

the Mukpo clan divided into three sub-lineages that took up residence respectively in the highlands, the middle lands, and the lowlands of the area around a sacred mountain named Machen Pomra. The Elder lineage took up the highlands and descended from the daughter-in-law who was the eldest. She was sent by her father-in-law into the highlands to find a magical object that would provide a name for the family of her sub-lineage. She found a golden yoke and the name of her family became Ser, which means “gold.” She was called Serza, the wife of the Ser family, thus naming her branch of the Mukpo clan according to its feminine origins.

⁴ The Bum family is a subset of the Cadet Lineage. They probably gained their name from their possession of a valuable copy of the *Hundred Thousand Line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*, which is often a sacred object in a Tibetan family.

⁵ Chöla Bum’s three wives are denominated by the names of their original families. So, for example, Rongza is “the wife from the Rong clan.” This means that she is partly still under the protection of that clan, which must keep good relations with the Mukpos. Her male sons are named not according to their paternal descent from Mukpo Dong, but according to their mother’s line. So they are called Rongtsha, “nephew of Rong.”

⁶ the last word - *blo phug* - literally, mind cave. Innermost mind, that upon which one must depend in a counsel..

⁷ The Hor are a neighboring tribal kingdom which also has at times a tributary relationship with China. The battle between Ling and Hor is an historical event and also the basis for the longest chapter of the Gesar Epic, *The War Against the Hor*..

⁸ Senglön is the father of Gesa. He and Chipön, the chief of Ling are two of the most important characters in the epic. Both of them, therefore, are seen as descendants of Indian tantric saints. Thus the Tibetan text expresses a typical Tibetan position: that they are politically connected with China, but culturally descended from India.

⁹ Wargods, wermas, and oath-bound protectors - *dgra lha*, *werma*, *dam can chags pa'i*.. These are three kinds of local deities important in Tibetan cosmology. The wargods are deities and complexes of energy that invest the body of the warrior, sitting on his or her head, two shoulders, and heart center. Iconographically they are represented as small armored warriors. If a Tibetan knight has all his wargods perched upon his body, he or she has a “battle aura” of immense power and is difficult to defeat. Wermas are like dralhas. They gather around warriors whose contemplative powers are strong and invest the weapons with power. The oath-bound protectors are local deities that have been bound magically by Buddhist masters and now must serve the Buddhist cause. The shrines that worship these deities as spirits of the land and environment are called “castles” and “fortresses,” because they are usually found in nature as piles of rocks that look like Tibetan fortifications. A life stone (*bla rdo*) is a magical stone which holds the life essence, the magical essence and power of an individual or a group.

¹⁰ This passage includes an untranslatable honorific punning on Gyatsha Zhalkar’s name. He is a *rgya dar*, Chinese silken scarf, a *rgya stag* a Bengal tiger, and a *rgya khra*, a bird of prey. The word *rgya* means a different thing in each context. It is parallel to the use of the word ‘*jam*, which means “soft” in Chipön’s praises. Chipön is *phyi ‘jam*, outwardly soft, *nang ‘jam*, inwardly soft, *dro ‘jam*, warm and soft, and *lhod ‘jam*, loose and soft. But the word ‘*jam* is not a pun on any of Chipön’s many names. There are, however, two famous Tibetan lama/scholars whose names begin with the word ‘Jam: Jamgön Kongtrül and Jamyang Khyentse Özer--- two gurus of the 19th century editor of the

epic. This would explain the oddness of the line translated “He controls the machine of his luminous mind,” which has within it syllables from these two guru’s names. This passage praising Chipön could be a tribute in code to these two great yogins who were, according to the colophons, active in encouraging this edition of the epic.

¹¹ Rare and Precious Three Jewels - the objects of refuge for all Buddhists: the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings), and Saṃgha (the monastic community).

¹² First sign.... field of power - The “field of power” (*wang thang*) is the charisma an individual or country possesses when it is going to be successful in its endeavors. It plays about the shoulders of warriors like the “battle aura” mentioned in modern Asian cartoons. It is an aspect of the merit developed by Ling through previous good deeds and moments of courage of its inhabitants. Here the birth of a noble warrior such as Zhalkar is a first sign of the merit which the entire country of Ling possesses-- the merit to develop a great aura of power and be successful in the future. It is a first sign of the coming of their greatest warrior, Zhalkar’s as yet unborn half-brother, Gesar of Ling.

¹³ These sounds “ala” and “thala” are the Tibetan equivalent of tralala. With these sounds the bard singing this song gives the melody for the rest of the song.

¹⁴ Aphorisms are a very important part of Tibetan literature, in part because the legal system depends on the services of mediators who employ proverbs and gnomic expressions to decide cases and disputes. There are at least three kinds of aphorisms: the ancient tradition of Tibetan sayings (*gna’ mi bod kyi gtam rgyun*), proverbs (*gtam dpe*), and elegant sayings (*legs bshad*). The ancient Tibetan sayings are considered a distinct oral corpus in themselves, different from the thousands of proverbs in current usage.

¹⁵ If goods came, it was the custom to portion them with the blade of a knife -(*gros byung na gri rtses kham bkos dar* - *gros* means possessions or goods valuable things such as clothes and food which come your way). The expression *gri rtses* literally means “with the trip of a knife” and *gam* means “a bite” or “morsel.” The idea is that in the old days if somebody gained something, they would share it with everybody else, holding the meat, for example, in their teeth and cutting off a piece with their knife to share with the others.

¹⁶ stupa - originally a burial mound covering relics of a saint, some stupas are architectural monuments, domed and pinnacled towards dedicated to a buddha, others are small ornamental reliquaries of the same shape.

¹⁷ Mongolian gait - *rta ‘gros ldan*. This is the special way of running Tibetans teach their horses which makes them give a smooth ride, so that the rider need not post. It looks like the high stepping gait used by horses in a steeple chase.

¹⁸ White Sixth turquoise - *g.yu drug* - a kind of turquoise, the highest quality turquoise. If you put a drop of milk on it, it turns the milk pink, which is a sign of its high quality. We do not know what the other five orders of turquoise are, but think that perhaps in medicine there are five other turquoises.

¹⁹ *rta rag pa* - black mane and tail, yellow body, black feet, and sometimes a black muzzle.

²⁰ A divine nectar drunk by the gods and symbolically given to humans in initiation ceremonies. Amṛta means “anti-death potion.”

²¹ An interesting list of three qualities a political leader must have, which seem to be compared

to the three disciplines of the path: morals, meditation, and wisdom. Field of power is the aura of power that grows and develops around the shoulders of an individual--his charisma. The sense of knowledge in this case is not metaphysical knowledge, but practical knowledge, knowledge of the people.

²² The mythical creature called a Snow Lion is supposed to have a turquoise mane. There is actually a very magnificent creature in Tibet called a “Snow Leopard,” but it does not have a wondrous green mane.

²³ These are invisible demonic forces posed against Ling and its Buddhist society. Some of them are great forces such as the Tanma, who appeared as Giant Oxen to oppose Padmasambhava’s coming to Tibet. Others cause sickness and disease. All must be defeated by Gesar’s magic.

²⁴ The term “devil harrier” is the equivalent of the Tibetan. *lha sring ‘byung bo’i ltag bdud la/ mi min ‘phrul gyi mi bu zhig* - This passage refers to Gesar who, as an enemy of the world of invisible monster spirits, is a *māra* (a devil) to them. He is a devil who “devils the back of the neck” (*ltag bdud*) of gods, *rākṣasas* (demons), and ghosts or elementals.

²⁵ This Tibetan epic view of the Chinese emperor makes him speak like a tribal chieftain, even down to the singing of epic songs of advice and the deployment of numerous village proverbs.

²⁶ The term paternal lineage is the equivalent of the Tibetan *pha rus dung*, which literally means “the tribal lineage of the fathers,” a distinction of special importance in the epic where maternal descent is noticed as well as paternal descent.

²⁷ Eight Classes of Non-Men. The Tibetan *mi min sde brgyad* is a mysterious category, reminiscent of the Eight Classes of gods.

²⁸ This probably means the life-force and life-essence at one’s heart- center.

²⁹ Usually gandharvas are described as elegant, invisible cosmic musicians playing softly on divine instruments. Here, however, they have become just another wrathful deity in the armies of the Buddhist warriors.

³⁰ a dzo is a specially bred milk cow.

³¹ In this case the mother lineage is probably a reference to the fact that the three “nephews” are related to the Chinese emperor and each other through marriages. The maternal descent of each of these warriors is a point of prime political importance, a sort of alliance that should prevent war between them.

³² Lenpa Chögyal was married to a daughter of Kunga from one of the three divisions of the Kingdom of Hor, the Yellow Hor. The fourth and longest volume of the epic, describes the war between Ling and Hor. This is a war actually attested by history. At this point in the epic war with Hor has not yet broken out, but apparently Gyatsa Zhalkar already harbors animosity against them, for he regards Lenpa Gyögyal’s marriage to a foreign woman from Hor as ill-starred. All this, of course, was predicted by the Chinese Emperor, who fruitlessly, as it turned out, warned the three nephews against internecine struggle.

³³ The tiger’s stripes are described poetically as being shaped like six smiles. So poetically the tiger is simply called Six Smiles, just the way a snow lion is called just Turquoise Mane.

³⁴ The word for clan here is *pha rus* which means “paternal clan.” The sense is that they killed all the men in the province.

³⁵ Ralo Tönpa is a wealthy man in Gog. The future mother of Gesar has become his possession, a servant to him. She is actually a *nāgini*, a dragonness, in disguise. Her father, Tsugna Rinchen, is the king of the *nāgas*. At the insistence of the all-powerful, god-like tantric yogi Padmasambhava, Tsugna has allowed his daughter to wander across the earth as a human so that her fate can lead her to Ling. Now the moment has come. This war will set her free from Gog and she will be captured by Ling. There she will be known as Gogmo, the woman from Gog. She will marry Senglön and father Gesar.

³⁶ A three-fold division of local deities that matches the Confucian notion of Heaven, Earth, and Man. Lha are sky gods matching heaven. Lu are dragons and stand for earth and water. Nyen are mountain gods and stand between the two realms of Heaven and Earth, the way Man mediates between Heaven and Earth. In this case the three levels of reality are part of a conspiracy to make sure that the mother of Gesar and her family are not harmed.

³⁷ Tibetan *ma yig* - perhaps short for *gdod-ma*, meaning “primordial texts.” But in the epic they are taken to be paired with the *pha ‘bum*, “father hundred thousand verses,” as if there is a male and female ancient collection of prophecies and proverbs for Ling.

³⁸ The jewel is the *nāga* princess. “Victory banner” is a takeoff on Ralo Tönpa Gyaltzen’s full name, Gyaltzen meaning ‘victory banner.’ The pinnacle refers to the fact that the *nāga* princess took with her the best of the *nāga* kingdom’s treasures. Mouse refers to the year that Gyatsa will actually go and fight Gog and win the princess---that is, this very year, the year of the mouse or rat. “White” here refers to White Ling, whose wishes will be fulfilled by the raiding expedition, because the *nāga* princess will give birth to the new king of Ling, Gesar.

³⁹ One of the most precious possessions of the Ling tribe is a richly ornamented copy of the Buddhist *Hundred Thousand Line Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*. In fact, one of the major families in Ling is named after this book, Bum (‘*Bum*), meaning 100,000.

⁴⁰ dri - a female yak.

⁴¹ These precious things, a lovely blue tent, a precious ornamented scripture, and a dri with magic horns, are all considered as a sort of dowry that goes with Gogmo, a gift from the fabulous wealth of the *nāgas*.

⁴² To “praise the wargods” means to perform the tribal ceremonies of making a purificatory smoke offering and flying windhorse flags. This ceremony involves the creation of an altar with banners of the four directions, the elements, and other essentially Taoist symbols. The power of a warrior’s charisma and good fortune, known as “windhorse,” is summoned and mythical animals which represent the elements and the four directions are invoked: red fire tiger, blue thunder dragon, white snow lion, and red garuda bird. An offering of purificatory smoke is made in the midst of this arrangement. These practices are central to the Gesar epic and much discussed in the epic, where warriors perform these ceremonies in order to increase their personal power and to have victory in battle and politics.

The practices are shared by the Chinese tradition where they are thought of as ancient Taoist rituals. See, for example, chapter 49 of the Chinese martial epic *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi*) where a strategic general, Zhuge Liang, performs this ceremony in order to control the

winds. His version of the ritual involves one uniquely Chinese element, invocation of the seven stars of the Big Dipper. Luo Guanzong, trans. by Moss Roberts, *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 372.

43 Trothung is Gesar's uncle, but an evil man who invariably intends harm because of his selfishness and self-serving political policy. He always fails, however, perhaps because he is an emanation of the Buddhist deity Hayagrūva, the horse-headed slayer of demons. In any case, in this scene he typically gives bad advice designed to help himself and betray his friends, but it all backfires to the good of Ling and he becomes a laughing stock.

Younger Lineage - *chung rgyud* - that is, to the clan of Zhalkar, which is known as the younger or lesser lineage because it descends from the founder of Ling's (Chöphen Nagpo's) youngest son.

44 One of the principle aims of a smoke offering is to raise a column of smoke down which the wargods may descend. These energy principles alight on the body of the warrior, on his head, shoulders, and breast and, dwelling there, uplift the warrior and protect him in battle.

45 Now the elements are represented in Indic Tantric Buddhist style, as the five consorts of the five primordial buddhas. Locana (*spyān ma*) is the female Buddha consort who represents the element of Earth. Therefore she becomes the hearth or stove, which is the basis or ground for the offering. The other female buddhas are represented in the rest of the stanza. Māmaki (*mamaki*), the buddha of water; Paṇḍarāvāsīnī, the buddha of fire, (*Gos dkar mo*); Samaya Tārā, buddha of air, (*Dam Tshig sGrol ma*) and, Dhātviśvari, the buddha of space, (*dByings kyi dBang phyug ma*).

46 appearance-emptiness - *snang stong* - a metaphysical term from tantric philosophy. The tantric philosophy evolved to explain smoke offerings is quite interesting.

The nature of the phenomenal world (appearance) is emptiness. Therefore, some schools of Buddhist philosophy declare that there is no truly existent appearance, but only emptiness. In tantra, however, one realizes the emptiness of appearance without losing the experience of appearance or the phenomenal world. Thus tantric enlightenment involves a simultaneous realization of the vividness of appearance and of its emptiness. Because appearance is vivid, though empty, the gods who represent the phenomenal world of hearth, home, the elements, the wargods, etc. may be invoked. For although they are empty by nature, appearance teems with them as the vivid self-expression of the ground of being.

47 the Five Buddha families - the lords of the five female buddhas, the five consorts: see glossary.

48 The dharmakāya, sambhogakāya, and nirmāṇakāya are the three levels or aspects of the buddha: the mind, speech, and body. In this chant the mind of the buddha, the ultimate nature of the buddha is represented by the primordial buddha Vajradhara. The form buddha takes when he manifests in visionary appearances is represented by the colorful symbolically coded sambhogakāya buddhas, the buddhas of the five families. The nirmāṇakāya is represented by the three protectors: the bodhisattvas of Wisdom, Compassion, and Energy.

49 Three patron goddesses of Ling. The first, Yeshe Tsogyal, is a famous yogini. See *The Biography of Yeshe Tsogyal*, translated by Padmakara translation group. The second is a protective deity. The third is the divine aunt, a goddess, of Gesar of Ling.

50 Tibetan is filled with onomatopoeic sounds in three syllables. Usually these sounds

represent natural sounds, but sometimes they represent situations. *Tha ra ra* is the sound of clouds of wargods or in some cases the sound of poisonous clouds spreading. It may not be a sound at all, but just a feeling. More ordinary ones are, for example, *khyi li li*, the sound of a tempest, or *ur ru ru*, thunder, or *zi ri ri*, the buzzing of bees.

⁵¹ Refers to a victory yell that is given when Tibetans reach the top of a mountain or accomplish some feat: *Ki Ki So So Lya Gyal-lo*. *Ki Ki* and *So So* are simply victorious sounds. *Lha Gyal-lo* means “Divine Victory” or “The gods are victorious.”

⁵² See Stein 61: 204-205.

⁵³ [Hellfer, 67].

⁵⁴ Stein 56, p. 388