

西藏宗谱：纪念古格·次仁加布
藏学研究文集 Tibetan Genealogies: Studies
in Memoriam of Guge Tsering
Gyalpo (1961-2015)

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中国藏学出版社

Tibetan Genealogies

Studies in Memoriam of Guge Tsering Gyalpo (1961-2015)

Edited by

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China Tibetology Publishing House

Beijing • 2018

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From Death to New Life

An 11th-12th century cycle of existence from southernmost Tibet

Analysis of *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites,
with notes on manuscript provenance

Toni Huber (Humboldt University)

every living thing comes from the dead
– Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*

1. Introduction*

This contribution in memory of our departed friend and colleague Tsering Gyalbo is part of a larger research project documenting contemporary eastern Himalayan rites for revitalisation of the living, promoting fertility and virility, and allowing women to conceive new children. I refer to all the rites and myths, ritual specialists and community festivals related to this phenomenon in my research region as the cult of Srid pa'i lha.¹ The cult is found at some seventy locations within eastern Bhutan and the adjacent Mon yul Corridor of Arunachal Pradesh (India). Many indicators suggest that the immediately neighbouring

* Acknowledgements: Thanks are due to the following persons: Joanna Bialek (Berlin) for constructive exchanges of ideas and feedback on linguistic issues; Mona Schrempf (Saarbrücken) for discussions and literature tips on birth and rebirth in Asia; Reinier Langelaar (Vienna) and Guntram Hazod (Vienna) for proof-reading and useful suggestions; Moke Mokotoff (New York) for his permission to use and publish the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript in his ownership; and Deborah Klimburg-Salter and staff at the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna (Department of Art History, University of Vienna) for access to high resolution images of the manuscript to enable my research.

¹ For publications related to the Srid pa'i lha cult, see Huber 2015, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2013 and In Press.

Lho brag district of southernmost Tibet, and adjacent districts including Gtam shul, Gru shul and Mon Mtsho sna, constitute the proximate historical source region for crucial aspects of contemporary revitalisation rites performed in the cult. A little-known population named Shar Dung inhabited these same regions until their displacement and dispersal during the 1350s due to Tibetan military campaigns.² The Shar Dung appear to be the most likely southward transmitters of various aspects of the cult into the neighbouring Himalayan valleys where it exists today. Although my informants mainly speak East Bodish languages, their ritual culture of revitalisation rites is recorded in local collections of Tibetan language manuscripts that are hereditarily transmitted and maintained within lineages of community ritual specialists. I thus investigated several collections of old manuscripts that can be sourced back to southernmost Tibet, in order to check for earlier precedents that might inform rites recorded in cult manuscripts and in ethnographic data I collected just south of Lho brag. Results from those investigations are presented herein, and are based upon a chapter in my forthcoming monographic work on the cult, *Source of Life*.

The present study reviews three rites found recorded in old, recently discovered manuscripts. The first rite termed *Rnel dri 'dul ba* occurs in an as yet undated, anonymous text discovered at the Dga' thang shrine in Gtam shul, but which I consider must date from the 11th-12th century period.³ The two other untitled rites I term *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* occur in a manuscript currently in private ownership in the United States, and scientifically dated to the 11th-12th century period.⁴ All three rites deal with mundane⁵ concerns, all are devoid

2 The *Rgya bod yig tshang* 380 describes the eastern Lho brag territory where Shar Dung strongholds (*mkhar btsan sa*) existed within a region defined by Chu skyed lung gsum, Lho brag gya ba bzhi (both possibly a reference to the three river valleys and four ranges – *gya ba?* – which define the actual geography of Lho brag as a region), the highlands of 'A lungs Skyogs mo and lowlands of Tsag sa wa bzugs. On the Dung and Shar Dung, see Petech 1990; Aris 1979: chapt.5; Aris 1986: 46-55 and especially Ardussi 2004.

3 The *dbu can* transcription and facsimiles can be found in *Dga' thang* 33-59, 131-178. On the whole collection and its discovery, see Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus and Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring in *Dga' thang* 1-8, and Karmay 2009: 55-65. Most recently, Karmay 2013: 20 stated, "judging by the style of writing, grammatical structure, the type of vocabulary and the notions that are expressed, there is no doubt that the Dga' thang manuscripts are very old, probably pre-11th century." Note that when citing texts in this collection, I always give three references in this order: page no. of *dbu can* transcription; page no. of facsimile; folio/line nos. of the citation.

4 Facsimiles of the manuscript have been published in Klimburg-Salter, Lodja and Ramble 2013: 39-45, and in Bellezza 2013: 30-76. For convenience I adopt the reference system for folios used in these existing publications. Bellezza 2013: 15, n.22 reported an AMS sample dating of the paper to 11th-12th century, which was confirmed to me by Moke Mokotoff (*pers. comm.* March 2016).

5 I intend 'mundane' as a general characterisation for practices and goals related to earthly human existence in the here and now, and the very proximate future, and which lack reference to any soteriological or 'ultimate' horizons.

of any concrete references to either the Tibetan Buddhist or the G.yung drung Bon salvation religions, and all clearly belong to a milieu of autonomous ritual specialists operating within local communities.

The study has four parts. Part I (chap. 2) sets out an analysis of *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites concerned with the post-mortem status of deceased fetuses or miscarried infants and in some cases their mothers, and how this impacts upon the living. Part II (chap. 3) analyses both the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites that have the combined goals of posthumously gaining new human lives following deaths, as well as protecting the germinal beings once they have arrived upon the earth.⁶ Part III (chap. 4) discusses the results which reveal a cognate cosmological framing and set of reference points across these three rites from the same 11th-12th century milieu and common geographical region. Read together, they indicate what amounts to a local cycle of human existence, at least to the extent that the concepts involved were applied in the rites under study. Moreover, most of the central concepts, identities, technical language and procedures in these three old rites are still evident today in the cult of Srid pa'i lha that I documented in the eastern Himalayas. Part IV (chap. 5) deals with manuscript provenance. I initially demonstrate that manuscripts recording *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites share certain close similarities with manuscripts recording revitalisation rites used in the cult of Srid pa'i lha. I then set out a wide range of evidence for establishing geographical provenance for the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript. I consider it was most likely composed in southernmost Tibet, within a zone of ca. 100 km diameter encompassing the area of the Dga' thang shrine to the north and the highland valleys of north-eastern Bhutan and adjacent hill regions where the cult of Srid pa'i lha is based upon similar manuscripts to the south. A conclusion proposes how we might best define the status of these three old rites.

Finally, it must be noted that the three old texts being considered herein contain a wide variety of obscure terms and grammatical constructions, and some of my proposed resolutions of them remain tentative.

⁶ I am aware of the study on the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript and the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* by Bellezza 2013. Bellezza's interpretations of these texts and his methodology diverge strongly from my own, while the detailed content in his publication is often flawed to the extent that any reference to it invariably requires a considerable volume of additional corrective commentary. I thus ignore it herein, and simply suggest interested readers compare the results of my study with those offered in Bellezza 2013.

2. *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites and their cultural background

The Dga' thang manuscript described by its publishers as *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, or 'Methods of subduing *rnel dri*', is the longest ritual text discovered at the Gtam shul site, with forty seven surviving folio sides. It records a collection of antecedent crisis tales and models for conducting exorcism and purification rites specifically to combat posthumous possessions appearing in the wake of culturally problematic deaths. Such deaths include those of mothers but especially of their infants occurring during childbirth or in utero due to what we would now medically define as septic abortion or miscarriage, and miscarriages induced by certain violent accidents, for example, being hit by a rock or falling from a precipice or horse are cited in the *rnel dri* tales.⁷ Samten Karmay accurately described the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* as related to "special purification rites" in cases of unfortunate deaths,⁸ while Brandon Dotson correctly understood that these rites are not directly concerned with the dead or their disposal as such, although the antecedent narratives cite deaths and in a few cases briefly refer to death rites as general causal and sequential framing references. Rather, the rites benefit the living by way of purifying surviving kin and spouses, appeasing deities who preside over social communities, averting reprisals by a deceased's family against another party, and so forth.⁹ At the end of one *Rnel dri 'dul ba* antecedent narrative, the rite's purpose is explicitly described as being 'In order that the dead do not pursue the living',¹⁰ while in another tale a *bon mo* ritual specialist is described as one who can 'bring a dead person back to life.'¹¹ Thus, despite death triggering the original problem, life and the living are very much and ultimately in focus here. This is one of various points the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites share in common with the rhetoric in the old *Ste'u* text studied in part II (chap. 3), for it, too, explicitly states that when death is concealed with the proper rites this benefits the living, in the form of gaining new, young lives (see below). An identical rhetoric occurs in Srid pa'i lha cult texts based upon the *Yangal* rites in the *Rnel dri*

7 A second Dga' thang manuscript dealing with various exorcisms including *dri* is called *Sha ru shul ston gyi rabs la sogs pa* by its publishers; see *Dga' thang* 60-75, 179-212. Its rites and language share but few similarities with the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, nor does it deal with *rnel dri*, and only features a certain type of *dri bon* rites and thus lacks the elaborate purification of the vertical cosmic axis by the Ya ngal ritual specialist.

8 Karmay 2009: 63-64.

9 Dotson 2008: 61-63.

10 *ShI phyIr gson myi 'brang ngo* /; *Dga' thang* 52, 167, f.37, l.2.

11 See the *myi shi sos gyi bon mo* named Kod shel lcag (elsewhere God she lcag); *Dga' thang* 55, 172, f.42, l.4-5, cf. 58, 175, f.45, l.7-8.

*'dul ba'i thabs.*¹²

The ca. 11th-12th century *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites from Dga' thang occur in the historical context of both older and later rites related to them. Problematic deaths associated with the term *dri* were already a concern expressed in Old Tibetan texts discovered at Dunhuang, although the precise meaning of Old Tibetan *dri* is not yet completely established. Dotson understood *dri* in such formulations as *dri ru bkrongs*, *drir grongs* or *drir nongs* to mean 'violence', but also noted that "violent death seems to be almost personified by the term *dri*, and is certainly personified by noxious beings such as the *btsan dri*, a particular type of demon."¹³ There are *dri bon* ritual specialists mentioned in Old Tibetan ritual texts, just as there are *dri bon* cited in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*. Modified forms of some unknown old rites related to *dri*, or at very least recycling of cultural materials from them, also continued in the later G.yung drung Bon religion, although they became reframed within a formal religious context. These G.yung drung Bon rites include transformation of older vocabulary, and this has frequently confused observers. The orthography of *dri* changed to *gri* in later sources, and hence often became understood literally as 'knife' and 'murder'.¹⁴ Also, *bdur* found in most of the Old Tibetan texts for death rites became written *'dur* by the G.yung drung Bon po, who then specifically assimilated the verb *'dur ba* to the verb *'dul ba*, with *'dur* in its nominal forms often also assigned to 'funeral rites' which obscures the fact that no funerals *per se* need be involved. David Snellgrove – who cautiously preferred to treat these verbs separately – already drew attention to this class of rites, which were explained by his expert Tibetan Bon po informants as "supressing troublesome spirits that return from the dead, especially those who have been murdered; for this purpose there is a ritual known as *gri 'dur byed pa*."¹⁵ Samten Karmay and others describe both *'dur ba* and *gri 'dur* as being used "to perform the posthumous evocation ritual of the killed" and "for exorcising the spirits that cause unnatural death," while the same rites termed *'dur* come to be more

12 For example, in a Ya ngal rite from Kurtö, we read the appeal, 'Today, open the door to the *lha* of the living! Today, close the door to the tomb of the dead!' (*'di ring gson gyi lha sgo phye // 'di ring gshin gyi dur sgo chod //*); *Shawa 1*, Text 3, f.16a, l.1-2.

13 Dotson 2013: 163-165. The *btsan dri* are mentioned in the *Sha ru shul ston gyi rabs la sogs pa* text; *Dga' thang* 67, 194, f.15, l.2.

14 See, for example, *gri* in both the *Gal mdo* and *Gzi brjid* presentations of the *Srid gshen* 'way' respectively in Kapstein 2009: 117, 124 and Snellgrove 1967: 116-117.

15 Snellgrove 1967: 300, cf. 259 n.40.

generally described as some form of “taming” by assimilating *’dul* to *’dur*.¹⁶

The Old Tibetan and later G.yung drung Bon contexts and terminologies related in certain ways to *Rnel dri ’dul ba* rites are clearly not identical to them, and traces of transformations in vocabulary and concepts across a ca. 11th century watershed era are everywhere to be found. Thus, anachronism is a particular methodological concern in relation to relevant G.yung drung Bon sources written in Classical Tibetan, not least of all because they currently lack any reliable provenance information.¹⁷ I therefore eschew them in my analysis of *Rnel dri ’dul ba*.

Our initial problem is gaining terminological clarity for *rnal* and *dri* and the rite name *Rnel dri ’dul ba*. Earlier, this had been understood by Dotson as “to ‘subdue’ (*’dul*) [...] various types of impurities (*rnal, dri [ma]*),”¹⁸ presumably reading *rnal* in relation to *mnal/ mnol*, while Karmay understood *dri ’dul ba* as the “taming of knifed deaths”¹⁹ by applying the later G.yung drung Bon meaning for *gri ’dur* to it. Neither explanation is convincing in the context of the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* narratives. I have never seen the word *rnal* attested in any other Tibetan language document, and uncertainties involving the Old Tibetan meaning of *dri* were signalled above.

What is certain in the text under consideration is that a *rnal dri* directly subject to *’dul ba* (‘suppressing’, ‘taming’, ‘converting’, and so forth) must refer to some being endowed with sentience since that is overwhelmingly what the verb *’dul ba* applies to in other contexts. There are occasionally different types of *dri* signalled within the text,²⁰ but here I

16 Karmay 1972: 349, and Karmay 1994: 419 translating a passage from *Mkhas pa Lde’u* 235, Karmay 2009: 63 for *gri ’dur* has “the taming of the knifed deaths”, and for *Mu cho khrom ’dur chen mo* “the Great collection of taming rites performed in public by Mucho”. See also *Zhangzhung* 122, *’dur sgo* which is defined as incorporating “taming rituals”.

17 A text collection now often cited by others is the *Mu cho khrom ’dur*. Currently, there is no historically and scientifically attested provenance information concerning dates, places of composition or authorship for any of this collection. Concerning internal claims, most of the individual works are anonymous, yet when attributions of origins are given they are often contradictory, some texts being cited as *gter ma*, others very similar not, with different *gter ston* credited, while some commentators state they were never *gter ma*, and so on; see the notes and colophons given in Martin, *et. al.* 2003: entries 31.1-31.54, 39.1-39.64. In my forthcoming monograph, *Source of Life*, I compare a group of texts from the *Mu cho khrom ’dur* with manuscripts containing parallel references in the Srid pa’i lha cult and with the Old Tibetan document PT 1060. Among them, the *Mu cho khrom ’dur* texts exhibit the most deviance, almost all of which involves reframing with discourses and vocabulary from the G.yung drung Bon and Tibetan Buddhist salvational religions.

18 Dotson 2008: 62 n.64.

19 Karmay 2009: 63.

20 See the various *dri* indexed to the sky, earth, intermediate space, stone, fire and later also water in the *Sha ru shul ston gyi rabs la sogs pa* text; *Dga’ thang* 60, 180, f.1 and 71, 200, f.21, l. 4.

am only drawing upon those accounts concerning *rnel dri*, which represent the vast majority of cases in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*. Accordingly, *rnel*, *dri* (or *gri*) and *rnel dri* (or *rnel gri*) are the specific designations given to deceased human victims towards whom *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites are directed. In the text itself we find them described as ‘child *dri*’ (*bu dri/gri*), ‘female child *dri*’ (*bu dri/gri mo*) and ‘female *rnel dri*’ (*rnel dri/gri mo*). In context, for example, the narratives describe them in scenarios, ‘In the country Dung yul, at Dung stod, a girl of Dung, a *rnel*, died’²¹ or when the infant becomes possessed and is specifically named as such, ‘The name of that female *dri* was *rnel dri* Dgab mar ma’,²² and so forth. Here one can note that almost all the score or so of *rnel dri* antecedent tales feature women who are pregnant and their unborn fetuses or babies who die of symptoms matching septic abortion or accident-induced miscarriage. On the one hand, the recurrent parallel phrasing *bu dri/gri* with *rnel dri/gri* and *bu dri/gri mo* with *rnel dri/gri mo* in text passages strongly suggest that *rnel* stands for ‘infant’ or ‘child’. On the other hand, it is conspicuous that within those narrative texts in the collection that place more emphasis upon the pregnant mother as the victim – albeit that her foetus must also die – we only find the term *dri* and not *rnel dri*.²³

When I discussed the above points with Joanna Bialek, a linguist-lexicographer of Old Tibetan, she suggested²⁴ that the otherwise unattested *rnel* may be the result of a specific type of as yet little understood developmental pattern evident for Tibetan word formation. Various attested examples of this include *rdo*, *rde'u*, *rdel* ‘stone/projectile’, *ba*, *be'u*, *bel* ‘cow/calf’, or *spra*, *spre*, *spre'u*, *sprel* ‘ape/monkey’, and so on. Thus, we might consider the development *na*, *ne'u*, *rnel*, in which *na* means ‘age, stage of life’, and diminutive *ne'u* literally ‘little age/stage of life’, i.e. a ‘young one’, ‘foetus/baby/infant’. The *r* superfix on *rnel* may appear out of place in this development, however lexicons attest the superfix-bearing form *sne'u* in a synonym for *bu tsha* ‘child, boy’, with an Old Tibetan occurrence of it attested as well.²⁵ Further evidence comes from the approximately contemporary *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript treated in part II (chap. 3), and in which the cognate term *ne'u*

21 *Yul dung yul dung stod na // dung gyI bo* [read: *bu*] *mo rnel te grongs* /; *Dga'thang* 39, 141, f.11, l.1-2.

22 *Dri mo de'I mying / rnel dri dgab mar ma* /; *Dga'thang* 45, 152, f.22, l.6-7. For other *rnel dri* names which share elements with this one, see *Dga'thang* 44, 150, f.20, l.7 *rnel bkrags dgab mar ma*, 50, 162, f.32, l.2-3 *rnel drI thag bshar ma*, and 47, 156, f.26, l.8 *rnel grI thag shal ma* (cf. *ibid.* 48, 158, f.28, l.4, and 49, 159, f.29, l.4).

23 See the case of Lha lcam Phye ma lam in *Dga'thang* 39-40, 141-142, f.11, l.4-f.12, l.4.

24 *Pers. comm.* 9 May in Berlin, and email of 12 May, 2016.

25 Das 1902: 771, cf. also *sne'u* as ‘children’ in Thomas 1957: 87 n.4.

zhon ‘young ones’ derived from *na gzhon*²⁶ features centrally within a set of cosmological references that are very close in certain respects to those found in *Rnel dri ’dul ba* rites. Based upon the aforementioned evidence, in this study I am provisionally accepting that *rnel* means ‘infant’ in the text concerned.

In the *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs*, the agency behind a *rnel* victim becoming a *dri* is almost always assigned to members of the *srin* and *sri* classes of spirit. In the narratives, these beings are not some generic or universal agents, but rather very localised figures associated with – and named after – the residence places of their victims in the terrestrial environment, or at sites where the victims perform activities.²⁷ The same pattern for identifying troublesome *srin* who require ‘ransom’ (*glud*) rites is already found in the Old Tibetan documents, and I will return to this point in the part III (chap. 4). Unlike any known Old Tibetan sources, the *srin* and *sri* in *Rnel dri ’dul ba* narratives are almost exclusively and intimately related to unborn children and their mothers. *Srin* and *sri* are said to ‘infiltrate’ (*zhugs*) the bodies – but most specifically the uterus – of women, cause ‘death’ (*grongs*, *gum*, *lcebs*) and ‘mishap’ (*nongs*) to their foetuses or babies who become *dri*, and also ‘drag off’ (*drongs*) their victims to become *dri*. One local *srin* even has the name Bu rkun, literally ‘Robber of Children’.²⁸ The *srin* which specifically target child victims in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* narratives are closely cognate with the *sri*, and likely they are variants of the same older word and class of beings. The more rarely involved *sri* are definitely ancient and dangerous beings from under the earth whose profile is more well-defined in the Old Tibetan sources than the already somewhat generic *srin*. Old Tibetan texts state that ‘*sri* having risen from the earth appeared’, identify them as ‘*sri* thieves in the earth’, while ‘up above one offers to *lha*, and down below one suppresses *sri*’.²⁹ However, the very close connection between *sri*/

26 *Na gzhon* BGT 1495, *lo na gzhon pa*, cf. Jäschke 1881: 298.

27 For examples, in the Rtsang shul tale it is the Rtsang *srin* Zla gar (*Dga’ thang* 47, 156, f.26, l.4), in the Dbye mo yul grugs tale it is Dbye *srin* Yug mo (*ibid.* 50, 161, f.31, l.10), in the [Yar] lungs sogs ka tale it is Yar *sri* Btsan bye Phag po sna rings (*ibid.* 49, 160, f.30, l.6), while in an incident that occurs at the boundary between the alpine slates and the meadows (*g.ya’ le spang mtshams su*) it is the G.ya’ *srin* Tshubs ma and the Gangs *srin* Phywa ba (*ibid.* 39, 141, f.11, l.9-10). Interestingly, in the tale of the progenitor king from the mid-13th century his first problem on earth is hostile *srin*; *Mkhas pa Lde’u* 236.

28 See the Gnubs yul gling grugs tale; *Dga’ thang* 48, 157, f.27, l.7. The name occurs in the later ritual text *Sri gsas bung ba stag chung bzugs*; see Karmay and Nagano 2002: 186 = f.4a.

29 See, in order of citation, IOL Tib J 0731: r122, *sa las sri lang ste chags* (cf. PT 1134: 74); IOL Tib J 0734: 7r270, *sa la sri rkun ma*; PT 1050: 5, *ya rus ni lha mchod la // mar du ni sri gnon cig //*. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of Old Tibetan documents are from OTDO (see References).

srin and children becomes strongly evident for the first time in *Rnel dri 'dul ba* narratives. Aspects of this cultural complex were preserved in the later Classical Tibetan vocabulary, with *sri'u* and *sri'u phru* positively referring to 'a human child' (*mi'i phru gu*). Yet, *sri'u* is also attested with a negative meaning much closer to the cases we are dealing with in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, namely for a 'woman whose child dies after birth'.³⁰ In older Classical Tibetan ritual literature, a somewhat cognate technical term *chung sri*, 'a *sri* of a young one' (*chung ngu'i sri*), occurs although it refers to a child victim and not a mother, and it is a clear synonym of *rnel dri*.³¹ A specific class of rites to suppress *sri* for protection of infants do exist within the Srid pa'i lha cult, and are also known from other older 'bon'-identified manuscripts used by autonomous ritual specialists for mundane rites.³² There are also cognate terms for rite techniques in earlier and later texts, including *sri khung* for a ritual pit dug in the earth to trap *sri*, which is cited in *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites and later texts.³³ Moreover, the words *sri'u* and *sri'u phru* are probably the earlier basis for the spoken expression *sifu* or *seefu* used today by speakers of East Bodish languages and the Tibetic language Chochangacha within the Srid pa'i lha cult for rites in which the ancestral sky *lha* descend to the ritual ground to impregnate women who are otherwise unable to conceive a child (see chap. 4). To my present knowledge, this whole cultural complex associating unborn and very young infants with *dri/sri/srin* in a ritual context can be traced back only as far as the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* and its cultural-historical milieu.³⁴

In summary, one can further note that in the antecedent tales of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* text,

30 Das 1902: 1288.

31 See *chung sri* in BGT 815: *byis pa chung ngu nas 'chi bar byed pa'i gdon nam sri /*, while *chung sri* is used throughout the *Sri gsas bung ba stag chung bzhugs* manuscript (Karmay and Nagano 2002: 185-197). See also the discussion in Blondeau 1997: 208-210, while Rangjung Yeshe Dictionary (consulted at: <http://dictionary.thlib.org>) cites a text title *sri bzlog 'khor lo 'bar ba* as "ritual work recited after the death of an infant to prevent the malevolent *sri* spirits from harming other children,"; cf. also Karmay 1972: 352, *sri kha (lang ba)* 'to meet one's fate' in G.yung drung Bon religious literature.

32 An example of such rites found in the cult is recorded in the manuscript *Lawa 2*, Text 1, and titled *Bon 'di ni bsbyi bsri 'khor mo bcug gsums bzhug sho* [original orthography], and in which the written forms *sri*, *bsri* and *sri'u* occur. A cognate type of rite is found in the *Sri gsas bung ba stag chung bzhugs* manuscript published in Karmay and Nagano 2002: 185-197.

33 See *Dga' thang* 51, 163, f.33, l.9, and the *Sri gsas bung ba stag chung bzhugs* manuscript in Karmay and Nagano 2002: 188 = f.8a.

34 One can note that the Dri gum tale in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, most recently translated and discussed by Dotson 2013, contains the same basic set of words and motifs – *dri*, *sri*, a death, a child and a ransom – we find in *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites.

there is an overall pattern for deploying terminology. The initial term used for a deceased infant victim is always *rnel*, while *dri* designates them after death when they become problematic, subject to '*dul ba* and dispatched away from the human world, and *rnel dri* identifies them in relation to more general discussion points, such as when their names are cited, their fates mentioned, and so on. The *dri* status is designated as problematic in various ways, but two verbal markers are most common, *dri yar ba* 'wandering/rambling *dri*', and *dri ma btul* 'unsuppressed *dri*'. If one accepted the suggestions made for *rnel* above, then rites described as *Rnel dri 'dul ba* can be understood to address 'young ones/infants' (*rnel*) who die violently or in culturally problematic ways rendering them susceptible to capture and control by *srin* and *sri*, and who, as resulting *dri*, ramble around posthumously precipitating problems, and thus must be subjected to ritual manipulation. In that case, *rnel dri* occurring as a compound noun is best understandable as 'wandering bad death infant spirit' in the specific context addressed here.

2.1 *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rite sequences

The *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* describes a whole series of rite techniques performed in part by the ritual specialist *A bo* or *pha* Ya ngal Gyim kong, whose unique identity and purificatory practices were all carried over from the Dga' thang manuscripts into the *Sel rabs* cycle of rites used in the Srid pa'i lha cult.³⁵ Since my present interest is to compare the overall cosmology expressed in *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites with that evident in the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts, and to assess these as possible early precursors for the cosmology of the cult, I will focus upon the first and by far longest and most elaborated rite within the collection, which covers the first eleven folios of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* manuscript. My discussion will also refer to several subsequent and parallel *rnel dri* narratives for clarification. The aim is not to detail every single procedure in the text, but rather to illustrate the basic operations, orientations and agencies a *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rite entails to accurately illuminate the cosmological framing.

The first rite of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* series has no title, narrative or named victim since the initial folios recording its mythical precedent are missing. While we lack the crisis narrative justifying performance of the rite, we know the subject was a female

³⁵ On Ya ngal in the cult of Srid pa'i lha, see Huber 2013.

infant victim,³⁶ who almost certainly died as an aborted or miscarried foetus following the overwhelming pattern in other *rnal dri* tales within the collection. The overall structure and individual components of all the rite sequences are clearly evident in the surviving materials, yet the language in places is often obscure with my proposed solutions accordingly annotated.

i. First phase: Ya ngal rites

The initial *Rnal dri 'dul ba* rite sequence is divided into two major phases. The first is presided over by *pha* Ya ngal Gyim kong, and the second by a *dri bon* (also *gri bon*) named Ra ljags Skyi rgyal. Between these two phases, a bridging text indicates the main character of each by stating, 'That above was the purification of a *rnal gri mo*, it is completed. [section break] This below is the method for suppressing *rnal dri*'.³⁷ The first purification phase includes a ransom rite (*blus*) repeated several times, a ritual journey itinerary transiting between eleven zones of cosmic space, within nine of which a series of elaborate procedures summarised as 'purification' (*bsangs*) must be repeated while undertaking the journey, and then a final procedure for closure once the initial goal has been reached. The itinerary of the vertical, upward ritual journey is of prime interest here. Various instructional cues in the text leave no doubt this is a verbal journey that must be chanted aloud at every stage. Initially, a list of ransom items is enumerated for presentation to the offending spirit agent who caused the victim to become a *dri*. In this case, it is a *srin* named Zo zo ring po. Thus, the departure point for the journey in the tale in question is the location of this spirit. While we lack this information due to missing folios, according to the pattern established in all other *rnal dri* tales within the collection these *srin* are always identified within the terrestrial locations of their victims (see below), and in some tales this is very specifically given, for example, at the boundary between alpine slates and meadow. The process commences as follows:

Offer [ransom items] into the hands of *srin* Zo zo ring po.

Ransoming [the victim] from the hands of *srin* Zo zo ring po,

Transit the doors that are upwards, the types of which are

The doorsill of the pass,

36 At the end of Ya ngal's first phase of rites, the *bu grI mo* is cited, while the completion statement mentions a *rnal grI mo*; see *Dga' thang* 37-38, 139, f.9, l.4, l.7.

37 *De yan chad rnal drI mo 'i bsangs lags te / rdzogs sho [= sa + ho] // // // 'di man chad rnal drI gdul ba 'i thabs so*; see *Dga' thang* 38, 139, f.9, l.7-8.

The bamboo door of the sheep,
The pine door [of] the horse head, and
The long water reeds³⁸ [door], and depart.³⁹

Following this, a range of helping ritual aids are gained to expedite the journey. One must then ‘step upwards over the first doorsill, and depart.’⁴⁰ The language of ‘door’ (*sgo*) architecture here, and how one ‘passes’ or ‘steps over’ (*rgal*) the ‘doorsills’ or ‘thresholds’ (*ma*⁴¹ *them*) in traditional houses – later also the ‘narrow path’ (*phrang*) leading to/from a house door is included – is entirely commonplace terminology and imagery from the domestic sphere. There are nine such ‘doorsills’ or ‘thresholds’ to pass over or step across, each numbered, with movement between and through them continually upwards,⁴² in order to reach a final point.

Crossing each doorsill, one enters a new spacial level each time in this upward series. These nine levels are generally colour- and substance-coded, have a familiar topography and people (*myi bo*) in them, and sometimes disturbing images are associated with them. The ontological status of these levels is not at all obvious from the text itself. For example, they could be so many ‘versions’ of the regular world as it appears to a troubled *rnal dri* being. This theme is encountered in another Dga’ thang text, the *Byol rabs*, where a man living in the world is troubled by ‘bad omens’ (*ltas ngan*) which distort reality for him, and we find

38 For the reading *chu rba* > *chu sba* (or *spa*) ‘water reed’, I follow the pattern in these texts of ‘doors’ being most often identified with particular types of woods or woody vegetation. A precedent of this type for *rba* and *smyug* together occurs in *Rnal dri ’dul ba* ritual instructions in a list of implements/devices called *shad* (‘rake’, ‘brush’?) made from three types of wood or woody plant stems, *byang gyI rba shad dang / bod gyI shing shad dang / mon gyI smyug shad dang / shad gsum gyis bshad* [read: *gshad*] *do* //; *Dga’ thang* 34, 132, f.3, l.3-4.

39 *Srin zo zo ring po’i phag du phul / srIn za za ring po’I phyag nas blus te / la’I them sgo dang / lug gyI smyug sgo dang / rta rgo* [read: *mgo?*] *gsom sgo dang / chu rba rang* [read: *sba ring?*] *gyI rigs yan chad gyI cig bgrod te gshegs so* //; *Dga’ thang* 33, 131, f.1, l.9-f.2, l.1.

40 *Rma them pa cig yar ru rgal te gshegs pa*; *Dga’ thang* 33-34, 132, f.2, l.7-8.

41 The original *rma* spelling is another example of the *r* superfix added to words which lack it in Classical Tibetan found throughout Dga’ thang manuscripts, e.g. *brla* for *bla*, while an *r* superfix is written for the *d* prefix of standardised Classical Tibetan, e.g. *rgu* for *dgu*, *rngul* for *ngul*. Moreover, in Srid pa’i lha cult manuscripts from valleys in northeast Bhutan directly adjacent to Lho brag, addition of an *r* superfix which does not occur conventionally is a common scribal practice, e.g. *rdus* for *dus*, *rdang* for *dang*, etc. A *rma* orthography could possibly have other meanings, but I strongly doubt that here due to the cognate and purely conventional vocabulary of house, door and entranceway it occurs with.

42 For example, f.5, l.10 ... *rma them pa gsum yar rgal na*; f.8, l.1 ... *rma them pa bdun yar rgal te*; f.8, l.11 ... *rma them pa rgu ya rol na*, and so on.

Old Tibetan expressions for worldly ‘calamities’ used in that narrative as well.⁴³ This *Byol rabs* is a case where a ransom is deployed to free a victim experiencing such perceptions, and thus appears similar to the first *Rnel dri ’dul ba* rite. These nine levels might also be representations of the type of defiled world resulting from the circumstances of death giving rise to a *rnal dri*, and the impure presence of its subsequent uncontrolled wandering. The main defilement concern is explicitly stated to be bodily fluids and matter released into the world during deaths of expectant mothers and their fetuses or new-borns, when conditions such as septic abortions or miscarriages induced by violent accidents occur leading to the advent of a *rnal dri*. This theme is reiterated time and again in parallel antecedent tales throughout the *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs*, for example:

The mother’s head was facing upwards.
The child’s head was facing downwards.
The pus shot out like a [bolting] horse.
The blood welled up, groaning like an ox.
The placenta was twisted in the covering.⁴⁴
The blood spread out, *tsa ra ra*.
Defilement of the *lha* melted the glaciers.
Defilement of the lakes penetrated to their depths.
Up above, the *lha* were unworshipped.
Down below, the *dri* were unsuppressed.⁴⁵

Thus, the world is ‘defiled’ (*bnol* > *mnol*) literally from top to bottom, which cuts off vital connections between living persons and their *lha*, and again, we see it is the living who are motivated to perform such rites since they are affected and will be its prime beneficiaries. The main rites for ‘purification of defilement’ (*mnol bsangs*) up the vertical axis, and leading eventually to the *lha*, are performed by the Ya ngal ritual specialist. However one views the nature of the nine levels of the itinerary, the ritual specialist must perform purification rites

43 For example, *skyin dang babs pa las* and *rma[n] dang sa las*; see the edition of *Byol rabs* sections in Karmay 2009: 79 for l.169-170.

44 In this context, the *dgab* ‘covering’ (usually in nominal compounds based upon *’gebs*) must be the amniotic sac or membranes which develop together with a placenta, and in which a miscarried foetus is frequently delivered intact.

45 *Ma mgo gyen du bstan / bu mgo thur du bstan / chu ser rta ltar rgyag [/] khrag glangs glang ltar ’khun / sha ma dgab la dkris // gtIng khrag tsa ra ra / lha bnol [read: mnol] gangs bzhu ’o // mtsho bnol [read: mnol] gtIng bkrum mo // yar ste lha ma mchod / mar de [read: te] dri ma btul /*; e.g. *Dga’ thang* 48, 157-158, f.27, l.9-f.28, l.1.

each time in preparation for passing to the next level within the ascending ninefold series. These transitions through the levels are expressed using the image of moving out of the door of a village house and closing it behind oneself:

With the occurrence of each included procedure,
Take a step out towards the narrow path, and
Say “Open the door which is like bone-white conch!
Open the door which is like a [black] ink inscription!
Open the door of the copper narrow path and iron narrow path!”
And break each narrow path wooden stave.

In each instance, invite the Ya ngal and his concomitant purification of defilement.⁴⁶

The doors are thus encountered, opened, traversed and a wooden stave is broken to obstruct them once again. This is clearer still in parallel *rnal dri* tales. For instance, in the Skyi ro narrative Ya ngal Gyim kong opens the way to the *lha* and then,

Each of the doors is traversed.
The door of turquoise bamboo.
The door of copper [coloured] wild rose.
The door of fir tree.⁴⁷

Lay down obstructions⁴⁸ for the thirteen doors.⁴⁹

Note that the ‘doors’ are made of various types of wood, sometimes colour-coded, with a total of nine doors for some versions of the rite and thirteen doors in other versions. Furthermore, in a list of procedures at the beginning of the second phase of this first and most elaborate *Rnal dri ’dul ba* rite one of them is termed ‘cutting off the narrow path of *dri*’ (*dri ’phrang bcaḍ pa*). As we will see shortly, the procedure of breaking wooden staves

46 *Cho ga khongs re lags pa dang / ’phrang mo ngo long cig byas la / rus dkar dung tsam gyI sgo phye cig zer / snag byang tsam gyI sgo phye cig / zangs ’phrang lcags ’phrang sgo phye cig byas la’ / ’phrang gdong mong [read: ldong mo] re re gcag go / de re re la yang [read: ya] ngal dang bnol [read: mnol] bsangs khongs re spyang drang ngo /; Dga’ thang 35, 134, f.4, l.2-5.*

47 For *’dong mo* *’wangs* read: *sdong mo wangs*. The *wang* [*shing*] refers to fir in my research region, and to my knowledge in southern Tibetan dialects it seems to be a variant of *thang* [*shing*], but cf. *wang mo* in BGT 2366 *shing mngar gyi rigs shig*.

48 While *’ga ’ga tsam* might conventionally be read as a variation of Classical Tibetan *’ga’ tsam* ‘a few’, I read *’gag ’gag tsam cIḡ*, parallel to the earlier *sgo sgo cig* preceding the motion verb. On *’gag* ‘obstruction’, see Jäschke 1881: 92 and ‘enge Stelle’, see *Wörterbuch*, 12: 362, BGT: 486 *’gag = sgo ’gag*.

49 *Sgo sgo cig bgrod ’tshal lo / smyug ma g.yu’i sgo / se ba zangs gyI sgo / ’dong mo ’wangs gyI sgo / sgo mo bcu gsum la ’ga ’ga [read: ’gag ’gag] tsam cIḡ bsgyer ro //; Dga’ thang 49, 159, f.29, l.10-11.* For *bsgyer* cf. *’gyer* and *sgyer*.

is also used for the final closure of the entire Ya ngal sequence. When the ninth and final doorsill at the end of this first phase of the rite has been crossed, the itinerary then states:

The deceased, an infant (*rnal*), died.

Deliver it. Deliver it to the *sman*.

When it is understood that [crossing] doorsill nine is completed,

The female child *dri* is ready for the *sman*.

Its pus is ready for lustrations.⁵⁰

Concerning ritual requisites for this, excavate a hole for each doorsill, nine of them.

[Use] nine rough stones.⁵¹

[Use] nine billets of wood.

Place each stone and a billet [in/at each hole?].

Break each wooden stave.⁵²

The method of accumulating [the requisites] together with the method of laying down [the obstructions] are one.

That above was the purification of a female infant *dri*; it is complete.⁵³

In other *rnal dri* tales within the collection featuring different ritual specialists, the same overall ritual process ensues, but with a clearer account of certain details of purification rites that merely occur in the Ya ngal versions as a single word or phrase. For instance, in several listings of his rite techniques and requisites, a Ya ngal is said to use nine smoke types (*dud*

50 The image here is related to the subdued child *dri* requiring ritual ablution (*bkrus*) and lustration (*tshan*) prior to delivery to the *sman*, for example *bu gri rgod las g.yung du btul / chu sna mang po nas bkrus / tshan sna mang po nas btub / [...] bu gri sman du bskyal* /; see *Dga' thang* 42, 146, f.16, l.7-9.

51 For *shal ba*, cf. Jäschke 1881: 557 *shal ba* and *shal ma* 'a flint, sharp-edged stone'.

52 For '*dong mo*' read: *ldong mo* 'wooden stave' or *sdong po* 'tree branch/trunk', cf. elsewhere '*dong mo* 'wangs for a wooden ritual port or gate (*Dga' thang* 49, 159, f.29, l.11), and further '*dong shas bcu gsum na* / *stag pa'I rgam shing dang bcu re gsum* / as ritual materials with other types of wood (*ibid.* 52, 165, f.35, l.8-9), cf. also *shing sna bcu gsum* with *shing bu* and '*gal pa*. (*ibid.* 50, 161, f.31, l.2).

53 *Dga' thang* 37-38, 139, f.9, l.3-8, *grongs yang rnel te grongs / bskyal ba sman du bskyal / rma them pa rgu rdzogs par shes na / bu gri [read: dri] mo sman du rung / de'i chu ser tshan du rung / 'dl'i ya stags nI rma them pa re re la khung bu re re rgu bsko // shal ba rgu / 'gal pa rgu // 'gal pa dang shal ba re re yang gzhang / 'dong mo re re yang gcag / bsag thabs dang gyer thabs bcas gcig go / de yan chad rnel grI [read: dri] mo'i bsangs lags te / rdzogs sho [= sa + ho] //*.

rgu)⁵⁴ and ‘live birds’ (*gson ma*)⁵⁵ as part of upward purification of defiled *lha*. In the Glan yul tale we read more fully,

The *lde gshen* Rmun bu and
The *tshe myi* Rmu rgyal
Used thirteen types of wood,
A large surface of woven/plaited material⁵⁶ and
Bamboo to make a long wall.⁵⁷
With the nine ‘son trees’ (*shing bu*) they made wooden billets.
By way of thirteen live birds (*gson ma*),
They purified the *lha* upwards.
They suppressed the *sri* downwards.
They opened the way for the coming of the *lha*.
They shone a bright light for the lord.
Humans and *lha* met up.
Lords and subjects met up.⁵⁸

The nine smoke types mentioned elsewhere are produced by burning wooden staves cut from the nine ‘son trees’ cited here. This ritual tree classification has been preserved as the ‘nine son trees of valleys’ (*lung shing bu dgu*) – together with the ‘nine father trees of sunny slopes’ (*bdag shing pha dgu*), and ‘nine mother trees of shady slopes’ (*srib shing ma dgu*) already known from Old Tibetan references – in the Srid pa’i lha cult as part of the *Sel rabs*

54 For instance, ‘For each included procedure as well, a Ya ngal prepares what is befitting with purification and nine smoke [types].’ (*cho ga khongs re re la yang / ya ngal cig gyIs bsangs dang / bdud [read: dud] rgu dang rigs bcas /*; *Dga’ thang* 34-35, 133, f.3, l.10-11.

55 For instance, ‘*Pha* Ya ngal Gyim kong, at the junction of three paths, purified the *lha* upwards again with nine *sri* holes, nine *mjol*, one rough stone, one wooden billet [and] one *gson ma*’ (*pha ya ngal gyIm kyong [read: kong] gyis / lam sum mdo shed du / sri gung [read: khung] rgu mdzol [read: mjol] rgu / sha ma [read: shal ba] gIg ‘gal pa cIg / gson ma cIg la / yar te lha yang bsang /*); *Dga’ thang* 51, 163, f.33, l.8-10, with the readings *khung*, *mjol* and *shal ba* based upon other precedents in the manuscript, cf. n.50 above.

56 Speculative. For *sle mo ngo cen* read: *sle bo/mo ngos chen*. A *sle* or *sle mo* is ‘a coarse blanket’ Jäschke 1881: 596, cf. BGT 2996 *sle mo*, while *sle ba/po/bo* refers to ‘a flat basket’ woven or plaited (*sle ba*) from cane or bamboo; Jäschke 1881: 596, *CDTD* (nouns) entries 8998-8999.

57 For *snyags ma* read: *smyug ma*, for which *snyug(s) ma* is a common variant. For ‘*dram rings*’ read: ‘*gram ring*, apparently a ‘long wall/base’ as a ritual structure or altar of a sort made from various woods.

58 *Dga’ thang* 50, 160-161, ff.31, l.2-6, *lde gshen rmun bu dang / tshe myI rmu rgyal gyIs / shIng sna bcu gsum dang / sle mo ngo cen dang / snyags ma ‘dram rings las btang / shing bu rgu dang de las ‘gal pa bgyIs / gson ma bcu gsum las / yar te lha bsangs / mar te sri bnan / lha’I gshegs shul phyé / rje’i snang gsal sgron / myI dang lha ru mjal / rje dang ‘bangs su mjal /*.

cycle whose primordial initiator is Ya ngal Gyim kong.⁵⁹ The term *gson ma* here literally means ‘a live one’ applied to birds,⁶⁰ and various species of *gson ma* birds used during rites frequently have something attached to them. This becomes clearer in the Dbye mo yul grugs tale:

The *lha* were driven off, driven into the sky.

The wild geese vanished, vanished into the lake.

The Dbye *gshen* Mkhar bu,

Attaching a *gshang* of gold⁶¹

To a vulture *gson ma*,

Opened the portal of the sky again.

Upwards, the *lha* were purified again.⁶²

Some of these same lines and motifs occur in *Sel rabs* texts featuring Ya ngal in the Srid pa’i *lha* cult.⁶³ Very similar descriptions for using *gson ma* and also bird wings – perhaps still on living birds – occur in Old Tibetan texts recording death rites, apparently to convey the ‘bad news’ of death and prepare an open path (*lam*) into the sky for a psychopomp animal.⁶⁴

Using all these and still other rite techniques, the Ya ngal’s ever upward ritual journey through the levels arrives somewhere beyond the ninth level. It is the second phase of suppression/conversion rites that now commence which crucially inform us where the

59 For instance, in the *Dri zhim dud sel* rite within the *Sel rabs* cycle, the *shing bu dgu* include the species *ba lu*, *su lu*, *’om bu*, *tsher bu*, *mkhan bu*, *srin bu*, *kham bu*, *skyer bu* and *star bu*; see *Shawa I*, Text 3, 37a, 6-39a, 1.

60 *Gson ma* literally ‘a live one’, cf. Das 1902: 1314 “*gson ma* colloq. for *gson po*: *phug ron gson ma* a live pigeon”. The *gson ma* birds are always prepared – sometimes by having objects attached to them – or at least are present just before a purification, see elsewhere in the *Rnel dri* ‘*dul ba’i thabs* at *Dga’ thang* 50, 162, f.32, l.5, *bya rgod gson ma la* / *gser gyi sha btags pa* / *gnam gyi mthongs yang phye* / *yar te lha yang bsangs* /; *Dga’ thang* 51, 163, f.33, l.9-10: *sha ma cIlg ’gal pa cIlg* / *gson ma cIlg la* / *yar te lha yang bsang* /, and in the *Byol rabs* at *Dga’ thang* 16, 105, f.21, l.6: *bdud bya skyung kha gson ma la* / *gser gyi dril chen btags* /, and also see PT 1047, l.360: *bya gag gson ma* // ‘*am spyang ki ltong gyis btag ste*.

61 I read the otherwise obscure original *gser gyi sha* or ‘*sha* of gold’ attached to the bird here as an error for *gshang* ‘flatbell’ since in a *Byol rabs* among the *Dga’ thang* manuscripts we find a *gson ma* rite technique described as ‘attach a large bell of gold to a demon bird jackdaw, the *gson ma*’ (*bdud bya skyung kha gson ma la* / *gser gyi dril chen btags* /; *Dga’ thang* 16, 105, f.21, l.6).

62 *Lha* ‘*phangs gnam du* ‘*phangs* / *ngang yal mtsho ru yal* / *dbye gshen mkhar bu yIs* / *bya rgod gson ma la* / *gser gyi sha* [read: *gshang*] *btags pa* / *gnam gyi mthongs yang phye* / *yar te lha yang bsangs* /; *Dga’ thang* 50, 162, f.32, l.4-6.

63 For example, in *Shawa I*, Text 3, f.31a, l.1-2: *des kyang lha yar gnam du yar* // *des kyang ngang yar mtsho la yar* //.

64 See PT 1194, l.49-50, *gshog la god kad bya rjungs btags na* / *gnam mthongs* [*phye?* OTDO reads: ‘gyed here] [---] *sprin gyi go seld to* /. Preceding this line the text successively indicates the *gshog* is a vulture’s wings, e.g. l.37 *bya rgod*, l.40 *rgod thang*, l.41 *rgod gshog*, etc., cf. also Stein 2010: 266 on *gshog pa*. Also PT 1047, l.360 *bya gag gson ma* // ‘*am spyang ki ltong gyis btag ste*.

journey ultimately leads to.

ii. Second phase: *Dri bon* rites

At the commencement of the second phase, there follow a series of episodes in the text described as ‘explanatory words of *dri* suppression’ (*dri gdul ba’i tshig bshad*), which feature the performance of a *dri bon* specialist. He commences his work up at the highest or ninth level – coded ‘gold’ or ‘yellow’ (*gser*) in this instance of the rite – and up as far as which Ya ngal has already purified. Then the *dri bon* works his way downwards through the coded levels in the reverse order to that passed through on Ya ngal’s upward ritual journey. In these short, formulaic episodes, which are repeated in most of the subsequent antecedent tales throughout the whole text, the location of the victim’s *dri* in each case is always first described with the set formula, ‘Its *dri* was upwards, rambling in the sky’ (*de’i dri yar gnam du yar*). Upwards in the sky is precisely where Ya ngal ended the first phase of the rite. At this point, a fixed, threefold subjugation, purification and dispatch procedure follows, apparently coming to an end in the abode of *sman* and *lha* beings. This was signalled already at the end of the nine level with the words, ‘The female child *dri* is ready for the *sman*. Its pus is ready for lustrations.’ Here are several descriptions of this procedure from the second phase of suppressing *rnal dri* by the *dri bon*. The first instance concerns Gser yul, reached by Ya ngal at the top of his upward ritual journey after crossing the ninth doorsill:

In the land Gser yul Gser stod,
Gser lcam Nyag, an infant (*rnal*), died.
Her *dri* was upwards, rambling in the sky.
The *dri bon* Ra ljags Skyi rgyal
Converted the *dri* from wild to tame.
It’s hide was tanned from thick (i.e. haughty)⁶⁵ to fine.
From the *dri*, [she] was brought down to the *btsun*.
From the *mtshun*, [she] was delivered to the *sman*.⁶⁶

65 ‘*Khengs* ‘to be full’, ‘puffed up’ (Jäschke 1881: 42, 56) in / *pags ’khengs las zhib du mnyes* / refers to an untanned hide, and has to be read in parallel with the alternate, recurring phrasing / *pags gser las zhib du mnyes* / (cf. f.10, l.5, l.11, f.11, l.3).

66 *Yul gser yul gser stod na’ / gser lcam nyag nI rnal te grongs / de’i dri yar gnam du yar / grI [read: dri] bon ra ljags skyI rgyal gyIs / drI rgod las g.yung du btul / pags ’khengs las zhib du mnyes / drI las btsun du phab / mtshun las sman du bskyal //; Dga’ thang 38, 139-140, f.9, l.11-f.10, l.3.*

And again, further down the series,

In the land of Shel, Shel yul stod,

A girl of Shel, an infant (*rneI*), died.

Her *dri* was upwards, rambling in the sky.

The *dri bon* Ra ljags Skyi rgyal

Converted the *dri* from wild to tame.

It's hide was tanned from thick (i.e. haughty) to fine.

From the *dri*, [she] was brought down to the *btsun*.

From the *mtshun*, [she] departed to the *lha*.⁶⁷

Across the range of examples we have, the final dispatch is consistently governed by the verbs *bskyal* 'deliver', *phab* 'bring down' and *gshegs* 'depart/go to'. It represents some kind of spacial descent via *btsun/mtshun*, followed by an exit that ultimately leads to *lha* and *sman* beings.

The ritual step for this phase dealing specifically with defiling bodily fluids and matter associated with a *rneI dri* death is described more explicitly in the later *rneI dri* tale of 'Gos za Phyam 'dar ma:

The child *dri* was converted from wild to tame.

Ablutions were done using many types of waters.

Many types of lustration fluids were cast upon it. [...]

The child *dri* was delivered to the *sman*.⁶⁸

In other *rneI dri* antecedent tales, we find the final dispatch to the abode of *lha* and *sman* characterised by a specific change of identity, and being handled by a particular specialist. In the Lho ga Lang grug tale, the Lord of Lho (an ancient clan) has a daughter Lho za Dril bu Sil sil sman. When pregnant with a female infant, a demon penetrates her womb, illness ensues, and a bad death follows, with 'The deceased, an infant, dragged off for *dri*.'⁶⁹ After being ransomed back from her *srin* demon keeper Zo bo ring po,

67 Yul shel shel yul stod na / shel gyI bo mo rnel te grongs / de'i dri yar gnam du yar / drI bon ra ljags skyI rgyal gyIs / dri rgod las g.yung du btul / pags 'khengs las zhIb du mnyes / grI [read: dri] las btsun du phab / mtshun las lhar [read: lha] ru gshegs //; Dga' thang 38, 140, f.10, l.16-9.

68 Bu gri rgod las g.yung du btul / chu sna mang po nas bkrus / tshan sna mang po nas btab / [...] bu gri sman du bskyal /; see Dga' thang 42, 146, f.16, l.7-9.

69 Grongs pa rnel grIr [read: drIr] drongs /; Dga' thang 46, 153, f.23, l.5-6. On [']drongs in these formulations, cf. also Dga' thang 51, 165, f.35, l.2, drongs yang glan drir drongs /, Jäschke 1881: 284 'dren pa 4. and p. 285 'drongs, BGT 1430 'drong ba.

[She] was drawn out and departed to the *lha* and *sman*.

[She] was offered into the hands of *sman bon* 'Bring dang.

[She] departed to the *lha* and *sman*.

As for [her] name, it was given as Lha za Dril bu Sil bu sman.

The benefit [of the rite] was like that in times past.⁷⁰

The deceased infant victim, who was first identified only as the 'infant female child' (*bu mo rnel*) or as the 'infant' (*rnal*) gains a new name based upon that of her deceased mother, Lho za Dril bu Sil sil sman, whose name literally means 'Lho Clan Lady, Bell Ringing *Sman*'. The victim now dispatched to the *lha* and *sman* is appropriately renamed Lha za Dril bu Sil bu sman, literally '*Lha* Lady, Bell Tinkling *Sman*', linking her symbolically back to her dead mother but marking her new *lha* category of being. This in no orthographic variant, nor is it incidental. The intentional renaming here is just one instance of a wider pattern evident in *Rnal dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites that combines marking of origins or descent together with transitions in modes of existence between *lha* and humans, and one I will explore in more detail in sections below.

It is also apparent here that it was not just *dri bon* who presided over the final dispatch, for *sman bon* also specialised in transfers to the *lha* and *sman* beings. This is based upon older precedents, but represents one of various apparent transformations that I return to again in the part III (chap. 4).

2.2 Cosmological framing

Where exactly *sman*, *lha* and *mtshun/btsun* are stationed in the cosmos is generally apparent in the *Rnal dri 'dul ba'i thabs*. Unambiguously, the *lha* are repeatedly said to be upwards in the sky. As for *sman*, in one case immediately following the dispatch of a *dri* to such agents, we are told that,

The *dur gshen* Rma da' delivered the infant *dri* to the *sman*.

Sman of the alpine slates (*g.ya*) ground it to fragments.

Today, the infant *dri* is subdued to the core.⁷¹

70 *Lha dang sman du bsnya* [read: *bsnyad*] *ste btang* / *sman bon 'brIng dang phyag du phul* / *lha dang sman du gshags* [read: *gshegs*] / *mying ni lha za dril bu sil bu sman du btags* / *gna' de ltar phan* /; *Dga'thang* 46, 145, f.24, l.9-10.

71 *Dur gshen rma da'yIs* / *rnal dri sman du bskyal* / *g.ya sman sil mar btags* / *de ring rnel grI'i* [read: *dri'i*] *gzhung du gdul lo* /; *Dga'thang* 52, 166-167, f.36, l.9-f.37, l.1; cf. also f.21, l.1-2.

Thus, *sman* here are in a terrestrial habitat, albeit a high alpine one. This correlates with many other ecologically-marked *sman* beings in Old Tibetan documents, where they occur in or at the sky, peaks, rivers, lakes, alpine slates, rock cliffs, and so on.⁷² It is worth pointing out here that *lha* and ecologically-marked *sman* are already attested among the oldest records of mundane rites surviving in Tibetan language. Wooden slips inscribed with Old Tibetan that were recovered from the Lop Nor region, and dating to the mid-8th to mid-9th century period, record rites addressing *lha*, *sman*, *yul sman* and *rtse sman* by specialists termed *lha bon po*, *sku gshen* and *zhal ta pa*.⁷³

As for *mtshun/btsun*, the text only indicates they are somewhere in a stage between the human world and the abode of *lha* and *sman*, nothing more. I have let the original spellings *btsun* and *mtshun* stand in my translations because throughout the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* manuscript they continually alternate in formulaic passages without any clear pattern.⁷⁴ One can only logically conclude that they refer to the same type of being, with *mtshun* (also *[b]tshun*) the original form of the word, while *btsun* represents a folk etymology.⁷⁵ The older attestations of the word apparently can mean 'ancestor', but only within specific contexts. In Old Tibetan sources, the imperial rulers referred specifically to their own 'ancestors' using the term *yab myes/pha myes*, whereas *mtshun* or *btsun* (and variants) almost always occurs in expressions related more directly to *lha* and *phy[w]a*, with *mgon tshun* or *'gon [b]tsun* being a typical example which spanned the ca. 11th-century watershed period as a reference in myths.⁷⁶ Classical Tibetan references retained this connection between *mtshun* and *lha*, with a 16th century Tibetan lexicon defining *mtshun*

72 See Stein 2010: 72-73, 267-268 for a summary of references to *sman* in some Old Tibetan and early Classical Tibetan sources, with IOL Tib J 0739 and IOL Tib J 0738 particularly rich in such references, while van Schaik 2013: 242 n.26, 247 cites Old Tibetan references to *rtse sman*.

73 Van Schaik 2013: 241-247.

74 We read alternatively *drI rgod las mtshun du phab / btsun las sman du bskyal* (*Dga' thang* 38, 140, f.10, l.5-6), *grI las btsun du phab / mtshun las lhar ru gshegs* (f.10, l.8-9), *drI las mtshun du phab / mtshun las sman du bskyal* (40, 143, f.13, l.1), and compare *dri rgod las g.yung du btul / dri las btsun du phab* (44-45, 150-151, f.20, l.10-f.21, l.1) with *rgod las g.yung du btul / drI las mtshun du phab* / (45, 152, f.22, l.4-5).

75 Joanna Bialek *pers. comm.* 9 May, 2016.

76 Variants occur in PT 1134, IOL Tib J 0739, IOL Tib J 0731. A variant of the segment *gnam rim pa dgu steng du mgon tshun* from PT 1134: 11, 19 occurs in the *Dga' thang* manuscript as *gnam gyI pha mtha' na / 'gon btsun phywa*; *Dga' thang* 53, 167, f.37, l.10. In *Gsang ba bon lugs* and *Grags pa bon lugs* narratives we find *mgon btsun phywa*; *Mkhas pa Lde'u* 230. The form *mtshun* means 'patrilineal ancestor' in Classical Tibetan. See the discussions of all these early ancestor terms in Stein 1983: 193-194 n.87 and Stein 1985: 104 n.47.

as ‘the male’s *lha* of patrilineal ancestors’,⁷⁷ while for *mtshun* (*gyi*) *lha* a mid-20th century lexicon offers ‘a *lha* who is of this world, a ‘*go ba’i lha* which descends from the time of male ancestors’.⁷⁸ However, in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs* there is no male gender assigned to *mtshun/btsun* and it is often female victims who are delivered to them (see below). In the absence of direct evidence, these categories of being are best left gender unassigned and neutral, and this applies especially to *sman* as well.⁷⁹ If one wanted to translate *mtshun/btsun* here as ‘ancestor’, then *sman* and *lha* must also be accorded ancestor status since they all share the same position in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs*. As will be seen in the following analysis of the *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* texts, this appears to be the case. Concerning the intended location of these beings in *Rnel dri ’dul ba* tales, they are definitely up the vertical cosmic axis. In an Old Tibetan document, the *btsun* appear together with *btsan*, *bdud*, *rmu* and the nine *g.yen* (*g.yen dgu*) as a group of spirit ‘thieves’ (*rkun ma*) who require a ransom rite,⁸⁰ or in other cases these beings can all exist arrayed up the vertical cosmic axis as the ‘nine *g.yen* in the sky’ (*gnam la g.yen dgu*), and ‘nine star *g.yen*’ (*skar ma g.yen dgu*),⁸¹ while in the document PT 1060 a descending hierarchy indexed to special horses begins with the *lha* land Gung dang (i.e. Gung thang), then the *bdud*, *dmu*, *skar*, *gzha’* (< *gza’*), *sprin*, *gnyan*, *klu*, *sman* and *srin*.

2.3 Summary

The overall sequence of the Ya ngal chanted ritual journey describes an itinerary passing up the vertical cosmic axis through a series of topographically defined levels, via doors that are opened and closed, doorsills that are crossed and paths followed, all indexed to woods and mundane materials and culminating in the sky (Fig. 1). This same pattern is more briefly

⁷⁷ *Pha mes pho lha*; citation in Stein 2010: 62-63.

⁷⁸ *Chos grags* 710-711 has ‘*jig rten pa’i lha zhig ste pha mes kyi dus nas brgyud pa’i ’go ba’i lha*, Another recent lexicon has the same definition, but adds that *mtshun* is a term of ‘Bon usage’ (*bon lugs*) meaning ‘the quintessence of the mobile vitality principle or life force of patrilineal ancestors; see BGT 2315, #2, *bon lugs ltar pha mes kyi bla’am srog gi bcud*’.

⁷⁹ The common idea that the word *sman* refers to female beings is a misconception based upon other readings of that word with the same or very close formal spellings (e.g. *dman*), and any specific gender assigned to generic *lha*, *sman* and *mtshun/btsun* needs to be justified by evidence in context. In various old myths, the genderless category *sman* is sometimes assigned a gender marker to indicate a female spirit of this type, for example, see *Rlangs* 11 on a *gnam sman ma*, just as *lha* and *mtshun/btsun* can be gender-marked in context.

⁸⁰ IOL Tib J 0734: 7r267.

⁸¹ See IOL Tib J 0731 *passim*, PT 1285, l.v.015, and IOL Tib J 0734, l.7r267.

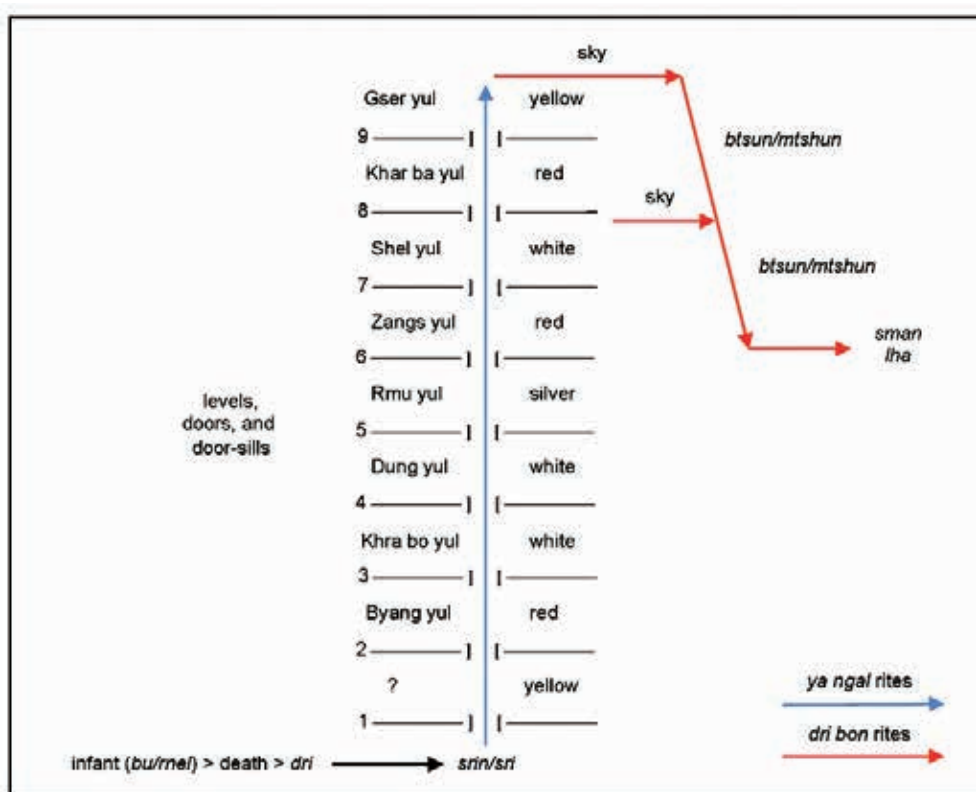


Fig. 1. Sequences and orientations in a *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rite.

reiterated in various of the successive *Rnel dri 'dul ba* tales, and of special significance is the fact that references to both nine level and thirteen level itineraries and rite sequences occur.

3. *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites

3.1 Introduction

Here I analyse the vocabulary, contents and cosmological perspectives in the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts, respectively. The language in both texts is Classical Tibetan, with a few orthographic and linguistic features indicating their age. The surviving folios on each recto and verso side of the manuscript are comprised of painted illustrations within framed panels, with short passages of text accompanying each of them beneath. Both *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts consist of collections of fourfold folio series (Fig. 2), with first, second, third and fourth folios in each series dedicated to a common theme across all subsequent folios of the

same number. Existing complete folios allow nine or ten such series, or surviving sections thereof, to be wholly or partially reconstructed.⁸² However, the content of both texts reveals that there were a total of thirteen types of *ste'u* and thirteen types of *sha slungs*, respectively, represented within each complete text. While the individual *sha slungs* are unnumbered, the *ste'u* described on every third folio within each fourfold series are numbered, and *ste'u* numbers four, six, seven, eight, nine, ten and thirteen are present among the surviving folios. This indicates the original manuscript was formed of thirteen fourfold folio series, recto and verso, respectively. The assumption is strongly reinforced by the evidence of the number thirteen being ritually and cosmographically significant in earlier and contemporary sources. We already observed this in Dga' thang manuscripts discussing rites for mundane purposes which are approximately contemporary with the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts. Moreover, in Dga' thang texts we find recurring reference to the specific motif of the sky or the upward vertical axis composed of thirteen levels (*gnam rim pa bcu gsum*).⁸³ The same cosmographic motif features in Old Tibetan documents,⁸⁴ but also in early Classical Tibetan sources composed in or by authors from and active in southernmost Tibet around Lho brag not long after the three old rites under study in this paper were in circulation.⁸⁵ We are thus dealing with an old cosmographic motif which is well-attested as localised in the most likely origin region of the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript (see chap. 5), and, as we will see below, exactly the same motif forms the cosmographic framework for a descent itinerary from sky to earth described across all surviving third folios of the *Ste'u* text.

Along with the text passages, the paintings on each folio of the manuscript are potentially instructive for understanding the rites being described. However, it is not always clear what the various illustrations of human-like figures actually depict since all lack inscriptions directly within their frames, while others do not correlate with the text

82 The second folio in the Na-v/Na-r series in the overview of surviving folios by Klimburg-Salter, Lodja and Ramble 2013: 39, and the Na-2r/Na-2v of Bellezza 2013: 68, 108, offers no evidence for its placement in this position – Bellezza's linking of the text fragments has no philological basis. It might have belonged to any of the missing series except the first one (the initial *yang* on facs. Na-2v, l.1 rules this out), and needs to be provisionally considered as unplaced.

83 See *Dga' thang* 13, 101, f.17, l.2-4, and 59, 177, f.47, 5.

84 See PT 1038, l.12, see Spanien and Imaeda 1978-1979, v.2: pl.312.

85 The most interesting examples occur in the early redaction of the progenitor king narrative by Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (1124-1192) composed in ca. 1170s-1190s (*Nyang ral chos 'byung* 157-158), and in the autobiographical account of Gu ru Chos dbang's (1212-1270/73?) early visionary experience at Gnam skas Brag (*Gu chos rang rnam* 12a, 3-4).

passages beneath them.⁸⁶ It is quite possible some groupings of these illustrations represent idealised views of ritual performance of post-mortem rites. For example, ritual actors wearing armour and holding weapons occur very widely in death and post-mortem rites conducted by highland shamans along the extended eastern Himalayas, while they are also represented in Old Tibetan accounts of funerals.⁸⁷ Such readings of the paintings deserve further comparative analysis. Neither paintings nor text provide any direct statement concerning the manuscript's geographical provenance, although various internal references and comparisons with other materials allow for well-informed preliminary conclusions about location of origins or composition (see chap. 5). The manuscript leaves the impression of being a rather local production which was not intended to be widely circulated for generic use, although the text passages do contain a range of traces of contact with a greater milieu of older mundane rites and myths, including death rites such as those recorded in Old Tibetan documents. It is noteworthy that both *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts completely lack the word *bon*, and while *gshen* occurs three times within the texts, this is merely as an element within compound names. Thus, as with the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, the only supporting sources we can draw upon with any confidence for an analysis are pre-11th century Old Tibetan ritual texts from Dunhuang, and the approximately contemporary Dga'thang manuscripts recording mundane rites which are of known geographical provenance. Most personal and place names are of the type found in many older Tibetan texts dedicated to mundane rites and the antecedent tales usually accompanying them. They are composed from a pool of meaningful elements that are constantly rearranged into different compound forms. There are, however, a small collection of immediately recognisable, more enduring named identities within the texts, and these, along with other clues and information, also contribute evidence for proposing a location of origin or composition.

86 For example, which – if either – of the two couples mentioned in the text passage on folio Cha-1r translated below is being depicted in the painted panel associated with it (Fig. 12)? Or are these people dressed in lay-persons' garments engaged in a rite or hunt, since a bow-shooting pose and archery equipment are shown in the frame? On folio Na-1r (Fig. 22), only the name 'Od de Gung rgyal is mentioned in the inscription, yet a female figure identical to that upon Cha-1r (Fig. 12) is depicted together with the male figure who looks completely different from the other possible 'Od de Gung rgyal image on Cha-4r (Fig. 15), where an armor-clad figure shoots a bow.

87 For examples, on Gurung see Pignède 1993 [1966]: 370-371, on Tamang see Höfer 1997: 16 n.29, plate 9 following p.122, Höfer 1981: plate 11 following p.99, on Mosuo see Chuan-kang Shih 1998: 116-117, plates, and on Naxi see He Limin and He Shincheng 1998: 157-159, and Rock 1955: 8-9. Note also the presence of those who hold spears and battle-axes in a processional list of ritual actors for a royal funeral recorded in the Old Tibetan document PT 1042: 123-124, *de'i 'og du phyag cha mdung pa / de'i 'og du phyag cha dgra sta / pa*.



Fig. 2. Opposite folio sides of the same section of the continuous, folded manuscript, with intact fourfold folio series from *Ste'u* text (l.), and from *Sha slungs* text (r.).

The *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts represent two separate but complimentary rites dedicated to a common goal. The vocabulary and syntax of both are often closely matched, albeit that the unique term *sha slungs* is never cited in the *Ste'u* text, and *ste'u* never in the *Sha*

slungs text. Their most distinctive and significant shared vocabulary are references to ‘small *lha*’ (*lhe’u* < *lha*) and *sman*, and the designation *ne’u zhon* (< *na gzhon*) or ‘young ones’ to qualify *lhe’u* and *sman*, as well as the description ‘small *lha* offspring who are brother and sister’ (*lhe’u sras lcam dral*). These references directly indicate the combined purpose of both texts, which is to safely usher new male and female lives into the world from ancestral realms beyond the domestic sphere of human existence. The diminutive *lhe’u* here is rare, occurring as a proper name element in but a few Old Tibetan myths.⁸⁸ However, it is unknown to me from other sources as a stand-alone category designation for a type of being or mode of existence as we find it applied in the *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* texts. Aside from a partial cognate in an Old Tibetan document,⁸⁹ the unique diminutive construct *ne’u zhon* meaning ‘young one’ is certainly closely cognate with *rnel* ‘young one/infant’ in the approximately contemporary *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs*.

3.2 The *Ste’u* text and rite

The rites defined in the *Ste’u* text are not “funerals,” as previous commentators have claimed, although deceased and burials are briefly alluded to on some of the folios. Rather, these rites define post-mortem procedures with the express goal of bringing new life into the world following a death, and the use of various ritual structures and offerings to enable this. Certain terminology in the *Ste’u* text is somewhat antiquated or rare, and must first be carefully appreciated.

The text features recurring use of *bdur* and *bdur yags* or *bdur yags pa*. The verb *bdur* occurs in Old Tibetan texts for death rites, and has been variously translated as ‘funeral rite’, ‘to bury’ (a corpse), and once also as ‘to conjure’ (the dead).⁹⁰ In Classical Tibetan, *dur* (and some compounds containing it) continued to mean ‘tomb’, ‘grave’, ‘burial ground’, ‘to bury’ (*dur du ’jugs pa*), ‘dig a grave’ (*dur rko ba*), and so on, while the verbs *’dur ba* and *ldur ba* both mean ‘to have gone to pieces’ or ‘to decay’⁹¹ and are probably semantically related to *bdur* and *dur*. Thus, I understand *bdur* in the *Ste’u* text as meaning ‘to bury’ (a corpse) and

88 See PT 1068: 6, 9, 20, also PT 1134: 67 *et passim*, also in the divination texts PT 1046B: 37 and IOL Tib J 0740: 2, 104, 155. Cf. the *lhe rje* deities in the *Gsang ba’i bon lugs* narrative, see *Mkhas pa Lde’u* 231.

89 See *sne’u* (written *sne ’u*) in IOL Tib J 0734: 5r198, ‘in order to embrace a child...’ (*sne ’u khyud pyir [read: phyir]...*), Thomas 1957: 69, 87 n.4, while *sne’u* is a rare synonym for *bu tsha* ‘child, boy’; see Das 1902: 771.

90 See Dotson 2013: 132, Stein 1971: 501, n.63 and Stein 2010: 62, 257, 258.

91 See *BGT* 1404, 1455.

referring to ‘burial’.

The term *yags pa* is quite rare. We know in Old Tibetan it belonged to the ritual domain of death from a single reference in PT 1042 describing a death rite. In that context, four *yag pa* are ritual actors at the start of a ranked sequence which appears to be a procession to the grave entrance, and who are followed by others holding spears and battle-axes, a *gshen* ritual specialist, and still others presumably holding the different ritual devices listed in the text.⁹² In later Classical Tibetan usage, *yags* directly signifies post-mortem procedures related to mourning or memorialising the dead. *Yags* is defined as a rite technique of making offerings with a ‘ritual support’ for the deceased (*’das mchod ’bul rten*), which Melvyn Goldstein glosses as “utensils for offering prayers for the deceased.”⁹³ Other reported Classical Tibetan usages relate *yags* to consolation for the bereaved and to offerings of gifts intended to effect this.⁹⁴ In the context of the *Ste ’u* text, I understand *yags [pa]* to mean ‘mourning rites’. All indications are that the use of *ste ’u* rites that the text is actually describing must occur only after burial and mourning rites have been fully accomplished. The text refers to these rites and ritual devices in some instances explicitly as ‘the *ste ’u* of completed burial and mourning rites’ (*bdur yags grub pa ’i ste ’u*), leaving no doubt they represent a third and different set of post-mortem procedures later on.

Regarding the terms *ste ’u* and *sbre ’u* for the series of material objects employed as ritual devices or structures in the text, *ste ’u* is very possibly related to Classical Tibetan *ste ’u shing* or *te ’u shing*. Lexicons define this as “a small wooden frame/seat or sitting bench.”⁹⁵ As will be seen, various *ste ’u* have components of wood (*shing*) fashioned into a lattice-work frame, and are said to function as ‘supports’ (*rten*). The original concept behind the term is more elusive. Since the term applies to a rite for ushering new life into the world, one proposal

92 See the passage in PT 1042: 123-125, *sor* [read: *sgor*; ? cf. l.41] *gshegstste* [read: *gshegs te*] / (123) *gshegs kyi rim pa la / thog mal* [read: *ma*] *yag pa bzhi* / *de’i ’og du phyag cha mdung pa / de’i ’og du phyag cha dgra sta* / (124) *pa / de’i ’og du gshen / de’i ’og du zo rig / de’i ’og du nam ka / de’i ’o du smra zhal / de’i ’og du /* (125) *zhal dang sku rten* /, etc.

93 Goldstein 2001: 989, see *yags* in BGT: 2545 *’das mchod ’bul rten* /.

94 See *yags* in Das 1902: 1125 “present sent to a bereaved person as a token of condolence; the present of condolence. *ma yags bya snyam pa la*”, also p. 950 *ma yags bya* “to console, give consolation to one who is in grief: *de’i dus na yab yum gum nas dge bshes la ma yags bya snyam pa la* ‘he thought of consoling the Dge-bshes whose parents had died.” Das’ authority in both cases is the *Jo bo rje A ti sha ’i rnam thar*.

95 *Chos grags* 334, *te ’u shing* – *khri ’u shing ngam rkub stegs*; cf. Jäschke 1881: 204 *ste ’u shing khri* citing Milarepa, and BGT 1030, *te ’u shing* - *khri chung ngu zhig*.

is that *ste'u* is related to, or an orthographic variant of, *the'u* and *thi'u*,⁹⁶ meaning 'bud', usually for a flower bud, but also applied to the young, fresh shoots of tree saplings. This possibility is strongly supported by representations of the *ste'u* ritual device or structure in the text itself. The painted images in the text (Fig. 3, 4) depict an erect, complex object closely resembling a sapling tree with a growing apical bud and lateral buds, but which also look like elaborate flowers. The accompanying text passages represent them as having 'eight lotus petals spread out' around the base as if the upper part were a flower bud. The meaning 'bud' for *ste'u/the'u* fits completely with the overall symbolism of fecundity and new life applied to these *ste'u* on the same folios as the paintings, which are also said to have ripe fruits and eggs surrounding them (see below). Contextual support for this interpretation of *ste'u* as *the'u* comes in the Old Tibetan document PT 1134 referring to a *gshen* ritual specialist performing death rites whose name is The'u bzhug (l. 61), with the proper name perhaps meaning something like 'stationed (*bzhugs*) [at] the *the'u*'. Since we can trace much otherwise rare terminology in the *sTe'u* and *Sha slungs* texts back to PT 1134 (see chap. 4), including other diminutives like *lhe'u* which also occurs just six lines below the The'u bzhug reference in PT 1134, we should seriously consider some associations here. In a *Klu 'bum* account obviously sharing continuities with Old Tibetan documents, a ritual specialist for death rites named *rgyal gshen* The'u yug is also introduced. This name, whether a variation of Old Tibetan The'u bzhug or not, is also most telling since the syllable *yug* means 'mourning' (mostly as *yug[s] sa*) cognate with *yags*, and is most likely linguistically related to *yags*. A second proposal could be that the local orthography *ste'u* indicates a word complex involving *gte/gte pa/gte ma* and *gta'/gta' ma* (with *gte'u* attested) 'a pawn, a pledge, bail', as well as *gto* 'apotropaic rite' (*gto bcos*) and sometimes 'ransom',⁹⁷ in other words something that has to be given – or the process of giving it – in exchange for what is required or wished for. In this case, it would be offerings made for new lives following a death. Finally, there may be a deeper highland Tibeto-Burman ethnolinguistic dimension to *ste'u* in relation to Himalayan shamanic rites of 'welcoming' and fetching the 'mobile

96 BGT 1161, *thi'u - gsar du kha 'bus pa'i me tog gi thi'u /*, and entry 1186: *the'u - 2. me tog kha ma 'bus pa /*.

97 See Jäschke 1881: 206, 208, and on *gto* Stein 1972: 235, 244 and Karmay 1998: 246. For this suggestion, I thank Joanna Bialek, *pers. comm.* email of 18.6.2016.

vitality principle' or 'soul' in a ritual journey and bringing it to a desired destination.⁹⁸ This possibility, as we will see below, is particularly pertinent since the *ste'u* rite involves a vertical itinerary of stations between the place of ritual and the top of the cosmos. Until more data become available, open-minded consideration of various possible derivations for *ste'u* will be required.

The term *sbre'u* in the *Ste'u* text appears to be a diminutive form of *sbra* or *[']brang*, meaning any covered structure, but a canopy, awning or small tent- or hut-like arrangement in this case, and the synonyms *gur* and *khabs* do occur in the text with *sbre'u*. The term is closely related to the verb *'bre ba* meaning 'to draw over', 'to spread', 'to stretch' referring to cloth coverings and wrappings, including awnings and canopies.⁹⁹

The *Ste'u* text is comprised of a series of four folio sequences (Fig. 2)¹⁰⁰ defining four related subjects:

- a. First folios give brief descriptions of tree-like ritual structures termed *ste'u* said to support the appearance of *sman* and *btsun*.
 - b. Second folios give descriptions of beings who are identified as protectors of *lhe'u* and *sman*.
 - c. Third folios feature trios of male figures and describe a second *ste'u* structure based upon erected awnings or coverings which are said to offer protection and refuge for *lhe'u* offspring who are 'young ones' (*ne'u zhon*).
 - d. Fourth folios offer a summary of precedents and goals, beginning with reference to ancestral figures, then super-condensed antecedent references to deceased, burials and mourning, and finally state benefits and invoke the goal of a present rite.
- a. Tree-like *ste'u*

The *ste'u* of first folios in the series, of which three examples survive, are presented in the same manner as *sha slungs* (see below), with the *ste'u* being numbered, some named, and some described with attributes. These *ste'u* appear to be erect, man-made and decorated

98 For example, the Gurung/Tamu term denoting shamanic rites involving a journey to the spirit world is *tē* (or *tēh*), related to the verb *tēwa* meaning 'to welcome' and 'going to meet'; see Strickland 1982: 234 and references cited therein.

99 See Jäschke 1881: 381 *bre ba*, 402 *'bre ba*, cf. Snellgrove 1967: 284, 304 on *bre* for both cloth canopies and the covering over the dome of a shrine in the G.yung drung Bon religion.

100 See the upper half of the useful overview of surviving folios in Klimburg-Salter, Lodja and Ramble 2013: 39.

tree-like or perhaps flower-like structures. Both text passages and illustrations clearly corroborate this type of *ste'u*, for example on folio Ca-1v (Fig. 3),

The fifth *ste'u* is given a name: *ste'u* which blazes precious conch light. At its apex, there blazes conch light. In between, small conch birds fly. At its base, eight lotus petals spread out. It supports the appearance of *sman* and *btsun*.¹⁰¹



Fig. 3. Folio from the *Ste'u* text (Ca-1v) depicting a tree-like *ste'u* with small birds.



Fig. 4. Folio from the *Ste'u* text (Na-1v) depicting a tree-like *ste'u* with small birds and wild animals.

And for the fragmentary text on folio Na-1v (Fig. 4),

The twelfth is the *ste'u* which blazes copper light. At its apex, small birds of the *sman* soar. At its middle, lacquered leather¹⁰² eggs [...].¹⁰³

Thus, the function of this *ste'u* is made explicit in that it ‘supports the appearance of *sman* and *btsun*’ beings. The small birds of the *sman*, and what appears to be a male and female pair of *nyig* or Tibetan gazelle surrounding these *ste'u* are clearly mentioned and depicted in

101 Facs. Ca-1v: *ste'u lnga mtshan gsol ba' / rin chen dung 'od 'bar ba'i ste'u / rtse la dung 'od 'bar / skabs [read: sked] na dung bye'u 'phur / rtsa na phad ma' 'dab bgyad bdal / sman btsun byon ba rten //*.

102 On Old Tibetan *bse'* as a material; see the extensive discussion in Bialek 2015: 115-122.

103 Facs. Na-1v: *bcu gnyis zangs 'od 'bar ba'i ste'u / rtse la sman bye'u lding / sked la bse' sgong [...remaining text illegible]*.

the *Sha slungs* text (see below) as markers of the presence of the *smān* and *btsun*. And this supports the idea that the birds and wildlife these beings are said to own, accompany or lead them from the natural wilderness to a ritual site at which *ste'u* have been set up. On another of these folios (Cha-1v), it states that both eggs and ripe fruits occur on or at this tree-like *ste'u* type. Thus, the symbolism is of fecundity and new life.

b. Small *lha* protector lords

Second folios in the series, of which five examples survive, depict beings armed with different weapons, mounted upon various wild animals and birds (Fig.5), and who are designated as *lhe'u mgon rje*, 'small *lha* protector lords'. The text passages mainly describe their attributes. More importantly, each *lhe'u mgon rje* is invoked to either 'appear as the small *lha* and *smān* protector!' or to 'act as the small *lha* and *smān* protector!',¹⁰⁴ while the ritual practitioner is instructed to make offerings to them accordingly.

c. Tree and trio of male figures *ste'u*

Third folios in the series have survived the best, with seven examples available in the manuscript. These *ste'u* are numbered, with four, six, seven, eight, nine, ten and thirteen, which is the final one in the series, available to us. Each is identified in their text panels with natural phenomena, the sun and moon (four), 'southern' clouds (six), atmosphere (seven), the earth (eight), the cosmic mountain (nine), glacier or snow mountain (ten) and finally the juniper tree (thirteen). Yet, the illustrations on all painted panels each depict a trio of human-like, male figures who display in unison a certain bodily movement or gesture, and these change from folio to folio. If the text actually correlates with the painted images, the



Fig. 5. Folio from the *Ste'u* text (Ca-2v) depicting a *lhe'u mgon rje* mounted upon a falcon.

¹⁰⁴ Facs. Na-1v: *bcu gnyis zangs 'od 'bar ba'i ste'u / rtse la smān bye'u lding / sked la bse' sgong [...remaining text illegible].*

identities of these trios of male figures are all ‘sons’ or ‘offspring’ (*bu, sras*) of *phya, sman, lha, klu* and *yul sa*¹⁰⁵ beings, as well as those of natural elements like earth, stone and green plants, or the Spring, Summer and Autumn seasons of the year.

This group of *ste ’u* have diverse descriptions. One instance is actually described as a ‘tree’. Other instances are simple ‘tent’-like structures comprised of some form of erected awning or covering (*gur, khabs, sbre ’u*) above, and a carpet, mat or cushion (*gdan*) below. As with other terminology in both *Ste ’u* and *Sha slungs* texts, mention of use of the same range of items also occurs in death rites recorded in Old Tibetan manuscripts, albeit with somewhat different meanings or in contexts we cannot be sure of are the same.¹⁰⁶ A third instance on several folios are descriptions of sublime or ‘virtual’ awnings and carpets comprised of meteorological phenomena and precipitation, including clouds, mist, rain and snow.¹⁰⁷ This certainly does not occur in any Old Tibetan accounts of death rites. Folios Pa-3v and Pa-4v explicitly mention the purpose of these ‘trios of male figures’ *ste ’u* type:

Thirteen, the everlasting turquoise juniper *ste ’u*. Mgon bu Lha sras, Klu bu Rin cen and Sdings bu G.yu le, the three. The *ste ’u* of completed burial and mourning rites. A cloth awning covers it above. A multi-coloured¹⁰⁸ foundation carpets it beneath. [...*illegible text*...] A blooming flower of gold. Its bark is vast and spreading. It exists as the protection and refuge of small *lha* offspring (*lhe ’u sras*) who are young ones.¹⁰⁹

While a tree like the juniper on folio Pa-3v is not mentioned for the other *ste ’u* of this

105 Note that *yul sa* is ambivalent. In Old Tibetan documents, it appears to mean both a type of being or deity often cited together with *sman* (e.g. PT 1051: l.30, IOL Tib J 0738: 3v23), and a term for a place or area (e.g. PT 1047: l.37, l.246, IOL Tib J 733: i.1).

106 For a few examples among a whole range, see PT 1042: 42 ‘tent of the cadaver and tent of the mental principle’ (*ring gi gur dang / thugs kyi gur*), and l.118 ‘spread a striped/multi-coloured felt covering on top of the grave’ (*se ’i gong du dbyam phying khra bo bting*), in PT 1134: 56 ‘as for the mental principle tent at/for the *’brang*, pitch a white one. As for the tailored [or: ‘rump/seat’ *byang > byang khog*] cushion/carpet, place the cushion/carpet’ (*’brang du thugs sbra / ni / dkar mo pub rtan byang rtan khod*), in PT 1136: 25 ‘erect a *’brang* for performing death rites’ (*shid bgyir ’brang gzugsu*, cf. l.18) which assumes *sbre ’u* may be related to *’brang*, and l.28 ‘spread a covering [on a psychopomp horse]’ (*khabs su bkab*), and so on.

107 For examples, see facs. Cha-3v and Ja-3v.

108 I read *mching* as *mching bu*, cf. BGT 846, *mdog sna tshogs ldan zhing*.

109 Facs. Pa-3v and 114, Pa-4v, l.1-2 (above painted panel): *bcu dsum* [read: *gsum*] *d.yung* [read: *g.yung*] *drung g.yu shug ste ’u / mgon bu lha sras dang / klu bu rin cen dang / sdings bu g.yu le gsum / bdur yags grub pa ’i ste ’u / dar bre ’u bla ’I khabs / mching gram* [read: *’gram*] *’og kyi gdan / [one line of text with ca. ten syllables illegible here] [Pa-4v] gser yi me thog bkra / shun pa zab dang dar ro / lhe ’u sras ne ’u zhon yi mgon dang skyabsu* [read: *skyabs su*] *yod //*.



Fig. 6. Folios from the *Ste'u* text depicting the everlasting turquoise juniper *ste'u* (Pa-3v, left frame) with continuous inscription on the top of the following folio (Pa-4v, right frame).

group, on all seven surviving folios we find an erect tree clearly depicted, apparently set into a base as if it were a ritual construction, at the left-hand side of each illustration (Fig. 6, left frame). It is quite possible that what is being depicted here are trees used during any rite performance which represented each of these thirteen *ste'u*. First folio series *ste'u* are also represented by tree-like structures or devices. Moreover, these *ste'u* on third folios are invariably described as being ‘of completed burial and mourning rites’¹¹⁰ clearly defining them as a post-mortem procedure following the main death rites, and employed for ‘protection and refuge of small *lha* offspring who are young ones’. The trios of male figures depicted and named upon every folio as ‘sons’ or ‘offspring’ of the deities of the natural world and its phenomenal manifestation are those charged with protecting new offspring who come into the world, most likely at the locations of each example of this *ste'u* type.

110 *Bdur yags grub pa*, cf. facs. Cha-3v, l.3-4, Ja-3v, l.5, Nga-3v, l.3, Nya-3v, l.3, Ta-3v, l.2-3.

Crucially, this series of locations together form a descending itinerary (Fig.16), and I will return to this topic in the respective summaries for the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts below.

d. 'Small awning' *sbre'u*

Fourth and final folios in the series, of which five examples have survived, represent a summary and culmination of each series. They all describe and depict ritual structures termed *sbre'u* or 'small awnings' which are basically the same as those described more simply upon third folios. These consist of components including cloth coverings and awnings, lattice-work frames – some described as wooden – beneath which the cloth covering is set up (Fig. 7, 8), and some with mats inside or under them, yet all of precious or exotic materials because they are being described here as mythical precedents. The text schema on each fourth folio begins with brief reference to possible ancestral beings, a mythical antecedent of burial of a deceased with precedent for a *sbre'u* ritual structure, and finally an invocation for present ritual performers to directly address the main goal of the rite. The text passages on fourth folios are the most explicit concerning the overall purpose of the rite. Folio Nga-4v (cf. Fig. 7) reads,



Fig. 7. Folio Nga-4v from the *Ste'u* text depicting a 'small awning' *sbre'u*.



Fig. 8. Folio Cha-4v from the *Ste'u* text depicting a 'small awning' *sbre'u*.

In the Bar land Gling drug, the *yul sa* Khri Do re and Khri lcam Gling mo skar. At the time the deceased was buried, a lattice-work which was blue was erected for a white conch small awning.

Today, [you] give young ones, male and female,¹¹¹ for the sake of a positive precedent.¹¹²

Folio Cha-4v reads (cf. Fig. 8),

Lha bu 'Brang kar and Lha sman 'Phrul mo. At the time the deceased was buried, a lattice-work which was turquoise was erected for a white conch small awning. By way of burial and mourning rites for the deceased, death is concealed. This benefits the living. [You] give young ones, male and female, for the sake of a positive precedent.¹¹³

Folio Pa-4v (see Fig. 6, right frame) contains an additional reference to primordial precedents,

Rgya sras Khru na and Rgya lcam Rgas mo btsun. When the deceased was buried, a lattice-work of Rgya tree wood was erected for a Rgya cloth endowed with motifs. In antiquity, the *yul sa* [beings] completed burial and mourning rites as *lha*. Today, [you give]¹¹⁴ young ones, male and female, and for the deceased there are burial and mourning rites.¹¹⁵

3.2.1 Summary

The *Ste'u* text describes a post-mortem rite whose goal is obtaining new life. The rite was performed after burial and mourning rites for a deceased person had been completed. The various ritual devices or structures and beings cited in the text passages of each fourfold

111 I follow Coblin 1991: 320 n.134 who assigned *pho smos* to both genders, while Richardson 1998: 154, 164 n.30 left it unassigned; cf. also *bu pho smos* in PT 1283: 247, and *'di rnams pho smos* in PT 1071: r251-r252, r266.

112 Facs. Nga-4v: *bar yul gling drug du / yul sa khri do re dang / khri lcam gling mo skar / grongs pa bdur dus su / dung bre'u dkar po la mthing yi dra tshugs can les* [read: las] *bzhingso* [read: bzhengs so] // *de ring ne'u zhon pho smos la dpe'bzangs don du 'bul lo* //.

113 Facs. Cha-4v: *lha bu 'brang kar dang / lha sman 'phrul mo dag / grongs pa bdur dus su / dung bre'u dkar mo la / g.yu'i dra tsugs* [read: tshugs] *can les* [read: las] *bzhings* [read: bzhengs] / *grongs pa bdur yags pas / shi bgab* [read: gab] *gson la bzang / ne'u zhon pho smos la dpe'bzangs don du 'bul* //.

114 Cf. the precedents *ne'u zhon pho smos la dpe'bzangs don du 'bul lo* on Nga-4v, l. 4-5 and Cha-4v, l. 5.

115 Facs. Pa-4v: *rgya sras khru na dang / rgya lcam rgas mo btsun / grongs pa bdur dusu* [read: dus su] / *rgya dar ris cen* [read: can] *la / rgya shing lion pa yi dra tshugs can les* [read: las] *bzhings* [read: bzhengs] / *gna'yul sa de rnams kyang bdur yags lha ru grub bo / de ring ne'u zhon pho smos kyang / grongs pa bdur yags so* / [a final line following here is illegible].

folio sequence reveal a series of four stages adding up to an overall process.

The first type of *ste'u* are set up to support the arrival of *sman* and *btsun* beings at the site. What the term *btsun* (< *mtshun*) refers to in this context will be discussed below. The wild animals and birds which the *Sha slungs* text states are owned by these beings, are also in attendance at *ste'u*, most probably as symbolic harbingers of, and guides for, the *sman* and *btsun*. The other symbols associated with these *ste'u* are of new life and fecundity. The new lives that arrive with the *sman* and *btsun* are directly identified as 'small *lha*' and 'small *lha* offspring'. This combination of wildlife, its *sman* owners and 'small *lha*' and 'small *lha* offspring' form a very concrete link to the *Sha slungs* text that I will discuss below. The mobile and armed 'small *lha* protector lords' described and depicted on second folios are the guardians of new lives while they travel together with the *sman* and *btsun* to the ritual site.

On third folios of the *Ste'u* text, the numbered series of 'tent'-like structures indexed to natural phenomena and objects proceed from high and rarefied regions down to and ending at a juniper tree, which is the thirteenth and final numbered *ste'u* of this type. Assuming the text was used in order from the first fourfold folio series through to the last, then the series can only mark stratified locations descending the vertical axis, from celestial abodes down to the terrestrial ritual site. The surviving sequence of numbers, locations and the beings indexed to them successively lists the *phyu* at the sun and moon (*ste'u* four), the *sman* at the southern clouds (six *ste'u*), the seasons Spring, Summer and Autumn in the atmosphere (*ste'u* seven), the soil, rocks and plants upon the earth¹¹⁶ (*ste'u* eight), the *yul sa* kings of the cosmic mountain (*ste'u* nine), the high white snows or glaciers (*ste'u* eleven) and the juniper tree (*ste'u* thirteen). Most importantly, it is said that each of these *ste'u* way stations in different, stratified locations offers refuge and protection to small *lha* offspring. This protection is offered not only by the various 'tent'-like structures created of materials appropriate to each stratified location (e.g. awnings of clouds and carpets of mists), but also by the trios of 'sons' or 'offspring' of the deities and natural phenomena associated with each successive way station. Thus, this set of progressive references taken as a whole running through all third folios reveals a thirteen stage descending journey required for new life to come down from ancestral realms above to reach a ritual site marked by a tree.

¹¹⁶ See facs. Nya-3v, i.1: *ma bu khrun snar*, an expression otherwise unknown to me, but perhaps meaning 'mother and child foremost division'?

The fourth and final folios in each series are more complex, and certainly synoptic in function, with three distinct references always appearing in the same order. First, there are beings with named identities, sometimes with a cognate location. Second, the erection of small awnings after burials, sometimes with the rhetoric that after death is ritually concealed, life benefits. Third, there is an appeal for male and female ‘young ones’ (*ne’u zhon*) who are ‘small *lha* off-spring’ to be given. The question here is, to whom do these three types of references refer? Whether or not the precedent of burials and erecting awnings applies to the initially named beings is unclear, although it seems rather doubtful. For one, there are no direct grammatical indications of this in any of the passages on surviving fourth folios. Moreover, the idea of synchronous, double burials of one male and one female in each instance appears somewhat unintelligible, and is also without precedent in cognate sources. Whatever the case, the first two references do represent antecedents of a kind.

Since male and female offspring given after death is the *Ste’u* rite’s stated purpose, logically these lives and their source must be the precedent being conveyed. The practical, ritual precedent is erecting small awnings after a burial. But who do the two named male and female identities represent? The ultimate source of any human life is an ancestor, while a new life descending from an ancestral realm beyond the human domestic sphere – as is the case in the *Ste’u* rite – will have an identity appropriate to its origins. One or both of these possibilities is what the pairs of named male and female identities in each text passage – and presumably the paired figures on each painting – should represent, viz. ancestors and origin identities of new offspring. Descriptive elements in the named identities indicate this to be so. We find them termed ‘*klu* off-spring young one’ (*klu sras gzhon nu*), ‘*lha* child/son’ (*lha bu*), ‘*Rtsang* offspring’ (*rtsang sras*) and ‘*Rgya* offspring’ (*rgya sras*) for male figures, with ‘sisters’ (*lcam*, a synonym of *spun*), *sman* and *btsun* defining the respective female figures. This is precisely the classificatory language used to describe the offspring and young ones found throughout the *Ste’u* text, but also in the *Sha slungs* text, for which we can mention in advance that on the final folio all the *slungs* are explicitly offered to ‘small *lha* offspring who are brother and sister’ (*lhe’u sras lcam dral*). This same pattern of references exists also for names in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* tales.¹¹⁷

117 For example, *Lha lcam Phye ma lam* (also *Lha lcam Phye leb*) (*Dga’ thang* 39, 141, f.11, l.7, l.11), and *Lha za Dril bu Sil bu sman* (*ibid.* 46, 154, f.24, l.10-11).

The above interpretation is further confirmed when locations sometimes associated with the paired, named beings are considered, at least for those we have approximately contemporary and cognate information available. Take, for example, the place named Kha la Rtsang stod on folio Ja-4v (Fig. 9, lower frame). In Old Tibetan documents, Kha la Rtsang stod or Rtsang stod appears as both quasi-mythical realm and principality with geographical location, it is especially associated with *phywa* beings who seem to be both human and divine.¹¹⁸ The named *lha* in the text must come from the *lha* land Gung thang (also Gung dang), which is explicitly mentioned as being up above the intermediate space of the atmosphere (see below), and cited in the *Sha slungs* text as the *lha* abode. The otherwise unknown Bar land Gling drug most likely refers to the intermediate space (*bar*) of the atmosphere. The initial passage on folio Ja-3v (Fig. 9, upper frame) reads,

Ste'u seven, the *ste'u* of the floating intermediate space (*bar snang*). Regarding what is upwards, the *lha* land is seen. Regarding what is downwards, the earth is seen. Regarding what is in between, the human land is seen. On account of that, it is the *ste'u* of floating [intermediate space].¹¹⁹

Thus, these are all fitting ancestral locations of



Fig. 9. Folio Ja-3v (upper frame) from the *Ste'u* text depicting a trio of 'son' protectors with a tree for the '*ste'u* of the floating intermediate space', and folio Ja-4v (lower frame) depicting Rtsang 'off-spring' Snying khar and Rtsang 'sister' Si le ma.

118 See Hill 2013: 39 citing PT 1060: l.74, IOL Tib J 0734, folio 7, ll. 292, 294, 298, and PT 1286, recto, ll. 186.

119 Facs. Ja-3v, l.1-3: *ste'u bdun bar snang 'phyo ba'i ste'u / yar bltas lha yul snang / mar bltas dog mo snang / bar bltas myi yul snang / de phyir 'phyo ba i [read: ba'i] ste'u* /.

the type we might expect to feature in antecedent references occurring on fourth folios of the fourfold *Ste'u* text series. The *Rnel dri 'dul ba* text also directly confirms that *lha* are like parents who give birth to humans and send their new-born children down to earth. In the [Yar] lungs sogs ka tale, the crisis of a *rnal dri* defilement is described for the living as follows,

The *lha* were driven off, driven into the sky.

The wild geese vanished, vanished into the lake.

Human beings were not begotten by the *lha*.¹²⁰

The verb *btsas* here literally means ‘give birth to’, while nominal *btsas pa* is used for ‘new-born children’. This is one of various explicit correlations between the cosmological framing in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* and the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts. This same idea of human origins from *lha* persisted in folk cosmology for some time after the 11th-12th century era of these old texts. In a 14th century source from southern Central Tibet, the progenitor *lha* 'O de Gung rgyal, who features prominently in the *Sha slungs* text, is explicitly cast as the *lha* ancestor of human beings.¹²¹ The Srid pa'i lha cult in my research region is based upon exactly this idea as well (see below).

3.3 The *Sha slungs* text and rite

Like the *Ste'u* text, the *Sha slungs* text is also arranged into a number of series – apparently originally thirteen – of short, four folio sequences (Fig. 2)¹²² defining four related subjects:

- a. Two of the surviving trio of first folios – the third represents an exception¹²³ – have the same text schema with three distinct references as we find on fourth folios on the *Ste'u* text. Initially, pairs of *lha* beings from *lha* abodes are simply named. Second, going to the *sman* beings dwelling in terrestrial mountains and lakes together with *yul sa* beings is described. The strongholds (*mkhar*) and fortresses (*rdzong*) are cited as dwellings of ‘small *lha*’ (*lhe'u*), of ‘young ones (*ne'u zhon*) who are small *lha*’, and

120 *Dga' thang* 49, 160-161, ff.30, l.8-31, l.1, *lha 'phangs gnam du 'phangs / ngang yal mtsho ru yal / lha yIs myI ma btsas /*.

121 See *Rlangs* 5, where the passage reads: *srid pa lha rabs mched bzhi zhes kyang bya / mgo gsum tsha [? read: mgon tshun phy] zhes kyang bya / de nas mi rgyud du grol ba ni / sras 'o de gung rgyal /*.

122 See the lower half of the useful overview of surviving folios in Klimburg-Salter, Lodja and Ramble 2013: 39.

123 The exception is facs. Na-1r, with only a very fragmentary text, the first words of which read '*Od de gung rgyal yi thugs kyi sprul pa les / sman rdzong [...]*, and which does not allow us to order the content together with the two other surviving first folios.

of *smān*. Finally, ritual instructions for protection and care of them by other beings are cited.

b. Second folios all depict groups of birds, including ‘small birds’ indexed to different environments, which are the property of *smān* and ‘small *lha*’, and larger birds that protect and shepherd them.

c. Third folios all cite *sha slungs* and depict different wild herbivores in male, female and juvenile trios, with mention of their qualities or functions in relation to *smān*, *btsun* and ‘small *lha*’.

d. Fourth folios describe both named *lha* and *myi* beings related to various categories (*yul sa*, *sgra bla*, *sa bdag*) who protect and care for *smān*, ‘small *lha*’ and their property of wild herbivores which live with them.

It is immediately obvious from this overview that ‘small *lha*’ (*lhe’u*), *smān* and more rarely mentioned *btsun*, all of whom are found in the natural environment together with wildlife and birds, and who are the positive focus of a complex of other types of beings, are the principal object of the *Sha slungs* rite. Before examining examples of each folio type in the fourfold sequence, the meaning of the rare word *slungs* and its unique forms *sha slungs*, *slungs ma* and *sha mkhar slungs ma* within the text must be considered, since its interpretation is crucial for understanding the rite.

3.3.1 Meanings of *slungs* and *sha slungs*

Slungs is attested in Old Tibetan documents, primarily in relation to administration and law and with only two brief references in relation to descriptions of rites. In the first context, it refers to a ‘way station’, perhaps ‘post station’, a halting or dismounting place or fixed spot along a road or route, while in some instances it might be glossed as ‘outpost’. F.W. Thomas identified ‘government *slungs*’ (*mngan slungs*), ‘Chinese *slungs*’ (*rgya slungs*), ‘nomad *slungs*’ (*’brog slungs*) and ‘soldier *slungs*’ (*so slungs*), the latter defined as “messengers responsible for transporting provisions to hill-stations,” and he also suggested “military police.”¹²⁴ In different Old Tibetan documents *slungs* are associated with ‘messengers’ (*po nya* > *pho nya*), ‘horses’ (*rta*), ‘horse keepers/grooms’ (*rta rdzi*), and ‘horse owners’ (*rta bdag*).¹²⁵ An imperial administrative innovation apparently included regularising distances

¹²⁴ Thomas 1951: 51-52, 64, 151, 236, 276-277, 296-297, 376, 423, 446.

¹²⁵ PT 1096: 2r-r5, r16-r19, PT 1290: r10.

between *slungs* ‘way stations’.¹²⁶ In some Old Tibetan documents the word occurs in *slungs tshugs* and together with *tshugs* in context, and in *slungs sa*,¹²⁷ both of which have informed analogous later usages in Classical Tibetan, such as *tshugs sa* ‘caravansary’, ‘way station’ and *gru tshugs sa* ‘ferry boat station’, while *slungs* itself fell out of use.

The common aspects indicated for Old Tibetan *slungs* are fixed and well-defined halting spots, location along a regular route as opposed to any random site, and places occupied by and significant for both persons and animals, especially horses and those who own, ride and care for them. When fully interrogated, 11th-12th century *sha slungs* and its variants are found to preserve most of this older semantic scope.

Beyond administrative and legal contexts, Old Tibetan *slungs* is only known from two references to rite descriptions occurring in antecedent narratives, and both are variants of the same text. *Slungs* occurs in mythical accounts in which the body of a horse is being discussed. The horse is a psychopomp animal termed *do ma snyings dags*, and might also have been sacrificed. In PT 1134, we read of the psychopomp horse, ‘as for the mane, it was bound with silk. As for the tail, it was given as/appointed for a *slungs*’.¹²⁸ A myth narrative in PT 1136 repeats the same formulation, ‘As for the tail, it was given as a *slungs*’.¹²⁹ If the horse was sacrificed for the rite, then perhaps the tail was removed and given for use as a flag or standard to mark an actual *slungs* site, for instance, so that such a way station could be seen by travellers from a distance? Or perhaps the ritual arena in which the horse is treated in these texts could have been considered a *slungs*, one subsequently marked by the horse’s tail? Such horse tail standards mounted atop poles were widely used in ancient Central Asia and regions of Mongol rule and influence. They were mentioned in the *Marco Polo*, and Henry Yule’s notes to his translation report “*Túk* or *Túgk*, is the horse-tail or yak-tail standard which among so many Asiatic nations has marked the supreme military command.”¹³⁰ An interesting cultural link between *slungs*, horses (*rta*) and standards or flags was carried over into the word *lung rta* (and *klung rta*), a term for a ritual flag depicting a horse, by replacing the obsolete syllable *slungs*.¹³¹

126 See the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* in Dotson 2013: 297, 388.

127 PT 1096: r2-r4, PT 1290: r12.

128 PT 1134: 123: *pum puM ni dar gis / bchings / rnga ma ni slungs su bchug* [read: *bcug*].

129 PT 1136: 28-29, *mjug mani* [read: *ma ni*] *slungsu* [read: *slungs su*] *stsald*.

130 Yule 2010 [1871]: chapt. LIV, 231, n.2.

131 See Bialek 2015a: 33 n.34, Dotson 2011: 92 n.27, Uray 1984: 358–359, n.56.

In the *Sha slungs* text, we find *slungs*, *slungs ma* and more fully *sha mkhar slungs ma* forms. This latter ‘*sha* stronghold *slungs ma*’ appears to be the full form of *sha slungs* as a technical term, since Tibetan systems of abbreviation usually omit every second element in bisyllabic pairs in order to generate a condensed term (*bsdus yig*). This is confirmed by various usages in the text. Certain folios mention a numerical series of *sha slungs* based ideally upon a primordial pattern. After the last *sha slungs* in the text has been described, a summarising etiological reference states, ‘The thirteen *sha slungs* also initially came into being like that.’¹³² This strongly implies the text is discussing *sha slungs* as being something in the here and now in relation to primordial models. Since *sha slungs* are only mentioned on seven folios, we assume that the other six *sha slungs* of the ideal thirteen must be described upon the missing folios. *Sha slungs* are indexed to wild animals and birds, and the accompanying illustrations attest these correlations. There is a ‘*sha slungs* of the precious’ (*rin chen yi sha slungs*) for species of deer, wild ass and wild goats, a ‘small bird *slungs*’ (*bye’u slungs*) and a ‘final *sha slungs*’ (*sha slungs mtha’ ma*) assigned to ground dwelling marmot and badger. It is likely that the ‘*sha slungs* of the precious’ type is a general name encompassing them all. When the series are finished with ‘the final *sha slungs*’, it is stated that ‘The *sha slungs* of the precious are completed’.¹³³ One passage related to the primordial appearance or construction of *sha slungs* states, ‘As for the *sha mkhar slungs ma*, being the *sa bdag* queen, Lha mo brten ma adorned it [with] five precious things.’¹³⁴ The *sa bdag* queen just cited is identified as a *sgra bla* being. There is also another set of ‘three *sha mkhar men*’ (*sha mkhar myi gsum*) who are *sgra bla* and who are directly associated with the *sha mkhar [slungs ma]*.

Clearly there is significant semantic overlap between *sha slungs* and Old Tibetan administrative *slungs* ‘way stations’. There are a fixed series of *sha slungs*. They are designated as different types depending upon the beings associated with them. They are associated with animals and, as we will see below, these animals are the explicit property of owners, and are further looked after by designated caregivers. This is exactly parallel to the horses of the *slungs* ‘way stations’ whose owners and carers are cited in Old Tibetan

132 Facs. Pa-3r l.6-Pa-4r, l.1: *sha slungs bcu gsum yang / dang po de ltar bsrid do /*.

133 Facs. Pa-4r, l.3 (above illustration): *rin chen yi sha slungs rdzogs s.ho //*.

134 Facs. Pa-4r, l.1-2 (below illustration): *sha mkhar slungs ma ni / sa bdag rgyal mo ste / lha mo brten ma des / rin cen [read: chen] sna lnga brgyan/*.

documents. Since *sha slungs* are associated with wild animals, they also resemble the administrative *slungs* ‘way stations’ along a travel route which were necessarily spaced far off from places of intensive human use.

One significant difference between Old Tibetan *slungs* references and *sha [mkhar] slungs [ma]* is the latter term(s) being related to wild animals rather than domestic horses or horses used during rites. The *sha* element marks this distinction. *Sha* appears in the text with *slungs* as a generic term encompassing all wild animals invoked in the rite. Thus, *sha* qualifies the *slungs* which are related to all these animal species regardless, including various deer, wild ass, wild goats, marmot and badger, which are very different types of animals with highly diverse ecologies that do not overlap. Wild avifauna have their own term, ‘small bird *slungs*’ (*bye’u slungs*), and are not included under *sha slungs*. At the same time, the text also employs the generic category term *ri d[w]ags* to refer to all larger wild animals which are herbivores, while the specific usage *sha* to refer to ‘deer’ (*sh[w]a ba*) as a sub-set of *ri d[w]ags* only occurs once.¹³⁵ Thus, in this text *sha* in *sha slungs* and its compounds is to be understood generally as ‘wildlife’ exclusive of avifauna.

The *mkhar* element in *sha mkhar slungs ma* means ‘stronghold’, and is a well-attested term in Old Tibetan for fortified residence places of ruling elites. In Tibetan folk songs, poetic rural depictions of nature, and the culture of hunting we find *mkhar* commonly applied to environments occupied by wild animals of the *ri dwags* category, that is, game species. Moreover, in many such contexts *sha* and *mkhar* are explicitly related to *dgra lha* and *sgra bla* beings as we find in the *Sha slungs* text, since in Tibetan Plateau hunting cultures those beings are appealed to by hunters for success in obtaining game animals.¹³⁶ For example, a chanted appeal to *dgra lha* for hunting success I recorded in use among Changthang hunters in Gerze Dzong, far north-western Tibetan Plateau, and one which identifies game with the productive force *g.yang*, includes the lines, ‘In the midst of the broad stronghold (*mkhar*) of the meadows, is the multiplying *g.yang* of deer and wild ass

135 Facs. Cha-4r, l.3, while elsewhere we only find *sha yur po* with *yu mo* and *she’u cung* to refer to a specific type of deer on facs. Nya-3r, l.1-2.

136 See Huber 2012: 205-206, 210-211.

females and their offspring. Today, fetch that *g.yang* here.’¹³⁷ Thus, the association cited above between *sha mkhar*, the *sa bdag* queen and ‘three *sha mkhar* men’ who are all *sgra bla* is a wide-spread cultural pattern. Given that the older application of *mkhar* as ‘stronghold’ is something protective and difficult to access, *mkhar* is perhaps best translated as ‘refuge’ in *sha mkhar slungs ma* in relation to the known ecology of wild herbivores who can be sought after as game.

The Tibetan language has a very rich vocabulary for designating areas, sites and abodes of all types. From among these extensive possibilities, whoever composed the *Sha slungs* text was very precise in applying a particular Old Tibetan technical term of administration to designate whatever a *sha slungs* was meant to be. Given that use of *slungs* in the *Sha slungs* text is so cognate with Old Tibetan usages, we should precisely understand and translate *sha slungs* as ‘wildlife way station’, *sha mkhar slungs ma* as ‘wildlife refuge way station’, and *bye’u slungs* as ‘small bird way station’. Analysis of the contents of the *Sha slungs* text supports these meanings.

Aside from what has been cited above, the *sha slungs* as ‘wildlife way stations’ are given no further locations or attributes within the text. In other passages, only some of which mention *sha slungs*, there are references to wild herbivores abiding in mountain and lake regions, to birds found in both forest and rock areas, and one can also deduce that the *sha slungs* of marmot and badger were on, and partly in, the earth due to their ecology. Thus, all *sha slungs* are located in wilderness areas of the natural world, within the terrestrial realm of the cosmos. Concerning the actions of the wild animal denizens of *sha slungs* in relation to these locations, the text most commonly states that they ‘emerge/come out’ ([’] *byung*) from (*nas/nes*) *sha slungs*, nothing more. Although there are parallel *bye’u slungs* or ‘small bird way stations’ mentioned, birds in the text ‘hatch out’ (*rdol*) of ‘precious eggs’ (*rin cen sgong [nga]*), with one case of a ‘lacquered leather egg’ (*bse’ sgong*) and one of an ‘iron egg’ (*lcags sgong*), in the rocks, the forest, the realm of the earth, at or within the ‘life and death boundary’ (*gson gshin ’tshams*) and finally in the ‘four directions’ (*phyogs bzhi*). While the ‘life and death boundary’ is obscure, it might just allude to the ‘world’ within

137 *Spang mkhar yangs pa’i dkyil shed na // sha rkyang ma bu’i ’phel g.yang de // de ring ’di ru g.yang du len*; f.51a, 1.5-6 of *Gsang ba’i bdag pos gnang ba’i dgra lha dpang[s] bstod ces bya ba bzugs so* // (block print in 26 folios, paginated 39b-53a within a larger collection, and photographed at Sengkhon, Gertze County, Tibet Autonomous Region, August 2002).



Fig. 10. Folio Ca-1r from the *Sha slungs* text, with continuous inscription on Ca-2r (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11. Folio Ca-2r from the *Sha slungs* text with final lines of inscription for Ca-1r at top.

which everything takes birth and dies, and the other locations all describe the natural world. A third reference parallel to both *sha slungs* and these eggs and their locations which are apparently *bye'u slungs*, but one cited only twice and which is not directly related to wild animals and birds, are agate boulders (*mchong yi pha bong*) from which beings identified as 'sha mkhar men' (*sha mkhar myi*) who are *sgra bla* 'come into being' (*bsrid*).

An account of each folio type in the fourfold series now follows.

a. Going to the *sman*

First folios are the most instructive in the fourfold series of the *Sha slungs* text, although only two survive with intact text passages. The text schema in these passages is the same as found on fourth folios in the *Ste'u* text. They begin by simply naming a *lha* couple from places that are not on the earth. Then follows the practical precedent of going to the *sman* beings who live in a protected zone of mountains and lakes. Finally, there is the invocation of protective agency addressed to some deity by an actual user of the text during present performance of the rite. The text passage across folios Ca-1r and Ca-2r states:



Fig. 12. Folio Cha-1r from the *Sha slungs* text (text passage continued on folio Cha-2r above painting, Fig. 13).

Atop the land Sa le ljon, the stronghold of Smon lam rock [and] the whirling, white Dung lake. In between lake and rock, Lha sras Lha bo che [and] Lha za Gang cig ma. At the time of going to the *sman*, as for the small *lha* stronghold [and] the *sman* fortress, the *dmag dpon* was lord of *sgra bla*, the *sman* fortress was the fortress of *sgra bla*. In his hand, a sharp weapon [missing text]. Suppress the *gzed*, *btsan* and *g.yam dri* [or: *g.yam* and *dri*]. Young ones (*ne'u zhon*),¹³⁸ male and female, are to be brought together with the fortress of *sgra bla*.¹³⁹

Folio Cha-1r (Fig. 12) states:

138 The initial syllables of this line are unreadable, and I reconstruct *ne'u zhon* here from an identical, recurring phrasing on fourth folios in the *Ste'u* text, see facs. Pa-4v, l.5 *ne'u zhon pho smos kyang*, facs. Nga-4v, l.4-5 and Cha-4v, l.5 *ne'u zhon pho smos la*.

139 Facs. Ca-1r.l.1-Ca-2r, l.2: *yul sa le ljon stingsu* [read: *steng su*] / *smon lam brag kyi mkhar* / *dung mtsho dkar mo 'khyil* / *mtsho dang brag bar du* / *lha sras lha bo che* / *lha za gang cig ma sman du gshags pi* [read: *gshegs pa'i*] *tshe'* / *lhe'u mkhar sman rdzong ni* / *dmag dpon sgra bli* [read: *bla'i*] *rje* / *sman rdzong sgra bli* [read: *bla'i*] *rdzong* / *phyag na dbal mtsho* [= *mtshon* + missing verb here /] [Ca-2r] *gzed btsan g.yam dri 'dul* / [add: *ne'u zhon*] *pho smos kyang sgra bli* [read: *bla'i*] *rdzong dang sprad* //.

In the *lha* land Gung dang, the two, Lha sras Skyes cig and Mtsho sman Rgyal mo. At the time of going to the *sman*, the two, Gangs ri dkar po and Lha mtsho dkar mo, [were] the fortresses of the *yul sa* beings and *sman*: on Gangs ri dkar po, Sa lha Mgon skyabs dwelt; in Lha mtsho dkar mo, Sa sman 'Jam le abided. [They] were good protectors. Young ones (*ne'u zhon*), who were small *lha* (*lhe'u*) [and] *sman*, and living creatures, who were wild herbivores, resided in the stronghold and fortress of Kha ba 'od mkhar and Lha mtsho dkar mo. This Sa sman 'Jam le is to be cherishing to the *sman*.¹⁴⁰

The antecedent in both examples here is of descent of 'young ones' who are 'small *lha*' from an ancestral *lha* realm above the earth. The precedent concerns safe dwelling conditions for these new beings upon the earth (*sa*) in specific wild places among certain types of protective and useful co-residents. The final invocations or requests are to ensure young ones reach the appropriate protective abodes, and to designate who will care kindly for them.

The pairs of male and female identities beginning each text passage must either be *lha* ancestor names or origin identities of those who depart their abodes to go to the *sman* in the terrestrial wilderness as 'young ones' who are 'small *lha*'. They are named appropriately in the same manner as on fourth folios of the *Ste'u* text. In one pair, the male is designated as the '*lha* offspring' (*lha sras*) Lha bo che. The male's name in the second pair, Lha sras Skyes cig, can literally mean either '*Lha* offspring a human person' or '*Lha* offspring a gift', signifying the presentation of a human life from the ancestral *lha*. As for the abodes of these ancestors or their offspring, Gung dang (or: Gung thang) is well-known as the ancestral *lha* land above, but the land Sa le ljon is obscure. In fact, it also designates an ancestral *lha* abode high up the vertical cosmic axis, and we learn this from a slightly later manuscript from the same 'neighbourhood' in southernmost Tibet. In the *Bshad mdzod yid bzhin nor bu* redaction of the *Grags pa bon lugs* narrative composed during the 1400s in Gru shul, immediately adjacent to both Gtam shul and Lho brag, we find Dga' Sa le is the name of the

140 Facs. Cha-1r, l.1-5 and Cha-2r, l.1-4 (above painted panel): *lha yul gung dang du lha sras skyes cig dang mtsho sman rgyal mo nyis / sman du gshags pa'i tshe / gangs ri dkar po dang / lha mtsho dkar mo nyis / sman dang yul sa'i rdzong gangs ri dkar po la / sa bla [read: lha] mgon skyabs bzhugs / lha mtsho dkar mo la / sa sman 'jam le gnas [Cha-2r] [first two syllables missing/illegible here] sku srungs lags / ne'u zhon lhe'u sman [illegible, add: dang?] chags ri dags rnams / kha ba 'od mkhar dang lha mtsho dkar mo yis mkhar dang rdzong la bzhags / sa sman 'jam le 'di sman la 'o re byams //*.

fifteenth level of the sky from which *lha* come.¹⁴¹

The content of the precedent sections and the final instruction sections in these first folios are somewhat synoptic and prefigure what is described in greater detail upon the subsequent three folios in each fourfold series. That is, they present the range of protective locations that are ‘way stations’ (*slungs*), the denizens of these places in the form of birds, wild herbivorous animals and different non-human beings, and mechanisms that together ensure safe and caring conditions for the ‘small *lha*’ who are new ‘young ones’ sent down to earth.

b. Small bird way stations

Second folios present a series of locations summarised as ‘small bird way stations’ (*bye’u slungs*), list the avifauna inhabiting them, their characteristics and the relations among these birds and their *smān* owners. For example, folio Cha-2r (Fig. 13) states:

An iron egg broke open in the forest. The small forest birds *ke ke*, *khu long zer mong* and *bya gshen ’jon mo* continually lead the way in the forest. They are a favoured movable property [of *smān*]¹⁴². As for the protector of small birds, the long beaked *kang ka* [bird] emerged from the forests of Lho ga. [It] holds sway over the realm of trees. [It] must act as the protector of small birds who stops dispersal of trains of the *smān*’s small birds into the trees!¹⁴³

I deal with the identification of the birds and locations mentioned in this passage in parts III and IV below. The birds listed and depicted on all five surviving second folios have a range of roles based upon their size and their status as ‘property’. Species of small birds (*bye’u*) who are identified both as being existing property of, or which are offered (‘*bul*’) as property to, *smān*, not only ‘lead the way in the forest’, but also ‘lead the way in the rocks’,¹⁴⁴ ‘show the way taken by *smān*’¹⁴⁵ and ‘do not annoy *smān* with their calls’.¹⁴⁶ Those larger birds mentioned in each group, who are neither classed as property nor offered as property to

141 See the Copenhagen ms. edition by Haarh 1969: 409.

142 For precedents for use of *dkor* in relation to *smān* and birds elsewhere in the *Sha slungs* text, see facs. Ca-2r, l.4 (beneath painted panel), Na-2r, l.4-5 (beneath painted panel) and 71, Pa-2r, l.3-4 (beneath painted panel).

143 Facs. Cha-2r, l.1-8 (beneath painted panel): *lcags sgong nags la rdol / nags bye’u ke ke dang / khu long zer mong dang / bya gshen ’jon mo des nags la shul yang ’dren / dkor yi dam pa lags / bye’u mgon srungs ma ni / lho ga nags mtshal nes / kang ka mchu rings byung / shing kham s dbang du sgyur / smān yi bye’u ’phring rnams / shing la myi byer ba’i [/] bye’u mgon srungs ma mdzod //*.

144 Facs. Ca-2r, l.3-4 (beneath painted panel), *gshags shul brag la ’dren /*.

145 Facs. Pa-2r, l.3-4 (beneath painted panel), *smān lam shul yang[?] mtshon /*, with *lam shul* here understood according to BGT 2768, *gzhan dag phyin pa’i rjes kyi lam shul*.

146 Facs. Na-2r, l.4-5 (beneath painted panel), *smān yi sun ma ’bod /*.



Fig. 13. Folio Cha-2r from the *Sha slungs* text.



Fig. 14. Folio Pa-3r from the *Sha slungs* text.

smān, have a protective, shepherding role over the small birds, one which parallels that of the *lha* and *lha*-descended beings in relation to wild animals on third and fourth folios. Finally, there is no trace of any formal progression from one *bye'u slungs* to the next, no route, nor any obvious development of the arrangement of species and habitats being described on successive second folios. It appears more the case that together they form a network encompassing all of wild nature where birds occur.

c. Wildlife way stations

Third folios describing the 'wildlife way stations' (*sha slungs*), and the range of wild herbivores that dwell in them, are the best represented among the fourfold folio series, with seven surviving examples. Their text schema and content are quite similar to second folios presenting small bird way stations, albeit generally shorter in length. There are six larger sized wild herbivore species mentioned throughout these folios, including wild ass, cervid deer, takin, Indian muntjac or barking deer, alpine musk deer and Tibetan gazelle, and their classificatory identification is discussed fully in chap. 5 below. Most of them are individually listed as property that is being offered to *smān*. Several of the wild herbivores

are also designated as messengers (*pho nya*) who run far or fast, and one acts as a mount (*chibs*) of *sman* and *btsun*, much like the messengers and horses of the *slungs* way stations of Tibet discussed in Old Tibetan documents. The idea that *sman* and other beings who dwell in the natural world own and use a range of wildlife in the types of roles and functions just mentioned is entirely commonplace in Tibetan and high Himalayan traditions of myths and rites. By far the most revealing roles any of these animals have are those assigned to the last type of wildlife in the *sha slungs* series, namely the badger and the marmot on folio Pa-3r (Fig. 14):

As for [what emerges] from the final wildlife way station, marmot and badger, the two. Badger, the colour of turquoise. [They] make the dry mattress¹⁴⁷ of the *sman* by carrying off nectar waters. Marmot, the colour of gold. [They] ready the bed [for] small *lha* [and] *sman*. [These animals] count as movable properties for benefit.¹⁴⁸

Thus, if the passage is taken literally as an ecological statement, it could mean that small *lha* and *sman* sleep on the ground, or even under the earth, in this type of wildlife way station, since that is where both badger and marmot nest and are active. As with the *bye'u slungs* folios, there is no trace of any formal progression from one *sha slungs* to the next, no route, nor any obvious development of the arrangement of species being described on successive third folios. The final *sha slungs* in the series being the preserve of ground-dwelling animals also appears unsystematic in this regard, since marmots occupy alpine steppes while badgers dwell in forested valleys. Like all the *bye'u slungs*, the *sha slungs* together form a network encompassing all of wild nature where wild animals occur.

d. Wildlife protectors

On the five surviving fourth folios of the series, *lha* and *myi* identified beings, also sometimes related to *yul sa* and *sgra bla* categories, are depicted and described as having a protective and caring role towards wild herbivores that belong to *sman*, but also towards 'small *lha*' and *sman* themselves. Some of these protectors have the high status of progenitor

147 For *gdung sobs* I read *gdung [ba]* as the verb 'to be dried', and *sobs* as *sob* (cf. *gsob*) a 'stuffed' cushion/mattress (*sob stan*, etc.) of some kind. This fits best in relation to the role of the following marmot.

148 Facs. Pa-3r. l.1-6, *sha slungs mtha' ma nes ni / phyi ba' dang grum pa nyis / grum pa' g.yu yi mdog / bdud rtsi chab len bas / sman yi gdung sobs mdzad / phyi ba' gser yi mdog / lhe'u sman gzi' [read: gzim] mal sbyor / longs spyod dkor yi grangs /*. The remaining text of line 6 (*sha slungs bcu gsum...*) begins a three line passage ending on the top of folio Pa-4r which introduces a separate topic following the description of the marmot and badger.



Fig. 15. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Cha-4r) depicting a protector of wild herbivores or perhaps the *lha* 'O[d] de Gung rgyal.

lha, and the long enduring identity of 'O[d] de Gung rgyal (Fig. 15), whose cult is already apparent in Old Tibetan documents, is among them, while others are completely unknown beings. For example, folio Cha-4r featuring 'O[d] de Gung rgyal invokes him in relation to other protector beings:

Protector of wild herbivores, because *lha* 'Od de Gung rgyal, the master of ten thousand *yul sa* [beings], the ultimate source¹⁴⁹ of the *lha*, cherishes the *sman* and is of great assistance to deer, [you] do not send the movable property of *sman*, the wild herbivores, to the enemies which are *bdud*, *btsan*, and *srin po*!¹⁵⁰

The most distinctive feature of this and other fourth folio texts is the role of these

149 *Grol phugs*, although *phugs* could also mean 'perpetual' here, see BGT 1714, cf. Stein 2010: 152 "men who descend from the gods (*mi rgyud lha las grol ba*)" citing *Rlangs* 5.

150 Facs. Cha-4r, l.1-5: *ri dags srungs ma ni / lha 'od de gung rgyal ni yul sa khri yi dpon / lha yi grol phugs lags / sman la 'o byams la / sha la skyabs che bas / sman dkor ri dags rnams / bdud btsan srin po yi sgra [read: dgra] la ma skur shig /*.

protectors as suppressors (*'dul*) and hunters (*rngon pa*) of a range of negative spirits and forces, including *bdud*, *btsan*, *srin po*, *gzed*,¹⁵¹ *g.yam dri* (or *g.yam* and *dri?*), who might threaten the useful wildlife property of *smān* and small *lha*. It is noteworthy that some of the vocabulary here on 'hunters of the *bdud*' is shared with texts among the Dga' thang manuscripts,¹⁵² while the notion that these same types of negative spirits act as 'thieves' of other beings' lives is already established in the Old Tibetan ritual texts.¹⁵³ Thus, this aspect of the cosmology is fully congruent with older and approximately contemporary ritual texts.

3.3.2 Summary

As a rite, the *Sha slungs* text is concerned with managing a complex of relations among three sets of beings: those representing new life that comes into the natural, terrestrial world; those that aid and protect that first set of beings; and those that potentially threaten the interests of both the first and second sets. Apart from invoking all these beings and their relations by chanting the text, a user must emphatically instruct some beings to act (*mdzod*) as protectors or shepherds in certain ways, while appeasing others by making offerings (*'bul*). There are also a few appeals to bring new life together with (*sprad*) its safest earthly abode. Moreover, on the very final folio in the text, of the thirteen wildlife way stations it explicitly states, 'They are offered to small *lha* offspring who are brother and sister as properties for enjoyment/use. The *sha slungs* of the precious are completed.'¹⁵⁴

Sha slungs and *bye'u slungs*, and their wild animal and bird inhabitants, formed a network of functional locations throughout the natural wilderness. They served as safe havens for small *lha* who are new lives, together with their *smān* supporters, after descending from ancestral realms. It is reasonable to assume that, like way stations everywhere, *sha slungs* and *bye'u slungs* were temporary halting places on a journey, one that began up in the sky and eventually ended in a mother's womb. Small *lha* offspring who are 'young ones' were destined to be born as human children at some stage, and this brings us back to the *Ste'u* text as a complimentary rite.

151 The rare name *gzed* as a deity identity is found in PT 1060; see Stein 2010: 269.

152 Facs. Ca-4r, l.4 *tsan bdud kyi rngon pa*, cf. *Dga' thang* 60, 181, f.2, l.5, and 63, 185 f.6, l.6 on *bdud kyi rngon pa yin no* / as one of 'the three terrors one encounters there (on a ritual journey)' (*jigs pa gsum dang der phrad do' l*).

153 The idea is old, see IOL Tib J 0734: 7r267-268 on the *btsan*, *bdud*, *btsun*, *rmu*, *g.yen dgu* and *sri* who are 'thieves' (*rkun ma*) that require a ransom.

154 Facs. Pa-4r, l.1-3 (above painted panel), *lhe'u sras lcām dral la longs spyod dkor du 'bul /// rin chen yi sha slungs rdzogs s.ho ///*.

The *Sha slungs* text leaves no doubt that all the beings it presents abide in the wilderness upon the earth's surface, that is, below celestial and atmospheric abodes from where the *Ste'u* text describes descent of small *lha* offspring to a terrestrial end station. It thus stands to reason that the purpose of the *Sha slungs* rite logically followed on from the *Ste'u* rite. When new life was called down from ancestral sky realms using *ste'u*, the *sha slungs* and *bye'u slungs* and their denizens were ritually maintained in wild places to ensure a safe and supportive domain for these potential human lives (Fig. 16).

There is the question of whether or not a rite performed with either or both the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts could have been conducted using any chosen, individual fourfold series of folios, and thus targeted to the particular content of that series, or if the entire text including all thirteen fourfold series needed to be performed together for a complete rite. I am inclined to think that all thirteen had to be performed following the order of numbered *ste'u* on third folios, since together they define a protected itinerary through the world space from the sky abode of *lha* ancestors, via the *sman*, *mtshun/btsun* and *yul sa*, to the ritual site and thus the sphere of human activity. It must have been similar with the thirteen numbered *sha slungs*,

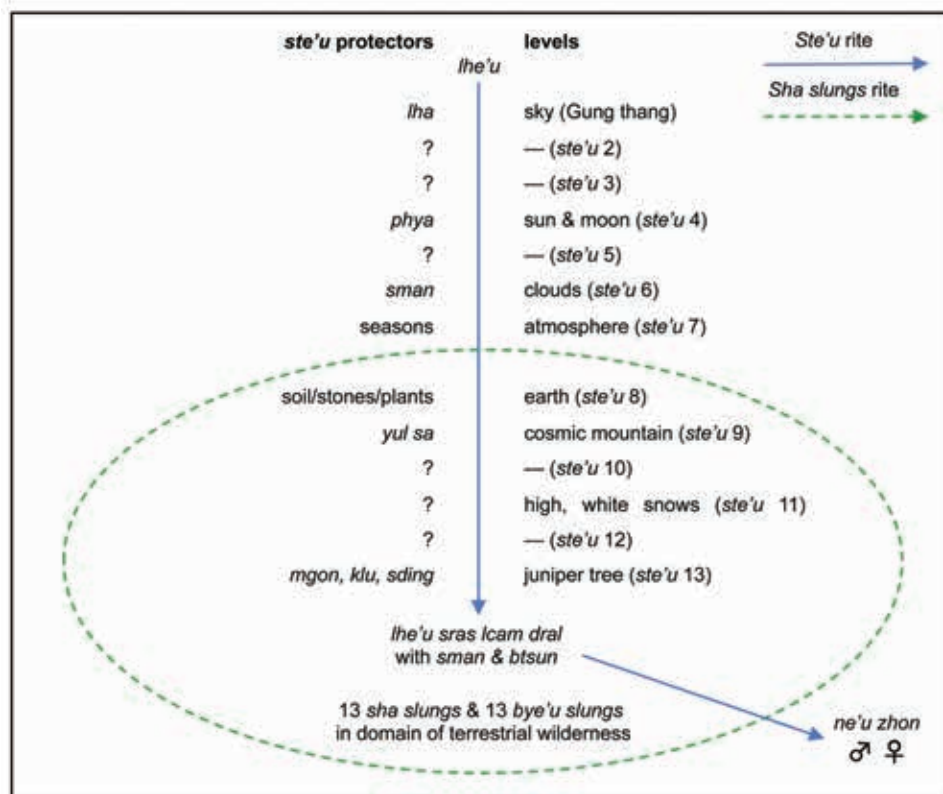


Fig. 16. Combined aspects represented in *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites.

which would have all been performed in order to ensure every part of the wilderness formed a safe and supportive haven for small *lha* waiting to take birth as new human beings. Only information on actual social practice could address this point more definitively, but we are unlikely to gain that.

4. Discussion – An old cycle of existence and its status in relation to regional cultural history and ethnography

Surveying all we know about the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites, we have demonstrated they share the same overall cosmological framing and common concepts and reference points. Considered together, they amount to a cycle of human existence, one that circulates or flows up and down the vertical cosmic axis. Its two poles are the social domain of personhood upon the earth below and the ancestral domain of *lha* in the high sky above. When transiting in between these poles, as deceased existences departing back to ancestors, or as vital, new lives given out by ancestors once again, existence must pass through the intermediary custody of *sman* and *mtshun/btsun*. At least, this is obviously so in the two ritual cases we are dealing with, namely, of culturally problematic deaths, and of intentionally bringing new lives into the world in a safe manner. The intermediary transits back and forth between personhood and ancestorhood are obviously critical phases in the circulation of existence. A myriad of other beings located in terrestrial wilderness areas and the proximate atmosphere exist not only to threaten and steal, but also to protect and care for human existence, whether in its deceased or in its vital modes. Hence, these transit phases have such intensive ritual interventions dedicated to them. In general, we should consider the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* procedures as merely being particular forms of *rite de passage* within this overall cycle.

Furthermore, these three old rites inform us that the entire cycle of existence operates in the sky, the atmospheric and the terrestrial domains of the cognisable natural world in general. It is purely mundane, and it is a potentially open cycle around which existence can continue to flow. There is no hint here of any 'other-worldly' destination or 'point of no return', but especially no separate 'land of the dead' or 'paradise', nor any 'heaven' and 'hell' types of destinations linked to moral status. We know that a range of such ideas (*gshin yul*, *dga' yul*, etc.) were already referred to in certain Old Tibetan documents – some possibly influenced already by Buddhism – as well as in early translations of Buddhist doctrines

into Tibetan (*sdig yul*, *dga' dang skyid pa'i yul*, etc.).¹⁵⁵ The *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites evince no continuity whatsoever with such representations. They express a cosmology completely separate from those promoted by organised salvation religions in the region since the period of Tibetan conversion to Buddhism.

The question arises of how best to identify the status of this old cycle of existence and the sources it occurs within from the perspective of regional cultural history? Materials from the Tibetosphere offer some obvious examples for comparison. One thinks of the Old Tibetan origin mythology of *btsan po* rulers descended from *lha*, or of contemporary Amdo folk notions recognising local mountain deities as community ancestors. Yet, these examples appear as merely superficial, mythological representations alongside the far more specific connections and mechanisms defining relations of existence between *lha* and humans in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts, which, as rites, are intended to offer practical procedures to attain specified goals, viz., people acted upon them. Thus, one assumption might be that these three old rites are just elaborated forms of what we already know of from other Tibetan Plateau times and spaces. This is the position taken toward rites in the Dga' thang manuscripts by those who claim them as “Bon ritual traditions” and stress unbroken continuities between Dunhuang documents and later sources,¹⁵⁶ while one commentator claims the “*bon*” he equates with all these old manuscripts is “best defined as a significant part of, if not the sum total, of archaic ritual traditions; those that developed or were redeveloped indigenously in Tibet.”¹⁵⁷ Besides the fact that these old texts do not represent themselves in this manner (see below), the ongoing drawback with such sweeping assessments is their repetition of existing generalisations and assumptions, rather than putting these to the test by working with the actual evidence to hand. I consider that these three old rites can be more fruitfully investigated in relation to obvious differences and similarities they exhibit in relation to other known traditions in the region, and their exact relationship with Old Tibetan documents can be more fully established, while comparisons with wider frames of cultural history and ethnographic evidence can be examined. I will

155 See Stein 2010: 58-59, 263-264, van Schaik 2013: 235 and Imaeda 1981.

156 See Karmay 2009: 63. The publishers of the Dga' thang manuscripts identified the collection as *bon gyi gna' dpe*, the rites themselves as *bon gyi cho ga*, and further divided some of them into *bon sde gson bon*, with this latter classification being found in G.yung drung Bon literature; see Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus and Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring 2007 in *Dga' thang* 1-2.

157 Bellezza 2014: 160.

now offer brief discussions of these three points as a basis for drawing my own conclusions on the status of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites.

4.1 Differences in relation to Tibetan materials

Commenting on the *rnel dri* tales, Samten Karmay observed “I have never come across this particular account in the later Bon tradition,”¹⁵⁸ and such an experienced authority is best placed to offer this assessment, one that accords with my own surveys of rites in Tibetan language sources in which *rnel dri* do appear unique. However, the same ideas and rites are certainly not unique in the adjacent Himalayas. Similar cases of spirit possession of a woman’s womb and foetus leading to miscarriage were already a recognised medical diagnosis termed *jātahāriṇī*, or ‘seizer of the born’, in a ca. 6th-7th century Sanskrit medical compendium titled *Kāśyapasamhitā*, old manuscripts of which were first known from Nepal.¹⁵⁹ Exactly the same concept of *rnel dri* as ‘wandering bad death spirits’, albeit not specifically restricted to – yet frequently applied to – infants born and unborn, represents a wide-spread cultural pattern and concern ethnographically attested along the extended eastern Himalayas. Such rites are focused mainly upon posthumous problems in the wake of in utero, natal and young infant deaths, maternal deaths during childbirth, violent accidents, suicides and less commonly murders. The often elaborate rites involved for dealing with this concern are most frequently the preserve of Himalayan highland shamans.¹⁶⁰

The identification of ancestors and the concept of a ‘soul’ – or more precisely ‘mobile vitality principle’ – as a basis for existence is another interesting point of difference between the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites and what we usually find in Tibetan Plateau materials. In the three old rites under study, it is striking that existence is never anonymous or abstract. In each of its four modes – as young life entering the world, in personhood, in being deceased, and in ancestorhood – existence is consistently categorised and named, thus always marked in terms of transformations of state and identity. It is not possible to find

158 Karmay 2009: 64.

159 See Cerulli 2012: chapt. 4 on the miscarriage narrative in the *Kāśyapasamhitā*.

160 For examples, see Gaenszle 2007: 37-38 on the Mewahang Rai rites for *hillasi* (accident and murder deaths), *ma: maksi* (maternal deaths in pregnancy or childbirth) and *chanu* (unborn child deaths), He Limin and He Shicheng 1998 on Naxi *Hâr-lâ-llü 'k'ô'* rites for suicide deaths, while together with Gerhard Heller I observed and documented the cognate Idu Mishmi *Brophee* rite in Upper Dibang valley during 2007 staged to benefit the family of a suicide victim experiencing troubles due to the deceased person’s wandering spirit.

anything comparable to this in Tibetan Plateau materials beyond these three old rites, yet sophisticated concepts of ancestors and rich vocabularies identifying them are commonplace in eastern Himalayan highland societies. In contrast to, and perhaps because of this feature, it is also striking that the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts never once refer to existence using any 'soul' terminology. Similarly, the term *brla* (< *bla*)¹⁶¹ only occurs in two among a score of *Rnel dri 'dul ba* antecedent tales, and then only in a very limited manner to discuss one specific technical operation for establishing support objects (stag's antlers or a stone in these tales) to catch and anchor wandering *dri*, rather than the victim they possess and who is rescued from them.¹⁶²

Moreover, the cultural background provided by Old Tibetan documents and the contemporary context of ethnographic data both inform us of the long-standing and wide-spread notion of a 'soul' or 'mobile vitality principle' among highland speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages, e.g. Tibetan *bla*, Gurung/Tamu *pla/plah*, East Bodish *pra/pla/phla*, Naxi *ó-hâ*, amongst many others. Yet, there are significant differences in the ways it is understood and represented. The definition of what *bla* means in Tibetan Plateau cultural contexts is repeatedly emphasised by scholars as being singular, with only one *bla* underpinning each human existence. However, this variation of the idea is actually aberrant within the wider region. In contrast, eastern Himalayan highland populations admit multiple souls – nine, seven and three are the more common enumerations – or a soul that is a divisible entity and which can thus exist simultaneously in different locations as 'divisibles'. This is certainly the case immediately south of Lho brag among East Bodish speakers, whose languages also extend northwards to some extent onto the southern fringes of the Plateau very close to the site where Dga' thang manuscripts were discovered. Indeed, the same multiple 'soul' concept is also clearly described in these Dga' thang manuscripts. For example, in the *Gnag rabs* we find an explicit reference to 'the human body with four souls' (*brla bzhi dang myi 'i* [read: *myi'i*] *lus po*),¹⁶³ and one thus cognate with Himalayan data but not with Tibetan Plateau data.

161 Karmay 2013: 23 n.9-10 convincingly explained the *brla* spelling as *bla* in a *Gnag rabs* from the Dga' thang manuscripts, cf. also *rta* spellings in Old Tibetan documents; Dotson 2008: 44.

162 See *Dga' thang* 39, 141, f.11, l.4-f.12, l.4 for the 'narrative of catching a *rnel dri* [on] stag antlers' and p.40, 142, f.12, l.4-13, l.1 on the 'narrative of a *brla* stone for a *rnel dri mo*'.

163 See the *Gnag rabs* narratives in *Dga' thang* 3, 88, f.4, l.6. See also the transcription in Karmay 2013: 28 but note his citation (p. 26) to p. 97 of the manuscript is mistaken for p.87.

Based upon these and other indicators in the content of the three old rites and the manuscript collections they occur in, we cannot unambiguously identify them as ‘Tibetan’ since they also appear to be ‘eastern Himalayan’. As for existing assessments that *Rnel dri ’dul ba*, *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* rites belong to a “Bon tradition” which existed across Tibet, this is problematic at best in light of the evidence. The word *bon* does not appear at all in the *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript, nor are any rites from the same or an earlier era of the type represented by *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* known from older manuscripts. In the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* text, the word *bon* is only infrequent, while its meanings there have nothing to do with any formal identity or movement, nor especially with any “tradition,” since the application of that word in contemporary English would demand at least internal rhetorical evidence of both time depth and continuity being claimed, and this is definitely not the case here. One *bon* usage in the text merely designates a single type of ritual specialist among a range of such figures appearing in the tales, including the *gshen*, *tshe myi*, *ya ngal*, and so forth, and whose roles are often not clearly distinguished from one another. The other *bon* usage – a single occurrence¹⁶⁴ – represents the technical term ‘rite’ that is attested in both Old Tibetan and other later manuscripts recording rites for mundane purposes.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, and like

164 ‘The antecedent narrative of Bkra za Gzig ’brang is wished for. It is the method (*lugs*) of the Phag bon Gsas khri.’ (*bkra za gzIg ’brang gyI rabs la ’tshal lo / phag bon gsas khri’i lugs lags so /; Dga’ thang* 52, 167, f.37, l.3-4), while the end of the same section reads, ‘The rite (*bon*) method of the Phag bon Gsas khri is completed.’ (*phag bon gsas khri i [read: khri’i] bon lugs / rdzogs s.ho //; Dga’ thang* 54, 170, f.40, l.4).

165 For *bon* as ‘rite’ in older texts, see Stein 2010: 268 and van Schaik 2013. Examples of *bon* as ‘rite’ in cognate, post-11th century texts recording mundane rites are common, albeit frequently overlooked and substituted for meanings draw from the G.yung drung Bon vocabulary. For instance, an old manuscript narrating a myth and concomitant rite for overcoming *sri* demons who cause infant deaths, and in which the ritual specialist invokes a deity named Bung ba stag chung, begins with the words ‘This rite (*bon*) appoints/invokes the *gsas* [against] the *sri*. Salutations to Bung ba stag chung!’ (*bon ’di ni sri gsas bdar ba / bung ba stag chung la phyag ’tshal lo*); Karmay and Nagano 2002: 185 (= f.1b). Also, in the undated *Ming sring dpal bgos dang lha ’dog bcas bzhugs* manuscript, the first section of which relates a myth of origin about the sharing of wealth between siblings in the context of a marriage rite, and in which the ritual specialist in the myth is consistently referred to as the *lha bon thod dkar* or *lha bon* and not as a *bon* or *bon po*, we read a list of materials required for the rite: ‘The [father] Rgya rje Ling dkar said, “Such things as a *lha* horse, a *lha* yak, a *lha* sheep, a *lha* goat and a *lha* turban of white silk, those are the materials which are required for the rite (*bon*), and required as the price of a daughter, and having searched for them all, place them in the hands of the seven *gnya’u* men. The seven men who are those *gnya’u*, each mounted upon a speedy stallion and went into space, to the *lha* land.”’ (*rgya rje ling dkar zhal na re / lha rta dang ni lha g.yag dang / lha lug dang ni lha ra dang / dar dkar lha thod la sogs pa / bon la dgos pa’i rdzas rnams dang / bu mo’i rin du dgos pa rnams / thams cad tshang ma btsal nas ni / gnya’u mi bdun phyag du phul / gnya’u de’i mi bdun gyis / mgyogs pa’i rta pho re re zhon / lha yul de ni dbyings su byon /*); Karmay and Nagano 2002: 218 (= f.425). In Sikkim, Balikci 2008: 338 found “the term *bon* refers to specific oral ritual texts that are chanted and considered to be the core of the *bon* specialists’ ritual knowledge,” while *bon ban* is the category of ritual specialists who can chant such texts.

the case of *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs*, we know of no rites equivalent to *Rnel dri 'dul ba* dated to the same or an earlier era from Tibet. Since the “Bon” identity now claimed for these little known 11th-12th century rites is often articulated by stressing continuities between Old Tibetan documents and later sources, these, too, can be examined.

4.1.1 Reuse of language from older texts

Leaving aside the major, and to date, unanswered question of how sets of Tibetan Language manuscripts discovered 1500 km apart in the Hexi Corridor of Gansu and in southernmost Tibet might have come to share content, we can examine what continuity actually represents where common words and phrasing occur in both sets of texts. From the earlier work of scholars like Rolf Stein and more recent studies by Joanna Bialek,¹⁶⁶ we are already well aware that shared vocabulary spanning the 11th century period is frequently associated with transformations of meaning and new contexts of application. A term like *slungs* in the *Sha slungs* text cannot be described naively as a ‘continuity’ or ‘survival’ from Old Tibetan. It has been subject to an intelligent and subtle creative process, and its later use embodies significant transformations of meaning and application. We can also be quite certain that administrators stationed in East Turkestan during the Tibetan empire, and ritual specialists somewhere in southernmost Tibet several centuries later, represented very diverse types of agents whose intensions for *slungs* served different needs. Other terms such as *bdur*, *yags*, *sbre'u* and to some extent *dri* in our sources can more easily be demonstrated as continuities with Old Tibetan usages due to their application in cognate cultural fields over time. Yet, these are not the only two options to explain and define common vocabulary we find in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites and Old Tibetan documents. We have examples of very direct and intentional reuse of words and identities without transformation. We also find reuse with modifications for which we cannot discern transformative intensions, i.e. they may have been incidental or convenient to an extent. There are also forms of creative ‘cut and paste’ reuse based upon possible misunderstandings or lost context, for instance due to oral transmissions, use of incomplete manuscripts, or as a result of folk etymologisation and language transformation more generally. Here I will give a few examples from my analysis of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts. My intention is limited to revealing the

¹⁶⁶ See Stein 1971, Stein 2010 (*Tibetica Antiqua* III & V), Bialek 2015 and 2015a, but also Blezer 2011 and Gurung 2011 for examples more specific to G.yung drung Bon.

nature and scope of the ‘constructedness’ of these later texts on the basis of older materials. A full linguistic analysis by a specialist scholar, for example, would yield other results and reveal different aspects.

As an instance of very direct and intentional reuse of words and identities without transformation, we can take the many *srin* names occurring in *Rnel dri ’dul ba* narratives, along with other basic tale settings and additional identities. Consulting the Old Tibetan document IOL Tib J 0734, we can find the following examples – which are not an exhaustive survey – of correspondences (Fig. 17) of identities within respective tale collections:

Source	Land	lord	<i>srin</i>	<i>gshen/bon</i>
0734	Dbye mo yul drug	Khar ba	Yug mo	Dbye <i>gshen</i> Kar bu
<i>Rnel dri</i>	Dbye mo yul grug	Khar ba	Yug mo	Dbye <i>gshen</i> Mkhar bu
0734	Mchims yul dgra sul	Ne’u	Pod	<i>shen</i> Do rab ’bring rab
<i>Rnel dri</i>	Mchims yul rgu sul	Ne’u sing	Pha	<i>gshen</i> Rgu gdo
0734	Skyi ro ljang sngon	Rmang po	Tsa lung zha’i (or: zhal)	<i>gshen</i> Rgyan ngar
<i>Rnel dri</i>	Skyi ro ljang sngon	Rmangs po	—	<i>gshen</i> Rgyan ngar
0734	Rtsang shul mtho	Phwa’a	Po da, Pod de	<i>shen</i> Snyal ngag
<i>Rnel dri</i>	Rtsang shul mthon ba’	Ya bo	Zla gar	<i>gshen</i> Snyal ngag
0734	Gnubs shul king drug	Sribs pa	Rkang pran	Rong po lde khar
<i>Rnel dri</i>	Gnubs yul gling grug	Sris pa	Bu rkun	<i>gshen</i> Rum po
0734	Yar khyim sogs [yar(/kar)]	’O lde spu rgyal	Pa sna ring po	<i>lde gshen</i> Rmun bu
<i>Rnel dri</i>	[Yar] lungs sogs ka	Rmun bu	Pag po sna ring	<i>lde gshen</i> Rmun bu

Fig. 17. Examples of narrative identities shared between IOL Tib J 0734 and the *Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs*.

These first examples represent quite systematic reuse. Another, more random range of details for building up *rnel dri* tales can also be found occurring in the Old Tibetan documents IOL Tib J 0734 and IOL Tib J 0738. For example, in a *rnel dri* tale set in [Yar] lungs Sogs ka, the beneficiary of the rite is Yar lha Sham po, while in the Old Tibetan Yar khyim Sogs [yar (/kar)] tale, an effigy (for a ransom?) is set up for Yar lha Sham po by a ritual specialist.¹⁶⁷ Or, a *sman* of the ‘alpine slates’ (*g.ya sman*) is discussed in a tale with the wording *g.ya sman sil*

¹⁶⁷ Cf. *Dga’ thang* 50, 161, f.31, l.6 with IOL Tib J 0734: 8r324.

ma[r], while we find closely cognate Old Tibetan wording *g.ya sman ni si li ma* in IOL Tib J 0738.¹⁶⁸ The parts of IOL Tib J 0734 where such correspondences occur contain a series of antecedent tales requiring ransom techniques involving *srin*, and since *Rnel dri 'dul ba* also includes ransoms in relation to *srin*, the reuses here are very rational in terms of common cultural fields with overlapping content. On the other hand, there is also a great deal that differs between these older and later texts in terms of other identities, usages, motifs, rite techniques and most significantly ritual goals. We cannot know which – if any – surviving Old Tibetan documents may have represented potential sources here, and some of the same or similar material just cited also occurs in PT 1285, for example. However, direct access to some written or oral traditions related in ways we do not yet understand to such documents must account for this degree of specific correspondence.

There are examples of reuse with modifications for which it is hard to discern any specific transformative intensions, and which rather appear incidental or convenient. One *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rite features a *sman bon* named 'Bring dang who ensures that the purified existence of a deceased finally 'departs/goes' (*gshegs*) to the *sman*. In the account of death rites in the Old Tibetan document PT 1134, we find a *rgya bon* named Brim tang whose function it is to set up 'nets' (*rgya*) for funeral structures.¹⁶⁹ In another account of death rites in PT 1042, it is said 'the *sman bon po* goes to fetch/leads (*drangs*) the *sman*'.¹⁷⁰ It suggests we might be observing a construction process in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* text which selects and combines approximately cognate materials to attain a different end result convenient for the author/compiler's specific intentions, albeit that the selections could be fairly arbitrary within certain sub-fields.

For the final type of case, in an above quoted *Rnel dri 'dul ba* description of the doors passed through on the vertical ritual journey, the wording *se ba zangs gyi sgo*, then *sgo cig bgrod* and *sgo mo* occurs in consecutive lines, with *se ba* 'wild rose' logically conforming to the context of a series of doors indexed to woody plant species throughout the text. In the death rites described in PT 1042, one reads *se'i sgor gshegs* (f. 42), and in PT 1134 *se mo bgrod* (f. 9, *et passim*). But in those Old Tibetan contexts, reference to the obscure term *se* relates to the

¹⁶⁸ Cf. *Dga' thang* 52, 166, f.36, l.9 with IOL Tib J 0738: 1v26.

¹⁶⁹ PT 1134: 119-120, and see especially Bialek 2015: 389-391 on transformations in Old Tibetan vocabulary of death rites.

¹⁷⁰ PT 1042: 77, *sman bon pos sman drangs lags*, cf. also the *sman bon* who states a divination result in PT 1043: 72.

‘grave’ or ‘tomb’ and its entrance or opening (*se’i sgo*), while we now know that *se* has been the object of a complex series of folk etymologies (e.g. *se gru bzhi*, *se mo*, *se mo gru bzhi*, etc.) which began being generated during the era of Old Tibetan use.¹⁷¹ Such processes most likely informed the development of a ritual vocabulary for *Rnel dri ’dul ba* rites.

The *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* texts offer the same range of examples demonstrating these types of cases, but two particular variations of them will be the focus here. One remarkable feature of both texts is the number of rare or uncommon diminutive forms they employ to designate crucial aspects of myth references and ritual content. These include *ste’u*, *ne’u*, *bye’u*, *sbre’u* and *lhe’u*, while *rnal* in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* text is hypothesised to be closely related to *ne’u*. The forms *ste’u*, *ne’u*, *bye’u* and *lhe’u* are all found together in a single Old Tibetan document describing death rites, PT 1134, albeit that there we read *the’u*, and while *sbre’u* is absent from the same document two of its likely precursors, *brang* and *sbra*, occur with the same meaning in a closely cognate field. All these diminutives are of interest for different reasons, yet I will focus upon *bye’u* as a concept category because of what it reveals about transformations during contexts of reuse, and possibly also about early ideas of ancestors.

For comparison with usages in the *Sha slungs* and *Ste’u* texts, quite a number of relevant Old Tibetan *bye’u* references are available especially in the document PT 1134, but also in PT 1136 and PT 1285. Here are some examples:

- i. *bya gshen ’jon mo* (folio Cha-2r): a ‘small forest bird’ which ‘continually leads the way in the forest’, a property of *sman*, found in Lho ga and with a tendency to stay into the trees. In PT 1136, a *bya gshen ’Jon mo* is a human ritual specialist who performs death rites together with *pha Gshen rab kyi myi bo* for the deceased Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun.¹⁷² The only thing in common, apart from their names, in the older and later citations, is the Lho reference occurring in both contexts.
- ii. *kang ka* (folio Cha-2r): a long beaked protector of small birds, from Lho ga, holds sway over the realm of trees, and stops dispersal of trains of the *sman*’s small birds into the trees. In PT 1134, the *gang ka* performs some undefined role – perhaps by calling *pu ru ru?* – in finding a path for travel (*’gro lam*) in the rocks for the purposes of a ritual journey by a psychopomp sheep during a death rite.

171 See the analysis in Bialek 2015: 389-391, who considers that *se* was possibly employed to avoid use of a taboo term; cf. also Stein 2010: 267.

172 See Dotson 2013: 135-136 for a translation of the narrative.

iii. *rma bya sgag mo* (folio Pa-2r): a peahen, a protector of the *smān*'s small birds that must stop them from dispersing, it also shows the way to go, and is offered as property. In PT 1134, the *sgeg sa*, peacock or peahen (cf. Classical Tibetan *sgeg ldan* syn. *rma bya*), together with the *khug sta*['] or swallow (Classical Tibetan *khug rta*), is the direct object of a specific rite technique: 'When the small bird swallow proceeds, tickle the end of its tail. When the small bird peacock proceeds, tickle the top of its tail.'¹⁷³

iv. *brag bye'u*, in context with *brag la* (folios. Ca-2r): they show the way to go in the rocks, which means the way taken by *smān*,¹⁷⁴ whose property they are said to be. In PT 1134, *bye'u* appears in relation to 'seeking a path in the rocks' (l.190, *brag la / lam tshol ba*) as part of an itinerary for a psychopomp sheep accompanying the deceased. In the *Sha slungs* text, 'in the rocks' (*brag la*) is also reused as a generalised setting in which small bird eggs of artificial materials hatch out. In PT 1134, a crane, a very large bird, also hatches out of eggs, but those eggs are without any distinction, nor in the rocks.¹⁷⁵

v. *gtsos to re* and *lam ba* (Ca-2r): both are unusual and otherwise unattested, untraceable names for birds. They are most likely products of reuse of text where the author/compiler lacked full knowledge of vocabulary meaning. The name *Gtsos to re* can be compared with the PT 1134 wording *gtsos/dgo re* (l.240), and *lam ba* with *lam 'pan* (l.170). Both *gtsos* and *lam* appear multiple times within PT 1134, and while *gtsos* has nothing to do with birds, *lam* is closely related in context to some actions of birds. A strategic and well-informed author/compiler would have had to wilfully and illogically ignore the attested meaning 'Tibetan gazelle' for *dgo*, which is completely incongruous in relation to a bird name. However, since the alternative dialect words *nyi gri* and *nyig* are used elsewhere in the text to define a Tibetan gazelle (see chap. 5), this indicates the word *dgo* with this meaning was unknown to them.

A final comment can be made on a possible source for the name Kha la Rtsang stod

173 PT 1134: 252-254, *bye'u khug sta' / song na / mju* [read: *mjug*] *gi mtha* [read: *mtha'*] *za reg / bye'u sgeg sa song na / mjugi* [read: *mjug gi*] *drung za reg* /, cf. parallel wording at l.213-214 and l.265-266. I derive 'tickle' from Classical Tibetan *za* 'to itch' and *reg pa* 'to touch'.

174 See facs. Ca-2r, l.3-4 (beneath painted panel) *gshags* [read: *gshegs*] *shul brag la 'dren* /, with facs. Pa-2r, l.3-4 (beneath painted panel) *smān lam shul yang*[?] *mtshon* /, where *lam shul* is understood according to BGT 2768, *gzhan dag phyin pa'i rjes kyi lam shul*.

175 For example, in PT 1134 we find a crane hatch from an ordinary egg, l.45 *khruṅg khruṅg ni sngo rdol na* /, and l.62 *khruṅg khruṅg ni sgong rtold* /.

designating an ancestral location from where offspring who will become new humans originate. We only know this particular form of the name in Old Tibetan from the catalogue of principalities section in PT 1060. That document lists Kha la Rtsang stod having a Rtsang *lha* who is *bye'u* and a Rtsang lord who is *phywa*.¹⁷⁶ Rolf Stein considered *bye'u* to be a diminutive of *phya* in this context,¹⁷⁷ in which case it must refer to a type of ancestor who is a *lha*. In the *Ste'u* text, new life comes down from the *lha* abode via a *phya* abode at the sun and moon where it is protected by *phya* 'sons', and when descending further it is aided by *bye'u* birds. The old associations here are rather telling, and probably also reflect earlier mythical and lexical antecedents of the *Ste'u* text.

4.2 Ethnographic traces

Here I will give summarised cases of contemporary ethnographic data which can be meaningfully compared with content in *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts. The first two cases are of rites I recorded during field research on the cult of Srid pa'i lha in eastern Bhutan, while the third describes the most common and visible post-mortem practice used throughout Bhutan. The fourth and final case offers reports of a wider, popular belief about the circulation and identity of human existence.

a. Rites for *lha* conceptions

In the Srid pa'i lha cult practiced in eastern Bhutan, directly south of Lho brag, various rites are performed in relation to ancestral deities stationed at the top of the sky, and who are classified variously as *lha* (and *pho lha*), *phya* (plus spoken variants), *pla* and *se*, *zhi* or *[g/b]zhe[s]*. One form of these rites named *sifu* or *seefu* (cf. written *sri'u* and *sri'u phru*) are performed so that barren women or infertile couples conceive new children. The aforementioned ancestors are lead down from the sky via thirteen-level itineraries which can include the *lha* abode, the sun and moon, stars, the intermediate space/atmosphere, clouds, Gtsang stod, the cosmic mountain, the descending slopes of the mountain side and various trees. The ultimate resting point upon earth at the ritual site is a living juniper or other highland tree, and/or a fresh cut tree sapling which has bark and side branches removed up to an apical topknot of leaves, plus some decorations or ritual devices added, and erected

¹⁷⁶ See PT 1060: 74.

¹⁷⁷ Pointed out in Stein 2010: 150 n.50.

into the earth. The descending ancestral deity is symbolically and linguistically equated with birds, and appearances of white birds before and during the rites are a harbinger of an ancestral deity's arrival. The ritual specialist calls for new children for mothers. Any children conceived following the rites must regularly acknowledge the ancestral deity as their 'parent' by offering rites of thanks and respect to them, and fall under the deity's life-long protection. They are socially categorised as *sifu* or *seefu* meaning 'off-spring' (and more explicitly as *lha sras*, *lha'i bu*, *lha'i sras mo*, *lha'i bu mo*), and named by their human parents after their sky ancestor. If, for example, that is Gurzhe (literally 'Gu[r] Ancestor'), who is regarded as the 'lha child/son (*lha'i bu*) of progenitor *lha 'O de Gung rgyal*, they receive a name incorporating the element 'Gu-', 'Gur-' or 'Guru-', such that a male child will be named Gurzhe, Gurulha, Guru Tsering or similar, and a female Gurumo, and so on.¹⁷⁸ They may also be named directly after *lha* as their parent/ancestor, with males called Lhadenla, Lhala, and Lhadarla and females Lhamo, Lhadenmo, Lhakey, and so on. Almost all features of these rites and the naming of putative offspring of ancestral deities represent the identical cultural pattern found in *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites.

b. Ya ngal elimination rites

At more northern sites closest to Lho brag, the cult of Srid pa'i lha includes rites termed *sel* 'elimination', for which Ya ngal Gyim kong is the primordial initiator in the *Sel rabs* manuscripts. Different stages purify and thus open the path for transit of the ancestral *lha* up and down the vertical axis, via thirteen and nine levels, between the top of the sky and the door of the domestic house. The rites include fumigation (*bsang*) using combustible materials from ninefold 'father', 'mother' and 'son' types of trees and shrubs, ablution (*khrus*) with an array of waters from different rivers, lustration (*tshan*) employing a variety of waters 'scented' by contact with different plants and environments, as well as downward suppression rites involving sets of *sman* and *bon* auxiliaries. Nearly all the techniques, the cosmographic scheme, the identity of Ya ngal Gyim kong, and a wide variety of other content in the cult also occur in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites from Dga' thang. This applies right down to the fine details of individual rite techniques. To take a single instance from

¹⁷⁸ This naming practice represents the genealogical patronymic linkage system widely found among highland speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages, but far less evident or absent among speakers of Tibetic languages; see Lo Ch'ang-p'ei 1945.



Fig. 18. Altar set-up for vertical dispatch of ancestral deities up through the levels of the sky and closure of the path, Tsango, northeast Bhutan.

the Lha mo che festival at Tsango in the Khoma Chu valley, a site a few days foot march from the nearest settlements in Lho brag across a pass formerly used for trade. At the point in the rites when the ancestral *lha* is dispatched back up through the levels of the sky, a series of thirteen small holes are excavated in the earth aligned in a row directly in front of, and facing, the ‘*lha tree*’ (*lha shing*) which is the terminal point of the deity’s descending itinerary to the ritual site. Into each hole, a ca. 1.5 m long branch of the woody shrub locally named *sershing* or ‘yellow wood’ (*Mahonia napaulensis*, Tibetan *skyer ba*), is inserted so that it stands erect. A few flat, plain stones set at the base of each branch form a kind of mini-altar. Upon each of these, three rough, natural white stones are placed in a small pile (Fig. 18). Finally, when the deity has departed again, each stone is hurled up into the sky and each *sershing* stem is broken to seal the path back up to the sky to avoid it becoming defiled.¹⁷⁹ Once the deity departs and reaches the first level of the sky, he is considered to

¹⁷⁹ For the same rite sequence employed by Ya ngal in the *Rnel dri ’dul ba* rites, cf. also the wording *gshed khung zur gsum brkos la // de’i khar skyer phur bcu gsum gyIs bskor*; *Dga’ thang* 34, 133, f.6, l.5-6.



Fig. 19. Tree-like *ste'u* on folio Cha-1v of the *Ste'u* manuscript (l.), and apical wooden ornaments on pine tree saplings used for post-mortem memorial rites, east Bhutan (r.).

wait there a short time before ascending finally out of range, and thus a last chance to appeal for his favours occurs. For this stage the local expression *them* is used, which in the Khoma dialect of Dzala means both ‘tarrying’ or ‘hesitating’ (cf. Tibetan *them bu* ‘stopping’) upon the ‘threshold/doorsill’ (*them*, cf. Tibetan *ma them*) going upwards. Apart from very minor variations, every detail I recorded during my field work for this process occurs in the *Rnel dri 'dul ba* rites in the Dga' thang manuscripts.

c. Post-mortem tree rites

It is almost considered compulsory in Buddhist communities throughout Bhutan that the family of a deceased person conduct a post-mortem memorial rite involving the erection of cut pine tree saplings. These are typically set up upon a high hill or remote, open site somewhat distant from habitation. The ideal number nowadays is one hundred and eight, although even erecting a single sapling is considered to fulfil this rite. Each tree stem should have its bark and any branchlets stripped off, with Buddhist prayer flags, ideally printed with the six-syllable mantra, attached to the length of the stem. In some remote rural areas, an apical topknot of foliage can be left atop the sapling's stem, although nowadays this is mostly replaced by a symbolic wooden ornament, in the shape of a sword with a disk around its base (Fig. 19, right frame). Present-day Buddhist representations aside, the form and position of these ornaments strongly resemble the apex of tree-like *ste'u* depicted in the *Ste'u* manuscript (Fig. 19, left frame). The rite has to be performed within a certain

period following main death rites, often within twenty-one days, but this varies between practitioners, with forty-nine days being an ideal maximum. The rite can also be repeated annually over several years following a death, and family members can gather with alcohol at any instance of setting up the saplings. The rite is now universally considered Buddhist. However, it lacks a formal doctrinal basis, has no single technical term to describe it, nor any orthodox ritual text, and is performed entirely by lay persons. The number one hundred and eight, which is now taken as a mark of the rite being Buddhist, is also applied to other non-Buddhist mortuary practices of the laity in the region.¹⁸⁰ Opinions about the rite's purpose are generally cognate, including helping to quickly separate the soul of the deceased from the living, or helping the soul find the 'lha's white path' (*lha lam dkar po*) to a positive post-mortem destiny, as well as gaining merit for the deceased. I think this rite can most fruitfully be considered a later Buddhist adaptation of the use of tree-like *ste'u* as found in the *Ste'u* text.

d. Aspirations for circulation of lives

In closing these examples, we can cite ethnographically attested conceptions of cycles of existence among Tibetan speaking peoples that closely match the logic of circulation found in the three old texts we are dealing with. Mundane ideas of human life circulating back and forth, via death and birth, across the transitions between realms of ancestorhood and personhood, and in which origins and descent are intimately identified, are not at all uncommon along the extended eastern Himalayas and the eastern Tibetan Plateau margins. The most common form of these ideas I am aware of today are people's express aspirations that their deceased relatives take birth once again within the immediate fold of the family or proximate kin group, and their acceptance that this is what results. Mona Schrempf published documentation of such a case in contemporary Amdo (Qinghai):

Lhamo's twenty-one year old cousin, who was her dearest female friend, died in a tragic accident. Lhamo's aunt and uncle had expressed their hopes that their deceased daughter would be reborn to Lhamo as her child. The two cousins had been playmates and very close childhood friends, like two sisters. The death of

180 The practice of corpse disposal into a nearby river, which is wide-spread from far northeast Bhutan across to Tawang and down the Mon Yul Corridor, has the number one hundred and eight for the ideal total of dismembered body parts disposed into the water.

Lhamo's cousin was therefore traumatic for the whole extended family. It was clear that only a rebirth of the deceased young woman within her family would be able to remedy the rupture and pain left behind by her sudden and premature death. [...] Lhamo eventually gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Nobody seemed surprised at the fact that her baby turned out to be a girl. It was obvious to everybody that she was the lost cousin, her former best friend reborn.¹⁸¹

The second case of this type, reported by Anne-Marie Blondeau from a Tibetan cleric's oral testimony given during the mid-1980s, is of rites employed for the parents of very young infants who die. As a young cleric, the informant gained his knowledge of apotropaic rites (*gtobcos*) from his uncle, a *sngag pa* practitioner in Khams, and then himself worked as a ritualist for the laity in the Spo bo region of south-eastern Tibet, further along the eastern Himalayas from Bhutan. Following preparation of an infant's corpse with a range of ritual procedures, during which its mother must turn the corpse's head in the direction of the sky *sman* (*gnam sman*), the ritual specialist invoked the deceased multiple times with such appeals:

Oh, you little baby (*sri'u*) who has passed beyond, by the power of this rite of *Oppressing the Sri* (*sri gnon*), ripen what is not yet ripened. Take the body of a 'black-headed person', and in this intermediate space between sky and earth, come back as a child of your mother and father! [...The informant then reported:] If one pronounces these wishes with execution of the rite in the correct manner, the baby will be reborn within that year as the child of its two parents. [...]¹⁸²

In my opinion, these cases demonstrate instances of long-term continuities with the cosmological outlook and rite techniques of the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts, and for the first three cases, they do so within a geographical region immediately adjacent to both the known origin location of Dga' thang manuscripts and the highly probable origin location of the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript (see chap. 5).

5. Notes on manuscript provenance

Rnel dri 'dul ba, *Sha slungs* and *Ste'u* rites not only share features of content in common, a range of evidence indicates that their manuscripts may have the same region of geographical

¹⁸¹ Schrempf 2010: 170-171.

¹⁸² Citations translated from the French text in Blondeau 1997: 202 & n.30, 203, with original Tibetan passages on p.219.

provenance. I will first illustrate some close and specific morphological characteristics and orthographic features shared by these two manuscripts and Srid pa'i lha cult manuscripts with very similar content which were produced relatively close to the discovery site of the Dga' thang manuscripts. A second section reviews internal pictorial and textual evidence on *Sha slungs* text folios that can be relevant for establishing geographical provenance, and finally I compare some of this with ethnographic records of *shalung* rites from the Srid pa'i lha cult region.

5.1 Shared morphological and orthographic features

Dga' thang texts, such as the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, were recorded in manuscript booklets, as opposed to loose *dpe cha* folios. They were discovered at Gtam shul, a place that would have been a straightforward premodern journey of 50 km along a major trans-Himalayan river system from the closest extant sites of the Srid pa'i lha cult in Khoma Chu valley and Kurtö. Manuscript folios are made of handmade paper vertically stitched along left/right folio margins to form a simple booklet, with corners on outer folio margins trimmed round (Fig. 20). They have an approximate folio width to height format ratio of 2:1. The texts are penned in black ink with a wooden stylus.¹⁸³ All these features of Dga' thang manuscripts are more or less morphologically identical to the older manuscript booklets found at Srid pa'i lha cult sites in the Khoma Chu valley (Fig. 21, 22), that is, in closest proximity to Lho brag.

A second type of manuscript found at Srid pa'i lha cult sites in the Khoma Chu valley are in the form of 'concertina'-like booklets. Their folios are both folded and stitched together to form a long, continuous folding text which is inscribed upon both sides, and which the user can continually turn the pages of to read through one text and then that written upon the reverse folio sides. These folded 'concertina' booklets are morphologically identical to the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript, with the exception that those I have recorded in northeast Bhutan have a more horizontal format while the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript is vertically oriented (Fig. 2).

Parallel to the morphological similarities between the three sets of manuscripts compared here, there also exist unique orthographic characteristics and some older and

¹⁸³ The handwritten scripts used in Dga' thang manuscripts are all of the 'headed' style, albeit inscribed in what Samten Karmay described as "rapid writing, a style that is very similar to that of the Dunhuang manuscripts," Karmay 2009: 58.

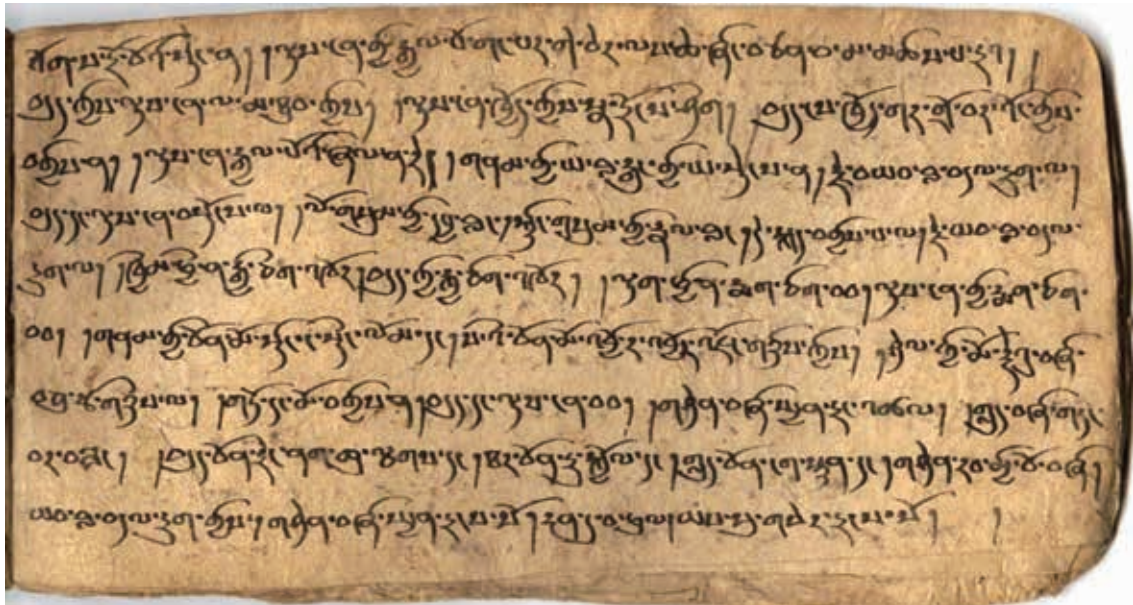


Fig. 20. Manuscript booklet folio with vertical left/right margin stitched spine, from a *Byol rabs* text, Dga' thang 'Bum pa che, Gtam shul.

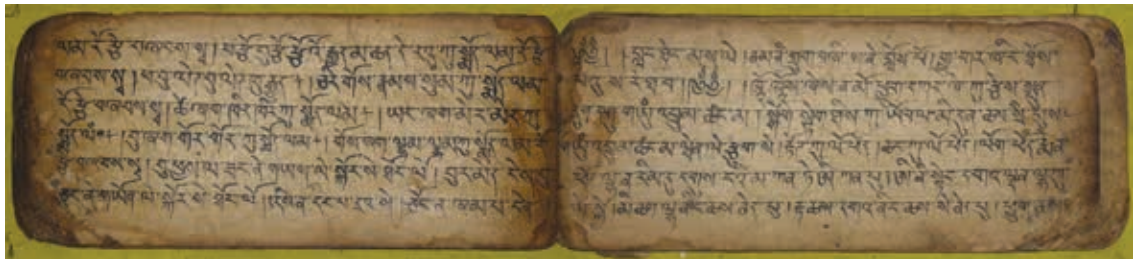


Fig. 21. Srid pa'i lha cult manuscript booklet with vertical, left/right margin stitched binding, lower Khoma Chu valley, northeast Bhutan.

seldom encountered language usages they also all share in common.

One telling example is the orthography of a *sho* terminal particle following final verbs with *sa* as secondary suffixes. It consists of a superfix *sa* above consonant *ha* carrying the vowel *o*, and occurs at title and section endings immediately preceding a double *shad* marker. It is especially found in *rdzogs sho* // and *bzhugs sho* // constructions in the cult's manuscripts (Fig. 23, frames a., b.) and in Dga' thang manuscripts (Fig. 23, frame c.).¹⁸⁴ The identical *rdzogs sho* // feature is also found in the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript (Fig. 23, frame d.).

¹⁸⁴ Compare *rdzogs* as final verb with *sa + ha + o* terminals in the *Gnag rabs* (Dga' thang 12, 100, f.16, l.1); the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* (Dga' thang 38, 139, f.9, l.8, and 54, 170, f.40 l.4, and 52, 167, f.37 l.3); and cf. *yegs sho*, *rdzogs stso* and *stsoogs sho* in the *Sman dpyad* (Dga' thang 83, 235, f.24 l.6-7).

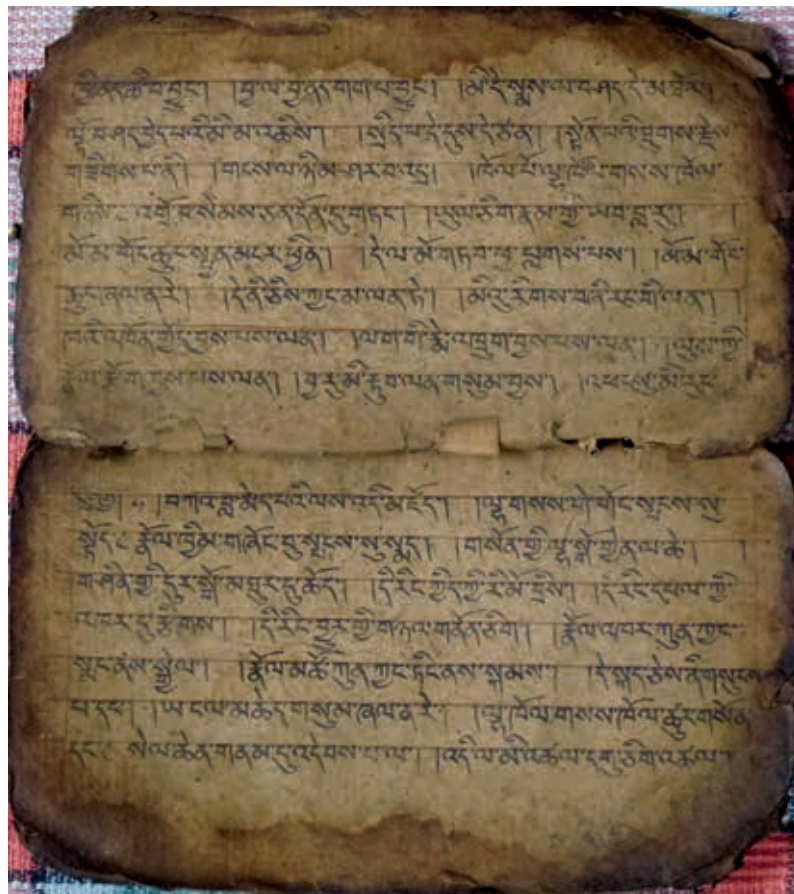


Fig. 22. Manuscript booklet with horizontal, top/bottom margin stitched binding, recording a *Sel rabs* text narrated by Ya ngal Gyim kong, upper Khoma Chu valley, northeast Bhutan.

A second example of particular orthography common to all three groups of manuscripts are abbreviated forms of representing the ergative, with 'i or 'is constructions employed instead of standard *kyis*, *gyis*, *yis* and *final vowel + s* forms. There are also a crop of usages very rarely found in texts from the post-11th century era. One example is the temporal expression *da rung da chung du* in both the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* text and *Srid pa'i lha* cult texts, something which also occurs in Old Tibetan documents.¹⁸⁵ Even more compelling is that both of the features just mentioned and the *rdzogs sho//* orthography are all found occurring

¹⁸⁵ For examples, within the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* (*Dga' thang* 52, 166 f.36 l.4-5), and *Sha ru shul ston gyi rabs la sogs pa* (*Dga' thang* 69, 197, f.18, l.7). For variations of the *da rung da chung du* string in Old Tibetan documents, see PT 1134: 066 *da rung ni da cung / du*; PT 1285: v52-53 *da rung da chung*; IOL Tib J 0739: 11r 05 *da rung ni da cung du*; cf. IOL Tib J 0731: r012 *da ring da chung du*.



Fig. 23. *Rdzogs sho* orthographies in manuscripts from Srid pa'i lha cult sites in the Khoma Chu valley (a. and b.), a Dga' thang manuscript (c.) and the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript (d.).

together in texts featuring the ritual specialist identity Ya ngal Gyim kong and the type of purification rites he is associated with.¹⁸⁶ Another feature shared between the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* text and manuscripts from Srid pa'i lha cult sites in the Khoma Chu valley is that, unlike the vast majority of anonymous older texts for mundane rites preserved in Tibetan language, they contain unique identities of their human composers.¹⁸⁷

5.2 Localising the *Sha slungs* and *Ste'u* manuscript

5.2.1 Evidence in the *Sha slungs* text

The anonymous manuscript containing both *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts comes down to us bereft of explicit information concerning its provenance, apart from the certainty that its paper is dated to between the 11th and 12th centuries. In light of features discussed in the previous section which are shared with both Dga' thang manuscripts and Srid pa'i lha cult manuscripts found in closest proximity to Lho brag, the *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* texts contain

¹⁸⁶ See especially the *Rnel dri 'dul ba'i thabs* text in *Dga' thang* 52, 166-167, f.36 l.4-5 *da rung da chungs du*, l.7 *ya ngal gyim kyong*, f.37 l.3 *rdzogs sho* // with the *sa + ha + o* orthography.

¹⁸⁷ See the names *Gar rgos pa* (*Dga' thang* 51, 164, f.34, l.1) and *Phag bon Gsas khri* (54, 170, f.40, l.3-4).

a range of evidence linking them to the same geographical region. This includes the named identities of some beings, settings that are named and described, and classifications and painted images of wildlife species in light of their known distribution and ecologies. We can also compare otherwise unique references in these texts with cognate ethnographic data from Srid pa'i lha cult festivals.

a. Names

In general, one can observe virtually all names for the *lha* and *lha*-related class of beings in the text are very close variations upon the typical 'recombinant' mythical names in nearly all older texts describing mundane rites, myths and cosmology. They are all (re)constructed from a basic pool of syllables and compounds that reoccur and circulate in multiple combinations within this type of literature, and this generation of diversity around common reference points is indeed a characteristic of older antecedent narratives (*rabs*). Some of these syllabic combinations yield so many similar variations there is no way to connect a common identity over time for a single figure.¹⁸⁸ In contrast to this, a few names never vary, and these are of most interest. By far the best known named identity among all the beings listed within the *Sha slungs* text is *lha* 'O[d] de Gung rgyal. This name, with only the most minor orthographic variations, has remained a constant identity in the texts concerning mundane rites from Tibet since sometime during the late imperial era until today. His name is the only identity to occur more than once on the surviving folios of the *Sha slungs* manuscript. This is significant since *lha* 'O de Gung rgyal is the primary and most universal deity featuring in the cult of Srid pa'i lha. In both the *Sha slungs* text and those of the cult, he is accorded the same primordial progenitor status. At the second mention of *lha* 'O[d] de Gung rgyal's name on *Sha slungs* text folio Na-1r (Fig. 24), the phrasing used is the same as that commonly occurring in ritual texts from the Srid pa'i lha cult.¹⁸⁹ In the *Sha slungs* text we also meet the *ne tso smra mkhan*, or 'parrot able to talk', who is a frequent interlocutor and actor in myths about 'O de Gung rgyal within the cult.

Certain individual name elements in both the *Sha slungs* and *Ste'u* texts are of interest for

188 The best example begins with the Old Tibetan name *rje* Bla bo bla sras (IOL Tib J 734, l.3r088, 3r100, 4r165), with Sgam Lha bo lha sras in the Dga' thang manuscripts (Karmay 2009: 71-73, 80-81), Lha 'o lha sras in the *Mu ye pra phud phy'a'i mthar thug* manuscript (Karmay and Nagano 2002: 35 =f.3a, 42 =16a), Sgam Lha'i lha sras in *Mkhas pa Lde'u* 230, cf. 236, and with Lha bu lha sras in Srid pa'i lha cult manuscripts. For still more variations, see Dotson 2007: 25.

189 Compare facs. Na-1r, l.1, 'od de gung rgyal yi thugs kyi sprul pa les / with Lawa 2, Text 13, Lha'i nam la dus bzhi'i bzhugs sho, 1b, 1-2a, 5, lha 'o de gung rgyal bya ba de // sku gsung thugs kyi sprul ba las //.



Fig. 24. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Na-1r) depicting a figure that could be *lha 'Od de Gung rgyal*.

they also commonly occur in ritual texts from Dga' thang and texts from the Srid pa'i lha cult found closest to Lho brag, while apart from Old Tibetan documents, these same name elements are far less common in other contexts. For example, we find the *-re* final suffix and its *to re* and *do re* forms for the final syllable(s) of names in all the documents in question. In the *Sha slungs* and *Ste'u* texts there are a *yul sa* being Khri do re (*Ste'u* f. Nga-4v, l.1-2), a bird *kon to re* (*Sha slungs* f. Tha-2r, l.3), a bird *gtsos to re* (*Sha slungs* f. Ca-2r, l.3) and a bird *pho re* (*Sha slungs* f. Tha-2r, l.2). In cult texts we find a ritual specialist Rgyal 'byor re and an origin place She re, while in the *Byol rabs* manuscript from Dga' thang there is a protagonist Klu rab Bzang to re.¹⁹⁰ Manuscripts with redactions of *Rgyal rigs* genealogies represent a third 'local' text from the same general geographical zone as the cult and the site of Dga' thang, and they, too, preserve *-re* suffixed proper names.¹⁹¹ The same *-re*, *to re* and *do re* forms are very common for proper names in texts such as the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*. Such name forms obviously have a long-term circulation in the region between Lho brag and the Himalayan distribution zone of the Srid pa'i lha cult, yet they are rare in other post-

¹⁹⁰ *Dga' thang* 21-22, 113-114, f.29, l.6, f.30, l.1, 4, 5, 8.

¹⁹¹ *Rgyal rigs* f.4b, 6b, Dbas rgyal To re, f.9b Khor re, f.45a Mthong re.

11th century literature written in Tibetan.

Another interesting type of rare name element or epithet has the forms *sman bu* ‘son of the *sman*’ and *sman sras* ‘*sman* offspring’, both forms of which occur in the *Ste’u* text (f. Cha-3v, l.2-3) in the names Sman bu La se, Sman bu Yu ne and Sman sras Skye cig. The name or title Sman sras also occurs in Srid pa’i lha cult texts as the father of a ritual specialist, while Sman bu sheb is the name of a cult site established by Khu clan members who migrated from Lho brag into the upper Kho long Chu river valley.

As for named settings in the *Sha slungs* text, there is only a single identifiable non-mythical place mentioned in the whole text, and this is the forested area of Lho ga on folio Cha-2r (Fig. 13).¹⁹² Lho ga is also called Lho ga lang drug in Old Tibetan documents and Lho ga lang grug in the Dga’ thang manuscripts. It was an ancient principality probably related to the Lho clan and adjacent to Ltam (i.e. Gtam shul) where the Dga’ thang manuscripts were discovered, and was the basis for the later region of Lho brag.¹⁹³ Lho brag is without doubt the proximate origin place for the cult of Srid pa’i lha, and its lowest valleys extending southwards into the immediately adjacent Himalayan watershed are indeed heavily forested places very different from the arid Tibetan Plateau lands close by to the north.

Other settings in the *Sha slungs* text are certainly mythical. Yet, the very occurrence of specific names among them strongly indicates the same zone of geographical origins in southernmost Tibet and Lho brag, while the same names are highly relevant within the Srid pa’i lha cult also. One setting on folio Ca-1r is described as being, ‘Atop the land Sa le ljon, the stronghold of Smon lam brag surrounded [by] the Dung mtsho dkar mo [...].’¹⁹⁴ The Dung mtsho dkar mo is the most ubiquitous primordial toponym within the Srid pa’i cult’s narratives, and one identified by its participants in local landscapes across the cult’s distribution region of eastern Bhutan and the Mon yul Corridor, not to mention in Lho brag itself. Many clues hint that the Dung mtsho dkar mo name is intimately related to the pre-14th century Shar Dung population of Lho brag and surroundings, and I have addressed this topic in detail elsewhere.¹⁹⁵ In addition to the *Sha slungs* text, the Dung mtsho dkar mo name also has its earliest known roots in the Dga’ thang manuscripts from Gtam shul,

192 The *Ste’u* text likewise only features a single possibly ‘real’ place name, Kha la Rtsang stod; see facs. Ja-4v: l.1.

193 See citations to Old Tibetan documents in Hazod 2009: 173 and Map 3, also Dga’ thang 45, 153, f.23, l.1-2.

194 Facs. Ca-1r: l.1-2: *yul sa le ljon stingsu* [read: *steng su*] / *smon lam brag kyi mkhar* / *dung mtsho dkar mo* ‘khyil /

195 See Chapter Sixteen of my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life*.

that is, ancient Ltam shul adjacent to Lho brag. While the mythical country name Sa le ljon is otherwise unknown, it has noun equivalents in myths within both the Dga' thang manuscripts and the *Bshad mdzod* redaction of the *Grags pa bon lugs* narrative composed in Gru shul immediately adjacent to both Gtam shul and Lho brag.¹⁹⁶ The name Gangs ri dkar po on *Sha slungs* text folio Cha-1r (Fig. 12) is of course generic. However, it too happens to be a prominent mythical toponym in the Srid pa'i lha cult. It names a resort of the progenitor *lha* and 'son' of 'O de Gung rgyal, Gu se Lang ling, while the Gang sri dkar po name and its mythical identity are associated with a high peak in southern Mon Mtsho sna just to the east of Gru shul and the upper Kholong Chu valley,¹⁹⁷ and the name Gangs ri dkar po is invoked in rites of the Srid pa'i lha cult until today.

b. Wildlife Classifications

Confidently assigning zoological classifications to names of any organisms cited in Tibetan texts from most historical periods, or even attempting the same using colloquial conversations with indigenous informants, is a challenging task. This is because ethnographic evidence consistently demonstrates the same indigenous animal name can be locally applied across a number of species of superficially similar appearance, species that nevertheless have quite different zoological classifications, and this occurs to the point of divisions between different family-level classifications of organisms. Experience teaches that correlating indigenous names with physical evidence – live sightings, body parts or scats – of the wild species in question is the only certain methodology. This is unavailable to us in dealing with the *Sha slungs* text. However, that text uniquely provides a series of realistic painted images of most wild species it mentions by name. In a few cases, it also provides habitat information together with the wild species names. While we cannot provide a full and unequivocal zoological classification for all species listed, most are transparent enough to gain an overall impression of the general region those who composed the text – or the earlier traditions they drew upon – must have been familiar with and gained their knowledge and inspirations from. Moreover, around half of the larger wild animal species cited in the text have distributions strictly limited to certain regions and sub-regions of the

196 For example, see Sa le sbram in both a *Byol rabs* and *Gser skyems kyi rabs* in *Dga' thang* 30, 125, f.41, l.4-5, and 31, 128, f.44, l.3. As noted above, in the *Bshad mdzod* (Copenhagen ms. edition Haahr 1969: 409), Dga' Sa le is the fifteenth level of the sky.

197 See Huber 2015b: 228-229.

greater Tibetan Plateau system and Himalayan highlands. This narrows location possibilities down quite considerably.

The large wild animal species listed in the text can be divided into two groups. Those easily identifiable are the *rkyang* ‘wild ass’, *sha* ‘deer species’, *phyi ba* (or ‘*phyi ba*’) ‘marmot’ and *grum pa* ‘badger’. Of these, all are found in southern Tibet, while the badger, which must refer to the Asian badger or sand badger (*Meles leucurus*), is strictly limited in distribution along the interface of the eastern Himalayas and south-eastern Tibetan Plateau margins. The more ambiguous names include *skyin*, *kha*, *dan* and *nyi gri* or *nyig*, and I will now consider each of them in turn.

Concerning *skyin*, some lexicons indicate it applies to the wild goat species called ibex, although ibex is strictly limited to the extreme northwest of the entire Tibetan Plateau system. However, the name *skyin* and its spoken variants including *kin/kyin/khyin/khying/khyim/kyem/khyem* is applied right along the eastern Himalayan highlands to designate the takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*).¹⁹⁸ That wild caprid is only found in forested mountain tracts eastwards from the Bhutan Himalayan highlands, and across to the very far eastern borderlands of the Tibetan Plateau, although never upon the high plateau itself. The painted images on folio Cha-3r directly above the text passage citing *skyin* (Fig. 25) clearly confirm the intention of the artist to realistically depict a takin rather than an ibex. The horn-bearing male animal on the left has a long-haired shaggy coat which is dark. This long-haired shaggy coat, with Winter hair growing over 20 cm in length, clearly distinguishes the takin from caprids like the ibex which can also be termed *skyin*. Moreover, the darkest of the four subspecies of takin are those inhabiting the eastern Himalayas at the westerly end of takin distribution in Asia, specifically in Bhutan and neighbouring parts of far western Arunachal

198 Words for takin have a complex background in the region. ‘Takin’ itself may be borrowed from a Mishmi language – probably Digaru – and the ‘kin’ element is cognate to *kin/kyin/khyin/khying/khyim/khyem* names related to takin in many highland areas along the eastern Himalayas where Tibetan and East Bodish languages are spoken. Various Tibetan and west Bhutanese names for takin incorporate ‘yak’ references in addition to the *kin/kyin/khyin/khying/khyim/khyem* elements that signal a wild goat species (cf. *skyin* in BGT 147 *gzugs dbyibs ra dang 'dra ba'i ri dwags shig*), for example ‘*brong khyim si*’ in earlier Bhutanese religious texts (today spoken *jongkhimsi* in western Bhutan), while Frederick Bailey, a keen hunter and wildlife enthusiast who spoke fluent Tibetan, reported east Himalayan names for takin as, “To the Miju Mishmis (i.e. those living near Rima) they are known as “Kyem”, while the Mishmis up the Dibang river (Chulik Atta tribe) call them “Akrön.” The Abor name is “Siben-ö.” Takin is the name used by the Digaru Mishmi” (Bailey 1912: 1069-1070), and “The people of Po Me and Kongbo call them “Kyimyak” [*skyin g.yag*] or “Tsimyak” (Bailey 1915: 74). The ‘Brug pa Kun legs hagiography records a myth of the origin of the takin as a hybrid between goat and bovine animals following a sacrifice rite (Kretschmar 1981: 112).



Fig. 25. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Cha-3r) depicting *skyin* animals.



Fig. 26. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Tha-3r) depicting *kha* animals.

Pradesh. The male's horns in the painting are characteristic of the takin's rather short horns (ibex have very long horns), which first bow forward and then sweep back and up, and which can appear crossed over when viewed from the side. The female depicted to the right in the painting has typical takin coloration, with yellowish hair darkening on the undersides, legs and along the back.

The animal *kha* (*kha po* for male, *kha mo* for female), painted on folio Tha-3r (Fig. 26) is without doubt intended as a realistic depiction of the Indian muntjac or barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*). The male animal is a plain reddish brown colour, with short, unbranched horns (or with one small protrusion on the right-hand horn), which matches the morphology of real male muntjac in the wild. As on the painting, female muntjac possess no horns. The name is also found written *kha sha* in Tibetan,¹⁹⁹ and throughout the Srid pa'i lha cult distribution zone this name is pronounced both *kha sha* and *ga sha* depending upon the local mother tongue of the speaker. The muntjac finds its northern limit of distribution along

199 The name and species identity confirmed by the painting on folio Tha-3r are not to be confused with other vague or alternative entries in lexicons for species with longer, branched antlers; cf. Jäschke 1881: 236 *kha sa sha ba* 'snow deer', 'elk', in Sikkim 'the deer', and 'spotted deer', and *kha sha* in BGT 213, *ri dwags bye brag cig*.



Fig. 27. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Ja-3r) depicting *dan* animals.

the extended Himalayan highlands between Nepal and north Burma.

As for the deer-like animals named *dan* (*dan po* for male, *dan mo* for female) depicted on folio Ja-3r (Fig. 27), one reliable lexicon lists *dan mo* as ‘the female of the ibex, and of the musk deer.’²⁰⁰ Ibex can immediately be ruled out due to the painted image accompanying the text on folio Ja-3r. Rather, the realistic depictions of the painted *dan* animal bodies resemble the alpine musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*). Alpine musk deer are found in southern Tibet and along the extended eastern Himalayan highlands between Nepal and northwest Yunnan.

The animal name *nyi gri* (male) or *nyig* (female and juvenile) is unknown to me from all Tibetan reference sources. The name must represent antiquated local usage from the era and area of the text’s composition, or a non-Tibetan language. The only realistic candidate for *nyi gri* I have so far come across in terms of location and time period is the Dzala dialect spelling *no ’u ge* written in Tibetan script in an old manuscript of the Srid pa’i lha cult from the Khoma Chu valley, directly south of Lho brag. The narrative context is an origin and migration account of the Khu clan who move from southernmost Tibet into north-eastern Bhutan. In that context, *no ’u ge*²⁰¹ designates a wild animal species being mentioned as an

200 Jäschke 1881: 250.

201 Cf. CDTD (nouns) entry 3024 གྲེན ~ གྲེན as the Khams Tibetan Nang chen dialect pronunciation of *gnyan*.



Fig. 28. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Ta-3r) depicting *nyi gri* male, female and fawn (l.), and the Tibetan gazelle male, female and fawn (r.).²⁰²

offering during a rite named *nawan* (or *na ban*) at a site along the Lho brag Shar chu river valley in southernmost Tibet. The other animals mentioned for the same offering include thar or serow, female deer and wild pig. The painted *nyi gri* images on folio Ta-3r (Fig. 28 left frame) very realistically represent the Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*, Fig. 28. right frame). The characteristic dark, thin horns of the male on the right are swept directly back, while the female lacking horns is also accurately depicted. Tibetan gazelle (T. *dgo*) are distributed across the whole of the Tibetan Plateau system.

In summary, half of the larger wild animals depicted in the *Sha slungs* text are geographically limited to southernmost Tibet and the highland ranges of the extended eastern Himalayas as far east as northwest Yunnan and north Burma. The other half all have much wider distributions that all include southernmost Tibet. The badger, whose distribution is restricted to valley systems along the south-eastern Tibetan Plateau margins, is a key indicator. If the provenance of the manuscript is in any way related to the wild animals realistically depicted and named in it, then we can be in no doubt about its regional location in a southernmost Tibetan region bordering the extended eastern Himalayas from Bhutan eastwards.

202 Image source: "The Tibetan Gazelle, *Gazella picticaudata*" in P.L. Sclater and T. Oldfield. 1894-1900. *The Book of Antelopes*, vol.3. London: R.H. Porter, plate LII (Public domain).

There are quite a number of bird species mentioned throughout the *Sha slungs* text. However, for various reasons they are generally more problematic to derive classificatory identifications for as potential aids to geographically locate the text. Due to their mostly small size and somewhat stylised depictions on the manuscript's paintings, most bird images cannot be readily correlated with ornithological data leading to an identification. Unlike the specificity in names for larger animals, some birds are mentioned in the text in purely descriptive terms (e.g. *rlung bya gshog drag* 'wind bird powerful wings'), while other names can refer to so many different species (e.g. *thang kar* or *khyung* for raptors and large carrion-eaters) that they are not reliable indicators. Another group of bird names (e.g. *kon to re*, *gtsos to re*, *lam ba*, etc.) are completely unknown from any reference source, and a hypothesis concerning their origins in processes of reusing Old Tibetan textual material was advanced above. Yet another group of birds, including the parrot, cuckoo and peafowl, are all species familiar from the eastern Himalayas and obviously correlate directly in terms of their distributions with those large animal identities limited to the same region discussed above. The most interesting bird names for the present exercise are those of forest birds of Lho ga occurring in the text passage on folio Cha-2r (Fig. 13), which was translated above. Their significance for locating the *Sha slungs* text geographically is best appreciated in relation to the comparison of ethnographic data in the following section.

c. Ethnographic comparisons

During rites for Srid pa'i lha cult festivals in the Dirang region of the Mon yul Corridor, a 'tepee'-like ritual structure termed *shalung* is used. This provides a set of reference point strongly suggestive of continuities with, and later adaptations of, descriptions occurring in the *Sha slungs* text. Here I can provide but an abbreviated summary of *shalung* use and significance, while details are forthcoming in my monograph *Source of Life*.

The *shalung* rite is presided over by a hereditary and autonomous ritual specialist locally termed *bonpo*, but simply written *bon* in local manuscripts. The rite is mainly addressed to the progenitor *lha 'O de Gung rgyal* and some communal and nature deities mythically assimilated to him. There is a local manuscript written in Tibetan script recording chants to these deities. The 2.5 m high 'tepee'-like *shalung* structure (Fig. 29) is fashioned out of freshly cut branches of a specific tree species, and has an inner cavity. The *shalung* structure is said to be 'decorated with/adorned by precious things' (*rinchen gyen*, cf. Tibetan *rin chen [b]rgyan*). This consists of flowering branches of *Rhododendron sp.* (Fig. 29). It is erected



Fig. 29. A hereditary *bonpo* (r.) and his ritual assistant seated in front of a *shalung* structure, upper Sangti Chu valley, Dirang district, 2009.

in a sacred grove, beyond the village precincts. *Lha* are invoked to descend the vertical cosmic axis to the *shalung* during a nocturnal rite in which only the *bonpo* and his assistant participate. The *shalung* is considered a temporary shelter for deities at the ritual site. Its cavity holds the dead bodies or body parts (mainly heads) of certain species of wildlife, including deer, birds and fish, harvested from local hills, forests and rivers. On the following day of rites, which the whole worship community attend, these contents are later taken out of the *shalung* to be used for communal feasting and exchange. Other food items and woollen cords in the *shalung* are used to convey vitality and long-life to participants.

In the festivals I documented, the main wild animal species used in the *shalung* was the Indian muntjac or barking deer, and it was reported that in times past the takin was used. As we saw above in the *Sha slungs* text, the muntjac or barking deer (*kha*) and takin (*skyin*) are both large wild animal species invoked in the old rite. In the local dialect of Tshangla spoken in Dirang, the element *sha* forming part of *shalung* has the meaning of a generic classifier

marking ‘wild animals’²⁰³ exactly the same generic classifier as written *sha* in the *Sha slungs* text. As for birds used in *shalung*, there are two locally named *jun* and *zhangka* that should be used, although these birds could not be obtained at the times I witnessed the rite. I will discuss these two birds shortly. Finally, there are fish used. The three types of wildlife are representative of all creatures from land, water and air. A *shalung* rite has several goals that coincide. It ensures game and fish for future harvest. It acknowledges and reinforces some older relationship between descent groups in different settlements who participate. It is a meat offering to the ancestral deity, and an opportunity for the worship community to harvest newly arrived vitality from the same deity.

Concerning the two birds *jun* and *zhangka* which must be used in a *shalung*, they appear to be those mentioned on the *Sha slungs* text folio Cha-2r as forest birds of Lho ga. *Jun* and *zhangka* are the colloquial pronunciations used by Tshangla-speaking participants of the *shalung* rite, yet ritual specialist informants say they are actually Dakpa names introduced when the rites were brought southwards from Tawang during the past, and where the names would be spoken *jon* and *changka* or *cangka*. The *jun* pronunciation is typical of the o > u vowel shift made by Tshangla-speakers when using Tibetan vocabulary (e.g. Tibetan *lha mo* is spoken ‘*lhamu*’). It appears these two local names are equivalent to the two in the text, with Dakpa *jon* matching the ‘small forest bird’ (*nags bye ’u*) named *bya gshen ’jon mo*, and *cangka* the long-beaked *kang ka* bird that holds sway over the realm of trees and acts as guardian of, and shepherds around, the *bya gshen ’jon mo* and its small forest bird fellows. The oral origin narrative of the *shalung* rite reported to me in the Sangti valley included the explicit detail that the *jun/jon* bird is of special significance for the ritual specialist *bon* Shenrab who is locally credited with initiating this rite. This appears to be a cultural memory preserving the old connection cited above between a *bya gshen ’Jon mo* who is associated with *pha Gshen rab kyi myi bo* in PT 1136. The *kang ka* bird appears to be mentioned in PT 1134 as the *rgya bya gang ka*.

Back in the forests of the Mon yul Corridor where the *shalung* rite is performed, both

203 In Dirang Tshangla, *sha* is used as a generic classificatory suffix on the names of larger game animals, such as *gasha* ‘muntjac’, *basha* ‘goral’, *rogsha* ‘langur monkey’ and *omsha* ‘bear’. A ‘hunter’ is thus a *shapa*, and his techniques include that known as *khon sha* (also *sha khon*) for driving large game, and setting leg snares called *shashong* where *shong* is the string or cord used in the snare mechanism. *Sha* also means ‘meat’, which is a meaning also found in Tibetic and East Bodish languages to the north, while a *sha* classification of wild animals is not.

the *jun* and *zhangka* are real birds. As for local interpretations of these bird names, the *jun* is a small ‘russet-coloured’ (Tibetan *’jon*) forest bird of not more than 15 cm length, and of good song. Although I have been unable to establish its exact taxonomic status, it is most likely one of the many fine singing thrush or lark species occurring in this part of the eastern Himalayas – note that nightingales are absent in the same region.²⁰⁴ As a southern forest bird that is ‘long-beaked’ and holds sway over the realm of trees in this context, the *zhangka* is easily identifiable as the heron or egret. These birds commonly roost in trees, often in large numbers up in trees near water, and some species also nest in trees as colonies. Multiple species of herons and egrets occur across the research region. In Tibetan, *kang ka* is attested as a name for herons and egrets, and is apparently derived from Sanskrit.²⁰⁵ What *kang ka* in the *Sha slungs* text and *rgya bya gang ka* in PT 1134 once referred to is a more difficult question. In texts that are temporally most proximate to these references, the *kang ka* is a distinct carnivorous, scavenging bird described together in a group with the crow, vulture and owl.²⁰⁶ But in modern era lexicons, the name is applied to vulture (*bya rgod*), and a bird of burial or funeral sites. Such later definitions would not easily allow for a forest bird, while no species of Tibetan Plateau and high Himalayan vultures can in any way be described as ‘long-beaked’. If it is a vulture, then it can only be the slender-billed vulture (*Gyps tenuirostris*) found in Assam and sub-Himalayan environments in India and Nepal.²⁰⁷ All this brings us back to the region in which *shalung* are used today, or at least the complex ecological frontier between forested Himalayan tracts and the southernmost Tibetan Plateau, as opposed to the arid Tibetan highlands.

Certain of the manuscript illustrations in the *Sha slungs* text might supply further clues linking it to the contemporary performance of *shalung* rites used in the Srid pa’i lha cult. Two of the illustrated panels (Ca-4r, Ja-4r) depict white clad, human-like beings (Fig. 30, 31). Whether or not, and how, the text beneath each painting actually relates to the images

204 According to *CDTD* (nouns) entry 2826, *’jon mo* ‘a kind of small bird’ synonymous with *’jol mo* (entry 2829, cf. *BGT* 909), for which a number of identities are given in different sources (turkey-hen, peacock, lark, nightingale, etc.), but that seems beside the point in the case being dealt with here.

205 Jäschke 1881: 2.

206 See the *Bstan ’gyur* reference in *Wörterbuch*, 1: 30.

207 The description *rgya bya* may be for an ‘Indian/foreign bird’, but in relation to burial/funeral sites it could be a bird related to a ‘net’ (*rgya*) which appears to have been a ritual structure or device (or part thereof) used in earlier Tibetan funeral rites; see Bialek 2015: 157 160.



Fig. 30. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Ca-4r) depicting a being who could be a *lha* or idealised ritual specialist, or both.



Fig. 31. Folio from the *Sha slungs* text (Ja-4r) depicting a being who could be a *lha* or idealised ritual specialist, or both.

remains uncertain upon various folios throughout the manuscript. These figures may be the *lha* the passages mention, but they may also be ritual specialists, especially of the primordial type who usually represent models and ancestors of living ritual specialists. In any case, one of these beings is flanked by erect trees or branches and a pair of flowers (Fig. 30), while the other sits between two flowers (Fig. 31). Tree branches and flowers are of course the basic material for constructing a *shalung*, while they are among the most common altar components for revitalisation rites performed in the Srid pa'i lha cult. The symbolic value of flowers is intimately related to origins, procreation, mobile vitality and fertility in both older myths from the region²⁰⁸ and in ritual cultures presided over by shamans along the extended

208 For instance, see *Mkhas pa Lde'u* 228 on a yellow flower of gold and a blue flower of turquoise which are the very first objects in creation, and give rise to the first male and female beings. See also the Naxi *Ts'ò mbêr ssâw* myth informing the *Muân bpò'* festivals of cyclic revitalisation, in which a white flowering tree is the setting for the first union of a human male and a divine female from the sky; Rock 1948: 75.



Fig. 32. Ritual specialist standing before a *shalung* structure decorated with rhododendron flowers; note the central feather plume atop the ‘horned’ headgear, Rahung, Dirang district, 2011.

eastern Himalayas.²⁰⁹

The figure illustrated on folio Ja-4r wears headgear with a distinctive ‘horned’ appearance topped by a central plume-like device (Fig. 31). This very distinctive headgear of the same construction, with a central plume, and sometimes also white in colour,²¹⁰ is worn by some shamans in the central Mon yul Corridor where *shalung* structures are used to deliver offerings to ancestral deities located up the vertical axis (Fig. 32).

To my current knowledge, the *shalung* rites I was able to observe are not described in any other ethnographic accounts from the eastern Himalayas or the Tibetan Plateau. Like the *Sha slungs* text itself, these rites appear to be unique to the region where we find them today. Their character is clearly an amalgam of different cultural patterns which have flowed with

209 On flowers, vitality and fertility during rites among Himalayan shamans, see Gros 2012: 381 n.59, 499 on the Drung, Höfer 1994: 53-55, *et passim* on the western Tamang, Gaenszle 2007: 269-272, *et passim* on Rai groups, and Yang Fuquan 1998: 197-199 on the Naxi.

210 See also Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 40 and plates xiv, xvii for a Sherdukpen version of the same headgear termed *keng guthung* ‘horned hat’.

migrating peoples down from the north and up from the south, respectively, along the Mon yul Corridor. Although nowadays the Dirang worship communities speak Tshangla, the ritual language for these rites is actually Tibetan influenced by the East Bodish language Dakpa spoken further north up the Mon yul Corridor, and Dirang descent groups involved in the rite often trace their origins either to the Dakpa-speaking Tawang region or further north to Tibet. On the other hand, various features of the rites resemble ‘tribal’ practices of the foothills and the Assam plains further south, being practices that belong to other populations speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, such as the Bodo-Garo group and the so-called Kho-Bwa cluster of languages, or practices found in areas where such peoples were once the earlier settlers. Structures highly reminiscent of the *shalung*, for example, are used among hill peoples speaking Kho-Bwa languages further south in the Mon yul Corridor during their annual clan revitalisation festivals staged each Winter,²¹¹ as well as on the neighbouring plains of Assam during the well-known post-harvest festival called Bhogali Bihu or Magh Bihu.²¹²

Many points of interpretation related to the data presented above remain incomplete with the present state of research. Nevertheless, the combined evidence already indicates a high probability that the origins of the *Ste’u* and *Sha slungs* manuscript can be located somewhere within a zone of ca. 100 km diameter encompassing the area of the Dga’ thang shrine to the north and the highland valleys of north-eastern Bhutan and adjacent Himalayan regions to the south, and within which the cult of Srid pa’i lha is still practiced based upon similar manuscripts and where it also preserves a wide range of often closely cognate rites and language references.

211 On the construction of a Sherdukpen equivalent of the *shalung* structure, see Dollfus and Jacquesson 2013: 86 and plate xvii, although the indigenous term used to designate it is unclear from their account. Dollfus and Jacquesson translate *loblang* as ‘god residence’ (p.146) indicating it specifically as a place name where such structures are erected (p.137), and talk separately of the structure of tree branches resembling a *shalung* as the ‘God’s home’. They etymologise *loblang* as a Mey/Sherdukpen word meaning ‘the Place *blang* of the God (s) *lo*’ (p.84) and that *blang* means ‘an inhabited place’ (p.141). In Mey/Sherdukpen, *toblang* is a ‘cattle pen’, *langbuche* a ‘fence’, *langkhung* the ‘ground floor’ of a house (Rinchen Dondrup 1988: 41, Blench 2011), and apparently *blang* and *lang* refer to structures consisting of a space directly upon the earth surrounded by an enclosure, such as the design of the *shalung* and the ‘God’s home’. Since *lo* is the Mey/Sherdukpen cognate of T. *lha* used in much ritual terminology, it would appear likely *loblang* is a spoken cognate of T. *lha brang* ‘deity’s abode/hut’ used elsewhere throughout the region to the north to describe the same type of ritual structures, just as *brang* is found in non-Kho-Bwa languages immediately north of the Mey/Sherdukpen area to refer to structures consisting of a space directly upon the earth surrounded by an enclosure and used as livestock pens, sheds and huts, e.g. Tshangla *wa brang* ‘cattle-pen’, *ta brang* ‘stable’ (Das Gupta 1968: 75); Brokpaké *ta brang* ‘cattle-pen’ (Rinchen Dondrup 1993: 36).

212 This is the ritual hut named *bhelaghar*, especially in its older, more conservative ‘tent’- or ‘tepee’-like forms.

6. Conclusions

Based upon the evidence and analysis in this study, my proposals for assigning a status to the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites within a wider perspective of regional cultural history and ethnography are as follows:

- i. As ritual literature, these texts are sophisticated later constructions based upon a pool of older linguistic and cultural resources represented in a range of Old Tibetan documents, and not only those dedicated to rites and myths, but also to administration and law. The modes of access later writers had to this older pool of resources remain unknown. The texts evince transformations in which extensive later reuse of Old Tibetan words and phrasing frequently bears only indirect or no meaningful connections back to their original environments of use. Claims of continuity with older ritual literature across a ca. 11th century divide for texts such as the *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* should only be advanced in relation to a critical accounting of such transformations.
- ii. These texts and the rites they record represent a complex interplay between certain cultural patterns known from the Tibetan Plateau and others recorded from the eastern Himalayas. Their uniqueness appears indicative of localised agency and socio-cultural phenomena present in southernmost Tibet, namely in and around Lho brag, and adjacent Himalayan areas to the south, but so far not known from elsewhere. We cannot simply identify these old texts and rites in any blanket manner as ‘Tibetan’, but only as being localised within a contiguous interface between southern Tibetan Plateau margins and eastern Himalayan highlands.
- iii. Unqualified identifications of *Rnel dri 'dul ba*, *Ste'u* and *Sha slungs* rites as “*bon*” or “Bon tradition” are unproductive and misleading in scholarly contexts. The most significant problem these sweeping designations represent is masking – by causing us to ignore or be blind to – valuable evidence of diversity and complexity across past times and spaces. Such *bon*/Bon identities can only be analytically useful for discussing old texts containing rites and myths related to mundane concerns when we comparatively justify them using transparent, critical criteria and actual empirical data. Without such support, they are best regarded as nativist claims.

* * *

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Lawa 2 = Untitled collection of 15 texts with loose *dpe cha* folios. Private collection, Lawa village, Lhuntse Dzongkhag. Photographed December 2012.

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