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Constitutional Mythologies and Entangled Cultures in the Tibeto-Mongolian *Gesar* Epic: The Motif of Gesar's Celestial Descent

The Gesar/Geser epic cycle is a warrior epic known throughout the Tibetan and Mongolian-speaking regions of Asia and is still largely sustained through a shamanistically tinted oral tradition. This article focuses on the epic motif of the hero's divine descent and constructs both a "constitutional mythology" for the epic based on this motif and a reconstruction of the probable archaic core of the epic motif. It also focuses in particular on the representations of the hero's sky-god father. The variability in the representation of this figure reflects the cross-cutting religious influences on this Silk Road epic. These range from archaic "native" Inner Asian traditions concerning sky and mountain gods, to Buddhism (and its debt to Indian Vedic religion) and even Silk Road Manichaeism.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Oral epics, sky gods, mountain gods, political ideology, Buddhism

THE FOLLOWING PAEAN TO LING GESAR, taken from an eighteenth-century Tibetan xylograph (or woodblock print), gives a representation of the multivalent and "totalizing" heroism that is typical of the eastern Tibetan and Mongolian epic traditions concerning the epic hero King Gesar:¹

By morning a marauding butcher,
By evening a lama who guides departed souls.
A *buddha* who has gone beyond the earth.

Immutable pole of the pristine blue sky,
Immutable peg that holds fast the earth's foundation.

Executioner who tames *Rudra*,
Neck-yoke of Yellow Hor,
Bludgeon of black demons,
Destined god of Tibet and the world.

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In the discipline of the holy *dharma*, he is Śākyamuni
 In the secret *mantrayāna*, he is Padmasambhava.
 With penetrating method and wisdom, he is Jamyang ('Jam-dbyangs/Mañjuśrī)
 With great loving kindness and compassion, he is Chenresig (Spyan-ras-gzigs/Avalokiteśvara)
 With great magical strength and power, he is Chanadorje (Phyag-na rdo-rje/Vajrapāṇi).

Son of the magically manifesting primordial *wer-ma*,
 Son of the swift unimpeded *dgra-lha*
 Master of enjoyment, he is prince of the water spirits (*klu/nāga*) below
 Master of magic, he is prince of the gods (*lha/deva*) above
 Consummation of heroic skill, he is prince of the mountain deities (*gnyan*) in the middle.

Having lived through five hundred pure and five hundred impure rebirths
 For his story to be told [in full]
 Would be beyond [our] ability to comprehend.

As seen here, Gesar is a worldly chief and champion, a master of heroic arts and a vanquisher of tribal foes, a hero who is aided by the “combat spirits” (the *dgra-lha* and *wer-ma*). He is also an incarnation of divinity who shamanistically unites the vertically arranged realms of Tibetan folk religion: he is descended from gods (*lha*) above, the water-spirits (*klu*) below, and the presiding mountain deities (*gnyan*) of the Middle Realm. Above all, he is a Buddha in every register: a Buddha in the exoteric and esoteric *dharmas*, a hero who unites the five principles of method, wisdom, love, compassion, and magical power. And he represents the unity of the holiest of trinitities of Tibetan Mahāyāna/Vajrayāna Buddhism: namely the *Rigs gsum mgon po* (Lords of the Three Families) Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and Vajrapāṇi (fig. 1).

A totalizing heroism of this kind befits a figure who is embraced in Tibet (especially in its eastern parts) as a symbol of cultural identity and national unity. Should Tibet ever have its own national currency, it would not be surprising to find an image of Gesar emblazoned across every banknote (cf. fig. 2).



Figure 1 Tibetan mural: The *Rigs gsum mgon po* (Lords of the Three Families).



Figure 2 Equestrian statue of Ling Gesar.

In keeping with the character of the *Gesar* epic as an explicitly Buddhist epic that is structurally analogous to the shamanic hero-tales spread through much of northern Asia,² Gesar's warrior-heroism has chivalric, shamanic, and tantric dimensions.³ The present article focuses on this hero's divine ancestry in the vertical spirit world of Tibetan folk religion. In particular, it examines the distinctive motif found in the *Gesar* epic of the culture hero being the incarnation of a son of a high god in the Upper Realm sent to establish order in human society.⁴

This aspect of the epic is called "distinctive" because, even though divine descent in one form or another is a common motif in the world's heroic and religious epic traditions, it is singular in the context of Tibeto-Mongolian and Turkic warrior epics. Although the hero of Inner Asian heroic legends is commonly ordained by sky or mountain divinities, only in the *Gesar/Geser* cycle is the hero actually descended from them as the incarnation of a sky-god-prince. Among the plethora of Mongolian heroic epics, for example, the epic of Geser Khan is alone in presenting the hero in this way. So unusual is this motif in Mongolian heroic epic that Roberte Hamayon, who has spent many decades studying the Buryat *Geser*, says of it that "a Christian influence has long been suspected" (Hamayon 2004:300).

This is a possibility that cannot be denied out of hand, especially in light of the well-attested presence of Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism on the Inner Asian trade routes over which Tibetan rulers vied for control between the seventh and tenth centuries AD, but it is a speculation hard to verify; and given the resonance of the motif of descent from sky-gods with what is known about the pre-Buddhist culture of Tibet, it is probably an unnecessary conjecture. In the course of this article, what

I hope to illustrate about the motif of divine descent in the *Gesar/Geser* epic is its traditional referentiality in the context of Tibetan culture.⁵ Of particular interest is its association with the Old Tibetan constitutional mythology of divine kingship during the Tibetan Empire of the seventh to ninth centuries, a mythology that persisted as a model of political legitimacy beyond the demise of the Empire itself. Secondly, I want to show how the particularities in the way this motif is formulated in the *Gesar* epic tradition bear the marks of cross-cutting religious and cultural influences. These influences range from Indic Buddhist cosmology (with its Vedic pantheon of 33 gods and the Brahmā realms above); Inner Asian shamanism; Tibetan Bon and other forms of Tibetan folk religion;⁶ and even, as reflected in the Mongolian name of the sky-god-father as Qormusta, the influence of Silk Road Manichaeism.

The Question of Origins

As a preliminary to further discussion of the layers of referentiality in the epic's palimpsest of the hero's divinity, it will be useful to take into account the historical origins of the *Gesar* epic, insofar as these can be known.

In Tibetan scholarly tradition, there is a broad consensus that the *Gesar* epic emerged from a historical kernel concerning a Buddhist chief who lived in eastern Tibet in the eleventh century. Just as considerable Western scholarly energy has been expended on showing that the title "Gesar" is derived from the Byzantine Greek title *kaisar* "Caesar" (see, e.g., Uray 1985),⁷ a similar amount of scholarly energy has been expended by Tibetan scholars to show that there may indeed have been an historical eastern Tibetan horse-trading chief, perhaps named Sengchen Norbu or Norbu Drandul, who assumed the central Asiatic title "Gesar" during the "Period of Fragments" (*sil bu'i dus*) that followed the demise of the Tibetan Empire in the ninth century AD (see, e.g., Dmu-dge bsam-gtan 2004).⁸

Mongolian scholars also tend to accept that the *Geser* epic has Tibetan origins. They see its dissemination into Mongolia as part of the general program of cultural importation from Tibet to Mongolia that started in the thirteenth century. The Mongolian scholar Damdinsuren, for example, argued that the historical kernel of the epic lay in the eleventh century in northeastern Tibet (Damdinsuren 1957).

This is not the place to go into the intricacies of these historical arguments. Here, it will suffice to observe that, although verifiable textual mentions of the epic of Ling Gesar in Tibet are relatively late (probably dating from the late fourteenth century), the origins of the epic—in terms of its form and the cultural milieu it seeks to represent—appear to be early, and likely stretch indeterminately into Tibet's largely uncharted, pre-literate past. This can be surmised from the many ways in which the epic reflects an archaic Tibetan worldview. Moreover, the epic embodies a tradition of pre-literate performative heroic memorialization that is expressed, for example, in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, a text found in the library cave at Dunhuang, which had been sealed in the eleventh century. In some places, the *Chronicle* adopts a prosimetric form, one that is highly reminiscent of the *Gesar* epic as a performative genre in which the protagonists sing self-vaunting songs in the first person. The setting of the *Gesar* epic also harks back to archaic models of Tibetan society. The poem

is set in a clan-based society reminiscent of what we know of the Tibetan imperial and pre-imperial periods, in which the “ancestral fortress” (*pha-mkhar*) is a primary marker of group identity,⁹ while marriage alliance is a primary means of ensuring solidarity between rival families. The epic also features a range of apparently archaic divinities,¹⁰ and it elaborates an archaic “shamanistic” model of conflict related to the non-Buddhist Tibetan concept of *bla* (sometimes translated as “soul”) and its associated protective spirits of combat (*sgra bla/dgra bla/dgra lha*) and personal flourishing (*sku bla/sku lha*). The epic’s model of conflict is quite particular: the hero defeats his opponents first by cutting them off from their source of spiritual strength through their *bla gnas* (soul-residences), which can be wild or domesticated animals, mountains, lakes, or trees. The opponent’s connections to divinity (and thus to martial efficacy) are severed by killing or destroying their soul residences and by tricking them into destroying or desecrating the *rten* (receptacles or shrines) of their *bla*. This renders them vulnerable to defeat, and the hero is then able to cut their life-force (*srog*). This model of conflict has little to do with classical Indian Buddhism and is clearly connected to native Tibetan shamanistic ideas that have been preserved to some degree in Bon tradition. In the epic, this archaic model of conflict is only partially subsumed by the Buddhist Vajrayāna paradigms of demon-subjugation.¹¹

Given this apparently archaic worldview, scholars have repeatedly been inclined to see the epic as having ancient, pre-Buddhist, Inner Asian cultural roots. Given the lack of hard textual evidence, however, it is impossible to assert the epic’s antiquity with any confidence. At present, we have no documentary evidence for the existence of the epic before the late fourteenth century, the only possible exception to this generalization being a ritual text of smoke purification (*bsang*) that may in part date from the thirteenth century, a translation of which, by this author, is forthcoming.

Another reason why it is impossible to assert the epic’s antiquity with any confidence is that the epic’s archaic features continue to have some vitality in living Tibetan culture, especially in outlying regions that, over the centuries, have resisted absorption into the centralized politico-monastic hegemonies of Tibetan culture. The persistence of archaic Tibetan sensibilities concerning the spirit world and its relevance to human societies is exemplified particularly in localized Tibetan traditions of shamanic spirit-mediumship with which the *Gesar* epic has strong affinities.¹²

On the basis of the documentary record alone, an epic story-cycle concerning Ling Gesar and his companions can only be asserted with any confidence from the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth century. This is the probable period in which the Tibetan quasi-historical text known as the *Rlangs kyi po-ti bse-ru* underwent its final redaction.¹³ Allusions in this text to Gesar and his warriors being contemporaries of the sage Changchup Drekol (Byang-chub ’dre-bkol), a semi-legendary figure held to have lived in approximately the eleventh century, are the textual basis on which most Tibetan scholarly assertions about Gesar as a historical figure are made. The *Rlangs kyi po-ti bse-ru* is effectively the historical charter of the Lang (Rlangs) clan, whose fourteenth-century scion Changchup Gyaltsen (Byang-chub rgyal-mtshan, d. 1364) rose to political supremacy in central Tibet in the wake of the Mongol demise. His rule, like those of his successors (the rulers of the Pagmodru Dynasty), was notable for its reintroduction of many features of the pageantry of the old Tibetan empire.

It seems likely that it was this post-Mongol period of Tibetan cultural reassertion that was most formative for the establishment of the *Gesar* epic as a mainstay of eastern Tibetan popular culture. This development seems to have been closely linked to the simultaneous rise, in this period, of the eastern Tibetan kingdom of Lingsang, for which the epic constituted a myth of political legitimacy, with the Lingsang royal family claiming descent from Drala Tsegyal (Dgra-lha rtse-rgyal), Gesar's nephew in the epic and the figure who leads the final assault on Ling's great enemy, the Horpas. In the post-Mongol period, the kingdom of Lingsang (located near modern Derge) dominated the trade routes between China and central Tibet, enjoying close relations with the Pagmodru Dynasty, with senior hierarchs of Sakya and Kagyu lineages of Tibetan Buddhism (which were dominant in this period), and with the Ming Dynasty of China. (On the geographical relations referred to here, see fig. 3.)

One could thus tentatively conclude that the *Gesar* epic developed from the late fourteenth century as some kind of clan-based memorialization of the heroic deeds of the forefathers during earlier times, and in particular during the relative anarchy of the eleventh-century "Period of Fragments." It is possible, though it remains a conjecture, that the consolidations of the epic in Ladakh and Baltistan in the west may also have taken place after the fourteenth century, after the epic was transmitted by settlers from the eastern regions.¹⁴



Figure 3 Map of the region of Tibet.

The Gesar Epic and the Cult of Mountain Deities

If the *Gesar* epic is a Tibetan clan-based heroic legend, it is entirely unsurprising to find that the authority and divinity of the epic hero is closely associated with the notion of the hero's ancestral or local mountain deity. This is unsurprising because of the well-attested importance of local mountain deities as the repositories of worldly authority and clan-based political power in Old Tibet (as is discussed, for example, by Karmay 1994 and 1996 and Dotson 2012). Such ideas are part of a living culture that continues to be strong in contemporary eastern Tibet, where the propitiation of local mountain deities (*yul lha/gzhi bdag/zodor*) is still a major part of the religious complex of lay male Tibetans. It is therefore fair to surmise that the primary layer of the epic's palimpsest concerning the epic hero's divinity involves his close relationship to a mountain deity.

In the context of the *Gesar* epic, this mountain deity is known as the *sku-lha gnyan* Ger-'dzo (under a variety of spellings). The geographical location of this mountain deity has never been conclusively established, though some suggest a locale in the area of the Raja (Ra-rgya) monastery in Golok. However, the name is attested in all of our earliest textual sources relating to the epic, and is a key element in the *Gesar* epic's "pool of tradition" (Honko 2000). The *Rlangs kyi po ti bse-ru*, for example, cites the "mountain-neck" (*mgul*, i.e., upper slopes) of Ger-'tsho as the place where Ling Gesar, depicted as a secular chief and wealthy horse-trader, first met Changchup Drekol during his journey to China and asked him to be his *lama* (guru, teacher, or guide). And if we look at the early *bsang* (smoke purification) ritual text *Seng chen nor bu don 'grub la gsang mchod 'bul tshul*, which is among the earliest textual attestations of the cult of Gesar,¹⁵ we find Gesar celebrated there as a mounted warrior-buddha whose spiritual entourage of protective spirits includes the "great *gnyan sku lha* Gerdzo," who is described visually in that text as having a human body and the head of a snow-lion.¹⁶

Another relatively early textual attestation of the cult of Gesar is the "pure vision" (*dag snang*) of the Fifth Sle lung Rinpoche Zhepa'i Dorje (Bzhad-pa'i rdo-rje, b. 1697), who records his vision as having taken place in the Earth Female Bird year (i.e., 1729). In this idiosyncratic account of Gesar's spiritual paternity, the hero is described as being engendered by sexual union between a primordial sky-goddess and the "worldly deity" (*srid pa'i lha*) Ger-mtsho.¹⁷

Additional corroboration that the core of Gesar's divinity as a worldly ruler and warrior is conceived primarily in terms of his relationship to mountain divinity is found in a letter, dating from 1780, by the Amdo Mongolian luminary Sumpa Khenpo Yeshe Paljor (Sum-pa mkhan-po Ye-shes dpal-'byor) to the Sixth Panchen Lama Palden Yeshe (dPal-ldan ye-shes). In this letter, Sumpa Khenpo writes of Gesar's origins as follows (emphasis added; Damdinsuren 1957:184–91):

As for the actual birth place [of Gesar] . . . it is said that this place is called Kyi Nyimakunkil. Above that place, three rivers . . . unite in front of Takri mountain, where there is a small hill shaped like a heart. Below that, in the upper reaches of a rocky mountain, resides an ancestral territorial divinity (*gzhi bdag gnyan po*) called Gomparatsa, and in front of that rocky mountain, there are thirty cairns that are said to be Gesar's thirty kinsmen.

. . . Some say that since the people of Ling and Den were frequently attacked by brigands, they would regularly make smoke offerings (*bsang*) in that place to the territorial divinity of an ancestral mountain (*ri gnyan zhig gi gzhi bdag*), seeking protection, and it is said that *Gesar was born as that territorial divinity itself or as its emanation*. Such a thing is possible because even recently, for example, the wife of a nomad who regularly made offerings to her ancestral mountain (*ri gnyan*) in the land of Dongnag gave birth to a child . . . who is recognized by all, both lay and monastic, as the son of that place's territorial divinity (*gzhi bdag*).

Here, we find Sumpa Khenpo unequivocally reporting that Gesar was considered to be the son of local territorial divinity. He makes no mention of stories concerning his descent from sky-gods.

However, as we will see below, the motif of Gesar's descent from the high sky-god is also a core part of the epic tradition, found in one form or another in all tellings. So what are we to make of this motif?

The Constitutional Mythology of Gesar as the Divine King

The mythology concerning the hero's descent not just from mountain divinity, but *also from sky-gods*, raises Gesar's heroism to a new level. It raises him above the status of a local hero to one with both national and religious resonance. This is because the motif of descent from sky-gods aligns Gesar's heroism with two important models in Tibet's pool of tradition concerning worldly and religious authority.

First, it brings the epic into a dynamic relationship with the model of divine kingship found in the mythology of the Yarlung Pugyal (Yar-klung sPu-rgyal) dynasty, which ruled Tibet during its Imperial Period between the seventh and ninth centuries. The progenitor of this dynasty, known as Nyatri Tsenpo (Gnya'-khri btsan-po), was said to have descended, by means of divine cord (*dmu thag*), from the "gods of the sky" (*gnam gyi lha*), and this mythology was a key part of the Yarlung Dynasty's narrative of political legitimacy.

Second, the motif resonates with the religious mythology of heavenly descent associated with both Śākyamuni Buddha and the mythology of the Central Asian Buddha of Bon tradition, Shenrab Miwo (Gshen-rab mi-bo). The divine descent of the Śākyamuni Buddha from the Tuṣita (Tib: *dga' ldan*) heaven is considered one of the "Twelve Deeds of the Buddha" (*mdzad pa bcu gnyis*) and is celebrated across Tibet as an important annual Buddhist feast day (*lha 'babs dus chen*). And the mythology of Shenrab Miwo's divine descent through the various levels of the sky and the various classes of sky-gods is highly elaborated in Bon tradition, as in, for example, the 12-volume life of Shenrab known as the *gZi brjid*.¹⁸

Divine descent from gods in the Upper Realm (*gong ma lha'i yul*), and not just from worldly mountain divinity in the Middle Realm (*bar mi'i yul*), is thus a potent motif in the Tibetan cultural context. It evokes the native Tibetan conception of political authority associated with Tibet's period of imperial greatness under the Yarlung kings while also signifying, in a religious register, the hero's sanctity and enlightenment.

As already noted, it was probably in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the "warrior-buddha" form of the *Gesar* epic began to be disseminated as a significant

part of Tibetan popular culture, and it has also been noted that this period was one of Tibetan cultural and political re-assertion after a century of Mongol domination. It is interesting to observe that it was also in this post-Mongol period that we see Tibetan mythologies of divine descent being elaborated in other literary contexts as well. For example, there is the revelation of the highly influential *Bka' thang sde lnga* of Orgyan Lingpa ('O rgyan gling pa). This re-asserted the archaic mythology of the heaven-sent kings of Yarlung Dynasty with a renewed elaboration. And it was also during this period that the voluminous biography of the Buddha of Bon tradition was set down in writing in the revelations of Blo ldan snying po. In this 12-volume biography of Tonpa Shenrab known as the *Gzi brjid*, the motif of Tonpa Shenrab's divine descent is highly elaborated.

Based on this observation, it seems fair to speculate that, in the wake of the evaporation of Mongol power in the Tibetan cultural world in the mid-fourteenth century and the reassertion of a Tibetan political identity, a new impetus was felt for the narration of the specifically Tibetan ideal of worldly authority as not just ordained locally by mountain divinity, but also legitimated by the grander notion of sacral kingship and the divine descent of the king from the gods of the sky. Looked at like this, the *Bka' thang sde lnga*, the *Gzi brjid*, and the *Gesar* epic may all be seen as complementary medieval expressions of a renewed nativistic impetus, in the wake of a century of Mongol domination, toward the reassertion of the Tibetan ideal of sacral rulership. These works might all be thought to represent different expressions of a shared Tibetan "constitutional mythology" concerning divine kingship, a notion that distinguished Tibetan political mythology from that of Tibet's erstwhile Mongol rulers.¹⁹

The peculiar twist that the *Gesar* epic gives to this nativist Tibetan motif is in its presentation of the motif in a distinctly "warrior-esque" manner—one with the sacred heaven-sent ruler depicted as the equestrian knight, the horseback warrior furnished by the gods with all the weapons, armor, and spiritual supports required for the vanquishing of human foes and demonic rivals. What also distinguishes the handling of this motif in the *Gesar* epic is the imaginative mobility the *Gesar* epic lends to it in the context of an oral tradition of inspired extemporization, in contrast to the ossified literary treatments of the motif we find in the classic literary works like the *Bka' thang sde lnga* and the *Gzi brjid*.

The main features of the *Gesar* epic's constitutional mythology of divine rulership can be recovered through a comparative analysis of the epic's many tellings. First of all, the epic confirms that *worldly rulership is ordained by divinity*—in the first instance, by mountain divinity, and by extension, by sky-gods, however they might be interpreted, and also to some extent, by the spirits of the Lower Realm.²⁰ It also confirms that *legitimate rulership is not based on primogeniture, but rather on the ruler's suitability to the task*. In the epic, such suitability typically implies skill in equestrian and heroic arts (*dpa' rtsal*). Another crucial feature of the epic's constitutional mythology of sacral kingship is that *the ruler is chosen not through his own will to power, but rather through the drawing of lots or divination*—that is, in such a manner that the choice is left ultimately to the presiding powers (or deities) of "chance." Correspondingly, *the ruler takes on the role reluctantly*. All of these features (save the warrior criteria of skill in horsemanship and heroic arts), I would suggest, are important aspects of a wider

culture of political legitimacy in the Tibetan cultural world, one that persists in Tibetan sensibilities even today. One can observe this both in local traditions of civil religion (as explored, for example, by Ramble 2008), and also more broadly in the Tibetan Buddhist model of worldly and religious authority evidenced in the peculiarly Tibetan system of “rule by incarnation.” In particular, the feature of reluctant rulership that one finds expressed through the *Gesar* epic has remained a central sensibility in what we might call a wider “Tibetan political theory” concerning legitimate rulership. In the *Gesar* epic, we find this idea expressed through themes concerning the god-child’s unwillingness to enter the human realm. This theme of reluctance resurfaces repeatedly in traditional tellings of the epic. Throughout his life, we find the hero Gesar seeking to retire from worldly pursuits, and again and again, we find him being roused to action by the provocations of his vainglorious uncle Trothung (Khro-thung) and the chastisements and exhortations of his personal goddess and guide Manene, a kind of erotic mothering figure who regularly appears to the hero on the cusp of wakefulness and sleep, bearing ambrosiac boons and urgent calls to action.

Reflections of this notion of reluctant rulership can clearly be observed in Tibetan cultural history. We can see, for example, how the Imperial Tibetan model of the sky-god-king—one that held sway from the seventh to the ninth century—was transformed and supplanted in the post-Dynastic period by the explicitly Buddhist model of legitimate rulership by a Bodhisattva (a fully enlightened being who returns to human incarnation out of compassion for the sufferings of the ignorant). We see this transformation very clearly expressed in the voluminous *chos ’byung* genre of Tibetan religious historiography, which began to evolve from that period with its roots in eleventh-century “treasure texts” (*gter ma*) like the *Bka’ chem ka bkol ma* and the *Mani bka’ ’bum*. This *chos ’byung* genre gave expression to a very clear Tibetan national salvation mythography that centered on the repeated interventions in Tibetan affairs by Tibet’s destined deity (*bod kyi lha skal*), the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara or Chenresig (Spyan-ras-gzigs). As Tibet’s destined protector and savior, driven by “unbearable compassion” for the benighted beings of the “barbarous borderlands” (Tibet), Chenresig/Avalokiteśvara repeatedly incarnates himself in the Land of Snows:²¹ first as the monkey-progenitor of the Tibetan race, then as Tibet’s first Buddhist emperor Srong-btsan sgam-po, then as the eighth-century tantric guru Padmasambhava (regarded in Tibet as the “second Buddha”). This national mythography concerning the forced interventions of the Bodhisattva in Tibetan affairs then became the explicit model of rulership for a unified Tibet in the mid-seventeenth century under the fifth Dalai Lama, whose palace is named after the mythical mountain abode of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the *Potala*.

This notion of reluctant divine rulership (as opposed to legitimacy born of the will to power) has thus remained a central sensibility in Tibetan political history. And this sensibility is enshrined within the epic tradition of Gesar in the archaic motif of the god-child in the Upper Realm being reluctant to take on the mission of bringing order to the unruly world of men and demons, and having to be assuaged by the promise of magical weapons and armor, a fine horse, an array of spirit-helpers, and so on.

I will now outline the narrative of Gesar’s heavenly descent as found in six different prominent Tibetan and Mongolian tellings. From this, I will suggest a reconstruction

of the archaic core of this epic motif. I will then conclude with a discussion of the layers of referentiality that can be discerned in one very narrowly defined feature of the motif: the figure of Gesar's sky-god father.

The summaries given below illustrate the balance between flexibility and stability that characterizes the Tibeto-Mongolian *Gesar/Geser* epic cycle. As we can see from these summaries, the cycle preserves many specific motifs (even across regional variants), while still being open to the interpretation and improvisation of its diverse oral and literary tellers.

Broadly speaking, as has been observed by many scholars (e.g., Samuel 1994), the *Gesar/Geser* epic cycle has three main regional traditions: eastern Tibetan (Kham and Amdo), western Tibetan (Ladakh and Baltistan), and Mongolian (including Buryatia in the north and Kalmykia in the west). In all of these areas, the cycle continues to be transmitted in oral tradition, and so it is subject to the variation and flexibility that this condition implies.²² Among the Muslim bards of Ladakh and Baltistan, however, it is possible to discern a greater degree of conservatism with regard to innovation than one sees, for example, in eastern Tibet, where bards will typically extemporize very freely and creatively.²³ Although regional differences go some way toward explaining the variety evidenced in the summaries below, these summaries also serve to highlight the inadequacy of regionalization alone as an explanation for the epic's diversity, since there are patterns of convergence and divergence among these versions that clearly cut across regional boundaries. In particular, marked convergences can be observed between the Guide manuscript from Amdo (GM), from far northeastern Tibet, and the oral recitations from Ladakh (FL), from far to the southwest. Some of these convergences were already observed by Rolf A. Stein (1990), but there are many more specific convergences than the four broad thematic ones mentioned by Stein.

The Hero's Divine Descent in Six Different Tellings

The motif of the divine descent of the hero from the Upper Realms to the Middle Realm is found in every telling of the Tibetan and Mongolian *Gesar/Geser* epic tradition of which this author is aware, whether Tibetan, Ladakhi, Burushaski, Mongolian, Monguor, or Buryat. However, the precise treatment of this motif, even within the distinct regional traditions, is highly variable. This variability is illustrated here by summaries of half a dozen examples taken from prominent textualized versions of the epic over the past three centuries. These examples include Tibetan and Mongolian literary tellings dating from the period since the eighteenth century, a Ladakhi oral account recorded in the early twentieth century, and the published transcription of the oral recitations of a fêted illiterate bard in eastern Tibet.²⁴

1. The Beijing "Mongolian xylograph" (MX)

This Mongolian-language version was published in 1716, under the patronage of the Kangxi emperor, as a xylograph print entitled *Arban jü-ün ejen Geser qagan-u toguji*.²⁵ It is thus among the oldest texts of the *Gesar/Geser* epic cycle that can be reliably dated. It was likely culled from oral sources in southern Mongolia, though

its more remote origins may be in Tibet.²⁶ Here, the motif of divine descent is treated as follows (summarized from Wallace 1991):

Khormuzda, who dwells on Mt Sumeru with the “33 Gods,” is enjoined by the Buddha to send one of his three sons (named Ameen, Weele, and Tagus) to the human realm. The sons are reluctant to go. On account of his unrivalled strength and his skill with sword and bow, the youngest son Tagus is chosen. As conditions for his acceptance of this mission, he demands a set of divine armor and weapons, three female spirit-siblings, 30 lesser gods as companions, and a brown horse faster than an antelope. Tagus is then ready for his birth in Tibet as the son of Sanglun (the ruler of the Tussa tribe) and his wife Amirtasheela, who had been captured in a raid on the Bayan tribe.

2. The Rtsa ba'i rnam thar, also known as the “Gyantse xylograph” (GX) (Stein 1959)

This Tibetan text survives in several block-prints that apparently date from the late eighteenth century, including one at the British Library (catalog number 19999 b22). In 1981, this text was republished in *dpe cha* (loose-leaf block-book) form in Dharamsala, India. The treatment of the divine descent in this text is as follows (summarized from Me-'od-'bar-rtal 1981):

The human land of Ling is beset by enemies from without and within, and so petitions are made for a god-prince to be sent to the world to be its ruler. Although four god-princes are sent from the heavens, because of their negative aspirations they are born instead as demons that become the enemies of Ling. Three reluctant god-princes remain in the heavens. Their father, Tsangpa Karpo (Tshangs-pa dkar-po) [see fig. 4], instructs them that one of them must go. The mission falls to the middle son, named Dondrup (Don-grub), who grants his consent on condition that he be granted the requisites for defeating enemies. Tsangpa Karpo complies by granting him twenty-five “assistants.” Dondrup then retreats into meditation for seven days, and after receiving many offerings from all the gods and tantric deities, he dies in the divine realm. A *chorten* (*mchod rten*) or *stupa* (reliquary monument) is erected to his memory. He then goes to the land of Upper White Ling (*Gling-dkar-stod*) in the human realm and enters the womb of Gongtsa Lhamo ('Gog-tsha lha-mo).

3. The Guide manuscript (GM)

This is a Tibetan manuscript version that probably dates to the nineteenth century (or possibly earlier) and that was found in the area of Guide (Tibetan *Khri-ka*) in northern Amdo, near the Blue Lake (Qinghai/Kokonor/Mtsho-sngon).²⁷ Its narrative of the divine descent can be presented thus (summarized from Damdinsuren 1961):

In the Upper Realm of gods, the father Tsangpa Karpo and mother Bumchong Gyal-mo ('Bum-skyong rgyal-mo) have three sons named Donkar, Donlek, and Dondrup. Dondrup is strong, brave, intelligent, and skilled in heroic arts. At this time demons are flourishing in the Middle Realm, so all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas hold council



Figure 4 The god Tshangs-pa dkar-po, from a modern thangka painting in the Museum of Tibetan Culture, Xining.

and decide that a divine being must be sent as an incarnation to relieve the human realm of its suffering. The father Tsangpa Karpo calls his three sons before him and says: “You three are [as precious to me] as the eyes in my forehead, but one of you must go alone to the land of men, to defeat the four demons of extremity, to press down the haughty, and be a lord over the black-headed ones. You three, decide among yourselves.” The three sons confer, but since all are reluctant, they cannot agree. The god-child Dondrup suggests they draw lots using arrows, pebbles, and dice. In the morning they draw lots with arrows, and Dondrup is chosen; at midday with pebbles, and Dondrup is chosen; and in the evening with dice, and again it falls to Dondrup Karpo. The divine mother Bumchong Gyalmo says to her son: “You are selected, so you must go. But first you must ascertain what the situation there is like—if it is pleasant you can go yourself, but if it is terrible, then I your mother will go in your place.”

Dondrup then transforms into a fantastic bird with a body of gold, turquoise, and conch, four black talons of iron, and speckled eyes of agate, and flies down to the human land of Upper White Ling to make a reconnaissance. The bird is seen by Akhu Trotung (A-khu Khro-thung), who takes it to be a bad sign and fires an arrow at it. It is then seen by Sengtak Dirbu (Seng-stag ldir-bu), the future human “father” of the hero, who recognizes it as a good sign and sets about preparing offerings. The bird then flies back to the Upper Realm of gods and there enjoins his mother and father to grant him the requisites for his heroic mission: namely, a horse and saddle, a sword, a bow, arrows, a spouse, a horse steward, and so on, including as “translator”

the female divinity Ane Gongmen Gyalmo (Gong-sman rgyal-mo). He then dies, and his memorial *chorten* in the Upper Realm of gods is known as the Nyangde Chorten (Myang-'das mchod rten).

In Ling, the 50-year old barren woman Ma Gagtsa Lhamo (Sma 'Gag-tsha lha-mo) sees a miraculous apparition in the sky while milking the 'bri (female yak), and she becomes pregnant with the hero-child.

4. The Lower Ladakhi version recorded by A. H. Francke (FL)

This Tibetan version dating from the early twentieth century was transcribed from oral narrations in Lower Ladakh by the Moravian scholar A. H. Francke. Its treatment of the divine descent can be summarized as follows (from Francke [1905] 2000):

The shaman-hero Palle Gopo (Dpal-le rgod-po) witnesses the ongoing [cosmic] battle between the forces of the White Side and the Black Side: he sees a white bird battling a black bird, a white yak battling a black yak. He kills the black yak with his slingshot, and in recognition of this heroic deed, a divine apparition offers him many gifts. Although he refuses these gifts, he demands that one of the three sons of the king of the heavens be sent to rule the land of Ling. The apparition agrees to this and returns to the Upper Realm of gods.

Some time later, Palle Gopo himself goes to the Upper Realm of gods to reassert his demand for a god-prince to be sent to the world, but is rebuffed by the king of the gods, Mighty Gyajin (Brgya-byin).²⁸ So he journeys to the Lower Realm of water-spirits (*klu/nāga*) hoping to obtain a horse. Again he is not successful, so he journeys to the Middle Realm of the "seven refuges" (*skyabs bdun*), again in the hope of buying a horse. The deities of the Middle Realm grant him a marvelous horse and on it he re-ascends to the Upper Realm, this time brandishing a sharp sword. He again demands a god-prince, and this time the gods consent.

The king of the heavens, Mighty Gyajin, has three sons: Donden, Donyo, and Dondrup. The first two refuse the mission, but the third expresses willingness. The three sons then compete in a series of horseback contests set by their father, and the youngest son, Dondrup, wins them all. His jealous older brothers, thinking this will mean he will be exempt from the unwanted mission to the human realm, torment and bully him. In fact it is the younger son who is sent.

First, in order to undertake a reconnaissance of Ling, he transforms himself into a beautiful bird and descends onto the house of Akhu Trotung (A-gu Khru-thung), who shoos him away firing an arrow. The bird then returns to the Upper Realm. Dondrup then makes demands concerning the prerequisites for his mission: a mother, a castle, a horse, brothers, a bow and arrows, a protecting goddess Kurmen Gyalmo (bKur-sman rgyal-mo [*sic*]),²⁹ and a wife. Then Dondrup dies. He enters the body of his human mother Gongza Lhamo (Gog-bzang lha-mo) in the form of a hailstone that falls into her bowl and that she swallows.

5. The Lingsang Xylograph (LX)

This early twentieth-century text from the region of Kham in eastern Tibet is one of three volumes composed by the monk-author Gyurme Thubten Jamyang Drakpa ('Gyur-med thub-bstan 'jam-dbyangs grags-pa), the abbot of the royal monastery of

Dzong-go (Rdzong-'go) in the historic kingdom of Lingtsang (near Derge). The volumes were written under patronage of the "religious king" of Lingtsang and a number of influential *ris-med* lamas living at the time in that region, including particularly Ju Mipham Namgyal Gyatso ('Ju Mi-pham rnam-rgyal rgya-mtsho, 1846–1912).³⁰ An abridgment of this version was translated into French by Rolf A. Stein in 1956, and a full English translation is now available in Kornman, Khandro, and Chönam (2012). This version's radical Buddhist reinterpretation and reworking of the motif of the divine descent can be summarized as follows (from Kornman, Khandro, and Chönam 2012):

In the period after the disintegration of the Tibetan Empire, since Guru Padma-sambhava's job of taming and "binding by oath" the spirits of Tibet has remained unfinished, Tibet becomes mired in conflict, demonic pollution, and suffering. Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, moved by compassion, supplicates the Lord Amitābha ('Od-dpag-med), who replies with a prophetic instruction. In the "Heaven of the 33," there is a god-child named Dondrup, whose father is Lhachen Odenkar (Lha-chen 'Od-ldan-dkar, "Great God White with Luminosity") and whose mother is Manda Lhamdze. If this child is born as a human, says Amitābha, he will be a hero capable of "taming the hard-to-tame" and bringing peace and happiness to the snowy land of Tibet.

Avalokiteśvara then visits Padmasambhava, the apotheosized tantric guru, who is residing in his palace amidst the terrifying land of blood lakes and demons known as Camara (Rnga-yab gling). Disguising himself as a boy, Avalokiteśvara engages in a series of exchanges with a many-headed demon gatekeeper. The gatekeeper goes into the palace to confer with his lord, but when he returns, the boy has vanished and only a lotus flower is left in his place. The guard picks up the flower and brings it back into the palace, at which point it turns into an orb of light that dissolves into the heart of Padmasambhava.

Later, when Padmasambhava is performing an auspicious tantric feast (*ganacakra*), green light emanates from his head invoking the mindstream of the *dharmadhatu* Samantabhadra (Kun-tu bzang-po). Then from the heart of Samantabhadra emanates a blue five-pointed vajra (rdo-rje) that flies to the "Heaven of the 33" and enters the top of the head of White Cakrasamvara (Bde-mchog dkar-po), who transforms into Hayagrīva (Rta-mgrin). At the same time, from the heart of the "mother" Namkhe Yingchukma (Opulent Spaciousness of the Sky) emanates a 16-petaled lotus that enters the top of the head of the goddess Gyuma Dedzema (Illusory Beauty) who transforms into Vajravārāhī (Rdo-rje phag-mo). Then, in the "passionless union of the horse and the pig" (Vajravārāhī and Hayagrīva), the mindstreams of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions are invoked. From the heart-centers of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the five cosmic Buddha families, colored lights emanate in 10 directions, cleansing the obscurations that keep sentient beings in a state of ignorance. The light then gathers together and forms a double *vajra* that dissolves into the top of the head of white Cakrasamvara, generating great bliss, passing through his body, enters his consort as a "wind of transcendent wisdom" (*ye-shes rlung*). A little while after this, there appears in her lap a resplendent god-child blazing with light. This divine child, called Thopa Gawa (Thos pa dga' ba, Joyful to Hear), gives a teaching on cause and fruition and receives elaborate empowerments from Padmasambhava and each of the five cosmic Buddhas in turn.

Later, Padmasambhava invokes the assistance of the native gods of Tibet, all of whom pledge oaths of allegiance to Thopa Gawa, who then makes his demands—the prerequisites without which he cannot take the mission. He demands a Middle Realm mountain divinity (*gnyan*) as a father; a Lower Realm water-spirit (*klu mo*) as a mother; a wife who is a *dākinī* (*mkha'-gro*: sky-faring female guardians of the esoteric teachings); a land “endowed with splendor and glory”; subjects who will serve faithfully; armor, weapons, and a horse. Padmasambhava then looks out over the Tibetan plateau and describes its geography as if from the air. He settles upon Ling, in the east of the Snowlands, as the hero’s destined land. Padmasambhava then poisons the Lower Realm of *klu*, and this gives him the pretext for going there to ostentatiously cure the pestilence that he has in fact caused; he thereby extracts a promise from the *klu* king to send a daughter to the Middle Realm to be the hero’s mother.

The god-child later enters the womb of the *klu-mo* princess Gongza (*’Gog bza’*) while she is sleeping with her human husband Senglon (Seng-blon). During her sleep, she dreams she is making love to a handsome golden man in golden armor, who, we are told, represents the mountain deity Ger-dzo.

6. The oral recitation of the bard Grags-pa (GP)

This version, from the 1980s, is part of the recorded recitation of bard Drakpa (Grags-pa, 1906–1986; see fig. 5), an illiterate epic singer from Pelbar Dzong (Dpal-’bar rdzong) in Chamdo (Chab-mdo) Prefecture, eastern Tibetan Autonomous Region. After the liberalization in China that followed the death of Mao and the overthrow of the “Gang of Four” in 1978, Drakpa was recognized as a “master storyteller” and took up residence at the Tibet University in Lhasa, where he recorded 995 hours of *Gesar* epic recitation before his death in 1986 (fig. 6).³¹ His version of the hero’s divine descent can be summarized as follows (from Grags-pa 1998, 1996):

Demons in the Middle Realm are defiling the water and polluting the land, leading to an outbreak of sickness in the Lower Realm of *klu/nāga*. The king of the *klu*, Tsugna Rinchen, falls sick. Two *klu*-princes are nominated to bring a message to the gods, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas in the Upper Realm. They ascend on the back of a resplendent bird of many colors. The two *klu* do not survive the ardors of the journey and die en route, but the bird survives, and when it reaches the Upper Realm, it alights on the upper branches of the cosmic Wish-Fulfilling Tree. To test the bird, the high god Tsangpa Karpo orders that the bird be thrown on a bonfire and burnt for seven days. After seven days have passed, however, the bird rises from the fire completely unscathed, with letters of the *klu* message glowing on his wing-feathers. Tsangpa understands the message and convenes a grand assembly of all the divine beings of the Upper, Lower, and Middle Realms. The kings of the *lha*, *klu*, and *gnyan* all volunteer for the mission, but Amitābha deems them unsuitable.

Then Tsangpa introduces one of his 15 sons, named Butok Karpo (Bu-tog dkar-po), with a great paean as “the hero destined to subdue black demons, with power enough to kindle fire inside an ocean, with speed enough to ride a horse through a cliff of red rock, and agility enough to dance on the tip of a needle” (Grags-pa 1998:10). On the basis of this praise, it is decided that Bu-tog dkar-po should be sent. The god-child is extremely reluctant and runs away. He tries to evade the mission by hiding nine

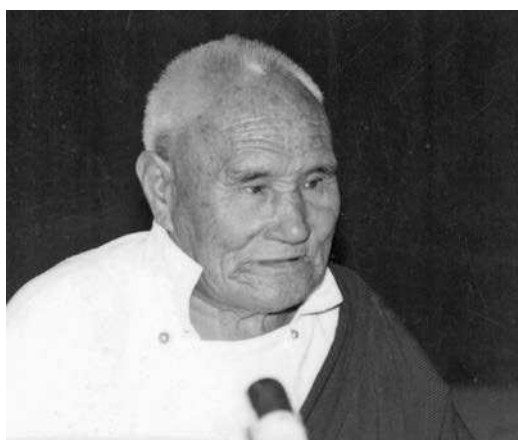


Figure 5 Tibetan epic singer Drakpa (1906–1986).

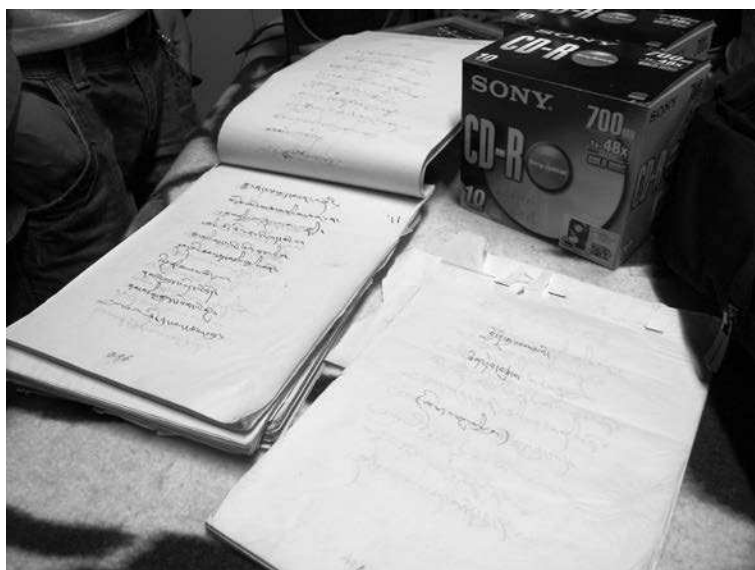


Figure 6 Audio recordings and transcriptions of the recitation of Drakpa.

times in various parts of the cosmos. He is found each time and returned to the god-realm by Padmasambhava.

Padmasambhava in the meantime heals the *klu* in return for them sending a *klu-mo* (*nagi*), or water-spirit, to be the hero's mother in the human realm. Eventually, enjoined by all the gods, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, *klu/nāga*, and *gnyan*, Bu-tog dkar-po agrees to the mission. He demands as prerequisites a helmet, impenetrable armor, a bow, two quivers filled with arrows, a bow-case, a sharp sword made of crystal, a meteorite-iron spear, a golden saddle, and all necessary equestrian accoutrements. He also demands special clothes of the *dgra-lha* for his 80 knights: and spirit-helpers from the *lha*, *klu*, and *gnyan*; and as supports for his body, speech, and mind, he demands statues, scriptures, and a variety of *chorten*. He also demands a huge tent that cannot be destroyed by lightning, wind, or water.

Finally, after manifold blessings and boons, he returns to his master Padmasambhava, makes obeisance, and then disappears like a rainbow. The human mother 'Gog-bza' (a *klu-mo/nagi* captured from the 'Gog tribe) becomes pregnant when visited by her husband Seng-blon.

If space were no consideration, two other regional variants would merit summarizing here. One is a Buryat telling of the *Gesar* epic (Baldano 1986) in which one finds elaborate genealogies of the dualistic heavenly realms of the gods—the black and white *tengri*. In this version, as in MX above, the god-son chosen to become incarnate as Gesar is the son of the high-god of the white *tengri*, Khan Qormusta. Another variant worth attention is a Monguor/Tu telling that has striking commonalities with GM (see Richtsfeld 2006).³² Here, the god-child in the heavens is known as Gama Dongzhu (Skar-ma Don-grub).

Oral Tradition and the Influence of Vajrayāna Buddhism

In its treatment of the motif of Gesar's divine descent, the *Gesar* epic alludes to an archaic Inner Asian complex of sky-gods (*gnam gyi lha*), female sky-divinities (*sman*), and male territorial mountain-divinities (*yul lha/ gnyan*). However, it is equally clear that, in its historical development, the Tibetan epic tradition has also been heavily influenced by the interpretive sensibilities of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism.

This influence is particularly evident in the eastern Tibetan epic tradition. Among the versions summarized above, it is particularly well exemplified in the early twentieth-century Lingsang Xylograph (LX) and in the oral recitations of Drakpa (GP). These tellings, in common with countless other eastern Tibetan tellings, are aligned with an explicitly Tibetan Buddhist interpretive sensibility concerning Gesar as a Buddhist manifestation and an object of ritual propitiation. This dimension of the epic tradition—as a vehicle for a devotional cult centered on the deified figure of Gesar—was given a huge boost in the late nineteenth century by the embrace of "Gesar-culture" by prominent lamas of the eastern Tibetan *ris-med* movement. In particular, the cult of Gesar was tremendously expanded by the ritual works centered on Gesar by the highly revered luminary Ju Mipham ('Ju Mi-pham rnam-rgyal rgya-mtsho, 1846–1912), who was himself involved in the patronage of the LX version. Although Ju Mipham did not initiate the Buddhist ritual cult of Gesar, he gave it a major boost in legitimacy, and his adoption and interpretation of Gesar as a symbol of enlightenment has in turn had a noticeable impact on the still-evolving epic tradition. His ritual works effectively elevated Gesar from the status of a rather marginal protector to that of a fully enlightened tutelary divinity (*yi dam*).³³ Mipham's Gesar practices, such as rites of smoke purification (*bsang*), rites of offering (*gsol mchod*), "retrieval of good fortune" (*gyangs 'gugs*), and the erection of Gesar prayer flags (*rlung rta*), continue to be performed by many charismatic eastern Tibetan lamas. And, as a further legacy of this promotional effort, Gesar has also been embraced in the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in the West (particularly by the burgeoning Shambhala group in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere) as a model for "engaged," "secular," or "enlightened-warrior" Buddhism.

In the explicitly Buddhist tellings of the *Gesar* epic, particularly those recorded since the time of Ju Mipham, a primary place in the narratives concerning the divine mission of the hero is accorded not just to the host of sky-gods in the Upper Realm, but also to the agency of the Padma (Lotus) family of compassionate Buddhas, with Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Padmasambhava representing its “three bodies” (*skugsum/trikāya*). In particular, Padmasambhava—the eighth-century Indian tantric guru who is credited with bringing Vajrayāna Buddhism to Tibet—occupies a central role as the epic’s divine architect. Thus, in the highly influential LX telling summarized above, it is Padmasambhava who orchestrates the hero’s mission in the heavenly sphere; it is he who travels to the Lower Realm of *klu/naga* to find a mother for the hero; it is he who identifies the country of Ling as the worldly locus for the hero’s human incarnation; and it is he, above all, who grants the hero boons and blessings throughout his epic mission.

The central role accorded to Padmasambhava brings the *Gesar* epic in line with the wider Buddhist Tibetan national mythography concerning Tibet’s conversion from pagan barbarism to Buddhism and its national destiny as the chosen “field of submission” (*gdul zhing*) of the enlightened compassion of the Padma family of Buddhas (in which Avalokiteśvara, mentioned above, represents the *sambhogakāya* aspect and the main Bodhisattva form). This assimilation of the *Gesar* epic to the broader Tibetan narrative of national salvation at the hands of Avalokiteśvara (and his *nirmāṇakāya* emanation Padmasambhava) is evident in the vast majority of eastern Tibetan tellings over the past 150 years.³⁴ This is so to such an extent that, in the imaginations of many Tibetans today, *Gesar* is generally understood as a “nativized” placeholder for Padmasambhava—a “folk version” of Padmasambhava, as it were. In particular, in the eastern Tibetan epic tradition, there has been a tendency since the early twentieth century to defer more or less explicitly to LX as the authoritative text concerning the hero’s divine descent, birth, and youth. Several contemporary *Gesar* storytellers defer openly to LX when offering their own accounts of the hero’s divine mission and early life; examples are the literate *Gesar* “treasure tale” (*gter-sgrung*) authored by Guru Jyantsen (Gu-ru rgyal-mtshan) from Gabde (Dga’-bde) in Golok; Tenzin Drakpa (Bstan-’dzin grags-pa) from Chikdril (Gcig-sgril) in Golok; and numerous earlier twentieth-century authors of *Gesar* texts, such as the third Jamtrul (’Jam-sprul) Rinpoche.

The authoritative influence of the Lingsang xylograph’s treatment of *Gesar*’s divinity is evident not just in many literary eastern Tibetan tellings, but also in the epic’s ongoing oral tradition. This is made particularly evident in the published oral recitations of the illiterate bard Samdrup (Bsam-grub, 1922–2011), who succeeded Drakpa as the most fêted singer of the *Gesar* epic in Tibet (see fig. 6). During his tenure as “master storyteller” at the Tibetan Academy of Social Science in Lhasa in the 1990s, Samdrup recorded over 2,000 hours of recitation. And in the published transcriptions of those recordings, we can see how he repeatedly incorporates, almost verbatim, extended passages from LX. One such example of a theme—in Albert Lord’s sense of “theme” as an extended narrative or poetic segment (Lord [1960] 2000:68–98)—“borrowed” from the LX telling, and repeated on several occasions in the course of Samdrup’s oral performance, is the technical narrative outlined above concerning the divine

generation of Thopa Gawa through a series of emanated light-rays that start with Padmasambhava and culminate in the “passionless union of the horse and pig” (Hayagrīva and Vajravārāhī) from which the divine child is engendered.³⁵

As I have suggested in a previous study (FitzHerbert 2009), one way to understand this phenomenon would be to regard Samdrup and the Lingsang xylograph as two exemplars of a shared eastern Tibetan oral pool of tradition. However, to my mind, the repetitions of LX that one finds in Samdrup’s repertoire do not have the quality of such shared oral-traditional themes. The convergences between LX and Samdrup’s oral performance are not in generic eulogies or schematic invocations of deities, genealogies, or vertical landscapes—paean of the type one might find nearly replicated in any telling. Rather, they concern specific idiosyncratic narrative “moments” that, in my view, must be considered particular to the “mental text” (Honko 2000) of the literary Lingsang xylograph. This suggests a genetic relationship between Samdrup’s performances and the literary LX version, which the illiterate Samdrup must have learned by ear at some point during his apprenticeship as a *Gesar* bard. Samdrup then used passages like these as kernels, or interpretative bedrocks, for his telling, from which he was able to elaborate and diversify his tale. That this “concertina method” of oral composition was indeed the one employed by Samdrup is given sidelong tribute in his biography, in which it is said that “from one [tale] he [Samdrup] tells one hundred, and from a hundred he tells a thousand.”³⁶

Reconstructing the Archaic Kernel of the Motif of Gesar’s Divine Descent

The influence that the Lingsang xylograph text has exerted on the eastern Tibetan motif concerning the hero’s divine mission is striking, but, from a comparative perspective, as seen from the summaries presented above, the LX version of Gesar’s divine origin is in fact the “odd one out.” What this reveals is that, in the eastern Tibetan epic tradition, the archaic traditional features of this epic motif (Gesar as descended from a high sky-god, for example) have been largely erased, being subsumed by a thoroughly Buddhist “mental text” whose overriding concern is an assertion of the hero’s credentials as a Buddhist deity. This is clearly shown by the fact that, in the LX telling, we are first told of a god-child Dondrup in the “Heaven of the 33” who is the son of a god named generically as Lha-chen ’Od-ldan-dkar (Great White Luminous God), but then, as the narration progresses, this father-figure is entirely forgotten in the ensuing narrative concerning the engendering of the divine child from a series of light rays emanating from and uniting a series of Buddhist tantric deities. What this mention of Dondrup, son of the great luminous god, amounts to is a nod in the direction of the traditional motif, which is then subsumed and transformed within the author’s radical remodeling of the motif.

By taking into account only those themes that are found in at least three of these summaries, it is possible to make a tentative reconstruction of what might be considered the archaic core of this epic motif. What this reconstruction shows is that these diverse tellings coalesce around a number of themes that are common to all three main geographical areas of the epic’s dissemination, even though many of these

themes are either passed over very quickly in the LX version or are altogether absent from it.

This reconstruction of the putatively archaic story of the hero's divine descent includes the following core features:

- The hero is one of the sons (normally three) of a high-god in the Upper Realm (MX, GX, GM, FL, GP).
- The god-child is the youngest child (or the middle child, never the eldest) (MX, GX, GM, FL, GP).
- His name is Dondrup, or some variant thereof (GX, GM, FL, [LX]).
- The god-prince is reluctant to take the mission (MX, GX, GM, FL, GP).
- The god-princes compete in contests or draw lots to see who will go ([MX], GX, GM, FL).
- A reconnaissance of the human realm is undertaken in the form of a bird (GM, FL, [LX]).
- The god-son demands prerequisites for accepting the mission; these include armor, weapons, a horse, and spirit helpers (MX, GM, FL, LX, GP).
- The god-son dies in the heavenly realm (GX, GM, FL).

Two things are noticeable in this reconstruction. First, from the patterns of convergence illustrated above, it seems very probable that the Guide manuscript (GM) and the Ladakhi traditions (FL) together represent a more archaic strand to the epic tradition (as has been pointed out by Stein 1990). And second, very few of these core themes are found in the "authoritative" LX telling.

Entangled Cultures in the Figure of Gesar's Heavenly Father?

Now finally, to return to the specific element within this motif concerning the hero's heavenly paternity, we find in the above summaries a range of suggestions. We find the divine father presented as

- Qormusta (MX)
- Tsangpa Karpo ('Tshangs pa dkar po) (GX, GM, GP)
- Gyajin (Brgya-byin) (FL)
- Lhachen Odenkar (Lha-chen 'od-ldan-dkar) (LX)
- Avalokiteśvara/Padmasambhava/Samantabhadra/Cakraśamvara/Hayagrīva (LX)

So how are we to understand this instability? The indeterminacy of the characterization of the heavenly father in the *Gesar* epic suggests that the vision of gods and men enshrined by the epic is not derived from any one particular religious framework, but is rather a nameless, autochthonous, religiously indeterminate notion of Upper Realm sky-gods. The diverse names used to express this notion are drawn from the variety of entangled religious cultures of Inner Asia.

Across all versions of *Gesar/Geser* one finds a core duality between the god-armies (*lha dmag*) of the "White Side" (*dkar phyogs*) and demonic armies (*bdud dmag*) of the "Dark Side" (*nag phyogs*). Correspondingly, the epic is set up as a continuation in the human realm of this cosmic dualistic conflict between gods and demons—a mythic notion that is common to many of the archaic mythologies of Eurasia.³⁷

In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, this dualistic cosmic conflict tends to find expression through its Indic framework: the battle between the *devas* (white) and the *asuras* (black), with Indra (Tib: Gyajin) as king of the “33 Gods.” The representation of Gesar’s heavenly father as Gyajin in FL reflects this well. Similarly, the representation of the heavenly father as Qormusta in Mongolian and Buryat versions reflects a similar adoption of the Indic model, since the high-god Qormusta (also known as Xormust, Khurmast, or Khirmos) is the name used in Mongolia for Indra, the god of thunder and the king of the gods (*tengri*) of the White Side. In these tellings, we see Qormusta, like Gyajin, explicitly framed within the Indic scheme of the “Host of the 33.” And in the 1716 Beijing xylograph (MX), Qormusta, like Indra, is presented riding an elephant as his mount.

This is not the end of the matter, however, for Qormusta’s traditional referentiality in the Mongolian pantheon is layered. Qormusta is also considered king of Mongolia’s native sky-gods (*tengri*), sometimes schematically considered to be 99 in number, and associated in Mongolian popular religious culture with mountains and, as with mountain deities in Tibet, with notions of political authority and worldly success. The significance of the *tengri* gods to Turko-Mongolian shamanism was noted by a number of medieval Islamic scholars such as Juvaini and Rashid al-Din. The territorial relationship of these deities with specific places helps to explain how Turko-Mongols, when they took over vast swaths of the Muslim world from the thirteenth century on, were able to travel so lightly in terms of their religious baggage and were so inclined to adopt the religious norms of their conquered subjects. Their shamanistic territorial gods stayed behind, quite literally, just as the local deities of Tibet have “stayed behind” in their homeland since the Tibetan diaspora of the 1950s.

As for the name “Qormusta,” it truly seems to encapsulate the theme of entangled religions in Inner Asia; for this name, which is used to denote both Indra (in a Buddhist context) and lord of the native gods of the steppe (in a shamanic context), appears to derive from the name of the Zoroastrian God of Light, *Ahura Mazda*.³⁸ So it seemed to Walther Heissig, who wrote, “at what time the infiltration of this Iranian divine figure took place, and above all, by what route, at present still remains to be explained” (1983:49).³⁹ In the absence of any concrete evidence regarding this question, it seems reasonable to suppose that the migration of this name into Mongolian was probably mediated by the strong and enduring presence of Manichaeism in the oasis trading cities of the Tarim Basin, and particularly in the city of Qocho/Turfan, during the latter part of the first millennium CE.⁴⁰

However, as we see in the summaries given above, by far the most common contender for the place of Gesar’s celestial father is Tsangpa Karpo (Tshangs-pa dkar-po). So what can be said of this deity?

First of all, reference must again be made to the Indic framework of Vedic gods. With the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, these came to supplant the native conception of sky-gods. Within the Indic framework, Tsangpa Karpo is the Tibetan name used for Brahmā, the Indian creator-god. But there is more to this figure in a Tibetan context than just the appropriation or adoption of an Indic deity. For in Tibet, Tsangpa’s cultural connotations have little to do with the four-faced Brahmā of Indian Vedic tradition, and instead relate to the indigenous Tibetan (and wider Inner

Asian) interest in sky-gods: ones who are conceived in some way as the extension or kin of mountain deities. This perceived kinship between spirits of high mountains and sky-gods of the Upper Realm is found in many Tibetan myths, for example, those concerning the descent of Nyatri Tsenpo, and in the figure of O-de Gungyal ('O lde dgung rgyal). This kinship between mountain gods and sky-gods in the Tibetan religious imagination is reflected in the fact that Tibetan iconographic depiction of mountain deities and sky-gods is almost identical: both are presented as mounted warriors, one of the standard iconographic forms of Tibetan art, used widely in the depiction of worldly deities and protectors.

In the context of Tibetan culture, Tsangpa Karpo must be understood first of all as an important native sky-god, one who was then converted to Buddhism and thenceforth propitiated as a worldly protector. That this is indeed how Tsangpa Karpo is understood within the context of Tibetan religion is confirmed by the web of association that connects this figure with other powerful Inner Asian sky-gods found in the Tibetan mythological complex, most significantly the Bon protector-deities Nyipangse (Nyi-pang-sad) and Namte Karpo (Gnam-the'u dkar-po), and the Buddhist protector-deity Pehar (Pe-har).⁴¹ The association between the archaic deity Tsangpa and Brahmā must be one of considerable antiquity and may indeed pre-date the adoption of Buddhism in Tibet. This can be seen from the way in which the Tsangpo River of central Tibet, when it enters India, is known as the Brahmāputra, "Son of Brahma," the only major river in India considered to be male.

That Tsangpa, in some pre-Buddhist guise, was indeed a figure of some significance and power in the old pre-Buddhist Tibetan royal religion is a suggestion also supported by the fact that Tsangpa, in his "white" (*dkar-po*) or "converted" Buddhist form, was adopted by the first great Buddhist King of Tibet, Songtsen Gampo (Srong-btsan sgam-po, ruled ca. 620–640), as his own personal protector. And Tsangpa Karpo was made the main protector of the first Buddhist temple ever to be built in Tibet, the one at Trandruk (Khra-'brug) in the Yarlung Valley.⁴²

The conclusion that Tsangpa should be considered an archaic Tibetan divinity recruited into Buddhism as a worldly protector is further bolstered when we consider the central position occupied in the *Gesar* epic by the hero's celestial "aunt" (*a-ne*), known variously as Gungmen Gyalmo "Queen of Sky-smān" (*Dgung/Gong-smān rgyal-mo*) or Nammen Karmo "White Sky-smān" (*Gnam-smān/Gnam-ne dkar mo*). This goddess-spirit-guide-and-companion of the epic hero, who is promised to the hero as a prerequisite for his taking on his worldly mission, plays a central role in all tellings of the Tibetan epic. While this figure (often known in short as Manene) has no correlative in the pantheons of Tibetan Buddhism, she is a familiar figure in Bon tradition, where Nammen Karmo (*Gnam-smān dkar mo*) is one of the nine primordial females born to the primordial creator deity of Bon, Sangpo Bumtri (Sangs-po 'bum-khri) at the dawn of phenomenal existence. This figure's role as the "paternal aunt" (*a-ne*) of the hero *Gesar* helps clarify how we might understand her cosmic kinsman, *Gesar's* father. Once again, the kinship of the two suggests that Tsangpa Karpo, as *Gesar's* sky-god father, occupies the same semiotic space as the Bonpo primordial cosmogonic creator deity, Sangpo Bumtri, the "lord of phenomenal existence" (*srid pa'i rgyal-po*), while *Gesar's* personal goddess, Manene, can be regarded as a correlative of

the ubiquitous goddess of Bon tradition known as the Sidpa'i Gyalmo, the "Queen of phenomenal existence" (Srid-pa'i rgyal-mo). One of that goddess's guises is Namshi Gungyal (Gnam-phyi dgung-rgyal), the Bonpo sky goddess whose ambrosiac spittle, when it fell on the earth, gave rise to the aromatic shrubs and medicinal herbs used in the ubiquitous native Tibetan ritual of "smoke purification" (*bsang*; see Karmay 1995). This, too, is a central part of the Tibetan cult of Gesar.

Conclusion

We may thus conclude that what the LX text has done, in effect, is to appropriate or rescue (depending on one's point of view) the epic and its hero Gesar from the realm of popular religion and high sky-gods with their relationship to mountain deities, as evidenced in the culture of pre-Buddhist and imperial Tibet, and replace them with a model of Buddhist deification that furnishes Gesar with legitimacy and stature within the esoteric culture of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism.

By presenting Gesar not as the son of a sky-god, selected through the drawing of lots, but rather as an emissary of the enlightened compassion of the *trikāya* of the Padma family of Compassionate Buddhas engendered through the enlightened mindstreams of several important tantric deities, Gesar's divine rulership in the LX telling is imagined not as that of a worldly sky-deity, but rather as that of a Buddha and a symbol of enlightened action in the world.

I hope to have shown in this article that the superposition of world-religion frameworks on the motif of the hero's divine descent remains a relatively superficial one when we take into account the core structure of the epic as opposed to its verbal articulation in the modern period. In its earlier and more primary forms, the motif of divine descent aligns the hero Gesar with the old Tibetan constitutional mythology of the ruler as a descendant of "gods of the sky," as is evidenced in the royal ideology of the Yarlung Pugyal. This native mythology, in turn, is expressive of the Inner Asian political culture of deferral to territorial divinities, deities that are often connected to mountains and, by extension, to the sky.

Since this article takes as its subject an epic poem that has long been disseminated through oral recitations, I will conclude with a brief excerpt from such a performance. In this passage, the hero Gesar invokes the celestial father, whose role in the epic has been central to my discussion. The singer in question is the bard Drakpa, whose animated version of the motif of the hero's divine descent (GP) is given in a bare summary above:

lu a-la lu tha-la lu tha-la re-ya!
 With *a-la* and *tha-la* I summon my voice today!
 Victory to the gods! *ki ki ki! swo swo swo!*
 With *dgra-lha* and *wer-ma*, victory to the gods!
 Victory to the *wer-ma*, and to the protectors of the Buddha-dharma!
 With a war-cry *ki-ki*, I sing this song!
 With a war-cry *swo-swo*, I raise my voice!
 The god I call upon to bear witness today is this—
 From the pure realm of the pristine sky above,

From the *mandala* of the thirty sacred places,
 From a radiant conch-shell throne,
 I call upon my father, Great God Tshangs-pa dkar-po!
 A pure white helmet of conch upon your head,
 Rainbow light shimmering around your presence,
 On your body, white and silver and conch-shell armor,
 A silver arrow-shield-a-shielding.
 Tiger-skin quiver on the right, leopard-skin bow-sheath on the left,
 Right hand brandishing a crystal sword,
 Left hand grasping a divine white spear,
 Body adorned with arrow, sword and spear!
 Riding a divine white horse as your steed
 And leading a divine white army of gods behind,
 With regimental banners swirling above—
 Bear witness to my song today,
 Come today to your son's aid!

Notes

1. In Mongolian-language regions, the epic hero is known as “Geser.” For the sake of convenience, in this article, the Tibetan form Gesar (*ge sar*) will be used except when specific reference is made to Mongolian traditions. The quotation that follows is excerpted from folios 5–7 of the *rtsa ba’i rnam thar*, a Tibetan xylograph version of the Tibetan epic that likely dates from the mid-eighteenth century, one copy of which is held in the British Library in London. Following Stein (1959), I refer to this as the “Gyantse Xylograph,” abbreviated GX.

2. On Siberian hero-tales as structural analogues for shamanic ritual, see Taube (1985). For a survey of northern Asian shamanic ritual as found in the available ethnography, see Alekseev ([1990] 1997). The commonalities between the accoutrements of northern Asian shamans and traditional Tibetan Gesar bards were long ago illustrated by Rolf A. Stein (Stein 1959:376ff.). Per-Arne Berglie has shown how the culture of spirit-mediumship and the Gesar epic remain closely related in Tibet (Berglie 1996). In his work on the Gesar epic, Geoffrey Samuel has described it as lying at the “shamanic” end of the Tibetan religious spectrum, though his use of the term “shamanic” is a broader one than mine (Samuel 1993, 1994).

3. A version of the *Gesar* epic that particularly brings out the hero’s representation as a “tantric hero” and master of the “Four Tantric Activities” (*zhi rgyas dbang drag*: pacifying, increasing, magnetizing, and destroying) is the one by Rma-ru dbang-chen nyi-ma recorded in the three manuscript volumes held in the Musée Guimet in Paris. This has recently been published, with French translation, in Blondeau and Chayet (2014).

4. A word on terminology may be helpful here. I use the word “motif” in much the same way as it is used in Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (see, for example, Motif A512.3, Culture hero as son of god). I will use the word “theme” as it is used by Albert B. Lord ([1960] 2000) to describe an extended narrative segment that may be repeatedly deployed in the course of a singer’s “composition in performance.” Thus the different individual versions of an epic may employ any number of themes to embellish and elaborate upon a motif. There is no guarantee that such themes will be shared across different versions, even though the wider motif—“the culture hero as the son of a high god,” for example—is present in all.

5. My use of the term “traditional referentiality” draws on the work of John Miles Foley (particularly Foley 1991 and 1999).

6. Bon (or more specifically Yungdrung Bon, G.yung drung bon), one of the religious schools in Tibet, is noteworthy for its incorporation of elements of pre-Buddhist mythology into its teachings, as well as of shamanic and animistic elements (see Karmay 1975). Bon is also the term used for the pre-Buddhist royal religion of Tibet. In addition, the term is used today in Tibet to describe a range of uncoded apotropaic and local ritual practices that are not explicitly tied to Buddhist understandings.

7. As attested by Bactrian numismatic evidence, a Buddhist TurkShahi king of Kapisa (near modern Kabul, Afghanistan) adopted the title *fromo kesaro* (Caesar of Rome) in the mid-eighth century as a gesture of solidarity with Byzantium during the period of the Arab conquests in Central Asia. The title “Gesar” was then adopted by Tibetan historians as a generic title used to denote the Turkic chiefs to the north and west of Tibet during the Tibetan imperial period.

8. Associating the epic’s historical kernel with northeastern Tibet during the eleventh-century “Period of Fragments” that followed the breakup of the Tibetan Empire has become an orthodoxy in Tibetan scholarly works. Despite the implosion of centralized Tibetan authority in this period, Eastern Tibetan chiefs continued to enjoy considerable wealth and power by controlling the lucrative Chinese/Inner Asian horse-tea trade passing through the Gansu corridor. In particular, considerable historical research has been devoted to the person known in Tibetan sources as Rgyal-sras Khri-sde, and in Chinese sources as Jiaosiluo, as the possible historical figure around whose career the epic tradition was later spun. This figure was a Tibetan chief who lived ca. 997–1065 and who headed up a powerful Tibetan martial confederation in the region of Tsong-kha, around present-day Xining (Smith 1991:27). This suggestion was first made by the Russian scholar Potanin ([1893] 1950:381). The suggestion was further developed by the Chinese scholar Ren Naiqiang (for references, see Stein 1959:144 [where the name is transcribed as “Jen”] and Li 2001:320) and was further supported by the Mongolian scholar Damdinsuren (1957:202–12). Horlemann’s work on this figure (Horlemann 2005, 2007) and on the uncertainties concerning his origins (Was he an orphan from Khotan? Or was he the scion of the old royal house Yarlung who came from that dynasty’s exile in western Tibet to rule the northeast?) makes these mooted connections to the Gesar legend all the more intriguing. However, early speculations about the phonetic equivalence of the names “Jiaosiluo” and “Gesar,” suggested by scholars such as Damdinsuren, have been conclusively rejected by recent scholars. And for their part, Tibetan scholars are unanimous in rejecting any identity between Rgyal-sras Khri-lde/Jiaosiluo and Ling Gesar (e.g., Blo gros rgya mtsho 2004:12).

9. In the *cante fable*-like *Gesar* epic, characters typically begin their songs by introducing themselves in terms of their ancestry and their clan-based holdings, typically including an ancestral fortress (*pha mkhar*). This is suggestive of early Tibetan history, when such holdings served as a marker of identity. With the growth of Buddhism in Tibet, clan and ancestry became less marked.

10. These range from sky-gods like the *ma sang*, to the female *smān* divinities associated with purification, to mountain divinities and combat spirits.

11. For insight into the Buddhist “tantric” model of conflict or demon subjugation, in particular the myth of Rudra (considered to be the foundational myth of the wrathful tantras), see Dalton (2011). The influence of this Tantric model of conflict is certainly felt in the *Gesar* epic’s pool of tradition, but it has not displaced the more archaic model based on the concept of *bla*, which remains one of the defining features of the Tibetan epic tradition.

12. Traditionally in Tibet, spirit-mediums (*lha-pa*), healers (*smān pa*), diviners (*mo ma*), and itinerant holy-men (*manī-pa*) often doubled as epic bards, in much the same way as shamans in Inner Asia often double as epic tellers. See Berglie (1996).

13. The *Rlangs kyi po-ti bse-ru* is a revealed “treasure text” (*gter ma*) for which assertions of authorship are very problematic. For detailed assessment of the final redaction of this text, see Stein (1962).

14. This remains highly speculative. However, it is worth observing that the Balti dialects of Tibet in northern Pakistan appear to have linguistic affinities with eastern Tibetan dialects. At what period a migration connecting these regions took place, however, remains obscure.

15. A translation of this text, found by Tashi Tsering in the archive of Namkha Drime in Orissa, India, is due to be published soon by this author in *Archi Orientalni*, Prague. On the basis of its obscure colophon, this text has been tentatively attributed to Karma Pakshi (1204–1283). Although that attribution is far from certain, the language of the text is indicative of considerable antiquity, at least in parts.

16. *Seng chen nor bu don ’grub la gsang mchod ’bul tshul*, fol. 12. His other spirit-helpers include his theriocephalic “spirit-siblings”; the nine *wer-ma*, associated with elements in the landscape and depicted riding on wild animals; and the nine *dgra-lha* headed by the “tiger-spirit” Gnyan-stag dmar-po.

17. The Tibetan text can be found on the TBRC (Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center) website with the TBRC reference W22130–5899–17–25.

18. A text revealed to the Bon scholar and mystic Blo ldan snying po in the late fourteenth century.
19. My use of the term “constitutional mythology” is indebted to Martin Mills (personal correspondence).
20. The compliance of the water-spirits below (*klu/naga*) is also important, though this seems to constitute a further layer of traditionality connected to popular tales concerning marriage with *klu/naga* spirits in Indic and south-east Asian cultures.
21. Note that he is male in Tibetan mythology, rather than female as normally depicted of Guanyin, the Chinese form of the deity.
22. The work of Walther Heissig on the Mongolian *Gesar* traditions (1983) and of Silke Hermann on Ladakh traditions (1991) show that, in both of these regions, the epic has continued to be a flexible oral genre while conforming to certain recognizable narrative schema shared within their regional traditions. My own work on the eastern Tibetan epic suggests similar conclusions (FitzHerbert 2009).
23. This insight is from Siddiq Wahid of the University of Kashmir, who has worked on the Ladakhi *Gesar* for many years. He suggests persuasively that, because the epic is considered to reside outside their own religious domain, Muslim bards in Ladakh and Baltistan are less inclined to innovate, and thus they have preserved a more ossified, archaic form of the epic. For a wonderful visual insight into the world of these Muslim *Gesar* bards of Indian Ladakh and Baltistan, see the 1999 film by Iffat Fatima, *The Kesar Saga*.
24. Such transcriptions as this last-mentioned one have been published at great length in the People's Republic of China since the early 1980s. See the article by Qubumo Bamo and Gejin Chao in this issue.
25. A German translation was made by Schmidt in 1839, and an abridged English translation of that text is available from *Gesar! The Epic Tale of Tibet's Great Warrior King* (Wallace 1991).
26. It is notable that although this is a Mongolian-language telling, *Gesar* is here presented as a Tibetan ruler. This detail points to the epic's Tibetan origins despite its broad acceptance within Mongolian folk culture. That the origins of this telling are indeed Tibetan is also clarified by an analysis of the names of the characters, many of which are phonetic renderings of Tibetan names.
27. The Guide manuscript was translated into Chinese by Wang Yinuan and into German by Matthias Hermanns (Hermanns 1965:415ff.). The original Tibetan text was lost during the Cultural Revolution. Fortunately, the manuscript appears to have existed in several copies, and a Tibetan manuscript version found in Mongolia has been published (Damdinsuren 1961).
28. The spelling in Francke's transcription, here as elsewhere, is faulty. He has “Rgya-bzhin.” Brgya-byin (“One hundred blessings” or “One hundred sacrifices”) is the Tibetan translation of Śakra or Indra, king of the gods in Indian Vedic mythology.
29. Here again, Francke's transcription is faulty. It should read “Dgungs sman rgyal mo.”
30. The *ris-med* (or “non-sectarian”) movement in late nineteenth-century Tibetan Buddhism sought to preserve and integrate teachings and rituals found in different schools of Buddhist (including Bonpo) practice.
31. Several volumes of recitations by this bard have been published (see Grags-pa 1996, 1998). His recitations have also been extensively used as a source for a 40-volume hardback composite edition of the *Gesar* epic published in Beijing.
32. The Tu/Monguor language has no writing system, thus all textual tellings of the Monguor versions come to us only through Chinese translation. Wang Guoming, of Gansu Nationalities University, a scholar who is himself from a family of hereditary *Gesar* bards, has been doing tremendous work to preserve the Monguor oral versions by publishing them in Chinese translation.
33. Mi-pham's ritual texts on *Gesar* have been published in Chengdu in a recent anthology (Ju Mi-pham 2006). One of these ritual texts is cited in the colophon of the third volume of the LX version as that version's explicit inspiration (see Kornman, Khandro, and Chönam 2012:516).
34. These versions include the far-eastern Tibetan telling in the Rgyal-rong language published recently by Guillaume Jacques (Jacques and Chen Zhen 2010).
35. Compare LX:13 with Bsam-grub (2001b:25–6) and Bsam-grub (2001a:6–7).
36. gCod-pa don-grub and Chab-'gag Rdo-rje tshe-ring (2001:77).
37. For a look at the place of this wider mythology of dualistic cosmic conflict in the context of Tibetan Buddhist culture, with particular reference to the custom of hanging prayer flags, see Berounský (2009).

38. This assumption is not certain, however. As an anonymous reviewer of the present article has noted, “the Siberian Turkic *Kürbüstü Khan* echoes this figure of Qormusta, both in name, and in stature, though the switch from back to front vowels in a Turkic language is somewhat rare.”

39. On Iranian influence on Tibetan cosmogonic myth, see also Kvaerne (1987).

40. On the establishment of this long-standing Manichaean kingdom on the Silk Route between Tibet and Mongolia, see Clark (2000). For an excellent overview of the mythology of Manichaeism, which was a deliberate blend of Zoroastrian dualism, Christian messianism, and Buddhist asceticism, and which persisted as a world religion from North Africa to China over several centuries, see Sundermann (2009).

41. De Nebesky-Wojkowitz states simply that Tshangs-pa dkar-po “is nobody else than Pe-har in his *srog bdag* form” (1956:145). On the web of associations linking Tshangs-pa dkar-po with the Inner Asian sky-gods of Tibet’s northern Asian (Hor-pa) neighbors, see de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956:145–53). For detailed treatment of Tshangpa karmo’s associations with the Bon protector Nyipangse, as well as the Buddhist protector Pehar, see Reynolds (2005:352–7).

42. See Sørensen and Hazod (2005).

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