

A Tibetan Journey

Interview with SAMTEN G. KARMAY (CNRS/CRCAO)

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The conversation below took place in order to be included in a volume in tribute to Mireille Helffer for her 90th birthday. Mireille and Samten have both contributed to the influence of French Tibetology in the world and even if they had different research interests, there is one theme that has brought them together: the Gesar Epic. But this conversation has gone well beyond that, and as we spoke, we discover Samten's unique physical, spiritual and intellectual journey. This is why I thought it would be useful to translate this article and to give a greater number of readers the opportunity to learn about "A Tibetan Journey".

Katia Buffetrille: *As we are about to offer this volume of articles for Mireille Helffer's 90th birthday, it seemed to me that this is the place for an interview with you who, like her, has experienced the developments of Tibetology in France, the place also to remind us of our first meeting with her and recall some memories that bind us to her. When did you meet Mireille?*

Samten Gyaltzen Karmay: I met Mireille in the 1980s. She was working on a text written by Sönam Lodrö (Bsod nams blo gros, 1784-1835). I do not remember if it was me who spoke to her about this Bönpo text dealing with the origins of musical instruments or if she had found it at the Bönpo Monastery in Dolanji, in Himachal Pradesh. This text deals with the mythical origin, but also sometimes with the real origin, of the instruments. It was a particularly important document for Mireille who had not found any text on the instruments in the Nyingma (rnying ma) tradition. It was at the origin of one of her articles (1997, pp. 343-361). I remember that Mireille also worked on the *Ngarab* (*Rnga rabs*), a text that deals not only with the manufacturing of the drum but also with the various types of drum. What about you, when did you meet Mireille?

¹ This article was first published in French in Buffetrille Katia et Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy *Musique et épopée en Haute-Asie. Mélanges offerts à Mireille Helffer à l'occasion de son 90^e anniversaire*. (Paris, L'Asiathèque), 409-428.

KB: *I remember very well my first meeting with Mireille. For me, our "real" encounter dates back to 1991, but of course, our ways had crossed before. I was returning from the Halase-Maratika caves in Nepal and we met in Bodnath. She was doing a fieldwork at Shechen Monastery (Zhe Chen), as she did for many years. I came back from Halase, feeling a kind of exaltation because while I was studying the phenomenon of Buddhicization of sacred mountains, lakes and caves, I could observe in this particular place an active and concrete Buddhicization led by a Sherpa lama. With great enthusiasm I told everything to Mireille without realizing that I had started to speak to her using the familiar form.² I was struck by her careful listening, the interest she showed for a subject that was not hers at all, an interest she moreover had for many subjects and which has not waned over the years.*

But let's go back to you. You told me one day that when you were a child, you heard some passages of the Gesar epic, which is one of the themes dear to Mireille. Can you say a few words about this?

SGK: My memories go back to the late 1940s when I was about 10 years old. In my country of Sharkog (Shar khog), in Amdo, after the harvest, in autumn, women, men and children, we all went to the mountains for two or three weeks. Only a few people stayed in the village to look after the houses. We settled on a mountain slope where each family in the village had a plot. We set up the tents below the slope terrain. The villagers worked all day, collecting the grass they had been drying in order to keep it as fodder for the animals in the winter. In the evening, after the meal, everyone gathered around a big fire. The evening began with songs and dances, then Apha Gyathar (A pha Rgya thar), a man from the village, began to recite the epic. He was the head of one of the households in the village but was originally from the east of Sharko (Shar khog). Maybe he came as adoptive-son-in-law (*mag pa*), I do not know. His topic was Ma Atag Lhamo (Ma A stag lha mo), one of the episodes of the Dülung (Bdud gling), but I do not remember the passage he sang. I was told that he also sometimes recited the story of Pa Gyatsa Zhelkar (Dpa' Rgya tsha zhal dkar), the half-brother of Gesar, but I never heard it. I still remember how beautiful his voice was. He told the story of Ma Atag Lhamo, then sang. I did not know at that time that what I heard was part of the Gesar epic, but I still remember today the many battles, the presence of scary personages, and that of Ma Atag Lhamo, a very

² As opposed to English which employs the pronoun "you", which is singular as well as plural, and is used for respectful as well as familiar speech, French carefully distinguishes between the singular "tu" which is familiar, and the plural "vous" which besides indicating a real plural—even in familiar speech—is also used for polite or formal speech.

courageous woman who participated so actively in the battles that her sword was covered with human fat.

In the evening, in the mountains, the recitation lasted a very long time. The beer (*chang*) flowed, some listeners slept, others sang or danced. It was a spontaneous celebration, with no particular organization or ritual dimension. Did the bard recite the whole story, or did he stop before the end? I confess I do not remember it anymore. Apha Gyathar was by no means a professional bard and I do not know if he was singing on other occasions. I only saw him on this occasion in the mountain and I do not think he has been invited into houses to practice his art. He was called *drungpa* (*sgrung pa*), someone who tells stories. There was no special bönpo bard because the function did not take into account the religious school and I do not remember having seen or heard of traveling bards.

It is likely that there were recitations of the epic on other occasions but I have never participated in anything other than this holiday on the mountain. I know that in Lhasa bards told the epic in the houses of the nobles, but I never had the opportunity to be present.

KB: *I am struck by the fact that you always say Ma Atag Lhamo or Pa Gyatsa Zhelkar. Is this usual in Amdo?*

SGK: This addition of Ma or Pa (Dpa') is indeed specific to the Sharwa country (Shar ba). I do not know if this exists all over Amdo.

KB: *I was always surprised that no one was named Gesar in Tibet. Do you know the reason? Moreover, are there other names of the epic's heroes given to Tibetans?*

SGK: In my family, named Karmay (Mkar rme'u tshang), there were two sisters one called Karthigmen (Dkar thig sman) and the other, Trotso (Khro 'tsho). I remembered this much later, when I was working on the Gesar epic, in France. The Ling (Gling) community knew thirteen very special women including Trotso, the daughter of Trothung (Khro thung), the evil uncle who sees his nephew Gesar as a threat. Trotso is a fairly common name, which is not the case with Karthigmen. The only person I knew with this name was from my family. I have never heard of anyone named Gesar, but I do not know why. The current king of Bhutan has a name that includes that of Gesar, but written in a different way: Khesar. On the other hand, it is common for women to be called Drukmo ('Brug mo), named after Gesar's wife, but not Atag Lhamo.

The best horse of the Karmay family was called Kyanggö (Rkyang rgod), named after the horse of Gesar, a name known to all

Amdowas. I do not remember who gave it this name, but I am sure that it was a family member who knew the epic. This name Kyanggö is a description of the horse since *kyang* indicates that the animal was brown in color and that it was wild, although *gö* (*rgod*) can also mean wise, capable.

KB: *In Les Neuf Forces de l'Homme ("The Nine Forces of Man"), the book you wrote with the Anthropologist Philippe Sagant, a passage is devoted to the hunt (pp. 172-182), but a very special hunt, that of large herbivores like deer with big horns or wild sheep. In her work on the Buryatians, Roberte Hamayon has shown the importance of reciting the epic before deer hunting, "the main game" (180). It is this recitation that will ensure the success of the hunt. What was it in your village?*

SGK: I never heard that the epic was sung before the hunt, and in my village the recitation was not related to a particular period. It should be pointed out that it was forbidden to recite the epic in the Bönpo monasteries—just as it was in the Buddhist monasteries—and also in the chapels of the houses. The monks should devote themselves to monastic life and listening to love stories has nothing to do with the religious practice. The same is true of the stories of the saintly madman Drukpa Künleg ('Brug pa Kun legs) or the mischievous stories of Aku Tönpa (A khu ston pa): they cannot be told within families or in chapels.

KB: *Recently, Anne-Marie Blondeau and Anne Chayet have published a book on the epic, by a Bönpo author, to which you contributed. Could you say a few words about it?*

SGK: The book edited together with Anne-Marie and Anne is indeed by a Bönpo author, Wangchen Nyima (Dbang chen nyi ma), a chief of the Khyungpo Marong (Khyung po Dmar rong) tribe who wrote many texts about the epic. I found this incomplete manuscript of three chapters in the Alexandra David-Neel's collection, when I was cataloguing it. No one knows where and how she got this text. Every year the author, who was not a bard, performed a Gesar *magdog* (Gesar *dmag zlogs*) ritual that aimed at harming enemies. Furthermore, there were Gesar sacred dances ('*cham[s]*) in Khyungpo, which was not the case at Sharkhog. The Gesar *cham* created by the 5th Dzogchenpa (Rdzogs chen pa) mostly belongs to the Nyingma tradition. The dances of Gesar originate from the Lingdro (Gling bro) tradition established by the great Nyingmapa master Mipham (Mipham, 1846–1912). I am not shocked by the appearance of new

Gesar's dances. As Professor Stein explained very well, the text of the epic is not finished: new episodes are born and are told.

The Bönpo consider Gesar as a god who protects from enemies (*dgra lha*). Mipham added a full religious aspect to the epic, which is only one aspect. However, the subject is complex since in the Bönpo version that we have translated, there is the idea that Gesar is a manifestation of Padmasambhava, which was amplified by Mipham. Certainly, we cannot remove the religious aspect of the epic since it is present throughout the text. But the Bönpo are more attentive to the lay aspects of Gesar than to its religious aspects.

KB: *When you arrived in France, you met Professor R. A. Stein, the great specialist of the epic. You also worked with him. I suppose that your respective ways of approaching the epic were very different. How did this meeting between a Western Tibetan scientist and a Tibetan researcher happen?*

SGK: In the early 1970s, Professor Stein lectured at the École Pratique des Hautes-Études on the Amdo version of Gesar. Among the course participants were Mireille Helffer, Anne-Marie Blondeau, Anne Chayet and Yoshiro Imaeda. At that time, I could not understand everything because of my lack of French. I then read the books that Professor Stein had written about Gesar. All were in French, nothing had been translated into English and he was the only one interested in Gesar besides Mireille who had published her thesis in 1977 on *Les chants dans l'épopée tibétaine de Gesar d'après le livre de la course de cheval* ("Songs in the Tibetan Epic of Gesar Based on the Book of the Horse Race").

Professor Stein had requested me to copy the Amdo version in order to distribute it to the other auditors. Little by little, I read his book on *L'épopée tibétaine de Gesar dans sa version lamaïque de Ling* ("The Tibetan Epic of Gesar in Its Lamaist Version of Ling"), which is actually a summary translation of three texts. To read his book *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* ("Research on the Epic and the Bard in Tibet") was not easy, but the many discussions we had together helped me a lot.

While he was Professor at the Collège de France (1966–1981), I had a post of "assistant". We read together texts he was working on, and then often he would give me a list of texts that were at the National Library. I had to read them and sometimes summarize them for him. It was very useful for me because it allowed me to read texts that I would otherwise never have read, mainly Buddhist tantras. It was the time when he was working on the submission of Rudra and on the metal masks called *saché* (*za byed*) whose origin he was looking

for. Professor Stein was very interested in borrowings and influences that might have existed between China and Tibet. If the Chinese civilization was central to his research, he did not forget how important it was to know what was happening on the borders of the country, and therefore in Tibet. I think I understood his vision during the introductory speech he gave when entering the College. He constantly made comparisons between Chinese and Tibetan facts to determine whether there were borrowings, and if so, which ones.

Through remarks that punctuate his book on *L'épopée et le barde au Tibet*, I realized that he did not consider Gesar a historical figure. Like all Tibetans, I thought at that time that Gesar had lived in the 10th century and that he had governed the kingdom of Ling. It was a shock for me to understand that Westerners regarded the hero of the epic as a mythical character. For Tibetans, the epic makes sense only if Gesar is a historical personage. Why waste time in creating characters that do not exist? Tibetan researchers have even tried to prove his existence and assign dates to him. I quickly realized that he was an invented character, certainly derived from a historical figure. However, I observe that our way of thinking is evolving: recently a Tibetan researcher admits that Ma Atag Lhamo was a character we had created. Previously, no one would have spoken that way.

KB: Mireille was interested in the instruments, but also their origin, their use, and she did a thorough research on this topic. She did a lot of fieldwork and her approach was not only that of a musicologist, but also that of an ethnologist and a philologist. What did you think at that time about a woman researcher working on liturgical music?

SGK: At the time, no one else was interested in this subject. I was not surprised, but I told myself that it would be very difficult to explain to Tibetans that a woman researcher was interested in the traditional music played in the monasteries, all the more because some rituals are forbidden to women. However, I was already used to French researchers and their method of working. I read texts with Mireille and discussed problems with her related to vocabulary which, in this domain, is very particular.

I must say that Mireille really did what she planned. She was mainly interested in Nyingma and Bonpo music. No other researcher has done such work. It must be emphasized that Mireille has conducted a research unique in the world.

As far as I am concerned, I do not understand the musical notation and, moreover I am not used to Nyingma music. Similarly, in Bhutan, liturgical music is totally foreign to me and I do not understand the way they play during the rituals.

When I was a young monk, we learned to play liturgical instruments by imitation and by practicing daily rituals. There was no class or school with a teacher, nor text telling us how to use them. Not to mention that music notation texts can only be read by a very small number of people. No novice was specialized in a particular instrument. Making mistakes was not considered as serious matter. Nevertheless, for the performance of the annual *cham*, one had to learn to play long trumpets (*dung chen*) and oboes (*rgya gling*) because, in that case, one has to learn to blow. As for the dance, we trained for weeks and only the good dancers were chosen.

KB: *Before addressing the subject of your coming to the West and your meeting with a totally new world as well as with the Western research, could you say a few words about your childhood?*

SGK: At the age of eight, I attended the school of my village, Kitshal (Ki tshal), with three other novices. Then, from ten to thirteen years old, I stayed at the small monastery of Nating (Sna steng), not far from my village.



Fig. 1 Kitshal. Village © Katia Buffetrille 1986.

When I was about thirteen years old, I did the preliminary practices (*sngon 'gro*), pushed by my mother. Lay people usually came to the monastery once a year to do the *ngöndro* (*sngon 'gro*) which consisted of a hundred thousand prostrations and the recitation of many mantras. We tried to do three thousand prostrations a day and it was really very difficult. These practices lasted six to seven weeks during which we stayed at the monastery. Otherwise, we stayed at home because there was nothing to do at the monastery. If there were ceremonies we had to attend, we would receive a message.

Then I was sent to Kyangtshang Monastery (Skyang tshang) which was bigger than that of Nating. There, I was considered as a monk and I led a real monastic life with early rising. Food and clothing were donated by our parents; the monastery did not provide anything. I lived with my great-uncle who was the head of the monastery and I took my meals with him. The other monks ate in the kitchen of the monastery. We had three meals a day except during the summer retreat (*dbyar gnas*). Some monks had decided individually not to eat anything at night. Eating meat was a common practice except for those who had vowed to give it up.

I left my village to go to Lhasa with six companions in 1955. We walked to Chengdu, then we rented a truck to Lhasa where we arrived in 1956 after two months of travel. We went to the Gelug (*dge lugs*) monastery of Drepung ('Bras spungs), which was well known for the quality of its teachings. I was twenty then. When I arrived, I was interviewed by a lama who asked me if I believed in Tsongkhapa (Tsong Kha pa), the founder of the Gelug school, to which I answered in the affirmative. In case of a negative answer, I would have been expelled.

We were staying at Zungchu Khamtshen (Zung chu khams tshan), a section that belonged to the Gomang Dratshang College (Sgo mang grwa tshang) and which sought to recruit monks. Those from Mongolia and Amdo were very few because of the arrival of the Communists. This monastic college did not accept the monks from Central Tibet, nor those of Kham (Khams) who were living in other colleges.

We rarely participated in rituals, not because we were Bönpos but because we were there to study. There were about forty monks who performed the rituals under the command of the chant master (*dbu mdzad*). Sometimes rituals were performed in our section (*khams tshan*), for example if a monk from Amdo had arrived and wanted to offer tea and money to the monks. Students like me could participate in these rituals but it was not compulsory. Personally, I never took part in them.

KB: *Following the Chinese invasion of the 1950s, then the Lhasa uprising in March 1959, you fled to India. It was in Delhi in 1960, when you were working in an Indian commercial printing house, that a meeting took place that would totally change the course of your life: that with Professor David Snellgrove. He was looking for Tibetan scholars ready to go to England to help him with his research on the Bön religion. You agreed to go into exile to the West with four companions.*

SGK: We spent six months at Snellgrove's home, about an hour by train from London. Then he found an apartment in London for three of us, my two companions, Tenzin Namdak (Bstan 'dzin Rnam dag, today called Yongs 'dzin Rinpoche), Sangye Tenzin (Sang rgyas bstan 'dzin, the late head of the Bönpo) and myself. Professor Snellgrove first worked mainly with Tenzin Namdak, and then when he left for India, I took over.

I worked with him four years, during which I learned English. He spoke the Tibetan dialect from Dolpo, Nepal, where he had stayed for a long time. I learned a lot from him, often unconsciously. He explained to me how he understood the texts that interested him and he asked me how I interpreted them. We were doing a critical reading. It was obvious to me that he did not accept what the texts literally said, and that he wanted to understand the interpretation of the Tibetans. This led to many debates. We did not agree, but that's how I learned what is called the scientific approach. When I left Tibet, I thought the earth was flat. Tibetans believe what the texts say literally, which is not the case in the West. Thus, when speaking of a character said to be historical, Tibetans accept everything written about him. During our readings, we found dates relating to personages mentioned in the texts. We compared these dates with traditional chronologies and it was obvious that Professor Snellgrove did not agree. At first it was a shock for me but I gradually understood.

For him, Bön was a form of Buddhism that has spread in Tibet long before the introduction of Buddhism *stricto sensu*. He thought that Tibetans could have been in contact with Buddhism long before the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the seventh century. This was very complicated to explain to my companions.

I think that Tenzin Namdak as well as Sangye Tenzin never really accepted this scientific vision which put in doubt what the Tibetan texts say. My companions could not read what Mr. Snellgrove had written because their English was insufficient and they thus could not understand his point of view.

I was younger than them and I learned English more easily. It was essential for me to learn the languages that could give me access to the Tibetological works. By working with Professor Snellgrove on his book *Nine Ways of Bon*, also on *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, I learned a lot, even if it was not always easy. I also benefited immensely from reading fiction, novels in English. Traditionally, Tibetans do not have fictional literature or very little because it makes no sense to them. I understood little by little the interest of creating characters, as well as the value of this literature.

KB: *Could you give some examples that show your evolution?*

SGK: For example, Mr. Snellgrove did not accept the dates given by Tibetan texts about Shenrab Miwo (Gshen rab mi bo), the master who is said to be at the origin of Bön. I opposed his claim that it was a totally mythical figure. The documents of Dunhuang mention at least five or six times the name of Shenrab without evoking, it is true, neither the origin of this character, nor his actions. The land of Tagzig (Stag zig), from which Bön is supposed to come, appears only in the late Bönpo tradition. For me, it is obvious that from a character called Shenrab, we created a kind of hero, in the same way that it was done with Padmasambhava or even the Buddha. Gautama was a simple monk whom the Mahāyāna presents with very particular characteristics like the thirty-two signs, etc. The same applies to Jesus Christ. Perhaps one day, archaeology work will tell us more about Shenrab Miwo, a character I have a lot of interest in, even though he never existed.

Let us take another example: for the Bönpos, the question of the origin of the *Gzi brjid*, the long biography of Shenrab Miwo which is at the base of the book of Snellgrove's book *Nine Ways of Bon*, does not arise: this text belongs to the Bönpo Kagyur (Bka' 'gyur), and was orally transmitted to Loden Nyingpo (Blo ldan snying po, 1360-1385?) by a sage. In addition, for us, the Kagyur texts go back to Shenrab Miwo. Professor Snellgrove wanted to know how this author had written these texts, what were his sources, his materials.

I started thinking and then questioning what the texts literally said. I then did some research. This is how I understood what science (*tshan rig*) was from the Western point of view. When I talk with my Tibetan friends about Western Tibetology, I always have trouble explaining them what it is about since they still continue to literally believe the texts. This is why I have a lot of problems with the monks of Menri Monastery (Sman ri), in Dolanji (India), who say that I no longer have faith and that I am no longer a real patriot.

Until I left Tibet, I had no doubt about my faith. For Tibetans, having faith is important because it reinforces their sense of belonging to the society: we are “from within” (*nang pa*). Now, I sometimes think that Tibetan believers are “backward” because they cannot fully use their reason, their logic. The study of logic (*tshad ma*) showed me the importance of reason to understand metaphysics. It is not possible to progress intellectually if one is inhabited by a deep faith. It is likely that somehow “losing” faith has helped me to pursue a university career according to Western standards. Thus, one cannot say in a Tibetan circle that Padmasambhava did not exist: I am the only one to say it. In my research on the “Great Perfection” (Rdzogs chen), a set of philosophical teachings and meditative techniques of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, I researched and found references to Padmasambhava in texts which are attributed to him. But the texts that mention him in the 8th-9th centuries speak of him as a mythical character. I did not find anything that proves either his coming to Tibet or the actions attributed to him. I have shown through my work on the “Great Perfection” that this philosophy developed mainly in Tibet, with Indian and Chinese influences, and that in the 10th century a properly Tibetan synthesis was formed. I have been heavily criticized, especially by Western researchers like John Reynolds because, for him, without providing any historical proof, the teaching of the Dzogchen dates back to very remote times. As my book has not been translated, Tibetans do not have access to it yet.

Another example is the great king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po, 617–649/650): he is certainly a historical figure but I cannot, like the other Tibetans, consider him as an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara or believe in the miracles that are attributed to him.

I do not criticize what the monks do or think but I do not accept it anymore as far as I am concerned. However, I have not lost my cultural tradition. I do not practice as they do, I do it in my own way but I am very interested in the way the monks practice.

KB: A very important cultural phenomenon among the Bönpos and the Nyingmapas is the tradition of text-treasures (gter ma). These texts, which are said to have been hidden by Drenpa Namkha (Dran pa nam mkha') for the Bönpos or by Padmasambhava for the Buddhists, are supposed to be rediscovered one day by a predestined being (gter ston) mentioned in prophecies. What is your position on this topic? What do you think, for example, of Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192), who is credited, among others, with the discovery of the Kathang Zanglingma (Bka' thang zangs gling ma), the first complete biography of Padmasambhava or of the Mani Kabum (Ma ñi bka 'bum), a collection of teachings and practices centered on Avalokiteśvara?

SGK: For me, the treasured texts (*gter ma*) as they are described in the Tibetan tradition do not exist. I consider Nyangrel Nyima Özer as the author of the texts whose discovery he is credited with.

As far as the Bönpo *terma* are concerned, it is possible that one day a text or a statue was discovered in a stūpa such as the great stūpa of Gathang (Dga' thang), but with regard to the texts said to have been found in a cave or elsewhere, I affirm that it is the discoverer who wrote them. This can be seen in the language: if the texts had really been written in the 8th or the 9th century, the language would be archaic. It is said, for example, that the *Mani Kabum* was written by Songtsen Gampo, that is to say in the 7th century, but when one reads the text, one understands that it was written after the 10th century. Language, vocabulary, grammar, all show that this text is not as old as tradition maintains. When I was in Tibet, I too believed in the existence of these treasure-texts in the way they are presented by the Tibetan tradition. Tibetans do not generally question this phenomenon for fear of being called *tawa logpa* (*lta ba log pa*), "people with a contrary view".

KB: *At the outset, you worked with these two great tibetologists, Professor Snellgrove and Professor Stein. Then, you started to write your own books, your own articles. Your way of understanding Tibetan history, religion, and culture was no longer that of a traditional Tibetan researcher but that of a researcher trained in the West. Can you say something about it?*

SGK: These two great tibetologists, Professors Stein and Snellgrove, have indeed had a great influence on my research. When I translated the *Legs bshad mdzod* into English, a history of the Bönpo tradition, I was helped by someone who became a great friend. He was a specialist in Italian literature who taught at the University of London. I showed him the translation of my text. This friend knew neither Tibetan culture nor religion, but he was very interested and the many questions he asked helped me understand how to approach a text. Thus, the Bönpo tradition says that the Bön was persecuted by King Drigum Tsenpo (Gri gum Btsan po), thus long before Songtsen Gampo. Drigum is for me the first historical king. There is a lot of information about him in the Dunhuang documents but nothing about this persecution. The Tibetan tradition points to another persecution in the time of King Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde btsan, 742–798). It occurred to me—and I wrote it—that there was only one persecution, the one under Trisong Detsen. This statement deeply shocked my Tibetan friends who then considered that I had really lost my culture.

Moreover, the *Legs bshad mdzod* contains many prophecies giving the dates of personages. Yet I consider these dates as data valid for the historian because, for me, these prophecies were not written before the life of the personage in question, but during his life or after. Tibetans, for their part, cannot accept that prophecies are used as historical sources, since they believe that they describe events that will happen in the future (in relation to the text). Nevertheless, I still think that if we cannot accept the tradition in a scientific way, it can still be respected as a tradition.

KB: If we summarize a little bit your background, we can say that you were confronted with Western culture, which led you to have a different view of your own culture. Then, you were confronted with your compatriots who had many difficulties to understand what you had become.

SGK: When we came to the West as part of the Rockefeller Foundation program, there were about twenty Tibetans working in various universities in the Western world. In fact, only two of us have become tibetologists: Panglung Rinpoche, in Germany, and myself. The reason was, I think, that we were the youngest and were more open to a new culture while Tenzin Namdak and Sangye Tenzin have always remained deeply involved in religion. They thus have always strictly observed their vows, even that of not eating meat, which is very rare among Tibetan Buddhist monks. Perhaps they were not ready to open up to another culture. But in my opinion, the essential reason has been their ignorance of Western languages. Personally, I was attracted by the ideas expressed by the Westerners and I had access to them.

I was asked a few years ago to present my work at Dolanji monastery and it went wrong. The monks had read the two volumes of my book *The Arrow and the Spindle* which had been translated into Tibetan and published in Beijing. It was the first time they had access to my work. About a hundred monks came with the books and, one after the other, they spoke out against what they had read: for example that Tönpa Sherab had never written anything, nor the Buddha. Until then they considered me a Bönpo like the others; but from that moment, they no longer looked at me as such. For them, I had betrayed Tibetan culture and it was very difficult for me to explain myself. They asked me to rewrite certain passages, and they even told me that I had only been wasting my time writing such things. They may not consider me totally as a person “with a contrary view” but they see me as someone very particular. My works are contested, but only by Bönpo monks. As for the Buddhist monks, I do not know. I was invited to Drepung monastery in India, but I did not

go there fearing a brutal confrontation. On the other hand, my books, *The Arrow and the Spindle*, have been very successful among Tibetans living in China.

I sometimes have the impression of being confronted with people from the 14th century who learn by heart without thinking and who are totally ignorant of Western writings. I now think that I lost a lot of time learning texts by heart even if I excelled at it. When we debated at Drepung, memorization made sense; but we did not debate every day. It is therefore usually a useless exercise especially since it is necessary to constantly repeat what we have learned so as not to forget it.

Many Tibetans in India have kept the traditional vision and religion still prevails among them. Western researchers, for their part, have been searching for the truth of facts and dates for a very long time, while scientific research is a recent step for Tibetans.

When I am among a group of Tibetans, I now feel the difference. I no longer feel fully Tibetan; rather Western and especially French. The influence of my reading has played a lot.

KB: *A long time ago, I read Adrup Gumbo's impressions of his stay in France. Jacques Bacot (1877–1965), this great scholar and explorer who had known him in Tibet during one of his travels, invited him to visit France. Adrup's look at our country is fascinating. What, in our Western culture, surprised you most?*

SGK: I remember when we arrived at London airport there were porters, all in suits and ties. However, we thought that this kind of dress was worn only by the bourgeoisie. So we were very surprised and a little shocked. We ourselves had suits that Snellgrove had bought for us.

KB: *This reminds me of the words of Adrup Gumbo who, after his visit to Marseille, said that all the inhabitants were rich and that there were no poor people (p. 353)!*

SGK: Also, in Tibet, physical contact is easy and habitual. The only time we do not touch is, for example, in case of illness, or if our interlocutor is a butcher or a blacksmith, that is to say, belongs to a social stratum traditionally considered impure.

We did not lose this habit of spontaneous physical contact right away, but we soon realized that it was not good. However, it was difficult for us to hold back and we only managed to do so little by little. But if Tibetans have easy tactile contacts, the friendly kiss does not exist. Professor Snellgrove had a lady among his neighbors who

had established a warm relationship with himself but also with Tenzin Namdak. One day, she went to him and spontaneously kissed him on the cheek. He went away, distraught; the lady was shocked by his brutal retreat.

Another thing that has been difficult to integrate is punctuality: in the West, it is impolite not to arrive on time for an appointment. In Tibet, there was no watch and exactitude was something very relative. Mr. Snellgrove's Sherpa assistant, Pasang Khampache, had already spent many years in England when we arrived. It was he who was in charge of our "education". The first time Pasang gave us an appointment, we nodded, but when we arrived there was no one because we were well over time. He got angry and we were disappointed. But, gradually, we learned.

KB: You went back home in 1985. You were then confronted not only with a country, Tibet, which had suffered and changed a lot but also with your family, with your friends, with the villagers, with people who had known you as a monk and who knew that you had become a great academic. How did it go?

SGK: While the events of the Cultural Revolution were still very much alive, it was difficult for me to describe to them my life, so different from theirs. Besides, I was no longer a monk, I was married and father of a child. Now, the villagers, some of whom had known me young, still had the image of a monk. So they wanted me to sit in their houses with the monks, at the place of honor, which I did not want. It is difficult for Tibetans to distinguish between religious respect and social respect. I wanted social respect but not religious respect since I was no longer a monk.

KB: It was during this trip that the villagers worshiped the local god (yul lha). This cult, which you had attended as a child, was again performed for the first time in many years. You explained in one of your articles (pp. 423-431) the importance of this cult for "national identity through the identification of each individual as an active member of his community and as a patriot of the nation" (p. 429). When you came back to your village, you had changed a lot as you explained it, and you arrived in this particular context that is the worship of the territorial god. You wanted to be a researcher whose purpose was to observe this cult while you were born there and knew some of these people since your early childhood. How did it go?

SGK: The worship of the territorial god had been effectively abandoned for more than twenty years. I participated by offering the fumigation of juniper (*bsang*) on the mountain. But my participation

in the ritual was not the same as that of my companions (about sixty). I had a camera that I used. I did not recite the ritual text with them, meaning that I was no longer a member of their society. I wanted to be a researcher and did not want to be involved in the ritual. It was my choice. My companions would have been much happier if I had participated in the ritual. I was struck by the strong belief they showed in the territorial god and I felt how much my attitude bothered them. They wanted to perform this ritual as it always was, and addressed people older than me who passed on their knowledge.



Fig. 2 A householder making the ritual arrow (*mda'rgod*) that will be put in the cairn in order to benefit from the protection of the territorial god. © Samten G. Karmay 1985.

The organizer of the ritual was a villager who worked with the Chinese and was therefore an official. However, he worked hard for the ritual to take place at that time so that I could be present. He was considered a collaborator of the Chinese authorities, but he remained deeply Tibetan. In fact, as long as we did not talk about the Ganden Phodrang government (*Dga'ldan pho brang*) or the Dalai Lama, there was no problem. On cultural issues, he had to be careful since it encouraged national identity. However, people had started to

express criticism against the Cultural Revolution but these criticisms were directed at the Gang of Four.

I was very conscious of being someone distinct. I was dressed in Western clothes and my friends were repeatedly asking me to wear a *chuba* (*phyu ba*), which I did in order for them to feel more comfortable with me. They then considered me again as a Tibetan, a member of their society. In addition, having a camera at that time distinguished me from others and I could not explain that it was for my research because they would not have understood. Most villagers at that time were uneducated. I would have liked to avoid this discomfort—an impossible task since I wanted to study the ritual very closely, the actions and also the feelings of the villagers. I do not think that my non-participation in the ritual was experienced as a treason, but it made them uncomfortable. The image they had kept of me no longer corresponded to what I had become and they wondered how I could change so much. What had happened? I think they began to question my faith in the territorial god, but they did not inquire directly. They understood that I was out of their society and I think they were not really happy with this situation.

Dances and drinks followed the ritual. Four boys were singing very well, but I did not understand the lyrics. One of them explained to me that it was a song in honor of Mao. I was very shocked: how could one worship the territorial god and then sing songs in honor of Mao? I told them about my feelings and they understood very well. There were also horse races. Traditionally, before the races, several village leaders showed their talent as orator. But that did not happen in 1985. The races had lost a lot compared to what they were before. I was afraid the villagers would get into trouble after the ritual, but nothing happened.

KB: But did not they see you as a model of success? You had come to know the world, you had a university career? That should also surely play a role in the perception they had of you?

SGK: They certainly saw me as an example to follow. For them, I had succeeded. My family members wondered if I would come back to live with them because they saw the future with little hope, and perhaps they thought that if I returned they would become like me. To come back at home was unthinkable for me. All this was sad.

The villagers even bestowed on me a kind of “power”. One day, a mother came to see me with her child. She wanted me to blow into his mouth like the lamas do when they recite a mantra and thus convey the power of this sacred formula. I laughed and later I always blamed myself because I offended her although that was not my

intention. I was looked at as a great scholar with the power to bless. When one is a scholar, he is seen as Ngagi Wangpo (Ngag gi dbang po), the "Lord of words", the scholar. This woman thought that by receiving my blessing, her child would one day perhaps follow the same path as me. People knew that I was famous but without really knowing why. They perceived me as someone who possessed something they did not have.

When I went to Gamay Gumpa (Dga' mal dgon pa), one of the most important Bönpo monasteries in the area, the monks wanted to welcome me with ceremonial scarves (*kha btags*). They were about 200 to 300 standing in a row. I arrived by car, much like a little Dalai Lama (laughs). However, I tried to avoid any situation that could lead to confusion as to my status. Nevertheless, I was obliged to receive the scarves, but my condition of ex-monk always made me very uncomfortable.

On the second day, while talking with Kalzang Dargye (Skal bzang Dar rgyas), the preceptor of the monastery (*slob dpon*), who was not only one of my friends at Drepung but also a great scholar, he told me: "How sad it is that you are totally lost for us and useless for our society. We spent a lot of time together at Drepung where you were going to become a great *geshe* (*dge bshes*), a position that would have been very useful for our monastery. You have become a layman and what you do is totally useless to us." He looked very sad.

It is true that I feel much better now with the Westerners whom I understand perhaps better than I understand Tibetans.

I am attracted to the West for its science and culture. My main interest is research. I do not listen very much to Tibetan music, but I really like Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, especially Beethoven. I am not interested in modern Tibetan painting either. On the other hand, Matisse and Gauguin are for me great masters. Perhaps my friend is right: I have become useless for the traditional Tibetan society.

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