmé Dorjé reports that the monastery later became home to the successive incarnations of the First Pawo Chöwang Lhundrub (1440-1503). Perhaps the most important Karma Kagyü monastery of them all, Tsurpu had for centuries—before the flight of the sixteenth incarnation to India—been the official seat of the Karmapas, a line of very high incarnate lamas. In fact, the Karmapa palace is situated nearby. The monastery was founded in 1187 by Karmapa Dusum Khyenpa (1100-1193), who was the founder of the Karma Kagyü school as well as a disciple of one of the fathers of the Kagyü lineage itself, Gampopa (1079-1153). According the Gyurmé Dorjé, Tsurpu was constructed atop the ninth-century ruins of Changbu Lhakang, a site at which Dusum Khyenpa apparently received a vision of the Cakrasamvara mandala. Dusum Khyenpa himself is an exceedingly important personage in the history of Tibetan Buddhism, for it is he who is credited with the inception of the trülku system. According to legend, he accurately predicted his rebirth in the person of the man who became known as the Second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi (1204-1283). It was Karma Pakshi who built the primary temple at Tsurpu around 1263. Presently, far from their home monastery at Tsurpu, the incarnations of Dusum Khyenpa reside in exile in India. Gyurmé Dorjé 2004, pp.139-142. For more on the Karmapa lineage see, Thinley 1980.

¹⁰³ More information about this individual can be found in Desi Sangyé Gyamtso's history of the Gadenpa tradition, the *Vaidūrya Serpo*. See VDS, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰⁴ 5DLNT and 5DLPT.

¹⁰⁵ A *makpa* is a matrilocal bridegroom accepted into a family when all of the young male leaders of that group have died or are otherwise incapable of exercising their right to inherit their family's wealth and property. An individual of this sort might also be invited into a family if there simply are no male heirs at all in said family.

When the young masters of the Gekhasa house were slaughtered by the Mongols, they were forced to take another *makpa* for support. There was one forthcoming, but, due to some kind of desire for evil, they accepted Nangso Norbu.¹⁰⁶

This Norbu figure would later prove a significant personage in Drakpa Gyeltsen's life.

In the years prior to Drakpa Gyeltsen's birth, a great civil war raged between the Tsang rulers, who were patrons of the Karma Kagyü school, and the Mongols of the Qoshot tribe, who supported the Gelukpa sect. Under the leadership of Gushri Khan (1582-1655), these Mongol warriors along with some native Tibetan groups including the Kyishöpa faction and the remaining members of the Pakmodru dynasty—which had once ruled all of Tibet—militantly opposed the Tsang ruler's attempts to seize power in central Tibet, or Ü.

These rulers had come to power when, around 1505, an ambitious young stable hand called Tseten Dorjé (r. 1505-1589) usurped the power of the Rinpung clan, which had ruled Tsang from its capital in Zhigatsé—located southeast of Lhasa—since around 1435. Relations between Ü and Tsang were not pleasant during these years, but there are several factors that are said to have served to significantly intensify the growing discord. First, when the Fourth Dalai Lama, Yönten Gyamtso—who was Mongol by birth—was brought to Lhasa, he received a congratulatory letter from a Zhamar (“red had”) Karmapa monk. For some indistinct reason, the letter was interpreted as a veiled insult. Thus, tensions between the Gelukpas and the Karma Kagyu sect worsened and, in 1603, civil war ensued. In 1605, Mongol forces stationed in Lhasa were forcibly ejected from the city.

Another factor contributing to the tensions between the Gelukpas and the Tsangpas was the Fourth Dalai Lama's refusal to meet with the third Tsang ruler, Karma Püntsock Namgyel (r. 1611-1622). The Tsang ruler, who was the great-grandson of Tseten Dorjé, had sent a letter to the Dalai Lama requesting an audience with him. It would seem that the latter was, at least initially, amenable to having respectful relations with the Gelukpas. Nevertheless, the Dalai Lama's advisors warned him not to enter into

¹⁰⁶ 5DLNT, p. 175. *Gad kha sa pa'i mi ngo gzhon pa rnams hor gyis bsad par brten mag pa gzhan zhig byas na yong rgyur 'dug kyang nyes 'dod kyi rnam pas nang so nor bu blangs song.*

communication with the Tsangpas and, as history tells us, he heeded this counsel. Pünstok Namgyel never forgot this stinging rejection. Indeed, when the Fourth Dalai Lama died in 1617, the Tsang ruler declared the search for his incarnation unlawful. Nevertheless, the search was performed in a clandestine fashion and the results were also kept secret until a more opportune time presented itself.

In 1618, Tsang troops attacked Gelukpa monasteries in Lhasa and managed to obtain for themselves complete domination of the city. These were tumultuous times for the Gelukpas. Because of their increasing popularity throughout central Tibet and into eastern Tibet, or Kham, the sect had become an object of suspicion. For their part, the Tsangpas forced a number of Gelukpa monks to take up Karma Kagyu robes. Many of the monks who did not convert were killed or otherwise brutalized. But the Tsangpas were not the only group harboring mistrust of the Geluks. In Kokonor, the chief of the Chahar Mongol tribe, Lekden Khan (1604-1636), also became wary of the sect; most probably because of their involvement with the Qoshots, but also because of his partiality towards another Tibetan religious group, the Bönpos. Still another anti-Gelukpa cell existed in Kham. This group was led by the Bönpo king of Beri, Dönyö Dorjé. Over time, these three groups allied themselves for the purposes of demolishing the Gelukpa sect.

Nevertheless, the Gelukpas and their allies were able to sustain themselves through these challenging times and in 1619, they set in motion a series of militaristic events that would change Gelukpa fortunes for the better. By 1641, after a series of conflicts, Gushri Khan and his allies emerged victorious. Both the king of Beri and the Tsang ruler were put to death, thus quieting their supporters and setting the stage for a period of Gelukpa domination of Tibetan religious and secular affairs that would not end until the seizure of Tibet by the Chinese Communists.¹⁰⁷

During this period, the Gekhasa family was not the only Tibetan family to have produced a noteworthy child. Coincidentally, another special boy called Kunga Nyingpo

¹⁰⁷ Additional information concerning this period of Tibetan history may be found in these and other secondary sources: Tucci 1949; Shakabpa 1967; Yang 1969; Ahmad 1970; Petech 1972; Dhondup 1984; Karmay 1988a; Dung-dkar 1991; Ahmad 1995; Karmay 1998; Richardson 1998; Rockhill 1998; Ahmad 1999; Pommaret 2002 and 2003; Chayet 2003; Karmay 2003; Cuevas and Schaeffer 2006; and Kapstein 2006.

(1617-1632) was born to the ruling aristocratic family at Chongyé.¹⁰⁸ Like Drakpa Gyeltsen, he too was destined to become an important Gelukpa Trülku.

Künga Nyingpo was born in 1617 in the Yarlung valley southwest of Lhasa in the castle of Chingwa Taktsé.¹⁰⁹ His father was a prince of that region named Miwang Dündül Raptén. His mother, a member of the important Nakartsé family, was called Künga Lhandzé.¹¹⁰ According to some accounts, she had a prophetic dream of her child's birth, signaling that this would be no ordinary youngster.¹¹¹ Indeed, in his early youth, officials from several monastic institutions, including both the Kagyüpa and Gelukpa schools, began to take an interest in the boy.¹¹²

It is at this point that the life stories of Drakpa Gyeltsen and Künga Nyingpo intersect. For both children were, at that time, being considered as candidates for the reincarnation of the Fourth Dalai Lama. Some sources suggest that Drakpa Gyeltsen was initially considered the “more serious”¹¹³ of the two candidates, but, whatever the case may have been, it is clear that separate factions arose in support of each boy.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, the hopes of Drakpa Gyeltsen's supporters were dashed when, in 1622, Künga Nyingpo was installed as the Fifth Dalai Lama and given the name Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso.¹¹⁵ In what may have been a conciliatory move on the part of the

¹⁰⁸ Karmay 1988a, pp. 6 ff.

¹⁰⁹ For more on Yarlung and its history see: Haahr 1969.

¹¹⁰ This family had a strong link with the Jonangpa sect. In fact, before she wed the boy's father, Künga Lhandzé was given to Taranātha—the leader of the Jonang sect—as a consort. However, she was sent back to her family because she and Taranātha were not compatible. When the child was born, though he was the son of Dündül Raptén, Taranātha insisted that part of his own name—Künga Mingyur Topgyel Wangi Gyelpo—be given to the child. As Karmay reports, Taranātha also hoped that the child would become a follower of the sect. Interestingly, however, Cuevas notes that the Fifth harbored strong feelings of resentment towards the Jonangpas because of Taranātha's rejection of his mother. He acted on these emotions by destroying the Jonangpa sect. Karmay 1988a; Cuevas 2006.

¹¹¹ Schaeffer 2005, p. 64.

¹¹² There are several reasons why Künga Nyingpo was sought after by these groups. First, the young boy's father was connected with the Kagyüpas and that sect became the “favorite” school of the child's family. In fact, because of the tumultuous predicament of the country at the time of the child's birth, the Tsang ruler offered protection for the mother and her child at his capitol in Samdruptsé. In addition, the sect tried to recognize the boy as an incarnation of one of its lamas. Künga Lhandzé refused this kindness, opting instead to join her family at Nakartsé. In the end, it was the Gelugpa sect that emerged victorious in the battle to enthrone Künga Nyingpo. Karmay 1988a, p. 6.

¹¹³ Karmay 1988a, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Karmay 1998, p. 140.

¹¹⁵ Künga Nyingpo received this name from Pañchen Lozang Chökyi Gyeltsen, who was responsible for his ordination. Karmay 1988a, p. 7.

Gelukpa hierarchs, Drakpa Gyeltsen was recognized as the fourth incarnation of the well-renowned scholar and fifteenth abbot of Ganden, Pañchen Sönam Drakpa (1478-1554).

At the age of six, in about the year 1625, he became the fourth trülku of the Upper Chamber (Zimkhang Gong) at Drepung Monastery and was given the name Drakpa Gyeltsen by the First Pañchen Lama, Lozang Chökyi Gyeltsen.¹¹⁶ To date, very little has been written about this particular incarnation lineage and it is no longer extant; therefore, it is difficult to discern exactly what the Drepung Zimkhang Gong was.¹¹⁷ We do, however, know that Pañchen Sönam Drakpa was the first to ascend this throne and he did so around the year 1539. Desi Sangyé Gyamtso (1653-1705) calls the post the “*zurzhuk* of the Drepung Zimkhang Gong.”¹¹⁸ The term *zurzhuk* (syn. *zur sdod*, *zur nyan*) seems to refer to some kind of impartial spectator or sideline observer in an assembly, but given the scarcity of information on this position it is difficult to say at this time what the role of the Drepung Zimkhang Gongma might have been.

On the other hand, it is certain that to be recognized as the Drepung Zimkhang Gongma was nothing of which to be ashamed. Quite the opposite, to be known as the incarnation of Pañchen Sönam Drakpa would likely have been considered a great honor. Not only was he the fifteenth abbot Ganden, and thereby the one-time head of the Gelukpa sect, but Pañchen Sönam Drakpa was also the author of countless treatises. In addition, he became known as an incarnation of the great lama and historian, Bütön Rinchen Drupa (1290-1364).¹¹⁹ He was also the teacher of the Third Dalai Lama. Thus, while the post itself may or may not have been as prestigious as that of the Dalai Lama, the incarnations of Pañchen Sönam Drakpa must have enjoyed at least some renown

¹¹⁶ DK, pp. 1820-21. The autobiography of this individual is extant and can be found in Demo 1978.

¹¹⁷ The precise reason for the dissolution of this incarnation lineage is not entirely known, but the general opinion seems to be that it had a great deal to do with the mysterious manner in which Drakpa Gyeltsen died. This issue will be discussed in greater depth in the following paragraphs; Drepung is one of Lhasa's three great monasteries (the others being Sera and Ganden). It was founded by Jamyang Chöjé (1379-1449). The monastery and its relics were consecrated in 1419. For more information about Drepung monastery, its history and organization see: Stein 1972, pp. 70-83; Goldstein 1998, pp.15-52; and Dakpa 2003, pp. 167-178.

¹¹⁸ VDS, pp. 81-82.

¹¹⁹ VDS, pp. 81-82. Bütön was a famed Tibetan historian whose most notable achievement was his contribution to the Tengyur (a section of the Tibetan Buddhist canon consisting of the teachings of the Buddha and commentary on those teachings). He compiled the writings of the Indian interpreters and commentators and provided a catalogue for those works. He also “undertook the immense task of exegesis and commentary on all the fundamental texts of Buddhism, both those on disciplinary precepts (*dul*, Vinaya) and the revelation proper (*mdo* and *rgyud*, Sutra and Tantra).” His primary monastery was Zhalu. Tucci 1980, pp.34-35. For more see, Ruegg 1952 and Szerb 1990.

simply due to their association with him. Furthermore, there seems to be some evidence that, following his ascent, some of Drakpa Gyeltsen's advocates began to see him not only as Pañchen Sönam Drakpa's incarnation, but also as that of the Fourth Dalai Lama.¹²⁰ In other words, they argued that he was the rightful incarnate heir of both thrones. If this is true, this assertion might have been seen by some as tantamount to labeling Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso a false incarnation (though it is technically possible in Tibetan Buddhism for two men to each be incarnations of two other men).

To return to less speculative events, following his enthronement, Drakpa Gyeltsen undertook his novice vows and began his studies under the tutelage of the First Pañchen Lama.¹²¹ According to the latter's *Collected Works*, during the course of their studies together, he bestowed upon Drakpa Gyeltsen and the Fifth Dalai Lama several teachings and empowerments including the Vajrabhairava¹²² empowerment (*rdo rje 'jigs byed kyi dbang*), the blessings of several dharma protectors (*chos skyong 'ga'i rjes gnang*), as well as oral transmissions on the instructions of the Buddha (*jo bo'i lam yig gi lung nams*).¹²³ Another source claims that Drakpa Gyeltsen also received the 45 Vajrakīla¹²⁴ empowerments from both the Pañchen and Dalai Lamas.¹²⁵ Finally, it was under the guidance of the Pañchen Lama that he undertook his full monastic vows.

We cannot, at present, determine who Drakpa Gyeltsen's other teachers may have been, but it seems relatively certain that he spent some time studying at a number of important monastic institutions. Among these were Drepung Loseling,¹²⁶ just outside of Lhasa; Kyormolung, in the Tölung valley; and Rawatö, in western Tibet. It was at facilities such as these that he learned philosophy and debate.¹²⁷ Apparently, he practiced both quite well. In fact, by some accounts, he became so adept at debate that he often bested even the Fifth Dalai Lama himself.¹²⁸ In addition, Dungkar tells us that "in Ölga

¹²⁰ Karmay 1998, p. 140.

¹²¹ DK, p. 1820.

¹²² Vajrabhairava is an epithet of Yamāntaka, who, as the reader might recall, Tsongkhapa upheld as one of the three primary meditational deities of his school. For more on this deity, his function and practices, see: Siklós 1996.

¹²³ PL1, fol. 137. For more information about the Pañchen Lamas see: "The Lives of the Pañchen Lamas." *Lungta* 10 (1996): 1-35.

¹²⁴ For more on this deity and the development of his cult see, Boord 1993.

¹²⁵ Dhonthog 2000, p. 14.

¹²⁶ For more about this monastic college see: Gyurmé Dorjé 1994, p. 113.

¹²⁷ DK, p. 1820.

¹²⁸ Smith 2006.

Chölung, Riwo Gepel, and other such places, he became the most famous of the learned and disciplined ones.”¹²⁹

At this time, the task of pinning down firm dates for these events is somewhat challenging. There is very little biographical information available that deals specifically with this particular Zimkhang Gongma. At the same time, most of the sources that do address his life seem to agree that the above-mentioned renown remained with him and even grew throughout his lifetime. Alongside the Dalai Lama, Drakpa Gyeltsen seems to have become famous throughout much of Tibet. Indeed, he and the Dalai Lama became known as the “upper” and “lower” Zimkhang respectively; that is, they were called the Zimkhang Gong and Ok.¹³⁰ While it is uncertain whether these titles indicated any hierarchical ranking, according to several accounts, Drakpa Gyeltsen’s fame and accord grew to be as great, and probably greater, than that of the Fifth. Together, he and the Dalai Lama presided over the Great Prayer Festival of Lhasa (*lha sa’i smon lam chen mo*), an important religious festival instituted by Tsongkhapa.¹³¹ The Fifth himself makes mention of this involvement in his autobiography when he reports that, in 1633 (when Drakpa Gyeltsen was about fourteen years old), “at the Mönlam Chenmo, the Tri Rinpoché¹³² and the Zimkhang Gong Trülku [came] and there were many thrones for those who came and cheerful spirits arose.”¹³³ Another source reports that Drakpa Gyeltsen’s throne was even positioned next to that of the Dalai Lama.¹³⁴

Pilgrims came from far and wide to visit and have audience with the Zimkhang Gong trülku. He even appears to have had some disciples among the Mongols, many of whom had been converted by the Gelukpas some time ago.¹³⁵ And although none of his writings appear, at least thus far, to remain extant, he made several prophecies and

¹²⁹DK, p. 1820. ‘*ol dga’ cho lung dang ri bo dge ‘phel sogs su bsnyen sgrub la brtson par mdzad pas mkha btsun bzang po’i grags pa che ba byung.*

¹³⁰ DK, p. 1820.

¹³¹ This festival commemorates the Buddha’s manifestation of miracles and occurs in the first lunar month of each New Year. For more information about the Great Prayer Festival see: Richardson 1993 and Kapstein 2006.

¹³² This is a reference to the abbot of Ganden.

¹³³ 5DLNT, p. 140. *smo lam chen mor khri rin po che dang gzims khang gong sprul pa’i sku gnyis kyang phebs pa’i bzugs khri mang zhing bag dro byung.*

¹³⁴ DK, pp. 1820-21. Schaeffer has noted the importance for the Dalai Lama of throne placement at this festival. See Schaeffer 2005.

¹³⁵ Karmay 1998, p. 140.

became known for his great skill as a scholar.¹³⁶ Some even believe that the Pañchen Lama—who we may recall was the teacher of both the Fifth and Drakpa Gyeltsen—favored him over the Fifth because of his various aptitudes.¹³⁷

But, as any modern-day politician or film star will attest, fame and renown are not always blessings. Very often the famous are as likely to receive unsolicited attention as they are to attract consideration of the desirable sort. And, in those days (and indeed even in modern times), incarnate lamas such as Drakpa Gyeltsen, who managed to gain for themselves some level of celebrity, were viewed in much the same way as we in the 21st century see movie stars and government officials. Thus, it should come as no surprise that, while greatly admired by many, the Zimkhang Gong trülku also had his share of opponents. The nature of this opposition, however, remains shrouded in mystery. It is, for example, unclear whether his foes were vocal about their enmity. And, if they did voice their criticisms, we cannot know for sure whether Drakpa Gyeltsen ever responded to their comments.

What appears rather certain is that the accord given this particular incarnate lama by his devoted lay supporters as well as by other important lamas (e.g. the Pañchen Lama) seems to have aroused the jealousy of some members of the Dalai Lama's government, in particular his regent, Sönam Chömpel (1595-1658).¹³⁸ This government, known as the Ganden Podrang, did not exist prior to the ascension of Drakpa Gyeltsen and Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso to their respective thrones. In fact, it was instituted around 1642 following the surrender of the young Tsang ruler, Karma Tenkyong Wangpo, at the hands of Gushri Khan. At that time, Drakpa Gyeltsen would have been about twenty-three years old, while the Dalai Lama was around twenty-five. As a token of his faith and devotion, the Mongol Khan decided to present the fruits of his conquest—

¹³⁶ Gyatso 1997 and Smith 2006.

¹³⁷ Smith 2006.

¹³⁸ Sönam Chömpel, who is also sometimes referred to as Sönam Raptan, was born in 1595 in the Tölung valley. Dungkar reports that he was a member of the Gyalé family, but the *Treasury of Names* claims that his family affiliation is uncertain. At a very young age, he became the chief attendant of the Fourth Dalai Lama and it was he who, following the death of his master, initiated the search for his reincarnation. In modern times, he is best known as the regent who revealed the discovery of the Fifth Dalai Lama. He is also known for his steadfast dedication to his goal of consolidating political power in the hands of the Gelukpas. It was Sönam Chömpel, for example, who is responsible for entreating the Qoshot for help in the struggle against the imposing Tsang forces. As we have seen, the victory of the Gelukpas over the Tsangpa was significantly accelerated by Mongol support of their cause. DK p. 1187; TN p. 1079; Richardson 1998, p. 447.

that is, the whole of Tibet—as a gift to the young Fifth.¹³⁹ Thus, the Dalai Lama became the ruler of the land and Sönam Chömpel—who had heretofore been known as the *zhelngo* (“chief attendant”) or *chandzö* (“treasurer”)—was installed as the *desi*, or regent.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Actually, the idea that Gushri Khan gave Tibet to the Dalai Lama purely out of the goodness of his heart is somewhat of an oversimplification of the circumstances. It is certainly true that the Mongols had been converted to Gelukpa Buddhism. Still, it is highly unlikely that his faith in the Dharma was his sole motivation for turning over secular rule of the region he and his troops had just conquered to the Dalai Lama and his officials. Of course, there are several explanations for this. In some ways, the Khan’s decision relates to events that occurred early in the history of the Dalai Lamas. We might see the relationship between the Fifth and Gushri Khan as mirroring that of the Second Dalai, Gendün Gyamtso (1475-1542), and Altan Khan, which itself mirrored that of Pakpa and Kublai Khan (1260-1294). The latter two had formed an alliance between the Sakyapas and the Mongols in which the Sakyas were granted secular rule of Tibet, while the Mongols promised to protect the region. This association became known as the priest-patron (*mchod yon*) alliance and it acted as a kind of protectorate rather than as a true granting of power. In the summer of 1578, having been invited by Altan Khan, Gendün Gyamtso arrived in Mongol territory. There, he and the Khan exchanged honorific titles. The lama presented the title of “Religious King, Brahma of the Gods” and was, in return, given the title “Dalai Lama”, *dalai* being the Mongol word for ocean. The title “Dalai Lama” was then posthumously conferred upon Gendün Drup (1391-1474), of whom Gendün Gyamtso was the reincarnation. A similar patron-priest relationship was established between these two figures. Thus, the Fifth’s relationship with Gushri Khan found precedence in past Tibeto-Mongol liaisons. In a sense, the Mongol commanders who initiated these alliances were conscious of their reenactment of the Pakpa-Kublai connection. Kublai was, after all, the Mongol Khan that conquered China and instituted the Yuan dynasty. Nevertheless, this was certainly not the only factor motivating Gushri Khan to enter into relations with the Fifth. It is more likely that the Khan’s impetus was more practical. After all, he had just conquered a large territory, a territory that needed to be supervised. As Kapstein has noted, “despite Gushri’s gift...neither he nor his descendants ceded all rights and entitlements in the conquered realm. Gushri Khan’s line continued to claim kingship in Tibet until the fall of his descendant Lhazang Khan six decades later.” Thus, the Dalai Lama, at least from the Khan’s perspective, had been appointed to care for and oversee the Khan’s territory. Shakabpa 1967, pp. 93-95; Karmay 1988a, pp. 3-4; and Kapstein 2006, p. 137. For more on the “priest-patron” relationship see: Dung-dkar 1991 and Cüppers 2004. For more on the Mongols and their relationships with Tibet and China, see: Petech 1972; Franke 1978; Morgan 1986; Rossabi 1988; Endicott-West 1989; Franke 1994; Elverskog 2004; Perdue 2005; and Elverskog 2005 and 2006.

¹⁴⁰ As Richardson has noted, Sönam Chömpel was actually appointed to this position before the Dalai Lama was granted “sovereignty.” While Gushri Khan maintained the title “king” of Tibet, he had no active role in the administration of the new government. Instead, he saw to it that the Dalai Lama would “confine himself principally to religious matters while to conduct civil affairs there should be a minister-regent appointed by the king.” The Khan thus nominated Sönam Chömpel as regent to act as secular ruler in his stead, while the Dalai Lama was entrusted with governing religious affairs. Before 1642, Sönam Chömpel was usually referred to as “Chief Attendant” (*zhal ngo*), but also held the title Dalai Chandzö. Tibetan tradition tells us that after that date he and his successors were known by the title *desi*, which means something like regent or “ruler.” This title was the one by which the Pakmodrupa and Tsangpa rulers had been known. Richardson reports that “it came to imply the holding of office during the rule of an adult Dalai Lama as distinct from the title *Rgyal-tshab* which was used of later regents when a Dalai Lama was a minor.” Still, Richardson doubts that the title was, in fact, widely used during the Fifth’s reign. He hypothesizes that, because of its connection with the Pakmodrupa and Tsangpa rulers (who were sovereigns over their own lands), the Dalai Lama himself might have viewed it as a term with “too strong overtones of independent authority.” Instead, he reports that the regent was usually referred to as “official” (*sde pa*) or as “protector of the land” (*sa skyong*). Richardson 1998, pp.447-449. For more on the regents of the Dalai Lamas see, Petech 2003.

Like Drakpa Gyeltsen, Sönam Chömpel was born in the Tölung valley and it was he who, in 1622, revealed Ngawang Lozang Gyamtso as the Fifth Dalai Lama.¹⁴¹ There were a number of reasons why Sönam Chömpel received the promotion to regent, not the least of which must have been his integral role in helping to bring about the victory of the Gelukpas/Qoshot Mongols over the Tsang rulers. In fact, early in the Dalai Lama's reign, Sönam Chömpel was one of three representatives sent to meet with Mongol rulers in hopes of securing military support against the insurgent Tsang warriors. And it is because of his success in this endeavor that the Tsang rulers and their various supporters were entirely quieted by 1642.

But the relationship between Sönam Chömpel and the Dalai Lama was not without its problems. In fact, there were several occasions upon which the former directly disobeyed the latter's requests. For example, in 1639, the chief attendant approached the young Dalai Lama in order to inform him of his and Gushri Khan's plans to attack the chief of Beri, who had aligned himself with the Tsangpas. According to Shakabpa, the Fifth was less than enthusiastic about these plans saying that "too many people have suffered in the past and even been killed because of this kind of political activity. I feel that if we are unnecessarily active, we might find ourselves in the same predicament."¹⁴² Sönam Chömpel, however, was driven by a strong desire to unify Tibet, and thereby consolidate temporal power into the hands of his school. Thus, he ignored the advice of the Fifth, issuing a joint communiqué commanding that the Beri chief be destroyed. The attack was thence carried out according to plan.

This is but one example of Sönam Chömpel's independent nature and willingness to turn a blind eye to the Dalai Lama's authority if it meant attaining certain of his own political prerogatives. There were several similar occurrences before the eventual victory of the Mongols over the Tsangpas and their cohorts. Still, these transgressions seem to have been forgiven once victory had been secured. As mentioned above, Sönam Chömpel was appointed regent by Gushri Khan during the latter's ceding of secular rule to the Dalai Lama.

So we see that Desi Sönam Chömpel was a highly ambitious politician, willing to go to drastic lengths in order to achieve his own aims. Therefore, it would seem natural

¹⁴¹ DK, pp. 1187

¹⁴² Shakabpa 1967, p. 106.

that he might have perceived Drakpa Gyeltsen's notoriety as a threat to his own control as well as to the authority of the Dalai Lama. And, at least by some accounts, this is exactly what took place. In fact one source reports that:

Because those who worked for the Ganden Podrang—which was headed by Desi Sönam Chömpel—and for the Dalai Lama were jealous, they [began] to look for a reason to kill Trülku Drakgyen. Among the many reasons for this was [the fact that], when a large number of travelers [from] Kham and other places came to Lhasa and requested an audience with the Zimkhang Gong, Drakgyen, it began to appear as though he were superior to the Fifth Dalai Lama.¹⁴³

The Death of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen

The accounts of Drakpa Gyeltsen's death by far outnumber those of his life. This may, at first mention, seem odd in light of the acclaim he appears to have garnered in the years leading up to his demise. But sinister forces were at work even then, and it is impossible to know for certain whether even Drakpa Gyeltsen himself could have known what dim fate he was soon to encounter.

In 1656, when the Zimkhang Gongma was about thirty-seven years old, he was found dead in his quarters with a ceremonial scarf lodged in his throat. This is the only point upon which all accounts of this event agree. One account claims that Drakpa Gyeltsen committed suicide because he was unable to bear the criticism of his opponents in the government. The story goes, as we have seen, that bereft of any real means of defending himself against his relentless enemies, the forlorn and exhausted incarnate lama willfully swallowed the scarf in question, at which point he soon died from suffocation.¹⁴⁴ In this scenario, then, he most certainly was aware of the fate that awaited him.

¹⁴³ DK, p. 1821. *kams sogs kyi 'gru pa gtos che lha sar yong ste gzim khang gong gi sprul sku grags rgyan la mjal kha zhu mkhan ni tA la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa las lhag pa lta bu byung ba sogs rgyu rkyen du mar sde srid bsod nams chos 'phel gyis gtso mdzad dga' ldan pho brang ste gzim khang 'og gi las byed rnams phrag dog gis grags rgyan sku bkrong rgyu...*

¹⁴⁴ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, p. 134.

Still other descriptions report that Drakpa Gyeltsen was forced by one or several attendant/s to swallow the scarf. Some accounts even claim that this took place following a debate between the Zimkhang Gongma and the Dalai Lama at which the former arose the victor. According to this version of the story, the Dalai Lama's supporters had grown weary of Drakpa Gyeltsen's repeated displays of superiority over the Fifth and decided to put an end to them once and for all. This particular telling also makes a point of mentioning that the scarf upon which the lama was suffocated was the very scarf he had won from the Dalai Lama in the debate.¹⁴⁵

Whatever tale they recount, most of these stories emphasize some level of animosity between the Dalai Lama and Drakpa Gyeltsen. And, while the descriptions the Fifth wrote about Drakpa Gyeltsen after his death are certainly negative,¹⁴⁶ it cannot be said with any certainty that there was any serious rivalry between the Fifth himself and the Zimkhang Gongma during his lifetime. Yet it seems very apparent that the Fifth's supporters, particularly the regent, disliked Drakpa Gyeltsen a great deal. More recent explanations tend to claim that this was because the latter openly opposed the rule of the Dalai Lama. In fact, this was precisely Georges Dreyfus's argument in his previously mentioned article chronicling the origin of the Shukden Affair.¹⁴⁷

In modern times, the Fifth Dalai Lama is known for his countless academic, literary, and political accomplishments, but there is evidence that, in the seventeenth century, at least some individuals were not impressed with his activities. Indeed a great many of these opponents could be found within the Gelukpa hierarchy itself. As I have already shown, Dreyfus argues that Drakpa Gyeltsen was likely a leader in this opposition. Still, I am not convinced that Drakpa Gyeltsen's involvement in the Gelukpa political world was entirely voluntary. That is to say, I do not think that it is likely that Drakpa Gyeltsen was necessarily opposed to the rule of the Fifth and I especially do not believe he could have been an opposition *leader*.

There are several reasons for this, not the least of which is the fact that the strongest opposition to the Dalai Lama's rule probably did not start until Drakpa Gyeltsen had been dead for many years. Furthermore, even if some tension existed during his

¹⁴⁵ Lopez 1998a, p. 188.

¹⁴⁶ See 5DLPT.

¹⁴⁷ Dreyfus, pp. 227-270.

lifetime, it would not have made much sense for Drakpa Gyeltsen to have been a part of the resistance. This is primarily because, as Schaeffer notes, the heart of a great majority of the strain that existed within the Gelukpa establishment was a continual power struggle between the two great Gelukpa monasteries, Drepung and Sera.¹⁴⁸ In particular, there was a longstanding quarrel among the two institutions as to the seating arrangements at the Great Prayer Festival. According to Schaeffer, the Dalai Lama felt compelled to work to establish the monks of his own monastery, Drepung, as the primary preceptors of the festival, relegating the monks of Sera to a secondary position.¹⁴⁹ If Schaeffer is correct, it seems absolutely counterintuitive to assert that Drakpa Gyeltsen would have aligned himself with the opposition. After all, Drepung was his monastery as well. He had just as much interest in its maintenance of authority as did the Dalai Lama.

This is not to suggest that the Fifth and the Zimkhang Gong trülku would have been great friends. It is not even to say that the two liked each other at all. At this point, it is not my intent to surmise what the nature of their *personal* relationship might have been. Rather, I want to propose that that relationship had very little if anything to do with Drakpa Gyeltsen's death. I believe that, as the quote at the end of the previous section suggests, the death of Drakpa Gyeltsen was the result of a conspiracy the mastermind of which was most likely a man whose thirst for political dominance may have far exceeded that of the Fifth: Desi Sönam Chömpel.

We know already that the regent was a politically ambitious individual. We know that he saw very little wrong with bending the rules if it meant that a greater purpose would be served. Furthermore, we know that he and many of his cohorts in the government saw Drakpa Gyeltsen as a threat. I would argue that he was viewed in this manner not because he was involved in any kind of political opposition to the Dalai Lama, but because, as has been shown, many people began to think of him as somehow superior to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Indeed, some even believed that he *was* the true Dalai Lama, or rather both the Dalai Lama *and* the Zimkhang Gongma! Certainly, this kind of speculation might have upset the Dalai Lama, but it seems evident that it was Sönam Chömpel who took this threat most seriously.

¹⁴⁸ Sera Tekchenling Monastery is one of Lhasa's three great monasteries. It was founded in 1419 by Jamchen Chöjé Sakya Yeshé (1355-1435), who was a student of Tsongkhapa. It was built near a site at which Tsongkhapa and his closest disciples had built hermitages. Gyurmé Dorjé 2004, pp. 117-118.

¹⁴⁹Schaeffer 2006, pp. 71-73.

Consider for a moment the ramifications of the situation. There is an incarnate lama whose rank is now, because of the assumption of temporal power by the Dalai Lama, subordinate to that of the latter. But this lama has somehow managed to gain for himself more acclaim than the secular ruler of Tibet! For Sönam Chömpel, who seems to have made consolidation of temporal power in the hands of the Dalai Lamas his life's purpose, this must have been quite an offense. Who did this Drakpa Gyeltsen character think he was? Something had to be done. And, as we know, Sönam Chömpel was quite adept at getting things done.

But for the regent to soil his hands with the blood of such an esteemed incarnate lama would have been political suicide. Indeed the assassin would have to be one of two kinds of people: either someone no one would ever suspect of murder or someone whose character was so incredibly deplorable that, should he be caught, no one would be surprised by one more transgression. It is at this point that Nangso Norbu reenters our tale, for he seems to have perfectly fit the latter description. Recall that Norbu was the *makpa* of the Gekhasa house, the birth house of Drakpa Gyeltsen. He also happened to be a blood relative of Sönam Chömpel himself.

By all accounts, Nangso Norbu was possessed of a rather unfavorable character. Dungkar even goes so far as to describe him as “an exceedingly deceitful, cunning, and greedy individual.” The text reports further that, “having become an official of the Ganden Podrang, Norbu performed many activities which were against the wishes of the Fifth Dalai Lama.”¹⁵⁰ The term *nangso* literally means something like a military guard or official, but it is clear from both the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama as well as from Shakabpa's political history of Tibet that Norbu's activities as a government official were certainly not limited to standing guard. Quite the opposite, Norbu appears to have been a general and, as such, he was most noted for his participation in various of the Tibeto-Bhutanese wars.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ DK, p. 1205. *Nor bu ni g.yo khram che zhing ham sem can zhig yin 'dug nor bus dga' ldan pho brang pa'i las sne bzung ste ta la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa'i bzhed pa dang mi mthun pa'i bya ba mang po byas.*

¹⁵¹ The Tibetan invasions of Bhutan began in the early-seventeenth-century. Initially, at least, the primary catalyst for these invasions seems to have been a feud between the Tsangpas and the Zhapdrung, who was the leader of the Drukpa Kagyü. Because of uncertainty about his authenticity as the heir to that incarnation lineage and because he offended the Tsang ruler, the Zhapdrung was forced to flee to Bhutan. The first of the Tibetan invasions was led by the Tsang ruler, Pünstok Namgyel. Having taken over the Drukpa

However, he seems not to have been a very good military leader. Aris reports that several of Tibet's defeats at the hands of Bhutan were attributable to the ineptitude of Nangso Norbu. In the wake of one such defeat (around mid-1600s), he tells us that "on fleeing from sPa-gro [Paro] he and his troops had to abandon all their tents and weapons which were taken with great glee by the Bhutanese." To add insult to injury, "Nor-bu himself had to suffer the embarrassment of a common tent in place of the great central pavilion he had previously pitched at Phag-ri [Pari] at the start of the campaign."¹⁵² But, according to Dungkar, Norbu was not simply a clumsy fool, but rather a calculated traitor. An entry in *Dungkar's Encyclopedia* reports the following:

It is said that, on the outskirts of Tölung, there was a line of chieftains by the name of Gekhepa [read: Gekhasa] who came to be the relatives of Desi Sönam Chömpel during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama. And later, during the time of a war between the governments of Bhutan and Tibet, [one of them] was sent to command the troops that resisted the Bhutanese army. Nevertheless, he secretly conspired with the Bhutanese and news of the defeat of the Tibetan government came to the troops.¹⁵³

monasteries in Tibet, the Tibetans made their way into Bhutan where they met an embarrassing defeat at the hands of the Bhutanese. In 1634, Tenkyong Wangpo led the second invasion of Bhutan. Again, the Tsangpas left Bhutan humiliated. The third invasion occurred in 1639. Bhutanese history records this as another Bhutanese victory; however, Aris notes that the terms of the peace treaty that followed the skirmish seem to indicate that the Tibetans had come out on top. The first Gelukpa assault on Bhutan occurred in 1644. The Tibetans, assisted in their efforts by 700 Mongol soldiers, seem to have initiated their invasion because they were offended by Bhutanese support of a revolt against the Fifth and his government. The Bhutanese overpowered the combined forces. In the mid-1600s, the Tibetans attempted another military excursion into Bhutan. This time, the invaders focused their efforts on Western Bhutan. Unfortunately for them, however, the Zhapdrung had recently consolidated his power in that region. Though there were moments in which the battle seemed to be unfolding in the Tibetan's/Mongol's favor, the forces were again defeated by the clever and well-prepared Bhutanese. There was a third Gelukpa invasion of Bhutan in 1657. As Aris reports, despite the fact that the whole Tibeto-Mongol army fell upon the Bhutanese, the assault proved fruitless. He tells us that "the 5th Dalai Lama attributed this to the bickerings between the chief Tibetan commander, Nor-bu...and the Mongolian commanders..." All together, the Tibetan government launched seven separate assaults on the Bhutanese between 1616 and 1679. Aris 1979, pp. 212-247; Ardussi 1997, p. 65.

¹⁵²Aris 1979, p. 227.

¹⁵³DK, p. 481. *Stod lung khul du yod pa'i dpon rigs gad khas pa zhes ta la'i bla ma sku phreng lnga pa'i skabs sde srid bsod names chos 'phel dang spun mched du gyur cing rjes su 'brug pa dang bod sa gnas srid gzhung gnyis bar dmag 'khrug byung dus su 'brug pa'i dmag gi gdon len dmag dpung gi dmag dpon du biang yang lkog tu 'brug pa dang ngan 'brel byas te bod sa gnas srid gzhung gi dmag la pham nyes byung ba'i lo rgyus yod pa...*

Based on the information presented above, I am inclined to believe that the “chieftan” (*dpon rigs*) of the Gekhasa (here misspelled “Gekhepa”) who was dispatched to Bhutan was Norbu himself. Therefore, it may have been less because of his lack of skill and more due to his treachery that Nangso Norbu made a name for himself as a rather lousy military commander.

All of this, of course, goes to Norbu’s lack of credibility and, thus, his suitability as an assassin. But there was more. As has been noted, Norbu was the *makpa* of the Gekhasa family. Traditionally, Tibetan families accepted these matrilineal bridegrooms only when all of their young male heirs were dead. The addition of the *makpa* to the family was meant to ensure that the wealth and property of that group remained consolidated in the hands of its members. We know that this was the case for the Gekhasa house, whose young leaders had been killed by a group of Mongols. Technically speaking, however, Drakpa Gyeltsen himself could have been considered an heir to the Gekhasa wealth. Indeed, it was not uncommon for Tibetan monks to own land and administer estates. Could it be that Nangso Norbu felt personally threatened by the fact that there still remained one legitimate male potential claimant of the Gekhasa assets?

While we may never know the answer to this question, we do know that it was Norbu who was enlisted to put an end to Drakpa Gyeltsen. Thus, we must assume that he stood to gain in some way from this arrangement. Perhaps he thought that, in getting rid of the Zimkhang Gongma, he would not only be doing his relative, Sönam Chömpel, a favor, but also in some way positioning himself better within the family. Whatever the case may have been, according to the Dungkar’s account, sometime during the year 1656, Nangso Norbu crept into the private quarters of the lama and forced a silk ceremonial scarf down his throat, thus ending his life. Dungkar reports that Norbu then returned to Tölung, caused some trouble of some kind, and some years later escaped to Bhutan,¹⁵⁴ where he must have lived out the rest of his life.

Following his mysterious death, a reliquary stūpa was erected to house the remains of Trülku Drakpa Gyeltsen. It was then deposited in the Zimkhang Gong. However, at some later time, the stūpa as well as the Drepung Zimkhang Gong itself

¹⁵⁴ DK, p. 1205.

were destroyed. This is because rumors had begun to surface that, due to the sinister nature of his death, Drakpa Gyeltsen had become an angry spirit. In order to counteract the negative effects of this spirit's activity, his remains were cast into the Tsangchu river.¹⁵⁵ Drakpa Gyeltsen's reincarnation was never sought after and the incarnation lineage of the Drepung Zimkhang Gong slowly disappeared from Tibetan memory...only to rise again in the myth of Dorjé Shukden.

¹⁵⁵ DK, p. 1821.

CONCLUSION

Drakpa Gyeltsen was the fourth and final incarnation in the Drepung Zimkhang Gong line. Knowing what we now know about this individual the preceding statement seems a bit odd. How is it possible that an incarnation line that boasted such notable Buddhist scholars as Sönam Drakpa and Drakpa Gyeltsen and that traced its spiritual inheritance back to the great Bütön came to such an abrupt and untimely end? How could Tibet's memory of such an esteemed incarnate lama as Drakpa Gyeltsen become so extensively diminished as to be just short of nonexistent? In truth, we may never know the answers to these questions, but it seems relatively safe to conjecture that one reason why the Zimkhang Gong line ended with Drakpa Gyeltsen and why the details of his life are largely absent from the pages of Tibetan history is simply that he became associated with the spirit/deity Dölgyel or with Dorjé Shukden and thereby subsumed within the various myths surrounding the origin of that deity.

In point of fact, Tibetans do remember Drakpa Gyeltsen, but their memory of him is inseparably connected with Dorjé Shukden. They (and most western enthusiasts of Tibetan Buddhism) cannot imagine this man without reflecting upon the violent and suspicious nature of his premature death and thereby upon his affiliation with Shukden. Drakpa Gyeltsen is almost always either the revered scholar and victim of the Fifth Dalai Lama's jealousy who became the great Dorjé Shukden or the unfortunate vow-breaker whose perverse intentions lead him to be reborn as an evil spirit. We know now that there was more to Drakpa Gyeltsen's life and death than what we are told by the various myths of Shukden's origin. Nevertheless, Tibetans, Tibetan Buddhists, and even western scholars rarely seem curious about who Drakpa Gyeltsen was and how he came to be connected to Shukden. Having already addressed the former issue, in concluding this study, I will briefly consider some explanations for the latter phenomenon. Finally, I would also like to suggest other possible angles from which I believe further study of this topic can be fruitfully pursued.

Smoke from the Funeral Pyre: Drakpa Gyeltsen and his Legacy

It is impossible to say what Drakpa Gyeltsen's existential state was (or still is?) beyond his mysterious death. Furthermore such conjecture is inappropriate in the context of an essay that does not profess to support one side or the other of the Shukden controversy. What can be said about that state is simply that it was, or at least is currently, contested. Why was it contested? Here again, history provides no clear answer, but there are nevertheless several possible reasons for this. In order to answer this query, we will need to reflect back to the previous chapter. We will need to recollect certain aspects of Drakpa Gyeltsen's life and the environment in which he lived.

As we know, Drakpa Gyeltsen was an acclaimed Buddhist scholar and incarnate lama. We have seen that his renown was so great that it is reported to have rivaled that of the Dalai Lama himself. His death was unexpected, premature, and mysterious. For this reason, we might imagine that Drakpa Gyeltsen's death must have been quite upsetting in Lhasa. Furthermore, as Dreyfus suggests, the murder

must have created a considerable malaise among Tibetans, who consider the killing of a high lama a terrible crime that can affect the whole country...Such a perception of misfortune must have been accompanied by events perceived as bad omens. There were probably stories of the possession and destruction of objects associated with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, as reported in the founding myth.¹⁵⁶

Dreyfus also points out that the fact that Drakpa Gyeltsen's reincarnation had not been sought after would, most likely, have compounded any anxieties that might have been present in Lhasa.

In these circumstances, there must have been a great deal of speculation about who had perpetrated the crime and for what ungodly reason. Thus, it would seem that, assuming they wished to detract attention from themselves, it would behoove the

¹⁵⁶ Dreyfus 1998, p. 17.

members of the Dalai Lama's government who were involved in the assassination to concoct an acceptable explanation for the death as well as for the mysterious events that must have surrounded it. Suggesting that Drakpa Gyeltsen had been a vow-breaker and had thus become an evil spirit following his death had a number of benefits. Foremost among these was the simple fact that it was (or it at least had the potential to be) believable—for, as we have seen, deaths that are particularly violent or mysterious are often thought to be conducive to rebirth in the spirit world. Specifically, we know that monks who are somehow “un-monk-like” in life are predisposed to being even less so beyond death. Thus there was precedent in Tibetan culture for such occurrences.

Still, it must have been quite difficult to convince those individuals who faithfully believed in Drakpa Gyeltsen's virtue and knowledge that he had become a troublesome spirit. And, while it is somewhat difficult to determine precisely the nature of their reactions to these allegations, there is at least some evidence that individuals writing on the matter in the years after Drakpa Gyeltsen's death were unconvinced. Indeed, Dreyfus has determined, as we learned in the Introduction, that the Tibetan historian Sumpa Khenpo Yeshé Peljor took issue with this characterization of Drakpa Gyeltsen.¹⁵⁷ As we know, he cites a quote from Sumpa Khenpo's *Chronological Table* in which the author claims that the assertion that Drakpa Gyeltsen became a Tibetan spirit (*bod de'i rgyal po*) following his death is simply “hateful speech” (*sdang gi gtam*). Instead, Sumpa Khenpo conjectures that the spirit in question is likely that of Desi Sönam Chömpel, who died a couple of years after Drakpa Gyeltsen.¹⁵⁸ This is an interesting assertion given the argument presented in the previous chapter; for, while we know almost nothing about Drakpa Gyeltsen's feelings regarding the propagation of the Gelukpa doctrine, we know for certain that the regent was a fervent proponent of his sect. And, after all, Shukden is associated with notions of Gelukpa supremacy.

Thus, it would appear that, at least in the beginning, those who respected Drakpa Gyeltsen viewed the story of his treacherous posthumous condition as an insult. Furthermore, it seems that it might even have been, in a manner of speaking, intended as such. That is to say, those who disliked the lama might have had a vested interest in seeing to it that his reputation be altered. And, however unfavorable this explanation

¹⁵⁷ Dreyfus 1998, p. 236.

¹⁵⁸ Sum-pa Kkhan-po 1959, pp. 70-71.

might have been to some, it clearly became more or less accepted. We know, for example, that this is the general explanation for why the Paṅchen Södrak incarnation line came to such an abrupt halt. We might then conjecture that, in answer to our earlier query, one reason why this myth has become so deep-seated in Tibetan Buddhist lore is that it is believable. That is, it is based on accepted Tibetan Buddhist notions of the possible consequences of the mysterious death of a high lama (or of a rotten monk). At the same time, it seems rather strange that, while those who despised Drakpa Gyeltsen initially created the origin myth of this wrathful spirit (as we know Dreyfus has argued), Dorjé Shukden's devotees have in more modern times embraced it.

This then causes us to wonder exactly when the viewpoints morphed. More specifically, there are several issues at stake here—issues that I believe have been overlooked by many scholars and that are deserving of a great deal more attention. As I have already suggested, I believe that much of the Shukden scholarship extant at present takes the origin myths of Dorjé Shukden at face value in that it assumes that there was a distinct rivalry between Drakpa Gyeltsen and the Fifth and that that rivalry was the sole reason for which the conspiracy to end the former's life was hatched. I would even go so far as to assert that current studies rely so heavily on the assumed authority of the origin myths that they do not even wonder about the man behind the myth. Secondly, I believe that modern scholarship has overlooked the fact that we know almost nothing about how Drakpa Gyeltsen became associated with Dorjé Shukden. We know that those who conspired to end his life were most likely behind the rumor that he became an evil spirit in death, but there does not seem to be any evidence that this “spirit” has always been called Dorjé Shukden. In fact, we know that many have claimed that the being was originally known as Dölgyel. Still, it is difficult to be sure that Drakpa Gyeltsen's spirit has, from the time of its inception, been associated with Dölgyel. Nevertheless, modern scholarship on this issue assumes that these relationships have always been—that Drakpa Gyeltsen's spirit, Shukden, and Dölgyel are simply co-emergent concepts, or rather that they are and always have been one and the same. At this point, then, I will proceed with offering several suggestions of ways in which future scholarship on this topic can begin to move beyond these outdated and somewhat uncritical notions.

Going Beyond Polemics: The Future of Shukden Research

I would argue that the task of future scholarship on this issue is to go beyond the Shukden origin myth. Scholars need to examine it for discrepancies, using it as a resource from which to mine anomalies whose solutions can be sought within the pages of Tibetan history. One of these problems is the issue of who Drakpa Gyeltsen was and why he became associated with Dorjé Shukden. This thesis has attempted to answer these questions, but it has by no means exhausted the limit of what I believe is left to be discovered.

For one thing, there exists the possibility that a biography or autobiography is extant in India.¹⁵⁹ Of course the chance of this is slim, but it is nevertheless possible. However, scholars should not be discouraged by the seeming lack of information about Drakpa Gyeltsen. Certainly, this quest is difficult because it was never meant to be undertaken. The very fact that his assassins worked tirelessly to disparage and distort his name means that the search for the historical Drakpa Gyeltsen must always begin on a somewhat discouraging note. Still, I believe much can be learned about this individual through deeper consideration of the people with whom he interacted. This, of course, requires a great deal of sleuthing, but there is much that has yet to be extracted.

There are a multitude of possible topics for consideration that have been only briefly addressed or are left entirely untouched by this study. For example, we have seen that it is possible to uncover important details of Drakpa Gyeltsen's life by consulting resources such as *Dungkar's Encyclopedia*, the *Treasury of Names*, the *Autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama*, as well as the *Vaidūrya Serpo*. Yet, even having reaped the spoils of these historical treasure chests, it is likely still possible to discover more about this figure from the writings of his disciples. One such pupil is the Mongolian Buddhist monk Jāya Paṇḍita Lozang Trinlé (b. 1642). His *Collected Works* is said to contain several of the prophecies of Drakpa Gyeltsen.¹⁶⁰ Thus, it is possible that one of these prophecies

¹⁵⁹ Smith 2006. Gene Smith suggested this possibility to me.

¹⁶⁰ Jāya Paṇḍita 1981. Here, I owe a debt of gratitude to Gene Smith for this information. According to him, some of these prophecies can also be found in Blo bzang rta mgrin 1964 as well. I have not, as yet, personally mined these texts. Smith 2006.

might help to shed some light on the claims of some modern-day Shukdenites who assert that Drakpa Gyeltsen prophesied his rebirth as a wrathful protector.¹⁶¹

Still, it is important, if we want to know more about this enigmatic individual, that we expand our detective efforts to include investigations of people and themes that are related to Drakpa Gyeltsen in a less direct way. Thus, another important avenue that needs to be further pursued is the issue of his family, who they were and what happened to them after he died. We already know that Drakpa Gyeltsen was a member of the Gekhasa family. We also know that this must have been a rather prominent family with strong ties to the Gelukpa school since it had previously produced an abbot of Ganden. Yet, important though it seems to have at one time been, it is difficult to find mention of this family in the primary sources. This should lead us to wonder why such a significant group of people is so little known. Does this have anything to do with its association with Drakpa Gyeltsen? Perhaps it is related to the fact that the family is linked with the shameful personage of Nangso Norbu. Was there a rivalry between Drakpa Gyeltsen's family and that of Desi Sönam Chömpel (and thereby that of Norbu)? These are questions to which there still may be answers. These are also exceedingly important questions because they open scholars up to a more critical stance regarding the reasons behind Drakpa Gyeltsen's demise. That is, we must at least allow for the possibility that the lama's death might not have been as closely related to Gelukpa politics as the founding myth would have us believe.

In considering this death, it is also essential that we consider the lives of Nangso Norbu and Sönam Chömpel more closely. In particular, we still know very little about the former. Indeed, in my research I came across only two mentions of this character in western sources. One of these can be found in Samten Karmay's *The Arrow and the Spindle*.¹⁶² The other I found in Michael Aris's history of Bhutan.¹⁶³ Of the two, Karmay's is the only source that mentions Norbu in conjunction with Drakpa Gyeltsen and his death. Aris's reference deals, as we might recall from the preceding chapter, with the Tibeto-Bhutanese wars in which Norbu acted as a commander of some kind. It seems evident, then, that most scholars have overlooked the connection between Nangso Norbu

¹⁶¹ See Gyatso 1991, p. 87.

¹⁶² Karmay 1998, p. 514.

¹⁶³ Aris 1979, pp. 227 & 247.

and Drakpa Gyeltsen, even though we know that the allusions to the relationship can be found in the primary historical literature.

Learning more about Norbu might also be, as I have suggested above, key to discovering the fate of the Gekhasa family. We know by now that some saw Norbu as a rather loathsome man. Aside from being the likely murderer of a well-respected incarnate lama, his military career was considered an embarrassment. Furthermore, there are references, as has been shown, to the *nangso* having somehow betrayed the Dalai Lama.¹⁶⁴ So we must wonder if Norbu's disgraceful pursuits were somehow intertwined with the seeming disappearance of an esteemed aristocratic family.

If Dreyfus, Lopez, and Batchelor oversimplify the events leading up to Drakpa Gyeltsen's death, they are also guilty of a somewhat casual analysis of the goings-on of his afterlife. Future scholarship on this issue would be well served by deeper consideration of the problematic origin of the connection between Shukden and Drakpa Gyeltsen. Dreyfus has most definitely made a significant contribution to our understanding of this situation by making the clever observation that it was not his followers but rather his enemies who concocted the legend of Drakpa Gyeltsen having become a spirit. However, I would argue that a fascinating and enlightening study could be made of the matter of when exactly this spirit began to be understood as Dorjé Shukden. Even more specifically, when did Drakpa Gyeltsen and the spirit he allegedly became begin to be associated with the Sakya deity Dölgyel? And then when precisely did he acquire the epithet, Dorjé Shukden?

According to Dreyfus, there is evidence for the existence of Dölgyel worship within the Gelukpa sect as early as the eighteenth-century, well before Pabongkha began to advocate the propitiation of Shukden.¹⁶⁵ As a matter of fact, we know that several of the abbots of Ganden supplicated this being. Still, do we know that those individuals understood Dölgyel to be the reincarnation of Drakpa Gyeltsen? Was the connection being made that early on or was it fabricated by Pabongkha in the nineteenth-century? Moreover, did those earliest Dölgyel devotees consider Dölgyel to be synonymous with Shukden? Did the name Dorjé Shukden even exist at that time?

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter Three above.

¹⁶⁵ Dreyfus 1998, pp. 242-243.

In order to answer these questions, scholars must draw upon early Sakya propitiatory texts oriented toward the worship of Dölgyel. In particular, Dreyfus mentions a text composed by the Sakyapa, Sönam Rinchen (sixteenth-century), which he claims is the earliest propitiatory text to Shukden.¹⁶⁶ I, however, would be curious to know whether this text mentions Shukden at all. If it does, then we know that there has been a connection between Dölgyel and Shukden since the seventeenth-century. Still, does the text draw a correlation between Shukden/Dölgyel and Drakpa Gyeltsen? Consideration of such texts and of the origin of this deity has not been the prime focus of this thesis, but I believe such an endeavor to be worthwhile. Studies should be done of all of the relevant propitiatory material between the seventeenth- and twentieth-centuries in order to determine exactly when these associations were solidified.

At this point one can clearly see that there are questions upon questions that can be asked regarding this issue. The Shukden affair in both its modern and historical forms is a dishearteningly complex topic. At the outset of my endeavor, having decided to set aside a great many of the queries presented above in order to focus solely on the concern of who Drakpa Gyeltsen was, I contacted Gene Smith in order to request any direction he might be able to offer. At the end a rather lengthy response to my appeal, Smith concluded his explanation by warning that this project might prove slightly too ambitious for an M.A. thesis, remarking that “this is a suitable project for a life's work.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, the preceding pages have only begun to skim the surface of what can and, in my opinion should, be learned about this issue.

A handful of western scholars have taken the Shukden affair into consideration in efforts to better understand its historical underpinnings, but I believe that their efforts have been somewhat shortsighted. I hope that this essay might serve as a starting point for a new way of thinking about this modern Buddhist crisis and its historical derivation. Of course, consideration of individuals and families whose life stories have long ago faded from Tibetan and Buddhist memory may seem futile and even frivolous in light of the profound ethical and spiritual predicament now facing Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhists, but I have great faith in the capacity of historical research for creating new

¹⁶⁶ Dreyfus 1998, p. 242. According to Dreyfus, this text can be found among the writings of the Sakyapa historian and religious scholar, Amé Zhab (1597-1659). I am currently in possession of this text and am combing it for said references.

¹⁶⁷ Smith 2006.

ways of understanding modern dilemmas. Learning more about the historical bases of this affair does not necessarily have to mean proving who is “right” and who is then “wrong.” In fact the benefit of such studies may have very little to do with their impact on the outcome of this quarrel. The benefit will, in my opinion, be a more profound understanding of a period in Tibetan history that is simply teeming with intellectual and political development. The death of Drakpa Gyeltsen has, in the past, been seen as a stain upon the seemingly untarnished reputation of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama, a stain that remains, in some ways, deeply enmeshed in the fabric of that office. Now we know that these events were concerned less with the office of Dalai Lama than with issues of personal and familial pride, jealousy, and deceit. Scholars, in a certain sense, owe it to Tibetan history and to the interested world to expose these events—not in order to shame the individuals involved, not so that blame can be placed here or there, but so that the real story can be told, whatever its outcome may be. This, in my mind, is the responsibility of the historian. Thus, I end this very rudimentary analysis in the hopes that others will gather up the threads that I have laid out, weaving them together to tell the tale that awaits its telling

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