

2. *Down With the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet*

Janet Gyatso

For they give satisfaction to one another and make
reparation for their injustice.

—Anaximander, frag. B1(DK)

"Land of the Bad Ones"¹; "Land of the Red-faced Flesh-eating Demons";² "Tibet, Land of the Hungry Spirits."³ These epithets reflect what seems to be an ancient conception of the country of Tibet *as being filled with spirits, mostly malevolent, that needed to be appeased and controlled* in a complex variety of ritual ways. Such concerns are attested in some of the earliest Tibetan documents available. But not only do the Tibetans refer to the animistic character of their religion in such epithets; they are simultaneously expressing a proclivity to characterize themselves, or at least their ancestors, the human inhabitants of Tibet, and indeed the basic nature of their national race, as being savage, uncivilized and demonic. The Tibetans themselves are the "red-faced flesh-eaters,"⁴ the denizens of "the little-known country of barbarous Tibet."⁵

If we can believe the contemporary Chinese court historians, this demonic character was not entirely figurative. The Sui and T'ang dynasty annals know the Tibetans as ruthless and aggressive, traits that were not unrelated to Tibet's success in the military sphere in its early historical period, particularly in China in the eighth century, A.D. The Tibetans had, according to the *T'ang shu*, (and notwithstanding some exaggeration about "barbaric" neighbors),

hundreds of thousands of men ready to bear arms.... They prize physical strength and despise old age. A mother salutes her son, and a son has precedence over his father.... They prize death in battle and hate to end their lives by sickness.... When someone is defeated in battle or runs away, they fix a fox-tail to his head to show that he is cowardly like the fox. A great crowd will assemble and he is certain to be put to death.⁶

And in the *Sui shu*, "They are all warriors.... They are given to lechery and obscenity to an extent unknown even among any other savage race."⁷

This preponderance of aggressive, male values notwithstanding, there is reason to suspect that in some Central Asian societies at this time the *female* also partook of such virtues, or at least was influential and powerful. We have evidence of an amazonian-like Land of the Women, perhaps two of them, in areas bordering Tibet, from both Chinese and Indian sources.⁸ A society that may have been Tibetan is described in the *Sui shu* and the *T'ang shu* as being matriarchal and matrilineal. The supreme ruler was the queen, and sons took the family name of their mother. The men were still the warriors, but they were directed by women, who "do not esteem highly the men, and rich ones have always men servants who arrange their hair...."⁹ Erik Haarh, in his extensive study of the central Tibetan Yar-lung dynasty, also notes an importance of certain female deities in early theogonies. He traces a "genitrix" back through the dGe-lugs-pa protectress dPal-ldan

Lha-mo, to a variety of pre-Buddhist female deities including Srid pa'i rgyal mo, mother of nine primordial eggs; A phyi gnam gyi gung rgyal; and the ancient sPu yul mo btsun gung rgyal, "progenitrix" of the *Yang-bsang-lugs* rendition of the origin of the Tibetan kings.¹⁰ Haarh finds especially significant the importance of the queen's family in the royal succession. Matriliney is also suggested in a Tibetan text of aphorisms from Tun-huang that may be connected to a female-dominated society of the fifth century Sum-pa people; here is voiced the sentiment that "the woman who is the good wife severs the husband's lineage."¹¹

Returning to the nonhuman world, it is certainly the case that the hordes of malevolent beings that populate the Tibetan imagination and undermine the noble aims of humanity are not limited in gender to the masculine. There are numerous types of such evil spirits, and each class has both male and female members. These spirits are sometimes conceived hierarchically, especially when recounted in creation myths as progenitors of the Tibetan people, but the hierarchies and relationships vary widely, as do the precise character and ritual function attributed to each type of spirit. In the words of Snellgrove and Richardson, "it has long since become impossible to distinguish between them."¹² In any case, it is specifically the female gender of one of the demon species, the *Srin*, that comes to represent both the spirit world in its entirety, and the demonic nature of the early Tibetans, in a founding myth concerning the Buddhist domination over the indigenous Tibetan religion.

The *Srin* are a particularly fierce evil spirit. They were later identified for translation purposes with the Indian *rākṣasa*.¹³ But they are clearly ancient and indigenously Tibetan. They are to be found in many origin myths¹⁴, and are often affiliated with specific regions of Tibet¹⁵. In its explicitly female form, the *Srin-mo* is cast in one source as the giver of catapult and infantry¹⁶. A bKa'-brgyud text knows the principal *Srin-mo* demones as Frog-head Bloody-eye (sBal mgo khrag mig).¹⁷ In an early Tun-huang text many other *Srin-mo*s are

named.¹⁸ Later said to have been subdued by Padmasambhava at Rong rong lung pa nag po,¹⁹ *Srin-mo-s* are placed in the retinue of such wrathful Buddhist deities as dPal ldan lha mo,²⁰ Rahu,²¹ and lCam sring, in a group called the "male and female Srin of the four times."²²

In the traditional Buddhist recounting of Srong btsan sgam po's introduction of that Indian religion into Tibet, it is this female *Srin-mo* who is particularly resistant to the new faith, and who is posed as one of its major obstacles. The very land of Tibet as a whole is seen as being constituted by the vast supine body of a *Srin-mo* demoness, here unnamed. This country-wide being must be brought under control before Buddhism can be established in the country. Her domination precludes by several generations the capitulation *en masse* of the manifold Tibetan spirits to the superior power of Padmasambhava, who bound them all by oath to become *dharma* protectors.

Like much of what we are told of the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet, the story of the supine *Srin-mo* does not appear in the scanty contemporary sources that have survived. The earliest known version of the story comes rather from the recast, mythologized accounts of the events of the Yar-lung dynasty, accounts that date from the second period of the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet (*phyi-dar*), after the tenth century. Michael Aris identifies the twelfth century *Mani bka' 'bum*, the seminal *gter-ma* text for the Buddhist retrospective account of King Srong btsan sgam po's reign, as the first appearance of the supine demoness.²³ However, there are echoes of the story in the *sBa bshed*, a text that was revised in the same period as when the *Mani bka' 'bum* was written, but the core of which is a contemporary account of the eighth century Khri strong lde btsan's period.²⁴

In any event, it is not my purpose here to determine the origin or antiquity of the supine *Srin-mo* story as such. Rather, given its pervasive presence in virtually all Tibetan histories of the period in which it is placed,²⁵ I would like to reflect upon the story's significance. In particular, who is this demon-

ness and why is she female? What elements of the Tibetan world at the time of Buddhism's entry does she represent? What is the fate of that world at the hands of the Buddhist narrative?

1. THE SUPINE DEMONESS (*Srin-mo Gan-rkyal-du bsGyel-ba*)

As the *Mani bka' 'bum* tells the story, the *Srin-mo* is perceived first by the Srong btsan's betrothed, the Chinese princess Kong jo. The princess is consulting her geomantical charts to determine why she is encountering so much difficulty in transporting a statue of Śākyamuni to the Tibetan court. Dramatically, the magnitude of the problem and its implications, not only for the importation of the Buddha image but also for the very fate of Buddhism in Tibet, dawns on Kong jo as she interprets the results of her calculations. In this passage from the *Mani bka' 'bum*, the anthropomorphic vision of the country of Tibet-as-demoness presents itself to Kong jo as she shifts her focus from the particular circumstance of the statue-bearing chariot getting stuck in the mud, to the significance of the large scale configurations in the lay of the land itself:

Kong jo understood that this Snow Land country (Tibet) as a whole is like a *Srin-mo* demoness lying on her back. She understood that this Plain of Milk of Lha-sa is a palace of the king of the *Klu*. She understood that the lake in the Plain of Milk is the heart-blood of the demoness. The three mountains surrounding the Plain of Milk are the demoness's two breasts and her life-line (*srog-brtsa*). The eastern mountain promontory afflicts the west; the western afflicts the east; the southern afflicts the north; the northern afflicts the south.²⁶

Thus is the entire shape of the landscape perceived as highly deleterious. The account goes on to attribute the unsavory behaviour of the country's inhabitants, such as banditry, etc.,

gests positive images latent in the Tibetan topography:

Of the four directions of this place, in the east is a mountain like a heap of flowers. In the south is a mountain like a heap of jewels. In the west is a mountain like a stack of *sūpas*. In the north is a mountain like a conch-shell cup on top of a tripod. If you build a chapel on the Plain of Milk²⁷, the naturally [auspicious] qualities of Tibet will come to develop.²⁸

There follows a complex set of instructions to counteract the many inauspicious configurations in the Tibetan land and to make possible the building of the Jo-khang chapel. Particularly called for is a transforming of certain sites seen as "faults" in the landscape—i.e., spots inhabited by the indigenous Tibetan spirits, such as the palace of the *Klu*, the camp of the *'Dre*, the bed of the *Ma mo*—into sites suitable for the congregation of the king's subjects, monks and mendicants. This includes a filling in of the lake in the Plain of Milk, and the establishment of Kong jo's Śākyamuni image in "the center of the land, in order to suppress the *Klu* palace."²⁹

What finally emerges as that which will conclusively bring the demoness-Tibetan-land into submission is the construction of edifices, specifically Buddhist chapels, at certain key spots (*me-btsa*) in the country.³⁰ The king, perceiving that the demoness is waving her arms and legs, determines that by placing edifices on her land-body, she will be physically pressed down (*gron*) and pinned, with her arms and legs immobilized. The buildings on her shoulders and hips will suppress the four main sectors (*ru-chen-po bzhi*); those on her knees and elbows will control the four borders (*miha-'dul*); those on her hands and feet, the four further borders (*yang-'dul*). Thus is articulated an elaborate scheme of thirteen Buddhist temples, with the Jo-khang poised on her heart, and with three concentric squares encompassing the Tibetan map: the center, the inner realm, the borders, and the borders beyond.³¹ The temples

Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, the Venerable Avalokiteśvara made a Dharma palace in Tibet, and thus saw to it that what would benefit the Land of Snows was accomplished."³²

2.

It is a violent conception indeed: a ferocious demoness as the land upon which stand the architectural structures of the nominally pacific tradition of Buddhism, structures that here suppress and dominate. The story's provenance is indisputably Buddhist, and it postdates the events it describes by several centuries. But it not only preserves the Buddhist version of the manner in which Tibet became a Buddhist country; there are telling traces here of Tibet's shadowy archaic religion, at least of how it was, and still is, viewed by Tibetans, Buddhist tampering notwithstanding. Moreover, even in its adulterated, tampered form, the saga of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism betrays a complex set of links with patterns of thought known in many parts of the world, links which can tell us something about the nature of that early, elusive phase of Tibetan religion itself.

Thinking of this demoness-land, one is put in mind first, of course, of the perception of the primary stuff of the planet—the *Ursache*—as a living being. Such a being is perceived throughout the world at the dawn of humanity, and is most often conceived as feminine—Mother Earth (although there are some notable exceptions, as in ancient Egypt where the god Geb is the earth and his feminine counterpart Nut is the sky). In her supine position, the Tibetan giantess is especially reminiscent of a world-supporting tortoise spoken of in various parts of Asia, usually portrayed as feminine, and which at least according to the Buriats is also turned on her back, with the world built upon her stomach.³³

But unlike the Greek *Gaia*, this Tibetan Mother Earth is not beneficent or sustaining. Just the opposite, the supine de-

moness threatens to undermine goodness, advancement and civilization in Tibet. In this role, the *Srin-mo* demoness belongs to a particular subtype of the world-being image, which occurs in certain creation narratives. Although her story is, strictly speaking, not a creation myth—a long succession of Tibetan kings and other figures and events precedes the episode in both history and myth—for the Buddhists the introduction of the *dharma* in Tibet does mark a creation of sorts, the dawn of civilization, and the institution of order, in a previously untamed and savage land.

The creation narratives to which the *Srin-mo* story is akin begin with a pre-existing primordial chaos, a chaos which is a female being. Then the female chaos is conquered, and she becomes the stuff of which the world is fashioned. Naturally wild and dangerous, when controlled it is just she out of whom civilization is built. A seminal creation myth exemplifying this syndrome is that of the Babylonian Tiamat, goddess of the monstrous deep. Tiamat is slain, quartered and measured out by the god Marduk, who uses the parts of her body to make heaven and earth.³⁴ Her eyes bring forth the Tigris and Euphrates rivers; her breasts become the hills.

Both the Tiamat and the *Srin-mo* narratives share an element seen not uncommonly in Near Eastern and Indo-European mythology, namely, that particular parts of a divine or primal body come to constitute particular parts of a newly created place. Sometimes this reassignment is marked by a dismemberment. We know the theme well from the poignant *Purāṇic* story of Sati, consort of Śiva. When she died and the bereaved god carried her body on his back in mourning, the other gods relieved his burden by causing her body to break into parts and fall to the ground. The spots in India where the parts of her body struck the ground became the sacred pilgrimage spots of Hinduism—particularly the place where her *yonis* landed.³⁵ Less well known, but probably in some sense informing the *Srin-mo* story, is a Tibetan creation myth from the non-Buddhist Klu-'bum cycle. Here the body of a *Klu-mo*, serpentine being from the deep, again female, gives

rise to the parts of the world: her head becomes the sky; her right eye the moon, her left eye the sun, her teeth the planets, her voice thunder, her breath clouds, her veins rivers.³⁶

Not all partitioned primal bodies are female. Ymir, the primordial Germanic male giant formed from coagulated ice, is slain and dismembered by his grandsons. His skull also becomes the vault of heaven, and his flesh becomes the earth, his bones the mountains, his blood the ocean.³⁷ Another primal man, Puruṣa, is often commemorated to the south of Tibet, in Indic mythology, as Prajāpati. His dismemberment facilitates the formation of societal order, the Indian castes, as well as the seasons, and the parts of the world: his head becomes the sky, his eye the sun, etc.³⁸

Partition, demarcation and order: the structural theme of these various myths aptly conveys the act of the institution of civilization. We know that for the Tibetans the theme of dismemberment infuses myth and ritual from an early date.³⁹ Moreover, the image of quartering is central to the conception of Tibetan polity as early as the "four corners" (*ru-bzhi*) in Tibet's military organization.⁴⁰ Clearly, the series of concentric squares depicted in the image of the *Srin-mo*, segregating the inner areas of Tibet and delineating the outer realms of the barbarians, has a related societal import. As Aris has shown, the ethnocentric cast of the inner, outer, and barbarians-beyond structure probably has Chinese origins⁴¹. Nonetheless, the intimations of political domination and organization do not sufficiently explain the myth of the supine demoness, and certainly not its significance for the introduction of the Buddhist religion. Moreover, there remains as a central element in the *Srin-mo* image a basic perception of the earth and the forces it embodies, forces that have deepest significance at the level of personal and spiritual experience of the world.

3.

It is striking to note that the narrative of the supine demoness does not record her conclusive slaying or decisive finishing off.

There is no mention of her death resulting from her horizontal crucifixion. Quite the contrary, there are important ways in which the demoness remains very much alive, a question to which we will return below.

Despite the other affinities with the creation myths noted above, the *Srin-mo* story differs in the important respect that she is not, in fact, actually dismembered. Various parts of her body do constitute the various regions of Tibet, but these parts are never severed from the whole in order for that constituting to take place. Rather, the parts of her body are merely held down (*gnon*). Unlike Prajāpati, who only comes to be reassembled in man's ritual construction of the *agricayana* altar⁴², we wonder whether the demoness's unity has ever been sacrificed at all.

Thus, the primary operative element in the domination of the *Srin-mo* may more precisely be said to be the set of chapels that pin her down. The image calls to mind another theme from world mythology, where pins and other, often large, vertical devices function not so much to destroy, as to hold and transfix. In the Vedic myth of the Indrakīla, the nail driven into the head of the serpent Vṛtra does not slay the serpent but rather stabilizes him. The nail also serves to prop up the sky.⁴³ This line of thinking engaged the early Tibetans as well. Mountains were thought of as "sky pillars" (*gnam-gyi ka-ba*) or "earth nails" (*sa-yi phur-ba*).⁴⁴ Man-made pillars called "long stone" (*rdo-ring*) were erected by the early Buddhist kings to mark possession of the spot and domination of the underworld below. King Khri strong lde bisan's tomb has a pillar called "fixing peg."⁴⁵ Another earth-nail pillar is at bSam-yas Monastery.⁴⁶ A related "peg that transfixes the earth" is an integral part of building rituals in Southeast Asia.⁴⁷ John Irwin writes of the "pillar cult" in both Indic and Judeo-Christian traditions.⁴⁸ In Chinese mythology, the Goddess Nü-kua also fixes the world by cutting off the feet of a turtle (cousin of the supine tortoise of the Buriats?) and uses them as pillars to separate earth from sky.⁴⁹ And in Tantric Buddhism, the act of demarcating, building and transfix-

ing are brought together in the *Mahāvairocana* rites for constructing *maṇḍalas*, where the pins that lay out the structure also "pacify the site."⁵⁰

And so the *Srin-mo* is not slain by the temple/nails, although she is surely held immobile. But even this immobility is not the only aim. What is thereby allowed is also of key importance. The temples built by Strong bisan sgam po simultaneously suppress the sites of the *Ma mos* and *Klus* on her body, and transform those places into Buddhist realms. Similarly did Apollo slay Pytho—"the bloated she-dragon"—and by that very act take full possession of the sacred Delphi.⁵¹ Again, it is a common pattern: the old site of the indigenous religion is associated with some sort of special configuration in the land, in which the powers of the deep are perceived as having particular force. It is a place connected with spirits, spirits that course in a cavernous underground realm, and are often of a female nature or associated with some overarchingly feminine flavor of spirituality. The incoming religion seeks out those very sites, and builds right on top of them. The new structures obliterate the old places of worship, but gain instant history and sacred power thereby.

Part and parcel of the relationship between the demoness land and the architectural structures upon her seem to be certain sexual innuendos. If the *Srin-mo* is a Mother Earth, then the architectural structures that hold her down must be seen as overtly masculine. At one point in the *Srin-mo* myth this is quite explicit: one of the pinning structures is a Siva *linga*, to be set on the "earth-enemy" (*sa-dgra*) in the east, a place which is "like the Srin-mo's pubic hair."⁵² Vertical buildings, imposing structures . . . erections; in contrast, the feminine earth is associated with fertility, nurturing, receptivity—even the stereotype of weakness and vulnerability voiced in Aris's reading of our *Srin-mo* as "the ancient yet virgin territory waiting to be subjugated and civilized."⁵³ The very horizontality of the ground itself is significant; as the feminist Irigaray sees it, the ground is the "matter upon which he will ever and again return to plant his foot in order to spring further, leap

higher."⁵⁴ The vertical and horizontal axes themselves come to have a value judgement inherently associated with them. Consider the moral connotation of "uprightness" in English, which may be compared with the lowly status of that which is "base."⁵⁵

4.

Why does Buddhism, upon entering Tibet, find the feminine ground to be monstrous, chaotic and inherently evil? Buddhism also portrays the Tibetan national character as female, and dangerous, in another story, this time concerning the origin of the Tibetan race itself. It is a commonly repeated tale: The Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, incarnated as a monkey, is enjoying a life of solitude in the mountains, when he is lured into marriage by a desperate, insistent rock demoness. Their offspring become the first Tibetans. Yes, this lusty female is also called *Srin-mo*, and the *Mani bka' 'bum*, in a passage separate from the tale of her embodiment of the Tibetan land, explicitly attributes the source of the love of killing, physical strength, and courage, all typically Tibetan traits, to this demonic ancestress. The more lofty virtues of spirituality and compassion, also seen to be embedded deep in the Tibetan character, are traced to the paternal monkey.⁵⁶

These gender-specific assignments of personality traits can be linked with a tendency in certain early Buddhist canonical texts, noted in recent years by Diana Paul and others, to portray women as the source of desire and attachment, primary enemies of the celibate Buddhist mediator-monk.⁵⁷ Later, Mahāyāna Buddhism compensated for this bias by reasserting the irrelevance of gender to the spiritual path and in enlightenment. Indeed, Tantric Buddhism, so prevalent in Tibet, may privilege the female.⁵⁸ Yet the general Tibetan image of women, as in the word itself, *skyes-dman*, lit., "inferior birth," retains some of the old suspicions and bias.⁵⁹

A connection between the feminine, evil, and the *Srin* class of spirits is not unknown to Tibetans independent of Bud-

dhism. Such an equation is made as early as an account, from the sixth century, of the sKyi Kingdom. In this account, the ascendancy of women, linked to such qualities as their coming to be "ungentle," is a result of the decline of civilization, attributed to the power of the *Srin*.⁶⁰ A cluster of negative qualities is also assigned to woman/*Srin-mo* in the Bon-po epic *gZer-mwig*. At one point, the father and brother of gShen rab's mother complain,

That which is called woman (*bud-myed*) is the demoness (*srin-mo*) of action. Because her grounding in attachment is so great, she is to be considered a ghost (*'dre*). Because her grasping lust is so strong, she is the cause of the world of the womb.⁶¹

But the domination of our supine *Srin-mo* has a more profound meaning than the simple-minded misogyny of statements such as these. For one thing, the *Srin-mo* does not primarily represent woman, but rather a religion, or more accurately, a religious culture and world view that is being dominated.⁶² And so we need to consider the nature of that pre-Buddhist religion, elusive and lacking in documentation as it might be, if we are to understand the fuller significance of the *Srin-mo* and her femininity.

5.

By the time the *Srin-mo* story is being told, the underdog religion is referred to as "Bon," and Buddhism portrays it as uncivilized, the perpetrator of such abominations as bloody sacrifice, and the cause of Tibetan ignorance and backwardness.⁶³ But this is not quite accurate. Actually, the term Bon is somewhat ambiguous, and certainly the general appellation as used now does not refer to the same set of religious beliefs and practices as the term did during the time of Strong btsan sgam po. In any case, Bon may well not be a truly indigenous Tibetan system; at least in large part it is itself foreign and may have suppressed yet an earlier strain of Tibetan relig-

ion.⁶⁴ If this is the case, then Buddhism, in characterizing Bon as barbaric and in need of suppression, may have been mimicking a pattern already established by Bon.

We have seen above that the Tibetans characterize their country as peopled by demonic spirits. It is known that much of early Tibetan religion was concerned with death. There abound rites dealing with the dead, leading them to other-worldly realms, and demarcating the difference between the realm of the living and that of the dead. Buddhist accounts attribute the act of "closing the door to the tombs of the dead" to the Bon religion.⁶⁵ If this is so, and if our supine *Srin-mo* symbolizes what is truly indigenous in Tibetan religion, part of which is the fearful, (ir)repressible world of the demonic departed, then Buddhism was not the first to suppress her.

The *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*, a late but well regarded account of the history of the religions of Tibet, singles out the suppression of the *Srin* and the *Dre* as one of the primary activities of Bon, at least from the time of the quasi-mythical King Gri gum btsan po⁶⁶. In the Tibetan epic, a *Srin-po*, this time male and nine-headed, is trounced and smashed by Gesar in order for the land of Gling to be created.⁶⁷ Even as early as the Tun-huang documents, the *Srin* is an evil force that has to be pressed down (*gnon*). In the text related to the sKyi Kingdom, and thought by F. W. Thomas to have been recited on the occasion of a scapegoat ceremony, the central event recounted is the holding down of the heads of various *Srin-pos*. Here, however, one of the principal suppressors is a female, "the Myang goddess who is master of the country."⁶⁸

The suppression of the demonic and deathly may be related to a larger movement in Tibetan religious thinking. Abstracting traces from the complex and widely varying accounts of the Tibetan kings in the later mythologized literature, Erik Haarh detects a revolution in worldview that he associates with foreign invaders who usurped the Tibetan throne, at the time of the king gNya' khri btsan po and Gri (or Dri) gum btsan po. Part of this transformation has to do with a common Tibet-

an tripartite division of the world into underworld, surface, and sky, a division that Haarh wants to show was not clearly demarcated in the earlier period.⁶⁹ Instead, the early Tibetans focused most on the underground. Haarh theorizes that former kings were buried underground, or perhaps under water. Only after that tumultuous usurpment did it become important for the kings to be interred in tombs above ground. In accordance with this theory, the movement away from the underworld, and the introduction of the religious significance of the heavens (as one phrasing has it, "The Bonpos liked the sky"⁷⁰) are exaggerated in the Tibetan myths about the early period. This tradition has the kings following gNya' khri btsan po ascending a "sky-rope" upon death. Again, the emphasis on the vertical.

Related to this line of speculation, as well as to the *Srin-mo* herself, is a revealing incident in the myth of Gri/Dri gum btsan po, portrayed as the king responsible for severing the sky-rope. Haarh identifies this incident as the occasion for the first above-ground burial of a Tibetan king. In an early version of the myth Dri gum's corpse is said to have been dropped first in the river.⁷¹ In order to retrieve it, and place it in a tomb, his ministers were obliged to plead with the *Klu* spirits of the deep. We may note with interest that the *Klu* that relays the king's corpse back to the surface is a female; she is a messenger of a *Klu-srin*, and she herself is called *chu-srin*, "Srin of the water."⁷² Is this mistress of the fate of the dead an aqueous sister of our land *Srin-mo*?

Forces of the deep, adversaries of the powers on high: cooperation with them is tenuous at best. Although the pieces don't quite fit together, we are approaching an understanding of how the *Srin* signifies what Buddhism was obliged to hold down. As for the femaleness of our *Srin-mo*, we have already seen that a number of factors concatenate. The land (what could be more indigenous?) as a Mother Earth; a tendency to characterize that which is uncontrolled and threatening as feminine; even some evidence that women held a powerful place in early Tibetan society. If that power was still in force at the time of

the introduction of the Bon, and then the Buddhist religion—religions that are both propagated in the main by male figures—we can see why the haunted, superstitious Tibetan world might have been merged with that of a prominent femininity, to produce one trouble-making demoness.

6. ALL MERE PROPERTIES OR ATTRIBUTES MUST FOR MYTH BECOME BODIES⁷³

In a postscript of sorts that appears in the *sBa-bzched* chronicle, the fate of the supine demoness and her cohorts is bitterly denounced by King gLang dar ma, last of the Yar-lung monarchs. Notorious for his persecution of the Buddhists and his reversal of the policies of his predecessors,⁷⁴ he is here blaming the presence of the new religion for the famine, plague and crop loss afflicting his capitol. In an assembly in which he has summoned all of his subjects who are not ill, he demands,

"What's the reason [for all of these disasters]? Do you know?" he asked.

"We don't know," they said.

"Well I know. There was a Gnod-sbyin devil called Kong cong⁷⁵ the Chinese. She brought the inauspicious god known as Śākyaṃuni and went to the top of Mt. Sumeru, disturbed the gods and destroyed them. Then she went to Urgyan and destroyed it. Then she went to Magada and destroyed it. Then she went to China and destroyed it. Then she went to Tibet, and being an expert at geomancy, she did geomancy. On the twenty-one spine bones of Mt. ICags-ka⁷⁶ that looks like a white lioness leaping into the sky, she put twenty-one *stūpas* as acupuncture pins (*me-rtsa*). She pressed down the head with a black *stūpa* with nine levels, and by making a temple on the top of the skull she pressed down the area of sŋod. If she hadn't pressed that down, (we) would have conquered India. On the

nose of Mt. dMar-po which looks like a tiger entering the nest of a mouse, she hammered in a wooden spike. If she hadn't done that, India would be under (our) control. She cut off Mt. Me-sna-gdong at Yar-lung, which looks like a rice sprout, at the neck. If she hadn't done that, Tibet wouldn't have a famine...⁷⁷

Despite gLang dar ma's diatribe, he does not quarrel with the basic perception that the land of Tibet is constituted by beings, nor with the notion that such beings are affected by structures built on top of them. gLang dar ma is objecting only to the particular structures employed, the particular deities they house, and the places at which they are erected.

There is a very Tibetan proclivity to image features of the landscape, on both small and large scale, as animated. Ultimately, this tendency is to be related less to creation narratives—where the transformation of the primordial stuff into a civilized world space occurs in at least a quasi-temporal succession of events—as to a world view which must be seen as preeminently atemporal. Such a vision, similar to what Diana Eck has called a "sacramental natural ontology,"⁷⁸ is common in Asia and elsewhere, though a taxonomy of its many varieties cannot be laid out here. In Tibetan writing and thinking it is so pervasive that an entire volume could hardly explore it fully. The image ranges from one of a being who inhabits a given place (e.g. the numerous *Khas* who populate lakes and other parts of the underworld), to the place itself as constituting the spirit of a deity of some sort (as in the ubiquitous mountain cults⁷⁹), to the perception of the actual contours of the land as being anthropomorphic or animal-like, by virtue of which that place is thought actually to be the being so outlined (as in our demoness story at hand). Such conceptions do not necessarily presuppose a narrative at all, but rather reflect some sort of projection of the elements of human perception onto the structure of the surrounding environment.

Once conceived, the *genius loci* is propitiated, appeased, protected, heeded, and valorized in myriad ways. It may also be

50 *Feminine Ground*

violated, offended, and even wounded, as is the supine *Srin-mo*. The perpetrator of such offences can be anyone, and it is really a question of opinion or perspective as to whether a given action or construction is beneficial or harmful to the spirits of the land. Indeed, a Bon-po text also contains a self-congratulatory account of the disruption and suppression of the earth beings by buildings.⁸⁰ Be the spirit propitiated or suppressed, the point is that the analogical, animated, projective perception remains. It is a basic feature of what R. A. Stein calls the "nameless Tibetan religion." But it fully pervades organized Buddhism and Bon as well.

7.

In a perverse way, we might say that the supine, suppressed *Srin-mo* is actually kept alive and well by the very narrative of her domination. Certainly the fact that versions of her story are repeated in virtually every history of the early kings makes her difficult to forget. Supine *Srin-mo-s* are also to be found at the base of other monasteries, as related in their specific histories.⁸¹ The striking image seems to be emblematic in Tibet of the very foundation of Buddhism.

One senses a certain pride in the description of the presence of the massive demoness. She reminds Tibetans of fierce and savage roots in their past. She also has much to say to the Tibetan female, notably more assertive than some of her Asian neighbors, with an independent identity, and a formidable one at that. So formidable that the masculine power structure of Tibetan myth had to go to great lengths to keep the female presence under control. And so we must beg to differ with Aris's characterization of our *Srin-mo*: she may have been ancient, and perhaps even virginal, but certainly she wasn't passively waiting to be subjugated. She was causing all sorts of havoc in the face of the incoming civilization, and required extensive Buddhist architecture, and narrative, to hold her down.

Strong btsan sgam po's erection of thirteen structures to sup-

press the *Srin-mo*, and later repetitions of the tale by other builders, constitute eloquent testimony to the continuing presence of the supine demoness. She may have been pinned, and rendered motionless, but she threatens to break loose at any relaxing of vigilance or deterioration of civilization. Indeed, the architectural erections insure her perdurance below; she provides no less than the organic unity of the land, the totality of the context in which civilization could thrive. In the final analysis, the very measures taken to subdue the *Srin-mo* have sustained her vitality in the Tibetan world.