RITUAL SPEECH IN THE HIMALAYAS
ORAL TEXTS AND THEIR CONTEXT

edited by

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Introduction
In a volume dedicated to Himalayan oral texts that are voiced within local ritual contexts, what legitimate place might a study involving a written text hold? The synchronic ethnographic realities of nearly all the studies in this book represent a particular set of cases, those selected precisely because the ritual texts involved are exclusively oral. Yet, in a great many other Himalayan ritual environments with oral texts as their central feature, we also find the oral versions existing in complex relationships with written versions. Appeals of any kind to a special status for either oral texts or written ones are unproductive in this latter type of context. Rather, we have to consider that ritual texts exist in two alternative modes, the oral and the written. These two modes are not at all mutually exclusive in practice. Indeed, they are very creatively articulated in many instances by those with mastery over the modes of a text's existence. The case study I present here will begin illustrating this perspective. It features a short ritual text entitled the 'Incense Narrative' (sPos rabs). This text's oral mode is publicly chanted by hereditary ritual specialists on the basis of a written manuscript within a system of ancestral rites known as Bon in Bhutan. The sPos rabs by itself is a very modest instance of Himalayan ritual literature. However, it constitutes part of a far larger and more complex set of myths and rites, outside of which it has no independent value and cannot be fully understood. One of my own approaches for working with the types of data that research on such texts can generate is also illustrated in the systematic presentation of the oral and written versions of the sPos rabs below.

For my Himalayan case study region in the northeast of Bhutan, there are no ethnographic accounts available to date. Thus, I necessarily begin with at least a minimal description of relevant social, linguistic, mythical and ritual settings within which the sPos rabs text actually exists. Before turning to detail, a general comment about written literacy and texts in my wider research region is germane. One thing that is well-known about eastern Bhutan and the adjacent Monyal Corridor is a long-term influence there of Tibetan Plateau social systems and cultural patterns. This initially included certain southward migrations of peoples, a highly literate form of missionary Buddhism, and then organized, hierocratic states from the 7th century on. One might well imagine that written literacy and texts would become dominant or at least commonplace aspects of life following such historical developments. This possibility seems to be one dimension of what some scholars mean when they talk about the 'Tibetanization' of the high Himalayan fringes of the Plateau. But the situation is not so. Up until the past two decades, the vast majority of the population in the region actually lived in small rural settlements populated by subsistence

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1 My gratitude goes to Dashi Karmay Ura, Dorji Gyaltsen and The Centre for Bhutan Studies (Thinpho) for supporting my ongoing research in eastern Bhutan. Marion Weustein and Donna Hendry kindly gave constructive comments upon earlier drafts of the text.
farmers and a few pastoralists, while Buddhist monastic centres were very few and far between with none being centres of scholasticism. My own social history and ethnographic studies indicate that most local communities have long existed as predominantly oral worlds in which written texts are actually very marginal. Writing and manuscripts have principally been, and often remain, the domain of a very few specialists, being employed only for particular circumstances or exceptional occasions. Certain types of ritual activity have been one such context in which written texts and the specialists who master them temporarily punctuate the predominant orality. It is against this background that we must appreciate the case study site of Lawa I which will now describe, and which is typical of rural communities throughout the region.

Case study: The sRas rabs of Lawa

Setting

Lawa is a small ridge-top village in the highlands of northeastern Bhutan.2 The mountain spur upon which Lawa sits is located between and directly above the confluence of the Kuri Chu and Khomba Chu rivers. This confluence represents a fairly sharp linguistic divide between two different Tibetan-Burman languages both classified within the Eastern Bodish group. Kuri Chu speakers dwell along the Kuri Chu valley to the west, while communities within the Khomba Chu valley to the east speak the Khombakha dialect of the Drala language.3

Lawa’s inhabitants are mountain farmers who grow a range of grain crops (mainly maize and millet in higher fields, and rice in lower ones), and who keep a few cattle for household dairy production. The lower Khomba valley area to which Lawa belongs is renowned in Bhutan for its exquisite hand-woven silk cloth. Skilled female weavers in Lawa generate additional cash for their households by supplying cloth to wealthy customers in the capital Thimphu. In general, life in Lawa remains very modest. The community of about a hundred persons living in 15 households is actually composed of two small hamlets, Lawa itself and the tiny settlement of Taladak just over a kilometre away to the north-west along the same ridge system. Despite the twin locations, most residents are closely related, and share a community identity. While everyone in the village is born and socialized into at least a nominal status as a Tibetan-style Buddhist, they also participate jointly in two forms of non-Buddhist communal worship. There is a cult of a local territorial deity, as well as a ritual system locally called Bon in which sky-dwelling ancestral deities termed Srid-pa‘Iha are periodically addressed for replenishment of life powers and fertility, and for mundane support. The sRas rabs or ‘Incense Narrative’ to be presented and analysed below belongs to this latter cult, focussed upon the Srid-pa‘Iha.

Unlike many of the dozens of more or less anonymous mountain villages in this part of Bhutan, Lawa itself has a historical profile. This is not an incidental point, because the cult of Srid-pa‘Iha in the region is almost always associated with sites at which a particular strata of much older, hereditary political and social power had been localized already prior to state formation in the region. In the past, Lawa was the seat of a local hereditary ruler, the Taya Gap. Few details of the lineage are known, although it is held that a vision of the house, Gap Sherab, was a supporter of Ugyen Wangchuk at the time the latter became the First King of Bhutan in 1907.4 The descendants of the Taya Gap dwell in an imposing old, multi-story stone house at the village centre, which is an important focus for Srid-pa‘Iha rites in the community. Not only is the house itself a key site for ritual performance, its household membership includes a hereditary specialist for Srid-pa‘Iha worship, as well as having the hereditary obligation as a major ritual sponsor of the regular festivals dedicated to the Srid-pa‘Iha deities. Even further back in the past, the strategic ridgetop site of Lawa was very likely the location of Shing zar-stod mentioned in late 17th century documents as the site of a former stronghold (mkhar) of the Wang-ma clan, known as Wang-ma-mkhar.5 Today, the Wang La hill stands above the village, as the abode of the territorial deity of the same name who presides over the community’s area. Lawa’s links with present-day Gangcaur village, far beneath in the deep Kuri Chu valley to the west, continue today in the form of a ritual relationship. Lawa’s pla-mi, who is the main hereditary ritual specialist leading Srid-pa‘Iha worship, also serves the Gangcaur community, and the ancestral deities of the two villages are regarded as siblings.

Worship of Srid-pa‘Iha at Lawa nowadays takes the form of a major and complex festival called Pla, and this is the ritual context for performance of the sRas rabs narrative we will examine below. The Pla at Lawa is not unique. Closely related festivals named Pla, Pha, Pcha or Cha are or have been – some are now defunct – staged by certain communities in all the parallel Himalayan river valleys just south of the Tibetan Plateau margins, from Kuria in Bhutan to the west across to Tawang in India to the east. The word pla and its cognates have a double meaning. On the one hand, as a technical term it designates the mobile vitality principle (actually a complex of divisible components) associated with each living, embodied person, but one which endures beyond a person’s physical death. This is a common Himalayan idea, often inadequately glossed as the ‘soul.’ The same word Pla (and cognates) is also used as a category title or proper name component of ancestral deities. In local thinking and practice, the pla and the Pla are interrelated.

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2 Location: N 27°41’08.7″, E 90°11’56.7″, at 2253m. Lawa is the modern administrative version of the name, and that found on most maps. Inhabitants actually pronounce it ‘Lhaa’ while older documents in the village spell it La‘og.

3 On these Eastern Bodish languages, see van Driem 2007, Hydlup 2011, 2013, and Bodt 2012: chapt.10.

4 Oral history reports Gap Sherab was succeeded by his son Gap Zangla, who enjoyed influence until the third King’s reforms of the mid-1950s, followed by Gap Gomo, and Gap Ugyen, the latter being the last ‘Gap’ to titled and the elder brother of the present head of the Taya Gap household. The Taya Gap named Sherab was a signatory to the oath of allegiance document supporting Ugyen Wangchuk’s ascension as ‘Brug gYud-po (see Li, Glibg gnyer rta pa gug po’I ha’ (2010), cited from a copy of the document held at the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu, cf. translation in White 1999: 227).

5 See the gYud rgya: 238, 273, in Ari 1986.

6 Pla and its cognates are not alternatives for written Iha or phywa, as was previously assumed; Ari 1980: 12, Pommelet 1974.
Lawa's major Pha festival is staged only once every two years during the 11th Bhutanese lunar month, while every alternate year a very modest 'small Pha' rite is performed. The major Pha I observed during December 2012 was staged over six non-consecutive days and nights, and involved all residents of Lawa and Tabader. During this whole period, all Buddhist ritual activity in the community is proscribed. Each day of Pha is comprised of a range of different rites at a series of locations around the village and its environs. The Pha is presided over by the pla-mi ('pla man'), plus his two ritual assistants known as the am-pa or 'horn-blower' who carries and blows a large, silver ornamented buffalo horn, and the pa-lo-pa, who holds a special ritual device known as a pa-lo which is a fan-like framework bearing white cock feathers and decorative cloth. Like all the ritual specialists for Srid-pa'i lha worship throughout the region, these roles are exclusively male and ideally transmitted within circles of close agnates. Additionally, during specific rites on certain days of Pha, these three male specialists are joined by four pre-pubescent girls from specific sponsor households. They are called pla'i kham, an honorific title literally meaning 'consort/spouse of the Pha deity'. The ritual dedication of young girls as 'brides' for the ancestral deities represents an old practice preserved in the cult of Srid-pa'i lha throughout the region. All of the seven specialist actors just mentioned are the performers of the sPhes rabs narrative during Pha.

The main rites of Pha entail long periods of oral delivery of ritual texts in a chant form. These chants are invariably lead by the pla-mi, while the am-pa and pa-lo-pa support him. All the texts they chant together belong to a specific genre locally designated as rabs. Rabs narratives are the mainstay of worship within the sixty plus communities who participate in the Srid-pa'i lha cult throughout this part of the eastern Himalayas, and I will say more on them below. The short sPhes rabs narrative in this case study is publicly chanted together with a suite of other closely related rabs on the morning of the fifth day of the Pha festival. This day is referred to as 'Khromagyen' or 'Khromagen' (written Khrom-ne-gyen), which means something like 'display and adorn' and actually relates to the function of the pa-lo device. Khromagyen is the name given to a particular ritual site (dorge-lha), consisting of two small dance grounds at the edge of Lawa village and oriented towards the northeast, with a spectacular view of the Khoma Chu river valley below. The orientation is significant: according to origin myths, this is the direction from which the ancestors arrived when they migrated here down the Khoma valley. Khromagyen dorge-lha is where the sPhes rabs is always performed.

Specialists, manuscripts and language
Narratives explicitly designated as rabs are mainly found on the Tibetan Plateau and in the immediately adjacent highland zone of the Himalayas. Moreover, cognate ritual narrative traditions maintained by societies speaking Tibetan-Burman languages can be found in use by ritual specialists who share much in common with the pla-mi and other exponents of Srid-pa'i lha rites, and at sites along the entire extended eastern Himalayas. Well-documented examples from highland Nepal include the oral rye chants of the Tamu/Gurung phajo, the oral rinpao and sangesap chants of the western Tamang bomo, and the chants of the Naxi ditæ-mab (or 'dongku') of highland Yunnan. These and other similar specialists are usually termed 'shamans' by ethnographers, although definitions of shaman – where even given, rather than simply assumed – vary within the scholarship on the Himalayas. At a certain level of comparison, it might be useful to consider the specialists and ritual literature of the Srid-pa'i lha cult in relation to such Himalayan shamans in the wider region, yet only on the basis of a certain set of basic traits they all share in common: skill based upon oral recitation of a substantial repertoire of ritual texts (often in the order of thousands of verse lines); undertaking verbal ritual journeys; invoking tutelary or helper beings often considered as ancestors or primordial archetypes; and their role being primarily transmitted through close male agnates, if not via direct patrilineal succession. Of additional interest in the present context, is Katherine Swancott's use of the expression 'text-reading shamans' when describing bino ritual specialists among the Nuosu (Yi) hill people of Yunnan. The bino share the same set of common traits I have just outlined for the other specialists above, albeit that their chanted ritual texts are written down. Thus, along with the bino, and the ditæ-mab among the Nuosu's Naxi neighbours, the ritual specialists of the Srid-pa'i lha cult might be considered within a sub-group of 'text-reading shamans' who all orally chant an extensive ritual literature from manuscripts.

Considered as text-reading shamans, the high majority of Srid-pa'i lha ritual specialists possess manuscripts holding the full written texts of most, if not all, of their major rabs narratives. In addition, there are always certain other rites that are not rabs-based, but which are also recorded in such manuscripts. For example, secret spells and instructions for their use, or more conventional forms of offerings to local deities. Like other specialists with written texts, we find a specific 'culture of the book' in place among text-reading shamans of the Srid-pa'i lha cult, plus a whole spectrum of possible relationships any particular specialist might have with his texts in practice. All this cannot be ignored when studying the rabs and written versions of their ritual texts.

All the written texts belonging to a text-reading shaman lineage are handed down from one generation of encumbants to the next, and sometimes recopied when they become too tattered from use or fragile due to age. The manuscripts as objects are treated with caution, never casually. When not actually in use for scheduled calendrical worship, they are always kept carefully wrapped in cloth, locked in a box, and usually stored in either the specialist's family house or the village temple, on the attic level directly under the roof. This places them above all the potentially defiling activities of the household. If manuscripts are removed again outside of the context of festival times (and this is very rare), a small purification rite is usually performed. When in use, the manuscripts can be handled by other persons at the specialist's discretion, yet they seldom pass out of the hands of their owners. There are two reasons for all of the above forms of care regarding these texts. One is that certain manuscripts will contain the secret spells of the lineage and instructions for their use. Since these spells are regarded as highly potent, they must never be revealed.

to anyone else. Secondly, and as already indicated, all the main ritual equipment which is used to worship the Srid-pa’i lha must never become ritually defiled, and thus potentially offend the deities. This means, in particular, any inadvertent contacts with the pollution associated with birth and death, and proscribed foods which ritual specialists must avoid (mainly pork, chicken, garlic and onions). The best way to ensure these two problems do not occur is control of access to and circulation of the manuscripts. Thus, manuscripts containing ritual texts are only practically accessible during actual performances of rites, and this in large measure applies to the text-reading shaman’s access to his own manuscripts as well. It means that in practice, articulations between oral and written versions of a ritual text are more in the order of processes learned over time via experience or developed while chanting. They do not result from abstract ‘study’ in terms of the reading and writing of manuscripts.

While written versions of the rabs are found at most sites of Srid-pa’i lha worship, they are by no means a compulsory or absolutely necessary item within the ritual tradition. Certain rabs are very seldom, if ever, written down. For instance, the actual itineraries of verbal journeys to the top of the sky to invite the deities are only rarely recorded in manuscript form. The clear preference is to retain these in oral form, perhaps because of the perforative character of the verbal ritual journey itself, which, depending upon the individual ritual specialist, can involve forms of visualisation and silent mental recitation. Certain lineages of Bon specialists possess written texts. I was told on several occasions by such persons that their lineage manuscripts had formerly been destroyed due to house fires, which are in fact relatively common in this region. At some villages, collective memory has it that due to losses elsewhere, manuscripts were borrowed to be copied by specialists from other communities in the past, but then never returned. Whatever the explanation, specialists without manuscripts have simply memorized all their rabs, which they then only ever express in an oral mode, although they or some literate helper may again reassemble the oral forms into written form. Additionally, certain specialists who do possess manuscripts from their lineage forebears are themselves nonliterate, and they too must memorize all the rabs. In fact, many older and highly literate specialists can more or less repeat the entire corpus of their written rabs in oral form, simply due to the deep familiarity with the material ensuing from decades of reading and reciting the same texts. One can observe these experienced specialists chanting thousands of verses perfectly and fluidly from memory during the course of a week-long Bon festival, all the while with their manuscripts habitually tucked into their gowns, resting upon the altar or even held in their hands, yet remaining bound tightly within their cloth covers which are never removed. The wrapped manuscript then becomes a mere prop of habit. In practice, such persons have become voluntarily ‘postliterate’* while functioning as specialists, due to an attained mastery of their ritual texts in an oral mode. On the other hand, older, nonliterate specialists sometimes carry their open manuscripts during the performance of rites, and when they lose track of the chant order, or cannot recall the exact wording, a literate assist-

ant will refer to the written texts in order to prompt them. At certain sites where a nonliterate specialist is to retire from service, mostly due to age or infirmity, and where no clear successor has been groomed or is apparent, it has been the case that the retiring incumbent will be requested to recite his entire corpus of rabs so that they can be written down in manuscript form for the convenience of the future incumbent, or simply to ensure their preservation during uncertain times of transition. Haplography, and related phenomena of manuscript cultures, are of course a common contingency of such (re-)recording and copying efforts, and thus another predictable source of variation in the ritual texts.

What all these aforementioned types of oral and written textual practices reveal is that, within the Srid-pa’i lha cult and its text-reading shaman’s texts flow back and forth in various ways between their oral and written modes, and do not necessarily remain exclusively in either one mode or the other. There is much flexibility and creativity possible in practice. All this is also somewhat true of many other traditions of ritual texts in the wider region. For instance, I previously documented very similar types of ‘fluid’ relationships between written and oral modes of the popular genre of ritual guides for places of pilgrimage used in both Tibetan Plateau and Himalayan areas.9

Another significant point is the actual language text-reading shamans employ in their manuscripts. This, too, can have a large bearing upon the articulation of written with oral versions of ritual texts, as well as how we study and understand the texts as outsiders. In the case of Srid-pa’i lha worship, Classical Tibetan is the common written language. Due to all the types of textual practice discussed above, these written Tibetan texts exhibit varying degrees of influence from locally spoken East Bodish languages. This can range from influence upon a few words through to entire texts being rather complete transcriptions of spoken East Bodish languages in Tibetan script. At Lawa, it is Khomakha dialect of Dzala and also Kartöp that influence ritual texts. I chose the sPos rabs recorded below because the level of such influence is very light, making it less complicated to represent and work with. But other texts at the same site are complex hybrids. Thus, spellings and vocabulary items are frequently influenced by spoken language, just as they are always be by the level of formal literacy of any scribe. But these processes can change the actual meaning of what is read and understood over time. I will give an example of this from the sPos rabs in the final section below.

**Rabs and their performance**

All rites used to worship Srid-pa’i lha ancestral deities have two dimensions: ritual actions performed by the specialists; and the chant’s ‘narratives’ (rabs) conveying the rite’s origin, ritual ingredients and equipment, and fundamental steps. It is the nature of rabs, as a form of ritual literature, which demands production of an oral version or mode of any text. The vocal ‘exposition’ (smrug) of a rabs must be publicly chanted by a dedicated specialist, like the pla-mi at Lawa, for a rite to be considered complete, valid and efficacious. Such origin stories serve as a kind of archetype, meaning a precedent or original model

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8 I borrow the term from Scott 2009: chapt. 6 ½ “Orality, Writing, and Texts.”

9 See Huber 1999: chapt. 5.
for a contemporary specialist performer’s activities, with ritual actions supposedly recreating or reenacting what the characters in the stories did in times past. This is also explicitly related to conceptions of a rite’s efficacy, and we often find final rhetorical statements in rabs are formulated along the lines of “what was beneficial in the past shall be beneficial now.”

Rabs is an old story type, or perhaps even loose ‘genre’, being well-attested in pre-11th-century Old Tibetan documents and other old manuscripts. Remarkably, when we compare the rabs used in Srid-pa’i lha worship today with some of these older known versions, they are very similar in structure and content, with common phrasing, proper names and vocabulary items being preserved verbatim. The bulk of existing scholarship on this type of ritual literature has investigated very old rabs, and it can be highly instructive for understanding the narrative structure and style of similar texts in use today. I will invoke this material several times again below. Nevertheless, insights gained from older rabs have severe limitations. The old narratives are merely preserved stories, and there is not a single instance in which we have any kind of contextualizing information about their possible performance. In this void, all commentators have so far assumed that use of rabs precedes a rite, that their chanted exposition is prior to the performance of associated ritual actions. This is not demonstrated by the use of rabs in Srid-pa’i lha worship. In that context, it is rather the case of chanting the rabs being the actual rite itself, or that chanting and related ritual actions occur simultaneously rather than sequentially. As an example entirely typical of how rabs are used in most communities following the system of the Srid-pa’i lha cult, let us now consider performance of the sPos rabs at Lawa.

When the sPos rabs recorded below was performed during December 2012, the three male specialists plus the four pla’i lam girls, all adorned in special costumes, formed a circle in ranked order at the Khromagyen dance ground. Joining this circle after a short time were two very small boys, one the son and the other the nephew of two of the male ritual specialists, and both dressed in clean and neat traditional male gowns. Everyone wore a white, turban-like crown upon their heads, and were barefooted, as per ritual requirements. Ranked in order behind the pla-mi were the pa-lo-pa, the um-pa, the two small boys, and finally the four pla’i lam girls. The circle they all formed had a large flat stone serving as a simple altar at its centre. Upon this stone were placed incense sticks in a grain-filled pot, a brass pot holding libation water in which a twig of Artemisia was dipped for distributing the liquid, and a small metal incense brazier into which a fresh branch of juniper was inserted. Next to the stone altar sat a large wooden barrel containing fresh, locally brewed beer. Led by the pla-mi, the three male specialists simultaneously chanted the text. Their delivery was sung with a distinctive musical quality. The actual pace of the oral chant was determined by the pla-mi reading from the manuscript he held in his hands. As the three specialists chanted through the entire text over a period of 20 minutes, all the performers continually danced around the circle in an anticlockwise direction termed a bon-skor or ‘Bon circuit’. The dance, also led by the pla-mi, involved a short step forward around the circle, a ninety degree turn in towards the central altar, a slight pause, a reverse turn back to the line of the circle, and then the next step forward again. All steps were performed slowly, and without any hand gestures. The ritual materials and equipment positioned within the dance circle were not used at all during the sPos rabs performance, being merely present, while the actual fumigation rite in which incense was burnt was only performed later in the day. Thus, a sung chant based upon a manuscript, and dance steps by a set of specialists observing ritual requirements were the sum total of the rite’s performance. When the form of the chanted oral text is then taken into account, the performative dimension becomes more complex, as we will see below.

Mythical framework, sub-stories, text structure

As others have meaningfully pointed out, rabs narratives are normally comprised of a number of modules with shorter sub-stories (also defined as rabs).33 These explain the origins of the first ritual actors, problem(s) for which their rites are a solution, the equipment and ritual ingredients required to conduct the rite, and the basic steps of ritual action. Sub-stories frequently depict or refer to a primordial search undertaken to gain what is needed. The short sPos rabs we will present below is an example of just such a sub-story. It narrates the origin search for the incense required as a part of the larger cycle of rites to which the sPos rabs belongs, as well as how the incense was first utilized in a rite. But understanding the significance of any sub-story depends upon knowing the larger framework of myths and rites it is a subordinate part of, and that will now be sketched for the sPos rabs.

Srid-pa’i lha worship typically consists of a ninefold ritual process, described in its oral and written texts as the ‘nine divisions for a rite’ (bon la le’u dgra). As a key part of this process, the lha deities to be worshipped must be invited down from the top of the multi-levelled sky world where they dwell, and settled temporarily upon earth at the site of the ritual with the appropriate conditions of purity and acts of hospitality. To ensure the proper and unhindered vertical transit of the deities between sky and earth worlds, a cycle of rites termed ad perform. The verb ad means ‘to eliminate’ and ‘to purify’, and the ad cycle used in my research area today is comprised of a suite of different purificatory practices employed in a sequence. These include fumigation with the fragrant smoke of plants (buang, sposer or duul sel), lustral with scented waters (tschan), ablation with pure waters (khrus or bhal), elimination of negative hindrances along a route by engaging specific helper deities (lam sel), and a special purification for the four seasons of the year (dus le’u lha mchod). The origin myth of the whole ad cycle and its individual sub-stories first presents the original problem of lha in the sky and humans on earth being cut off from each other. Much of the story is narrated by an archetypal specialist (gchen) named Yanga Gyim-kong. He is always referred to as ‘elder brother’ (Ad or A-ho) because all of the ancestral deities and their specialists within the greater Srid-pa’i lha worship system are specifically designated with kinship terms. The oldest Tibetan records we have of this same ’elder brother’ gchen named Ya-ngal Gyim-kong acting as a sel specialist occur in rabs

10 Dotson 2013: 144.

narratives recorded in manuscripts which have been provisionally dated to around the 15th century. Moreover, these manuscripts were discovered in 2006 at a Tibetan Plateau site just 60 kilometres northwards up a major river valley system along which the old trade routes between the 16th to 18th regions of southern Tibet and the villages in southern Bhutan where the Sel rubs and rites used in the Srid-pa'i lha cult are still current today. 12 There seems little doubt that we are dealing with a tradition of narrative (and perhaps ritual) action of very long duration within this particular region.

The necessity of maintaining a stainless relationship between humans and their innate ancestral deities by way of purification rites is explained in the long origin myth of sel rites. Versions of this myth are common to most Srid-pa'i lha worship communities of northeast Bhutan. In the myth, the primordial human descent groups are the 'Four Clans of Little Men' (Mi'u-rigs bzhi). Their most crucial ritual relationship is that with their ancestral and innate deities, the lha, but in particular with those of descent (phre-lha and mo-lha) who are identified as the Srid-pa'i lha and reckoned as spacial ancestors of clans or lineages. Due to defiling human behaviours, these deities remain in the sky and dwell out of reach within protective strongholds (mghar). Thus, humans can no longer gain life powers and support from them, and instead disease, chaos and torment ensue for the Four Clans of Little Men. A prognosis is requested from female divination specialists (mo-ma) in the sky, which reveals the problem and recommends that 'elder brother Ya-ngal Gyim-kong be called for. Ya-ngal describes the performance of an ensemble of sel or 'elimination' rites to open and clear the path between humans and their lha once again, after which balance can be restored. The sPos rubs is a sub-story within the overall Sel rubs, and thus Ya-ngal appears as the narrator in its text. At the beginning of the sPos rubs sub-story, Ya-ngal states that in it he is offering a specific 'section' (lé) of his comprehensive ritual solution.

The pla-mi of Lawa has a number of different manuscripts dealing with purification rites. Only two need be mentioned here. One in 3a folios contains the Sel rubs cycle, including an elaborate version of the core myth of the sel tradition just outlined above. It is part of a larger volume of manuscripts kept in storage and little used, and obviously serves as a 'master copy' from which smaller 'working texts' have been reproduced for firsthand use during festivals. The other manuscript, in which the sPos rubs of our present investigation is written, is one of the pla-mi's working texts. With seven numbered folios (recto/verso), it is missing its final page(s). Allowing for the usual non-standard spellings in such documents, its title, Bon grig rangs rubs abwa legs pa grig bshungs, can be glossed as "Containing an Elegant Exegetical Purification Narrative of the Rites." 13 The text has three main divisions, which are further partitioned into sets of sub-stories and lists concerning the different ritual materials and activities comprising the sel cycle:

A. Concerning purity and cleansing (gtang, dpag, bkra): i. 'Elimination (rite) with fragrant smoke' (Dri chen dud sel): - Genealogy of nine incense (spas) types required to purify lha; - sPos rubs narrating the original search for incense to purify lha; - 'Purification of the stronghold' (mKhar bsangs) narrating types of pollution associated with human activities (especially at the hearth) and domestic animals.

ii. Purification using lustration (Khrus chu rubs): - Search for the best types of pure waters; - Types of lustration with scented waters (tslun) for different lha.

iii. Funerary (bsangs): - Tree species used for smoke; - Origins of fire narrative (Me rubs), as stolen from srin-po demons by the trickster/messenger bat. 14

The versions of narratives in this particular working text are abreviated from longer narratives inscribed in the Lawa pla-mi's 'master' manuscript mentioned above. I have come across this trend to abbreviate the narratives at a few other sites as well. It appears to be a response related to social changes effecting the overall context in which Srid-pa'i lha worship takes place. 15 Whatever the case, in order to know what type of variants stories happens to be at a site like Lawa, one must consult or already be familiar with other manuscripts.

Prelude to the sPos rubs

As in many rubs for Srid-pa'i lha worship, an origin account and genealogy of the subject of the narrative sets the scene for following sub-stories or sections. Since chanting of the genealogy of incense (spas) immediately precedes chanting of the sPos rubs to introduce the latter, it is briefly summarized here: The grandfather of incense was the White Snow Mountain of the Phenomenal World (Srid-pa'i Gungs-ti dkar-po) while its grandmother

13 As is clear from the text's content, abwa 'here' is an abbreviated reference to abwa 'phung laid pa,' to extol/exalt the status of the deities being addressed. In the Srid-pa'i lha cult, bom commonly has the nominal meaning 'rite.' One can note that the sho terminal here and for titles and sections used commonly in many local Srid-pa'i lha cult manuscripts, with vowel-bearing sho composed of a 4 superscript stacked upon ha, appears to be an archaisms. For instance, see dbGa'-thang: 12, 36, 52, 54, 83.
14 On the trickster/messenger bat, see Huber 2013: 166-168. The final pages of the manuscript are missing here. It is most likely those contained the kRa'- thugs rubs or 'Narrative of Iron' which normally accompanies the Me rubs at this point, and that tells the origins of iron items related to the use of fire.
15 For one, during the Third King of Bhutan's social reforms in the 1920s, the major tax-paying households and minor social elites who have traditionally been hereditary ritual sponsors of Srid-pa'i lha festivals lost their inherited privileges, including control over peasant serfs as a domestic labour resource. This, and modern out-migration from rural villages, greatly increased the sponsorship burden of staging major festivals. The trend has been to reduce worship events in frequency and size, including abbreviating performance of cycles of rites.
was the Queen of the Earth Foundation (Sa-gzhi bTsun-mo). The parents of incense, Heat (Dzad) and Moisture (Lachan), produced nine sons who are the nine types of incense plants (pp.9): 1. Incense of Gyur, 2. White incense of Central Tibet, 3. Meadow incense of Mon, white Sandalwood, red Sandalwood, yellow Sandalwood, white Eaglewood, incense of du-ru-ka, and yellow-white incense. These plants are known as the 'nine king varieties of incense' (pp.9). They are explained as those required to purify the crucial relationship with the innate and ancestral protective lha (go ba'i lha) whom humans are born together with and stand in intimate relation to throughout their entire lifespan. In the Lawa tradition, they form a set of seven lha (the number can vary), who encompass all essential aspects of a person's social and physical existence, including descent, idealized or prescriptive affinity, the body, territory and socially defined residence unit. The Lawa version of the myth specifies them as those of the patriline (pha-lha), matriline (mo-lha), individual life force (leg-lha), mother's brother (zhung-lha), protection from and conquest of enemies (dgur-lha), area of abode (yul-lha) and site of family/household/community (yul-bdag). At this point in the text, the stPhas rabs commences.

Recording and presentation of text versions

Oral delivery of Himalayan ritual texts can be sophisticated performative events. In the case of stPhas lha worship, the performances are highly complex. In addition to coordinated chanting by multiple specialists, the musical quality of vocal delivery, and simultaneous dance, they can be systematically embellished with musical instruments such as flatbells and buffalo horns (the additional use of the single-sided drum by the main specialists in this region ceased during the past half century). Moreover, rites performed by a text-reading shaman add yet another layer of complexity which must also be taken into account, in the form of the manuscript text consulted to actually lead a chant, as well as the manner the text is read. The ethnographer's challenge is how best to record and later review such dynamic ensembles.

In my own experience as an ethnographer, successful methodologies are not available in any fixed or standard form for replication from 'cookbooks'. Rather, they are more in the nature of inventions or adaptations contingent upon circumstances, and always somewhat experimental in their application. The use of new technologies is one such circumstance. Recently, I began filming entire sequences of rites with small, inexpensive digital cameras. Those devices are usually mounted on tripods with an overview of the main area of events, ideally in locations where they neither disturb nor get disturbed. Supplied with enough energy and storage capacity, the cameras simply record video and sound for hours on end without my further intervention. My aims with the resulting recordings only relate to research support, not to producing finished ethnographic films. Primarily, I consult them as an easy to access aide-mémoire, as a multi-media extension of my usual hand- 

16 Exact meaning uncertain. I think in this context it refers to 'gyul' or 'bHa gyur-ri, a district located between Bod ('Tibet') and Mon in an ideal regional geography.

17 In Tibet, du-ru-ka is sometimes used as a traditional name for boughs of juniper, but that is unlikely here.

written fieldnotes, to help generate a written ethnography. Additionally, they provide an alternative or back-up soundtrack to oral material I otherwise capture with a small audio recorder. Finally, they often allow rather precise and comprehensive articulation, in real time, of what research subjects say or sing with their bodily actions.

In order to represent the disparate types of available data in a manner which maintains them together in their real time occurrence for analysis, I employ a simple transcription based upon a row and column table. The different possible data columns – time coding, oral text, written text, other performer sounds, dance steps, other performer actions, musical scoring, and so on – can be easily expanded, reduced or juxtaposed as needs be. Below I reproduce a version of my transcription worksheet for the performance of the stPhas rabs recorded on the fifth day of the 156 festival in Lawa village, Khoma district of northeastern Bhutan. Such worksheets were never intended by me for publication within a finished ethnography, except perhaps as technical appendices. The complete data set input into this worksheet was actually derived from a combination of digital film clips, audio recordings, my handwritten fieldnotes and still photographs. Since the desired focus here is demonstrating the relationship between oral and written versions of a ritual text, and because the original format of the transcription worksheet was designed for display with software on a computer monitor, rather than in a printed book, I only include three categories of data (written text, time coding, vocalized text) from the possible total available, together with an English translation.

18 This was the 14th day of the 11th Bhutanese lunar month, or 27th of December, 2012.

19 Tibetan script in transcribed according to the Wylie (1959) system, with the exception of using capital A for the thirtieth Tibetan consonant and I, E, U or Ö when it carries the respective vowel sign. I also preserve in Wylie transcription those oral syllables which were chanted faithfully from the written text, so that commonalities in both versions are immediately apparent. Text set in bold type represents non-semantic vocal embellishments not found in the written text. Time coding from the digital movie files is in minutes/seconds. My notes and apparatus extraneous to the spoken and written ritual text are set within [ ] brackets. Rather than an extensive philological treatment of the written version, I retain unedited all original spellings so as to reveal local writing practices found in such manuscripts (see Appendix for original manuscript pages). Most spelling variations will be obvious in context to competent readers of Tibetan (e.g. gn 'dakar for mgo 'dakar, 'dub ma for mdag ma, gnyis for gyi, thong for mthong, and so on), although I have annotated problematic or ambiguous readings, dialect-influenced vocabulary and instances of infection. For the sake of accessibility, and to reduce the clutter of brackets and insertions, I offer a lightly interpretive translation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Verse text and manuscript reference</th>
<th>Time coding, oral chant, and observations</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>[2b] 6: bsho'i le ya nag chal na ye///</td>
<td>00:31:02B: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>Still, an Incense Narrative division [of the rites] is needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>da rlung sPon ruby [3a, 1] le's cig 'tshal///</td>
<td>00:32:025b: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>Two white-headed old men went to procure the incense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>dang po sPon 'tshul///</td>
<td>00:33:029b: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>In the beginning, who wanted to procure the incense?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>rgyal po gu dkar gyur kyis sPon 'tshul phyin///</td>
<td>00:34:028b: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>By day, they kept on telling stories, and so,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>nyen mo nag tum gling gling nas//</td>
<td>00:35:027b: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>As a result, they did not find any incense at all.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>sna-mo sna pa dmar dam gyis chod//</td>
<td>00:36:025b: [Here the pla-mi discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at 2a, to 3a, omitting these first two written lines of the 3a Pos subs before recommencing to chant.]</td>
<td>At night, they were stopped by the pitch darkness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 'Tshal commonly occurs in these rabs, but with multiple shades of meaning, and sometimes as a scribal variant of 'tshad and 'tshal. For example, to search, 'to procure' (see following note). Here it must be read in the context of the longer SeI rabs myth informing this sPos rabs sub-story, there the current narrator Ya-nag is summoned and requested to provide a ritual solution, he consents to do so.

21 We read 'tshad 'to procure' here in other written versions of the sPos rabs.

22 Following phonetic imperatives, Drols- and Delps-speaking scribes frequently write the cognitive marker with a simple ' which confusingly represents standard orthography for one form of the Tibetan genitive marker.

23 A variation of sna pa'i smag (rum) found in other sPos rabs manuscripts.

24 The recurring expression sPos dang las (also sPos skyi las below), literally the 'response with incense,' is a carryover from versions of the longer SeI rabs myth, in which a ritual problem faced by the human protagonists is that they 'cannot reply [to the lha] with incense' (sPos dang las ma mtsa). I simplify it here for readability.

25 Read: rgyal ma rgyal.
26 Uncertain. I read nmo rgyas spang 'brog.  
27 Spoken 'menchung' (usually written sman chung in local texts) means 'young girl'; cf. also dialect 'menchur' (smam shur) as parallel form of male 'dagshur' (dag shur).  
28 The le lu is a pseudo-onomatopoetic flourish commonly used to express the 'bellowing' of smoke, steam or snowflakes in the air.

29 Although no agent is indicated in the original, in all other written variants of this ruba the female character is the agent.

30 The sla nga (also written lha nga or slung in Dzongska and in local texts) is a shallow metal pan used in most rural Bhutanese houses for burning incense, while rga' gling (lka) describes its broad mouth or opening.
Articulation of oral and written modes

Reviewing the worksheet quickly reveals the exact relationship between the written text of the Dvo rabs and its live performance as an oral chant during the stü rites. An ideal metrage of seven syllables has been achieved for most of the written verse lines, although individual lines can vary from 3–9 syllables. Each verse line from the manuscript is chanted in four successive oral permutations, three of which are unique:

i) all syllables of each verse line of written text are chanted;

ii) permutation i. is repeated, but with an initial 'way' vocal embellishment inserted as its first syllable;

iii) the final three syllables from the written line are then repeated as a refrain, with vocal embellishments framing them: 'ay' chanted as the first syllable and either 'ay', 'ah', 'eh' or 'oh' chanted as the fourth syllable;

iv) the initial three syllables from the written line are then repeated as a second refrain, with vocal embellishments 'ay', 'ah', 'eh' and 'e' chanted as the first syllable.

Thus, only permutation i literally follows the actual text written down in the manuscript, and even this is not strictly applied; further into the chant a single vocal embellishment is sometimes added at the start of the first line, thus replicating permutation ii at those points. The pattern for permutations iii and iv means that each middle or ideally fourth syllable within the order of every ideally seven syllable line is omitted from both of these refrains. One notes with interest that the majority of lines in which the pla-mi actually paused at and skipped over are those with either a lesser or great syllable count than the ideal line metre of seven. Perhaps this is mere coincidence. However, it could suggest that the coordinated act of reading then chanting to generate the refrain permutations iii and iv may be more of a cognitive challenge once a rhythm based upon a set syllable metre has been well established by the performer. One overall result of this fourfold permutation system for chanting text lines is an approximate threefold increase in performance time. Each line of the written text requires between 8–10 seconds for the pla-mi and his colleagues to chant in full. However, each fourfold cycle of permutations based upon the same line requires about 30 seconds of chanting.

The insertion of simple, non-semantic vocal embellishments, as we have here, often occurs in orally chanted forms of ritual texts in the Himalayas. One point of interest is that initial embellishments occurring at the start of lines, sections or even entire rabs in Srid-
pa'i lha worship are by far most commonly based upon a-syllables and their variants, such as ah, naah, a-hii, a-heey, a-heii, and so on. Exactly the same phenomenon occurs in chants by other Himalayan shamans from Nepal to Yunnan. On the other hand, exchanging the actual order of syllabic blocks – and thus words – to yield a scrabbled syntax or fragment-ed lexemes for each sentence or clause represented by a line of text, is unique in my experience of documenting ritual chants along the eastern Himalayas between east Bhutan and the Mishmi Hills.

It is noteworthy that variations of this same style of chanting are typical of many sites of Srid-pa’i lha worship in eastern Bhutan and the Monyul Corridor, where the specialist is normally a text-reading shaman using a manuscript. For comparison, below is a worksheet sample of the ‘Ablution Narrative’ (Khrus ru) chanted from a manuscript by the bow-po at Changmadung, a site of Srid-pa’i lha worship in the lower Kholong Chu valley of eastern Bhutan far distant from the case study site of Lawa, and where different languages are spoken:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Manuscript text</th>
<th>Time coding and oral chant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A he /</td>
<td>06:26. Ah aheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>da ni lha la khrus ru lha yod //</td>
<td>06:29. Ah da ni eh lha la, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>06:30. Ah khrus ru lha yod, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>sher gty chu bo gunggai chu chu //</td>
<td>06:44. Ah sheer gty eh chu bo, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>06:51. Ah gunggai' eh chu, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>gunggai chu dang de dang goig //</td>
<td>06:59. Ah gunggai' chu dang ah, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>07:06. Ah de dang ha goig, Ahaheey!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All this reveals that the written texts function as a baseline from which oral elaborations with their own logics are derived. These latter are never written down, and are only transmitted and learned by doing, when chanting alongside experienced specialists within the context of actual ritual performance. This pattern of relationship between a written liturgy which serves as an outline or guide offering the main points and sequence, and a more fully developed oral practice, is well-attested in Tibet and the high Himalayas. An analogous example from a ritual tradition bearing many close similarities to Srid-pa’i lha worship is found in the use of pictographic manuscripts by Naxi dib-im specialists. Concerning Naxi ritual manuscripts and their use, Michael Oppitz observed that, "The pictographs serve as mnemonic aids for much longer texts not written out: invisible bodies of oral tradition, recited aloud by the ritual specialists." 34

33 For examples, see Rock 1948: 300 on Hoo daah hoo hoo he and Hoo ho ho in Naxi Maba-epo’ rite sometimes led by a dib-im; Bhattacharjee 1983: 130 on Anjea Hii in Idu Mishmi funerals lead by an gii; Gaenssle 2007: 371, 376-302 on long-drawn a-ha in Sarainew rites of Mewang Ral; Haalmann 2000: 152-154, 286-293 on ha yia yia in chants for raising the sapa ‘soul’ by the Locherung Ral yelangaa; Hölder 1984: passim on a-s-s-s-s-s-a, aha a-s-s-s-a, bii, ha-s-s-s-s-s-s-s, ha-s-s-s-s-s-s-s in various chants of western Tanang Jomdo.

34 Oppitz 2014: 317.

Of the three Lawa specialists who chanted the text simultaneously during the sPoes rabs performance presented above, both the pla-mi and pa-la-pu are literate, while the um-po, who is older and by far the most experienced of the three, is unable to read. It was the um-po who actually had the text perfectly memorized. Among these three specialist actors, traditional ritual protocol dictates that the literate pla-mi holding and reading from his manuscript should always lead the chant. It is only he, as the hereditary specialist, who has the actual power (i.e. of tutelaries), techniques and authority to directly address the deities. And it is only the pla-mi or his agmatic forebears and descendants holding the same role whom the deities are believed to accept and indeed expect, all others being ritually and morally unacceptable. During the performance of the sPoes rabs, the flow of the pla-mi’s reading faltered, and even halted on occasion, primarily because he was momentarily caught out by his manuscript pages being jumbled into the wrong sequence. Whenever he suddenly paused for whatever reasons, the elder, nonliterate specialist always continued strongly chanting the following line of text with perfect accuracy, until he too was eventually forced to pause due to the ritual protocol of leading and following which must be maintained when vocalising the chant. However, these purely orally supported continuations of the lines by the um-po assisted the pla-mi to once again pick up the text at the correct place, so that he could regain his lead position. These minor instances demonstrated that, in this case, the oral version chanted from memory by the experienced albeit nonliterate performer was altogether more robust than that of the younger and relatively inexperienced one working with the written version.

Narrative variation

I found that throughout the research region there is a fairly high degree of overall consistency between oral and written texts of these narratives, and this was the case whether comparison was between multiple narratives within a single collection or between different specialists and their manuscript collections at separate locations. However, there is also always variation. Some of the minor variation is due to the way words are read, spokes, heard, understood and written down, resulting in spelling shifts on paper and pronunciation shifts during vocalization. Examples of this type can be found in my editorial annotations to the written and chanted sPoes rabs texts above, and another illustration will be given below. However, a second type of variation occurring in rabs is not a result of such incidental processes. Rather, it is intentional, and indeed seems to be a long-standing characteristic of rabs understood as a loose “genre” of ritual antecedent narratives. Rolf Stein remarked in relation to collections of both Tibetan and Moso (i.e. Naxi) narratives of this type, that they comprise,

[...] a collection of accounts which differ not only from one source to another, but also within one and the same corpus. However, they are all reduced to a unique schema of which they are variations. No authority chose among these variations an account considered as orthodox or valid in relation to the others.
On the contrary, the authors of these collections were conscious at the time of the thematic unity of all these accounts and of the necessity of giving them as large a number as possible of variants. These accounts are in fact as many as the cases or precedents which justify and authenticate the rites on the occasion of which they are recited.  

In some Old Tibetan manuscripts recording written rabs, we find series or collections of the same story type or ‘paradigm’, retold over and over again, yet each time with different characters and details inserted. Brandon Dotson recently analyzed the redactional outlines of Old Tibetan rabs, and demonstrated how they can be ‘...expanded through the inclusion of numerous portable motifs and through the insertion of nested antecedent tales’, while skilled redactors could easily ‘...shuffle’ relevant tropes, motifs, and formulas according to the occasion’. All the above observations apply perfectly to the written rabs collections maintained by the text-reading shamans of the Shri-pa’s lha cult. We might find two or three different versions of the same narrative recorded in the manuscripts of a single specialist, whereas the choice of which version to deploy as a chant is up to the specialist’s decision on the spot. The function and efficacy of each version is considered to be the same, once it has been chanted as an oral text in a ritually correct manner. The methodological corollary here is the same as for any sound analysis of myth, oral or written, ‘one cannot consider and ‘understand’ any version in isolation. Consciously or unconsciously, they form a network of relationships. They explain each other. One has to embrace the totality of the corpus’. So, what do the variations within the available ‘corpus’ of sPos rabs in Khoma and Kurto tell us?  

By studying, as I have thus far, this single version of the sPos rabs from Lawa in isolation, one might be seduced into thinking the story is conveying a kind of moral victory for the physically challenged over the distracted and somewhat feckless able-bodied. However, when we compare all available variants of the sPos rabs in the research area, this is obviously not the case. For whatever reasons presently unknown to us, a certain set of lines, or perhaps a small ‘motif unit’, around which the narrative development of the incense search story pivots, are not included in the Lawa sPos rabs. This absent unit concerns a vital ‘backstory’ for understanding why the central eyeless and legless characters actually undertake their search, and precisely it is that which enables such unlikely searchers to succeed. Here we can demonstrate the difference with other versions of the text by comparing a sPos rabs written and chanted at the site of Tsango about one day’s walk further upstream along the Khoma Chu valley. Here I translate the relevant section from the written version found in a manuscript used by Tsango’s hereditary ritual specialist. After the same story elements of old men, young men and children all falling in their searches for incense,  

the Tsango text continues with eyeless, legless and a third tongueless character trying to undertake a search journey:  

Who did they meet with on the way?  
They met with a [goddess] sMan-btsun ’phyug-mo.  
sMan-btsun ’phyug-mo asked them,  

"Legless cripple, whither do you wander?  
Eyeless blind man, where are you going?  
Tongueless mute, what are you saying?"  

Legless cripple responded,  

"In our human land Kyi-nthing.  
The Four Clans of Little Men are gripped by infirmity.  
Nothing whatsoever can be done to help with that.  
So we will make a sincere offering of incense.  
They were determined to go searching for the incense.  
sMan-btsun ’phyug-mo,  
Brandished with her hand,  
And broke off the legs of a seagull.  
She made legs with them for the legless cripple.  
Having cut out the tongue of a tame pigeon,  
She made a substitute tongue for it for the mute.  
Having plucked out the eyes of nine crows.  
She made substitute eyes with them for the eyeless blind man.  
She gave them the respective names:  
'Crow eyes', ‘Good legs’ and ‘Tongue which was not there before’.  

Following from this point, the three man-bird hybrid beings then cross the three passes and find the incense. They find the incense. This additional unit of narrative as backstory of course lends a far more satisfying and comprehensible storyline to the sPos rabs as a primordial search tale. When viewed from outside the tradition, a better story is always a more pleasing one, yet from inside the tradition the ritual value of both the Lawa and Tsango variants as rabs for chanting is considered identical. The comparison here also provides a good illustration of how spelling variation in a written ritual text can change meanings which may not be ap-  

38 On this place of origins in Bon and Tibetan narratives, see Blieser 2011.  
39 sHar du na dang ‘phoral de ’jas // sMan rtam ’phros mo cig dang ’jas // sMan rtam ’phros mo ni chul na re // ’thang po ’rChang mo gar khyun zer // ’long pa ’rIng [13] gar ’gor zer // ’klu pa ’rI med ci sma zer // ’thang po ’rCang med sHul na re // sYed kyi mI yul kyi ni thun nu // mI ’sugs bshi sNing gis sI // de la sI kyang mi phum te // ’sugs dang blu ge go s芒 ’kya ngas zer // ’sugs dang blu ’sHo ’sI byas // sMan rtam ’phros mo de // ’phrog gi sI slob gyis // ’thang ri sI ’kya ngas pI ca // ’thang po ’rCang med dI ’kya ngas pI byas // syl ba ’phre phre rNal sI dkar nang nu // ’kung ba de ’I kse sHul sI byas // byas pI sPo dge ’sI gling zin sI mI // ’long pa ’rIng med dI ’sI gling sI byas // de la sI kyang mI sHul su rI pI // ’reg rngi rDge rKang ang mI sI la // see Blieser, 102–103, 107 of the Sod rabs manuscript without title page I catalogue as Tsango 9, incomplete in 25 folios.
parent from the same words spoken in context. The Lawa manuscript’s ‘young girl cattle herder’, written sman chung phyugs mo, is spoken in a similar manner to the Tsango text's goddess name sman btsun 'phryng mo, but during sung chants they are indistinguishable. Forms of this latter name for goddesses are rather common in Tibetan language myths preserved as rhymes.

In closing here, I would note that the force of this additional variant is far more important than minor points of style and interpretation indicate. The Tsango variant encapsulates all the key motifs found in the origin myths of both the sel rites and Srid-pal'i Iha worship in general: primordial humans in a quadrupartite social order; unfilled ritual relations with ancestral sky (Iha); a resulting less than human condition of disability and lack of capacity; and the notion that humans and birds share commonalities or can have some basic sort of existential equivalence or interchangeability. A hearer or reader of this short unit of narrative within the tradition has all the key motifs of their system of myths and rites recalled for them within just a few lines of verse. Moreover, with this variant the scholar standing outside the tradition gains another example of these key motifs as they recur right throughout the extended eastern Himalayas, encoded within narratives and embodied in rites, types of ritual specialists and their material cultures; indeed, in most places we find text-reading shamans and their counterparts who work in a purely oral mode. To give just a glimpse of the comparative possibilities in the Tsango narrative, we can turn to the Naxi myth of anthropogenesis. It features all the same motifs: at the start of creation a bird-man hybrid being appears, part of whose transformation involves its claws becoming feet; the hybrid being wants ‘the one with ability’ to name it (but this is not possible); it then goes to ask a goddess who tells the question at it, ‘Where on this earth is such a strange being to be found?’; the goddess then cuts off its head with the swish of her sword. The Naxi of course also recognize primordial human social order as quadrupartite, claiming four original clans, and their myth of anthropogenesis features unfilled ritual relations with ancestral sky deities and a resulting less than human condition of disability and lack of capacity as its central motifs.

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40 See McKean 1992: 4ff. for the full version of the myth which underpins the Mado-lypa’ rites. In the next stage of creation of beings (p. 92), the myth describes three ‘birds’ leading the first generations of ‘fine and good people’ ‘to appear at the summit of the cosmic mountain: the white wagtai, the crow and the white butterfly. They parallel the bird trio of the Tsango narrative. Qiang populations to the north of the Naxi, who have ritual specialists called bi (or bto, bnot/mol, khot) similar to the Naxi dil-mo and a form of the Mado-lypa’ rites, have a myth of the primordial human ancestor in which two birds, the crow and the magpie, act as go-between, after which the birds are named for their defining qualities: see Graham 1988: 24. For Nepal, Hardmann 2000: 84–85 recorded a myth in which the various primordial Rai ‘brother’ tribes are on a journey during which birds substitute for humans as sacrificial beings, and she observed: ‘In Lohorung, Thalung Rai, Mewahang Rai and Dumi Rai mythology human characters are at times represented as birds [with] ‘natural qualities’ which make it clear they are bird-like.”

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APPENDIX

Manuscript pages of the 2Pos rabs.