

**RITUAL SPEECH IN THE HIMALAYAS  
ORAL TEXTS AND THEIR CONTEXT**

edited by

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**Legless and Eyeless [and Tongueless] in Search of Incense:  
Oral and Written Versions of a Bon *sPos rabs* from Northeastern Bhutan<sup>1</sup>**  
*Toni Huber*

**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 Monyul 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 17th 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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<sup>1</sup> My gratitude goes to Dasho Karmay Ura, Dorji Gyaltsen and The Centre for Bhutan Studies (Thimphu) for supporting my ongoing research in eastern Bhutan. Marion Wettstein 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 will now describe, and which is typical of rural communities throughout the region.

### Case study: The *sPos rabs* of Lawa

#### Setting

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

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 Khoma valley area to which Lawa belongs is renowned in Bhutan for 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 Taladar 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'i lha are periodically addressed for replenishment of life powers and fertility, and for mundane support. The *sPos rabs* or 'Incense Narrative' to be presented and analysed below belongs to this latter cult, focussed upon the Srid-pa'i lha.

2 Location: N 27° 41' 09.7", E 091° 11' 56.7", at 2255m. Lawa is the modern administrative version of the name, and that found on most maps. Inhabitants actually pronounce it 'Lhau' while older documents in the village spell it La-'og.

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

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'i lha 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 scion of the house, Gap Sherab, was a supporter of Ugyen Wangchuk at the time the latter became the First King of Bhutan in 1907.<sup>4</sup> 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'i lha 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'i lha worship, as well as having the hereditary obligation as a major ritual sponsor of the regular festivals dedicated to the Srid-pa'i lha deities. Even further back in the past, the strategic ridgetop site of Lawa was very likely the location of sGang-zur-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.<sup>5</sup> 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 Gangzur 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'i lha worship, also serves the Gangzur community, and the ancestral deities of the two villages are regarded as siblings.

Worship of Srid-pa'i lha at Lawa nowadays takes the form of a major and complex festival called Pla, and this is the ritual context for performance of the *sPos rabs* narrative we will examine below. The Pla at Lawa is not unique. Closely related festivals named Pla, Phla, 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 Kurtö 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.<sup>6</sup> In local thinking and practice, the *pla* and the Pla are interrelated.

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 Gonpo, and Gap Ugyen, the latter being the last 'Gap' so-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 rGyal-po (see l.14, *Gling gnyer rta ya rgad po'i thi'u* [seal]; cited from a copy of the document held at the Centre for Bhutan Studies, Thimphu; cf. translation in White 1909: 227).

5 See the *rGyal rigs*: 23b, 27a, in Aris 1986.

6 Pla and its cognates are not alternatives for written *lha* or *phywa*, as was previously assumed; Aris 1980: 12, Pommaret 1994.



Lawa's major Pla festival is staged only once every two years during the 11th Bhutanese lunar month, while every alternate year a very modest 'small Pla' rite is performed. The major Pla I observed during December 2012 was staged over six non-consecutive days and nights, and involved all residents of Lawa and Taladar. During this whole period, all Buddhist ritual activity in the community is proscribed. Each day of Pla is comprised of a range of different rites at a series of locations around the village and its environs. The Pla is presided over by the *pla-mi* ('*pla* man'), plus his two ritual assistants known as the *um-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 Pla, these three male specialists are joined by four pre-pubescent girls from specific sponsor households. They are called *pla'i lcam*, an honorific title literally meaning 'consort/spouse of the Pla 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 *sPos rabs* narrative during Pla.

The main rites of Pla entail long periods of oral delivery of ritual texts in a chanted form. These chants are invariably lead by the *pla-mi*, while the *um-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 *sPos 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 Pla festival. This day is referred to as 'Khromagyen' or 'Khomagyen' (written Khrom-ma-rgyan), 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 (*dongthan*), 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 *dongthan* is where the *sPos 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 Tibeto-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 *pye* chants of the Tamu/Gurung

*phajo*, the oral *rirap* and *sangrap* chants of the western Tamang *bombo*, and the chants of the Naxi *dtô-mbà* (or '*dongba*') 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 Swancutt's use of the expression 'text-reading shamans' when describing *bimo* ritual specialists among the Nuosu (Yi) hill people of Yunnan.<sup>7</sup> The *bimo* 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 *bimo*, and the *dtô-mbà* 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 oral 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

<sup>7</sup> See Swancutt 2012: 107, 113–114 n.1.

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 ritual 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 performative 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 no 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 reinscribe 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'<sup>8</sup> 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-

<sup>8</sup> I borrow the term from Scott 2009: chapt. 6 ½ "Orality, Writing, and Texts."

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 shamans, 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.<sup>9</sup>

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 Kurtöp 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 always are 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 chanted 'narratives' (*rabs*) conveying the rite's origins, 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' (*smrang*) 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

<sup>9</sup> 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".<sup>10</sup>

*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 lcam* 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 lcam* 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

10 Dotson 2013: 144.

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*).<sup>11</sup> 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 dgu*). 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 *sel* are performed. The verb *sel* means 'to eliminate' and 'to purify', and the *sel* 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 (*bsang*, *spos* or *dud sel*), lustration with scented waters (*tshan*), ablution with pure waters (*khrus* or *bshal*), 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 bzhi lha mchod*). The origin myth of the whole *sel* 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 (*gshen*) named Ya-ngal Gyim-kong. He is always referred to as 'elder brother' (*A'o* or *A-bo*) 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' *gshen* named Ya-ngal Gyim-kong acting as a *sel* specialist occur in *rabs*

11 Stein 1971, Stein 2010 [1968], Dotson 2008, Dotson 2013.



narratives recorded in manuscripts which have been provisionally dated to around the 11th 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 route between the lHo-brag region of southern Tibet and the villages in north-eastern Bhutan where the *Sel rabs* and rites used in the Srid-pa'i lha cult are still current today.<sup>12</sup> 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 (*pho-lha* and *mo-lha*) who are identified as the Srid-pa'i lha and reckoned as apical ancestors of clans or lineages. Due to defiling human behaviours, these deities remain in the sky and dwell out of reach within protective strongholds (*mkhar*). 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 prognostic 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 rabs* is a sub-story within the overall *Sel rabs*, and thus Ya-ngal appears as the narrator in its text. At the beginning of the *sPos rabs* sub-story, Ya-ngal states that in it he is offering a specific 'section' (*le'u*) 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 32 folios contains the *Sel rabs* 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 rabs* 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 gyi gsangs rabs dbu' legs pa gcig bzhugsho*, can be glossed as "Containing an Elegant Extolatory Purification Narrative of the Rite".<sup>13</sup> The text has three

<sup>12</sup> See Huber 2013, *dGa'-thang*: 1–8.

<sup>13</sup> As is clear from the text's content, *dbu'* here is an abbreviated reference to *dbu' phang bstod pa*, 'to extol/exalt the status' of the deities being addressed. In the Srid-pa'i lha cult, *bon* 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 *sha* composed of a *sa* superscript stacked upon *ha*, appears to be an archaism. For instance, see *dGa'-thang*: 12, 38, 52, 54, 83.

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 (*gtsang, dag, khru*):

i. 'Elimination [rite] with fragrant smoke' (*Dri zhim dud sel*):

- Genealogy of nine incense (*spos*) types required to purify *lha*;
- *sPos rabs* narrating the original search for incense to purify *lha*;
- 'Fumigation of the stronghold' (*mKhar bsang*) narrating types of pollution associated with human activities (especially at the hearth) and domestic animals.

ii. Purification using lustration (*Khrus chu rabs*):

- Search for the best types of pure waters;
- Types of lustration with scented waters (*tshan*) for different *lha*.

iii. Fumigation (*bsang*):

- Tree species used for smoke;
- Origins of fire narrative (*Me rabs*), as stolen from *srin-po* demons by the trickster/messenger bat.<sup>14</sup>

The versions of narratives in this particular working text are abbreviated 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.<sup>15</sup> 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 rabs*

As in many *rabs* 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 (*spos*) immediately precedes chanting of the *sPos rabs* 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 Gangs-ri dkar-po) while its grandmother

<sup>14</sup> On the trickster/messenger bat, see Huber 2013: 266–268. The final pages of the manuscript are missing here. It is most likely these contained the *lCags rabs* or 'Narrative of Iron' which normally accompanies the *Me rabs* at this point, and that tells the origins of iron items related to the use of fire.

<sup>15</sup> For one, during the Third King of Bhutan's social reforms in the 1950s, 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 (Drod) and Moisture (rLan), produced nine sons who are the nine types of incense plants (*spos*): E incense of rGya<sup>16</sup>, white incense of Central Tibet, meadow incense of Mon, white Sandalwood, red Sandalwood, yellow Sandalwood, white Eaglewood, incense of *du-ru-ka*,<sup>17</sup> and yellow-white incense. These plants are known as the 'nine king varieties of incense' (*spos kyi rgyal po sna dgu*). 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 (*pho-lha*), matriline (*mo-lha*), individual life force (*srog-lha*), mother's brother (*zhang-lha*), protection from and conquest of enemies (*dgra-lha*), area of abode (*yul-lha*) and site of family/household/community (*yul-bdag*). At this point in the text, the *sPos rabs* commences.

### Recording and presentation of text versions

Oral deliveries of Himalayan ritual texts can be sophisticated performative events. In the case of Srid-pa'i 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. These devices are usually mounted on tripods with an overview of the main arena 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-memoire, as a multi-media extension of my usual hand-

<sup>16</sup> Exact meaning uncertain. I think in this context it refers to E[-yul] or E lHa rGya-ri, a district located between Bod ('Tibet') and Mon in an ideal regional geography.

<sup>17</sup> In Tibet, *du-ru-ka* is sometimes used as a traditional name for boughs of juniper, but that is unclear 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 worksheet 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 *sPos rabs* recorded on the fifth day of the *Pla* festival in Lawa village, Khoma district of northeastern Bhutan.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup> Tibetan script is transcribed according to the Wylie (1959) system, with the exception of using capital A for the thirtieth Tibetan consonant *ʼA* and I, E, U or O 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. *gu dkar* for *mgo dkar*, *'dab ma* for *mdag ma*, *gyis* for *gyi*, *thong* for *mthong*, and so on), although I have annotated problematic or ambiguous readings, dialect-influenced vocabulary and instances of inflection. For the sake of accessibility, and to reduce the clutter of brackets and insertions, I offer a lightly interpretive translation.

Line #	Verse text and manuscript reference	Time coding, oral chant, and observations	Translation
[At this point, chanting the genealogy section of the text finishes at f.2b, 6 on the line: 'di yang dri zhim dud gsel yin //.] [movie file: P1150491.MOV begins]			
1	[2b, 6] <i>bswo'o A'o ya ngal zhal na re //</i>	0:01-0:28: [Here the <i>pla-mi</i> discovers pages of the manuscript out of sequence. Confused, he jumps directly from text at f.2b, 6 to f.3a, 1, omitting these first two written lines of the <i>sPos rabs</i> before recommencing to chant.]	<i>bSwo'o!</i> Elder brother Ya-ngal said,
2	<i>da rung spos rabs</i> [3a, 1] <i>le'u cig 'tshal</i> <sup>20</sup> //		"Still, an <i>Incense Narrative</i> division [of the rites] is needed:
3	<i>dang po spos 'thal</i> <sup>21</sup> <i>su'i</i> <sup>22</sup> <i>'tshal //</i>	0:29: <i>dang po spos 'thal su'i 'tshal</i> 0:39: <i>way dang po spos 'thal su'i 'tshal</i> 0:47: <i>way su'i 'tshal</i> 0:53: <i>ay dang po spos</i>	In the beginning, who wanted to procure the incense?
4	<i>rgad po gu dkar gnyis kyis spos 'tshal phyin //</i>	0:58: <i>rgad po gu dkar gnyis kyis spos 'tshal</i> 1:06: <i>way rgad po gu dkar gnyis kyis</i> 1:15: <i>ay gnyis kyis spos 'tshal</i> 1:22: <i>ay rgad po gu</i>	Two white-headed old men went to procure the incense.
5	<i>nyen mo nag tam gleng gleng nas //</i>	1:27: <i>nyen mo nag tam ah gleng gleng nas</i> 1:36: <i>way nyen mo nag tam gleng gleng nas</i> 1:45: <i>ay gleng gleng ay nas</i> 1:51: <i>ay nyen mo nag</i>	By day, they kept on telling stories, and so,
6	<i>nub mo mun pa dam</i> <sup>23</sup> <i>gyis chod //</i>	1:57: <i>nub mo mun pa dam gyis chod</i> 2:05: <i>way nub mo mun pa dam gyis chod</i> 2:13: <i>way dam gyis ay chod</i> 2:19: <i>nub mo mun</i>	At night, they were stopped by the pitch darkness.
7	<i>des kyang spos dang lan</i> <sup>24</sup> <i>ma rnyed //</i>	2:24: <i>des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 2:32: <i>way des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 2:41: <i>ay lan ma ah rnyed</i> 2:47: <i>ay des kyang spos</i>	As a result, they did not find any incense at all.

<sup>20</sup> 'Tshal commonly occurs in these *rabs*, but with multiple shades of meaning, and sometimes as a scribal variant of 'tshol (and *btsal*) 'to search', 'to procure' (see following note). Here it must be read in the context of the longer *Sel rabs* myth informing this *sPos rabs* sub-story; there the current narrator Ya-ngal is summoned and requested to provide a ritual solution, which he consents to do.

<sup>21</sup> We read 'tshol 'to procure' here in other written versions of the *sPos rabs*.

<sup>22</sup> Following phonetic imperatives, Dzala- and Dakpa-speaking scribes frequently write the ergative marker with a simple 'i which confusingly represents standard orthography for one form of the Tibetan genitive marker.

<sup>23</sup> A variation of *mun pa'i smag* [rum] found in other *sPos rabs* manuscripts.

<sup>24</sup> The recurring expression *spos dang lan* (also *spos kyi lan* below), literally the 'response with incense', is a carryover from versions of the longer *Sel rabs* myth, in which a ritual problem faced by the human protagonists is that they 'cannot reply [to the *lha*] with incense' (*spos dang lan ma mchis*). I simplify it here for readability.

8	<i>stag shar gnyis kyis spos 'tshal phyin //</i>	2:52: <i>stag shar gnyis kyis spos 'tshal phyin</i> 3:01: <i>way stag shar gnyis kyis spos 'tshal phyin</i> 3:09: <i>ay spos 'tshal ay phyin</i> 3:15: <i>ay stag shar gnyis</i>	Two young men went to procure the incense.
9	<i>nyen mo 'da' dang phongs la yengs //</i>	3:20: <i>nyen mo 'da' dang phongs la yengs</i> 3:28: <i>way nyen mo 'da' dang phongs la yengs</i> 3:37: <i>ay phongs la ah yengs</i> 3:43: <i>ay nyen mo 'da'</i>	By day, they were distracted in shooting with their arrows.
10	<i>nub mo mun pa dam gyis bcad //</i>	3:48: <i>nub mo mun pa dam gyis bcad</i> 3:55: <i>way nub mo mun pa dam gyis bcad</i> 4:04: <i>ay dam gyis eh bcad</i> 4:10: <i>ay nub mo mun</i>	At night, they were stopped by the pitch darkness.
11	<i>des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed //</i>	4:15: <i>des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 4:23: <i>way des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 4:32: <i>ay lan ma ah rnyed</i> 4:32: <i>ay des kyang spos</i>	As a result, they did not find any incense at all.
12	<i>byis pa na chung gnyis kyis spos 'tshal phyin //</i>	4:43: <i>byis pa na chung gnyis kyis spos</i> 4:50: <i>way byis pa na chung gnyis kyis spos</i> 4:59: <i>ay gnyis kyis eh spos</i> 5:06: <i>ay byis pa na chung</i>	Two young children went to procure the incense.
13	<i>nyen mo tsen mong rtse</i> <sup>25</sup> <i>la yengs //</i>	5:10: <i>nyen mo tsen mong rtse la yengs</i> 5:18: <i>way nyen mo tsen mong rtse la yengs</i> 5:27: <i>ay rtse la ah yengs</i> 5:33: <i>ay nyen mo tsen</i>	By day, they were distracted with their fun and games.
14	<i>nub mo mun pa dam gyis chod //</i>	5:38: <i>nub mo mun pa dam gyis chod</i> 5:47: <i>way nub mo mun pa dam gyis chod</i> 5:55: <i>ay dam gyis eh chod</i> 6:01: <i>ay nub mo mun</i>	At night, they were stopped by the pitch darkness.
15	<i>des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed //</i>	6:06: <i>des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 6:14: <i>way des kyang spos dang lan ma rnyed</i> 6:23: <i>ay lan ma ah rnyed</i> 6:28: <i>ay des kyang spos</i>	As a result, they did not find any incense at all.
16	<i>theng po rkang med dang //</i>	6:34: <i>theng po rkang med dang</i> 6:39: [the <i>pla-mi</i> pauses here to reorder confused manuscript pages, and begins again with the following line]	A legless cripple and
[movie file: P1150492.MOV begins]			
17	<i>long pa dmig med gnyis kyis //</i>	0:01: <i>long pa dmig med gnyis kyis</i> 0:08: <i>way long pa dmig med gnyis kyis</i> 0:16: <i>ay med gnyis kyis</i> 0:23: <i>ay long pa dmig</i>	An eyeless blind man, both,
18	<i>spos 'tshal phyin //</i>	0:29: <i>spos 'tshal</i> [incomplete: the <i>pla-mi</i> begins this line, but the <i>um-pa</i> simultaneously chants the following line which the <i>pla-mi</i> follows]	Went to procure the incense.

<sup>25</sup> Read: *rtse mo rtse*.



19	[3b] <i>la cig rgyal lo la gnyis rgyal //</i>	0:31: <i>la cig rgyal lo la gnyis rgyal</i> 0:39: <i>way la cig rgyal lo la gnyis rgyal</i> 0:47: <i>ay la cig eh rgyal</i> 0:54: <i>ay la gnyis rgyal</i>	They crossed over one pass. They crossed over a second pass.
20	<i>la gsum rgyal gyis pha ra na //</i>	1:00: <i>la gsum rgyal gyis pha ra na</i> 1:08: <i>way la gsum rgyal gyis pha ra na</i> 1:16: <i>ay pha ra ah na</i> 1:23: <i>ah la gsum rgyal</i>	Because they crossed over a third pass, beyond it,
21	<i>thog gyas spang bu'i</i> <sup>26</sup> <i>logs shel na //</i>	1:28: <i>ay thog gyas spang bu'i logs shel na</i> 1:36: <i>way thog gyas spang bu'i logs shel na</i> 1:45: <i>ah logs shel eh na</i> 1:51: <i>ah thog gyas spang</i>	As they examined the sides of heigh and broad meadow hillocks,
22	<i>spos kyi lan rnams thu lu lu //</i>	1:56: <i>ay spos kyi lan rnams thu lu lu</i> 2:05: <i>way spos kyi lan rnams thu lu lu</i> 2:14: <i>ah thu lu oh lu</i> 2:19: <i>oh spos kyi lan</i>	They got hold of some incense, <i>thu lu lu</i> . <sup>27</sup>
23	<i>sman chu</i> <sup>28</sup> <i>phyugs mo ci dang 'jal //</i>	2:25: <i>sman chu phyugs mo ci dang 'jal</i> 2:33: <i>way sman chu phyugs mo ci dang 'jal</i> 2:43: <i>ay ci dang ah 'jal</i> 2:48: <i>ay sman chu phyugs</i>	Who did they meet there? A young girl cattle herder.
24	<i>sman chu phyugs mo'i zhal na re //</i>	2:54: <i>ay sman chu phyugs mo'i zhal na re</i> 3:01: <i>way sman chu phyugs mo'i zhal na re</i> 3:09: <i>ay zhal na ah re</i> 3:15: <i>ay sman chu phyugs</i>	The young girl cattle herder asked,
25	<i>theng po rkang med gar khyams lo //</i>	3:21: <i>ay theng po rkang med gar khyams lo</i> 3:29: <i>way theng po rkang med gar khyams lo</i> 3:38: <i>ay gar khyams ah lo</i> 3:44: <i>ay theng po rkang</i>	"Legless cripple, whither do you wander?"
26	<i>long pa dmig med gar thong lo //</i>	3:49: <i>long pa dmig med gar thong lo</i> 3:57: <i>way long pa dmig med gar thong lo</i> 4:05: <i>ah gar thong oh lo</i> 4:11: <i>oh long pa dmig</i>	Eyeless blind man, what are you looking for?
27	<i>theng po rkang med gar thong lo //</i>	4:17: <i>e theng po rkang med gar thong lo</i> 4:24: <i>way theng po rkang med gar thong lo</i> 4:33: <i>ah gar thong oh lo</i> 4:39: <i>oh theng po rkang</i>	Legless cripple, what are you looking for?"
28	<i>theng po rkang med zhal na re //</i>	4:44: <i>theng po rkang med zhal na re</i> 4:52: <i>way theng po rkang med zhal na re</i> 5:00: <i>ah zhal na ah re</i> 5:06: <i>ay theng po rkang</i>	The legless cripple replied

26 Uncertain. I read *mtho rgyas spang 'bur*.27 Spoken 'menchung' (usually written *sman chung* in local texts) means 'young girl', cf. also dialect 'menchar' (*sman shar*) as parallel form of male 'tagshar' (*stag shar*).28 *Thu lu lu* is a pseudo-onomatopoeic flourish commonly used to express the 'billowing' of smoke, steam or snowflakes in the air.

29	<i>theng po rkang med rkang stsal phyin //</i>	5:12: <i>ay theng po rkang med rkang stsal phyin</i> 5:20: <i>way theng po rkang med rkang stsal phyin</i> 5:29: <i>ay rkang stsal ay phyin</i> 5:35: <i>ay theng po rkang</i>	"The legless cripple went in search of some legs.
30	<i>long pa dmig med dmig stsal phyin //</i>	5:40: <i>ay long pa dmig med dmig stsal phyin</i> 5:48: <i>way long pa dmig med dmig stsal phyin</i> 5:57: <i>ay dmig stsal ay phyin</i> 6:03: <i>ay long pa dmig</i>	The eyeless blind man went in search of some eyes."
31	<i>sman chu phyugs mo zhal na re //</i>	6:08: <i>sman chu phyugs mo zhal na re</i> 6:16: <i>way sman chu phyugs mo zhal na re</i> 6:24: <i>ay zhal na ah re</i> 6:30: <i>ay sman chu phyugs</i>	The young girl cattle herder told them,
32	<i>theng po rkang med rkang tsab bcos //</i>	6:36: <i>ay theng po rkang med rkang tsab bcos</i> 6:44: <i>way theng po rkang med rkang tsab bcos</i> 6:53: <i>ay rkang tsab ah bcos</i> 6:58: <i>ay theng po rkang</i>	"Legless cripple, I will fabricate substitute legs for you." <sup>29</sup>
33	<i>long pa dmig med dmig tsab cos //</i>	7:09: <i>ay long pa dmig med dmig tsab cos</i> 7:17: <i>way long pa dmig med dmig tsab cos</i> 7:26: <i>ay dmig tsab ah cos</i> 7:33: <i>ay long pa dmig</i>	Eyeless blind man, I will fabricate substitute eyes for you.
34	<i>theng po rkang med dang //</i>	[line is mistakenly omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	Legless cripple and
35	<i>long pa dmig med gnyis kyis //</i>	7:38: <i>ay long pa dmig med gnyis kyis</i> 7:47: <i>ay long pa dmig med gnyis kyis</i> 7:55: <i>ay med gnyis ah kyis</i> 8:02: <i>ah long pa dmig</i>	Eyeless blind man, both,
36	<i>spos dang lan snyed do //</i>	[line is mistakenly omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	Found the incense!"
37	<i>spos kyi lan</i> [4a] <i>rnams thu lu lu //</i>	8:07: <i>ay spos kyi lan rnams thu lu lu</i> 8:16: <i>way spos kyi lan rnams</i> [recording stops due to a technical problem]	Take hold of the incense, <i>thu lu lu</i> .
		[Movie file: P1150493.MOV begins]	
38	<i>blang nga byi ling</i> <sup>30</sup> <i>nang du gsang //</i>	0:06: <i>ay blang nga byi ling nang du gsang</i> 0:15: <i>way blang nga byi ling nang du gsang</i> 0:24: <i>oh nang du oh gsang</i> 0:30: <i>oh blang nga byi</i>	Fumigate with it inside a broad-mouthed incense pan.
39	<i>dud pa nam mkha'i thong su songs //</i>	0:35: <i>e dud pa nam mkha'i thong su songs</i> 0:44: <i>way dud pa nam mkha'i thong su songs</i> 0:53: <i>ay thong su oh songs</i> 0:59: <i>e dud pa nam</i>	The smoke goes into the heights of the sky.

29 Although no agent is indicated in the original, in all other written variants of this *rabs* the female character is the agent.30 The *sla nga* (also written *lha nga* or *slang* in Dzongkha inflected texts) is a shallow metal pan used in most rural Bhutanese houses for burning incense, while *rgya gling* [*kha*] describes its broad mouth or opening.

40	<i>nam gyi lha dgu 'gur du gsangs //</i>	1:03: e <i>nam gyi lha dgu 'gur du gsangs</i> 1:12: way <i>nam gyi lha dgu 'gur du gsangs</i> 1:21: oh 'gur du oh <i>gsangs</i> 1:27: <i>nam gyi</i>	It purifies the tents of the nine <i>lha</i> of the sky.
41	<i>'dab ma sa la songs pa ye</i> <sup>31</sup> //	[the <i>pla-mi</i> pauses to inspect manuscript, omits this and following three lines]	The glowing embers must go onto the earth!
42	<i>sa'i klu dgu gur du gsang //</i>	[line omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	They purify the tents of the nine <i>klu</i> of the earth.
43	<i>me chen bar rnam kham su song ba ye //</i>	[line omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	The bright flames must go into the intermediate space!
44	<i>bar gyis gnyan rnam dgu gur du sang //</i>	[line omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	They purify the tents of the nine <i>gnyan</i> of the intermediate space.
45	<i>phos lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	1:38: e <i>pho lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 1:46: way <i>pho lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 1:55: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 2:01: e <i>pho lha dbu'</i>	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>pho-lha</i> .
46	<i>mos lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	2:06: e <i>mo lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 2:15: way <i>mo lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 2:24: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 2:30: e <i>mo lha dbu'</i>	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>mo-lha</i> .
47	<i>srog lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	[line omitted by the <i>pla-mi</i> ]	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>srog-lha</i> .
48	<i>dgra lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	2:36: e <i>dgra lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 2:44: way <i>dgra lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 2:53: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 2:59: ay <i>dgra lha dbu'</i>	It is the incense which exalts the status of the <i>dgra-lha</i> .
49	<i>zhang lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	3:03: e <i>zhang lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 3:12: way <i>zhang lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 3:21: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 3:27: e <i>zhang lha dbu'</i>	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>zhang-lha</i> .
50	<i>yul lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	3:32: <i>yul lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 3:41: way <i>yul lha dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 3:49: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 3:55: e <i>yul lha dbu'</i>	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>yul-lha</i> .
51	<i>yul bdag dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos //</i>	4:01: e <i>yul bdag dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 4:09: way <i>yul bdag dbu' phangs stod pa'i spos</i> 4:18: ay <i>stod pa'i ay spos</i> 4:24: ay <i>yul bdag dbu'</i>	It is incense which exalts the status of the <i>yul-bdag</i> .

31 The purpose of terminal *ye* here and below is uncertain. It probably represents a Kurtöp imperative marker, and I treat it as such, although they are normally formed directly onto the simple verbal stem. It also recalls the special Tibetan ritual emphatic '*khu ye!*' which is chanted aloud during rites to 'entice/call back' (*khug*) various life powers or vital forces (*phywa*, *gyang*, *bla*, etc.).

52	<i>'di yang dri zhim dud gsel yin //</i> [4b, 6]	4:29: ay ' <i>di yang dri zhim dud gsel yin</i> 4:38: way ' <i>di yang dri zhim dud gsel yin</i> 4:47: ay <i>dud gsel ah yin</i> 4:45: ay <i>dud gsel yin</i>	This also <sup>32</sup> is the Rite of Elimination Using Fragrant Smoke."
	[at f.4b, 6, the <i>mKhar bsang</i> section began, while performers' chanting and dancing continued seamlessly]		

### Articulation of oral and written modes

Reviewing the worksheet quickly reveals the exact relationship between the written text of the *sPos rabs* and its live performance as an oral chant during the *sel* rites. An ideal metre 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', 'oh' 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 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-

32 The '*di yang*' relates back to the previous section on genealogy (summarized above), which is also identified within the text as the *Dri zhim dud sel*.

pa'i lha worship are by far most commonly based upon *a*-syllables and their variants, such as *ah*, *aah*, *a-ha*, *a-hey*, *a-hoi*, and so on. Exactly the same phenomenon occurs in chants by other Himalayan shamans from Nepal to Yunnan.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, exchanging the actual order of syllabic blocks – and thus words – to yield a scrambled syntax or fragmented 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 rabs*) chanted from a manuscript by the *bon-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:

Line	Manuscript text	Time coding and oral chant
1	<i>A he /</i>	06:26: <i>Aaaheey!</i>
2	<i>da ni lha la khrus rabs yod //</i>	06:29: <i>Aah da ni eh lha la, Aaaheey!</i> 06:36: <i>Aah khrus rabs ha yod, Aaaheey!</i>
3	<i>shar gyi chu bo gangga'i chu //</i>	06:44: <i>Aey shar gyi eh chu bo, Aaaheey!</i> 06:51: <i>Ah gangga'i eh chu, Aaaheey!</i>
4	<i>gangga'i chu dang de dang gcig //</i>	06:59: <i>Ah gangga'i chu dang ah, Aaaheey!</i> 07:06: <i>Ah de dang ha gcig, Aaaheey!</i>

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 *dtô-mbà* specialists. Concerning Naxi ritual manuscripts and their use, Michael Oppitz observed that, "The pictographs...serve as mnemotechnical aides for much longer texts not written out: invisible bodies of oral tradition, recited aloud by the ritual specialists."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> For examples, see Rock 1948: 30 on *Hò dshó hò á hò hò* and *Ho ho ho* in Naxi *Muân-bpò'* rites sometimes led by a *dtô-mbà*; Bhattacharjee 1983: 130 on *Anja-Hoi* in Idu Mishmi funerals lead by an *igu*; Gaenszle 2007: 271, 276-302 on long-drawn *a-ha* in Sarandew rites of Mewahang Rai; Hardmann 2000: 152-154, 291-292 on *ha: y! a: y!* in chants for raising the *saya* 'soul' by the Lohorung Rai *yatangpa*; Höfer 1994: *passim* on *a-a-a-a-a, aha-a-a-a-a, hoi, ho:y, ha:y, ha-a-a-a-ay, ho, ho-o-o-o-o-o, oho*, in various chants of western Tamang *bombo*.

<sup>34</sup> Oppitz 2014: 517.

Of the three Lawa specialists who chanted the text simultaneously during the *sPos rabs* performance presented above, both the *pla-mi* and *pa-lo-pa* are literate, while the *um-pa*, who is older and by far the most experienced of the three, is unable to read. It was the *um-pa* 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 agnatic forebears and descendents 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 *sPos 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 vocalizing the chant. However, these purely orally supported continuations of the lines by the *um-pa* 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 such 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, spoken, 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 *sPos 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 Mosso (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.<sup>35</sup>

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 formulae according to the occasion”.<sup>36</sup> All the above observations apply perfectly to the written *rabs* collections maintained by the text-reading shamans of the Srid-pa'i 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.”<sup>37</sup> So, what do the variations within the available ‘corpus’ of *sPos rabs* in Khoma and Kurtö 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 what it is that 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 failing in their searches for incense,

35 Stein 2010 [1968]: 304.

36 Dotson 2013: 143–144.

37 Stein 1971: 526, my translation.

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-mthing,<sup>38</sup>  
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 with 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’.<sup>39</sup>

Following from this point, the three man-bird hybrid beings then cross the three passes and 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 Blezer 2011.

39 Shul du su dang 'phrad de 'jal // sman rtsun 'phyug mo cig dang 'jal // sman rtsun 'phyug mo'i zhal na re // 'theng po rkang med gar khyam zer // long pa rmig [13a] med gar 'gro zer // lkug pa lce med ci smra zer // 'theng po rkang med zhal na re // nyed kyi mi yul kyi mthing na // mi'u rigs bzhi snyung gis zin // de la cis kyang mi phan te // spos dang blan gyi gtab bzang ngo zer // spos dang blan 'tshol 'gro 'o byas // sman rtsun 'phyug mo des // phyag gi sor sdog gyis // 'thing ril de'i rkang pa cag // 'theng po rkang med de'i rkang pa byas // sdul bya phug ron lce bcad nas // lkug pa de'i lce tshab byas // bya pho rog dgu'i dmig ston nas // long pa dmig med de'i dmig tshab byas // de la ming dang mtshan rtags pa // rog rmig dge rkang sngon ma'i lce //; see ff. 12b, 6–13b, 7 of the *Sel rabs* manuscript without title page I catalogue as Tsango 9, incomplete in 22 folios.

parent from the same words spoken in context. The Lawa manuscript's 'young girl cattle herder', written *smān chung phyugs mo*, is spoken in a similar manner to the Tsango text's goddess name *smān btsun 'phyug mo*, but during sung chants they are indistinguishable. Forms of this latter name for goddesses are rather common in Tibetan language myths preserved as *rabs*.

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-pa'i lha worship in general: primordial humans in a quadripartite social order; unfulfilled ritual relations with ancestral sky lha; 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 reoccur 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 yells 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.<sup>40</sup> The Naxi of course also recognize primordial human social order as quadripartite, claiming four original clans, and their myth of anthropogenesis features unfulfilled ritual relations with ancestral sky deities and a resulting less than human condition of disability and lack of capacity as its central motifs.

40 See McKhann 1992: 91ff. for the full version of the myth which underpins the *Muān-bpò* rites.

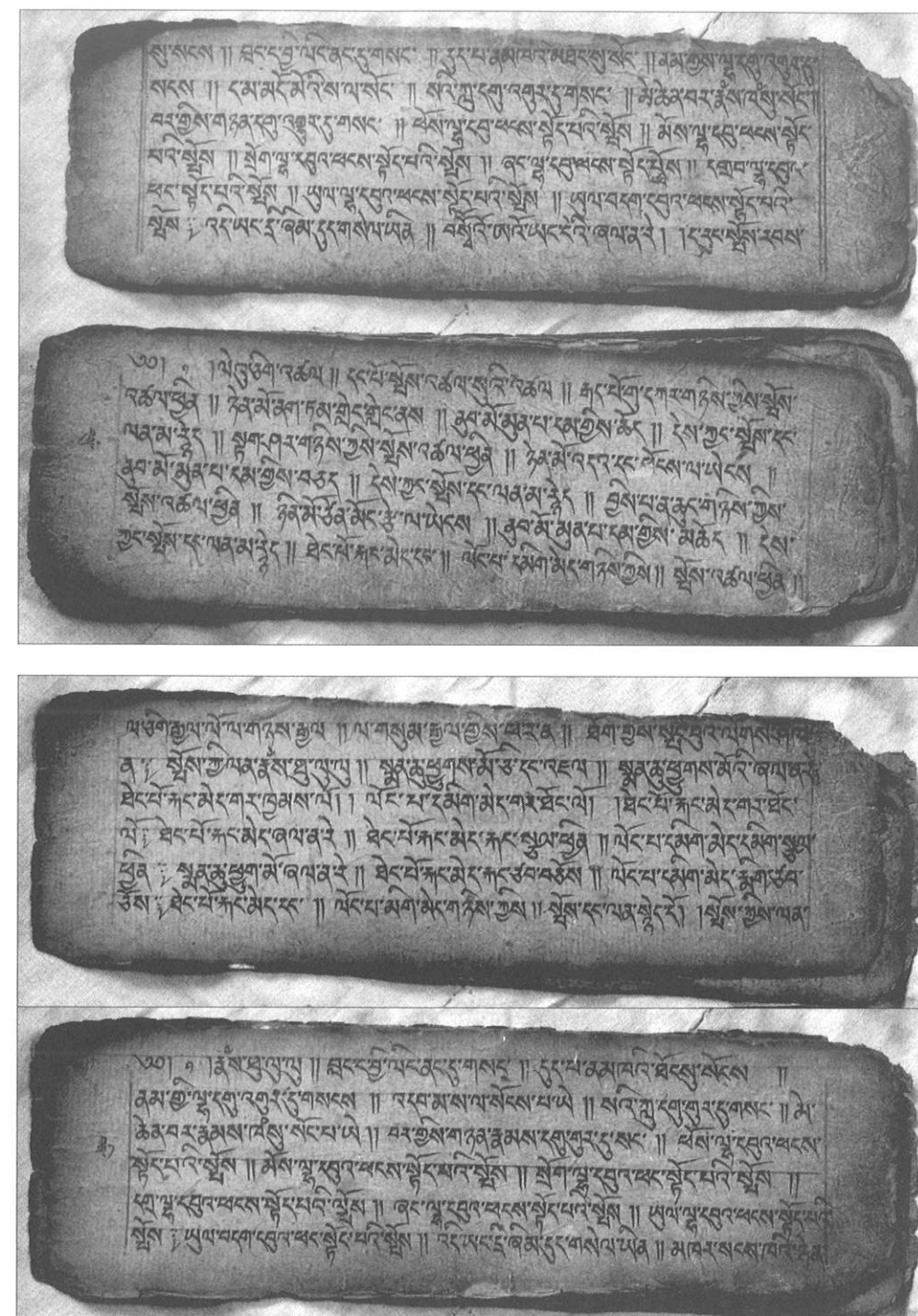
In the next stage of creation of beings (p. 93), the myth describes three 'birds' leading the first generations of "fine and good people" to appear at the summit of the cosmic mountain: the white wagtail, the crow and the white butterfly. They parallel the bird trio of the Tsango narrative. Qiang populations to the north of the Naxi, who have ritual specialists called *bi* (or *bibo*, *bimo/mu*, *bito*) similar to the Naxi *dtō-mbà* and a form of the *Muān-bpò* rites, have a myth of the primordial human ancestor in which two birds, the crow and the magpie, act as go-betweens, after which the birds are named for their defining qualities; see Graham 1958: 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, Thulung 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 sPos rabs.