Sam van Schaik

A Tibetan Book of Spells

Abstract: Magical practices, such as bringing rain, repelling hail, and summoning and dispelling demons, are an important part of both Bonpo and Buddhist practice in Tibet and the Himalayan region. This chapter explores the connections between a tenth-century book of magic preserved among the Dunhuang cave manuscripts and anthropological observations of magical practices recorded in the late twentieth century. Taking some key examples from the Dunhuang manuscript, I explore how certain key points of similarity show a continuity with the repertoire of a Buddhist ritual practitioner, or a Bonpo, or in practices that cannot be easily assimilated to either tradition. I argue that it is important to point out such correspondences, even when they occur over nearly a millennium, and when the mechanism of their transmission is, as yet, unclear.

1 Introduction

Specialists in healing, divination and the propitiation of spirits are found in both the Buddhist and Bonpo traditions of Tibet. These specialists may be monastics or lay practitioners, and their specific association with Bonpo or Buddhist schools is perhaps less important than the repertoire of ritual services that they provide. Many of the rituals are shared across traditions, and are found in variant forms widely dispersed across the Tibetan cultural area. And though changed in the process of transmission over the centuries, they also date back to the early development of Tibetan Buddhism.

Some years ago, I published two brief notes on my website *earlytibet.com*. In the first ('A Tibetan Book of Spells', February 2009), I introduced a Tibetan booklet from Dunhuang offering methods for divination, rainmaking and curing various medical ailments. In the second ('Two Frogs, a Thousand Years Apart', September 2011), I looked at a single ritual from this book of spells, and pointed out several similarities with a ritual observed by Charles Ramble in Nepal.[1] Though aimed

1 See 'A Tibetan Book of Spells', February 2009 (earlytibet.com/2009/02/19/a-tibetan-book-of-spells/), and 'Two Frogs, a Thousand Years Apart', September 2011 (https://earlytibet.com/2011/09/23/two-frogs-a-thousand-years-apart/). I would like to thank those who contributed to the discussion of this material in the comments' fields, especially Dan Martin and Péter-

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at different ends, both rituals involve moulding an effigy of a frog, filling it with various ingredients, and at the end of the ritual, placing it next to a spring.

Since then, I have noted several other points where the rituals outlined in this book of spells (IOL Tib J 401 at the British Library) are strikingly similar to rituals observed by anthropologists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Although I originally felt that the great distance in space and time between the Dunhuang booklet and the records of modern practices meant that these observations could only remain curiosities, I now think that it is worth exploring them a little further.

There has not been much work on this kind of ritual manual in the recent history of Tibet. As Nicholas Sihlé has pointed out, studies of local ritual practices in the Tibetan cultural sphere have generally relied on observation and description, with much less attention to any textual basis for these practices. Often the texts have been regarded as 'exogenous' or detached from local practice.[2] While collections of texts for this kind of practice do exist, they have attracted little interest from scholars.[3] As the examples that follow show, a particular ritual from this Dunhuang book of spells may find a later echo in the work of a Buddhist ritual practitioner, or a Bonpo, or in practices that cannot be easily assimilated to either tradition.

The value of the Dunhuang manuscripts has mainly been seen in terms of their age, naturally enough; less interest has been shown in the fact that this manuscript cache was formed by a local community. Despite the treasure-hunting that resulted in the dispersal of the manuscripts all over the world, there is an archaeological integrity to the collections, in that they have been generally kept separate from other manuscripts in the institutions in which they have ended up. Over the last two decades, the International Dunhuang Project has done much to bring these institutional collections together in an online resource (idp.bl.uk).

We are still some way from the time when we can compare this cache with those found in monasteries and stupas elsewhere. So at this stage, a comparison between the rituals found the Dunhuang manuscripts and contemporary practices observed in communities in the Tibetan cultural sphere might offer us insights that we would not otherwise have access to. In time the picture will be

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Dániel Szántó. More recently, I benefited from discussions of the Indic context of some of the rituals described here with Gergely Hidas and Gethin Rees.

2 Sihlé 2009.

3 An exception is Shen-yu Lin's (2005) work on the medical rituals known as *gto* collected by Mipham (1846–1912); the are several major printed collections of minor rituals, including the *Ba ri be'u bum* by Bari Lotsawa (1040–1111) and the *Las sna tshogs pa'i sngags kyi be'u bum by Mipham*. See Marc des Jardins contribution in the present volume.

clearer, the great gap in time will lessen as examples from the intermediate period come to light, and we will be able to make more sense of the continuities and changes in these rituals of daily life.

2 The booklet

The manuscript of the Dunhuang spellbook, IOL Tib J 401, is a codex, formed of bifolios stitched along the middle with thread. When opened out, the bifolios are the size of a small *pothi* (*dpe cha*) leaf (i.e. 8 × 38 cm).

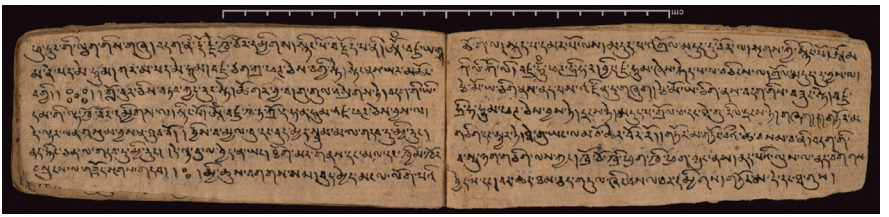

Fig. 1: The book of spells IOL Tib J 401.

The resulting long and thin folio size (8 × 19 cm) is unusual among the Dunhuang manuscripts; in fact no other codex manuscripts from Dunhuang are in this format, most pages being closer to square-shaped. As Agnieszka Helman-Ważny has pointed out, there is another Tibetan manuscript in the British Library with the same format. This manuscript is probably from the nineteenth century. This is also a compendium of texts, based in the ritual world of the Nyingma school, though less concerned with the quotidian aims of the texts in the Dunhuang spellbook. Helman-Ważny has also studied a Tibetan-Mongolian medical manuscript that has a similar long and thin format (9.5 × 22.4 cm), though in this case the binding is along the long top edge of the book.[4]

4 On the physical characteristics of IOL Tib J 401 and Or.15193 see Helman-Ważny 2014, 63–66; on the medical manuscript MEK 51761 (from the Ethnographic Museum in Krakow) see Helman-Ważny 2015, 339–342.

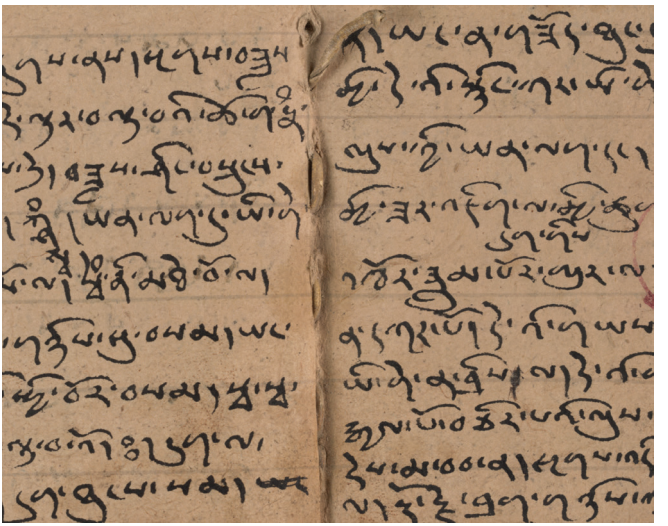

Fig. 2: Detail from the book of spells IOL Tib J 401.

As with some of the rituals in the Dunhuang spellbook, we are faced with a very long period of time between the date of the Dunhuang manuscript and the later Tibetan example. Nevertheless, we can speculate that the 'folded *pothi*' style of codex did occur in the intermediate period, if only because the *pothi* remained by far the most common format of paper folios in Tibet.

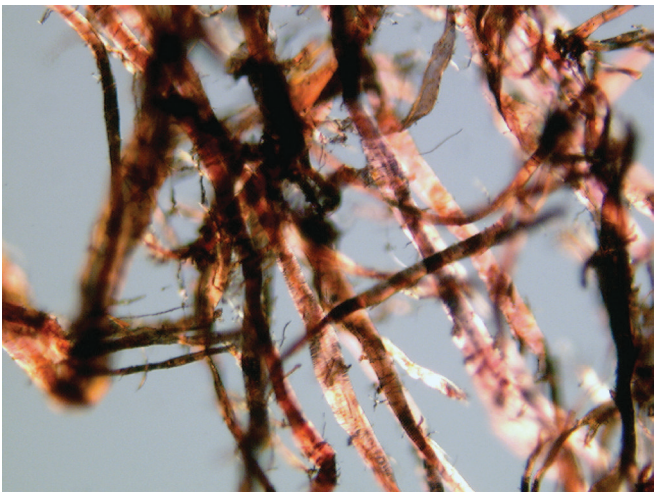

Fig. 3: Microscopic image of IOL Tib J 401 by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny.

The pages of the Dunhuang spellbook are composed of rag paper, a type of paper resulting from the recycling of textiles, sometimes along with old paper. The primary fibre type is *Boehmeria nivea* (ramie), and was made on a sieve, with laid lines showing four to five per centimetre. This type of paper is very common among the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts, and indicates that the manuscript was constructed and written locally.[5]

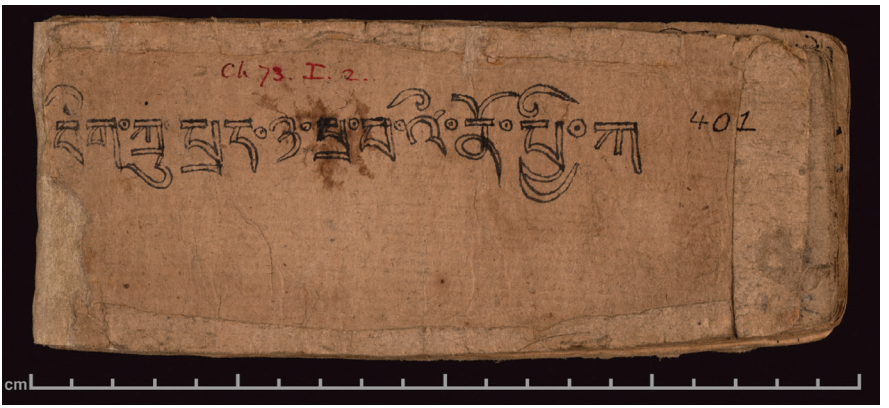

Fig. 4: The cover page of the book of spells IOL Tib J 401.

The cover of the book was written on in large, 'outline' style letters: 'This is the ritual manual of Bhikṣu Prajñāprabhā' (*big kru pad nya pra ba'i no pyi ka*). The term *no pyi ka* is unusual, though it does continue to be used in later Tibetan ritual literature. It appears (as *no-pi-ka*) in Sarat Chandra Das's *Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1902), with the definition 'n. of a religious service; propitiatory rite'. The word seems to be derived from the Sanskrit *sādhanopayika*. Though the Tibetan *no pyi ka* breaks the Sanskrit word up in the wrong place (it is *sādhana + upāyikā*), it seems to derive its meaning from the whole Sanskrit term.[6]

5 Helman-Ważny and van Schaik 2013, 721–722, 735.

6 In his work on the *mahāyoga* manuscripts from Dunhuang, Kenneth Eastman (1983) suggested that *no pyi ka* should be translated as *sādhana*, noting a Tibeto-Sanskrit glossary in Pelliot tibétain 849, which glosses the term as *sgrub thabs*. We can also point to certain other Dunhuang manuscripts, including IOL Tib J 553 and 554, which are undoubtedly *sādhana*s and bear the title *no pyi ka*. Robert Mayer and Cathy Cantwell (2008, 152) suggest (with thanks to Matthew Kapstein) that the probable origin of *no pyi ka* is a Sanskrit term *sādhanaupayika*. This is based on the suggestion that this is the original Sanskrit term behind the Tibetan word *sgrub thabs*. Therefore *sādhana = sgrub*, while *aupāyika = thabs*. However, Péter-Dániel Szántó has pointed

In any case, this title on the front of the Dunhuang spellbook seems to have been written by the owner of the manuscript, to let everyone know that it was his own *no pyi ka* or ritual manual. This, and the nature of the contents of the manuscript, strongly suggest that it was used in the actual practice of the rituals it contains. The owner seems to be identified as a monk by the title *big kru*, if we are to read this as a rather mangled transliteration of Sanskrit *bhikṣu*. This title is not commonly used by Tibetan monks in Dunhuang or other early sources. Intriguingly, Charles Ramble writes of a ritual specialist who lived in the village of Tangkya in highland Nepal going by the title Bichuwa. Ramble mentions the similarity of this title to *bhikṣu*, but also the Nepali word for a ritualist, *bijuwā*.[7]

The same words (*big kru pad nya pra ba'i no pyi ka*) are written, in the same bold style in another manuscript, Pelliot tibétain 41, which is a concertina containing Vajrayāna ritual texts. Here the words are not written on the silk covers, but in the middle of the manuscript, in a gap left between two texts. This manuscript appears to be in a different handwriting style from the Dunhuang spellbook, and whether Prajñāprabhā wrote either of them, or was only their owner, is open to question. Because Pelliot tibétain 41 is incomplete, it is difficult to fully understand the texts it contains, but it is clear that the first text, which is on the recto of the manuscript, contains instructions for the ritual preparation of medicine (*sman*). Thus there is certainly a thematic overlap with the Dunhuang spellbook. In any case, the assertion of ownership of not only the manuscript but the rituals it contains (i.e. *no pyi ka*) is significant because we know that in other communities, a specialist may closely guard the secret of a specific ritual if it is not generally known, thereby maintaining his or her role as specialist.[8]

3 The rituals

I have already detailed the full contents and layout of the Dunhuang spellbook IOL Tib J 401 in the catalogue entry in *Tibetan Tantric Manuscripts from Dunhuang*. Here, I will focus on some of the key rituals with thematic links to contemporary ritual practices in the Tibetan cultural area.[9]

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out that the titles of many tantric texts contain instances of the word *sādhanopayika* (as well as *maṇḍalopayika*); therefore the second part of the compound would be *upāyikā*, not *aupāpayika* (see comments in earlytibet.com/2009/02/19/a-tibetan-book-of-spells/).

7 Ramble 2008, 227–228.

8 See for example Ramble 2008, 177.

9 For the full catalogue entry, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006, 136–142.

3.1 Rituals of Bhṛkuṭī and Avalokiteśvara

The first ritual text written the right way up on the manuscript (5^{r}–11^{v}) is a series of rituals associated with the deity Bhṛkuṭī (written *'bur kur* in the Tibetan). The deity is also known as the Blazing Wrathful One (Khro bo rme brtsegs). She seems to originate in the *Purāṇa* literature (see for example *Matsya-purāṇa* 179.8), and in Tibetan Buddhism is often paired with Tārā as one of the consorts of Avalokiteśvara.

This is a long text, occupying five folios of the book. The ritual begins with the establishment of a four-cornered mandala, each side one cubit (*kru gang*) in length. The *vidyādhara* consecrates the mandala with ground flowers (*men tog*), and places a single vajra in the middle, or if one is not available, a white wand (*'dan dkar po*). A drawing of the deity is to be made, and the mantra as many times as possible. Then the *vidyādhara* lifts the vajra one cubit above the ground and recites aspiration and repentance prayers. When he praises with hymns (*bstod*), the deity herself arrives. The text states that the physical representation of the deity and the *vidyādhara*'s visualisation should be the same.

The individual rituals, too numerous to describe individually, include the following:

- Prophecy
- Subduing demons, people and animals
- Bringing forth water, and manipulating the flow of water
- Finding treasure
- Curing illnesses and insanity
- Bringing people together and attracting others

The collection of rituals focussing on Avalokiteśvara (16^{r}–21^{r}) is similar to the rituals of Bhṛkuṭī in that one deity is propitiated for a variety of ritual outcomes. This collection is more focussed than the earlier one on medical matters, and many of the rituals involve the preparation of medical ointments. As Ronit Yoeli-Tlalim has pointed out, the early Tibetan medical texts found in Dunhuang stand between the categories of 'medicine' and 'ritual', including treatments such as moxibustion, bloodletting and emetics, but also ritual activities such as the construction of effigies (*glud*).[10] The same can be said of the medical rituals here.

The particular form of Avalokiteśvara propitiated in these rituals can be either the thousand-armed form, or Amoghapāṣa, both of which are found in other

10 Yoeli-Tlalim 2015.

tantric literature in the Dunhuang manuscripts.[11] Compendiums of brief rituals such as these bear a close resemblance to some of the canonical texts found in the dhāraṇi and kriya tantra sections of the Buddhist Kanjur. These include the *Amoghapāśadhāraṇisūtra* and *Amoghapāśakalparāja*, and kriya tantra texts such as *Siddhaikavira*.

Further rituals include:

- Dispelling curses and other enmities.
- Warding off various kinds of spirit, including *gnod sbyin* (Skt *yākṣa*), *'dre, 'byung po*, and *stag srin* (i.e. the tiger-headed *rakṣasa*)
- Protecting crops from insects.
- Medical cures including diseases of the eyes, poisonous bites, burns, headaches and fever.

The association of Avalokiteśvara with treatments including eye medicine has continued to the present.[12] In other cases the specifics of the rituals do not appear to be closely linked to Avalokiteśvara; instead we seem to have previously existing rituals that have been adapted to a Buddhist context by association with Avalokiteśvara. For example, the first ritual is to ward off the influence of the tiger-headed demon (*stag srin*). This involves burning the skull of a cat, and mixing this into pure earth (*sa gtsang ma*), then making the form of a cat. After invoking Avalokiteśvara, the model cat is to be cut up into 108 pieces while reciting *om hri ha hum phat svaha*.

The basic structure of this cat effigy ritual has continued through to the present day (without the specific association with Avalokiteśvara), as reported by anthropologists working among the Sherpas in Nepal. Both Sherry Ortner and Robert Paul described this ritual as part of larger ceremonies including funerals and the annual Dumje festival. In these ceremonies, the lay community construct 'a large effigy described variously as a cat, bermang, or a tiger, tak (*stag*), made of dough with a finely sculpted clay head, and painted with black and white stripes, for which charcoal and flour are used.'[13]

After several other ritual acts, including making offerings and dancing, the cat effigy is taken on the main road out of the village, and just beyond the village boundary, placed on the ground and cut to pieces by young men in ritual role of *peshangba* using their swords.[14] While Paul refers to the effigy as a cat, Ortner

11 For the full catalogue entry, see Dalton and van Schaik 2006, 136–142.
12 See Czaja 2015.
13 Paul 1979, 281.
14 Ortner 1978, 93–94; Paul 1979, 281–282.

calls it a tiger. This may reflect the different interpretations of their informants; however, Paul writes that 'according to lamas, also, the cat is more correctly a tiger, the term "cat" being only a vulgar misconstruction'.[15] This cat/tiger multivalence is reflected in the ritual in IOL Tib J 401, in which the cat effigy is the means for dispelling the influence of a tiger-headed demon.

3.2 Curing insanity

The first set of rituals in the booklet are written upside down with respect to the other texts, and may have been written last rather than first. The opening ritual (fols 4^{v}–3^{v}) is a cure for insanity. Specifically, the ritual is introduced as a cure for a severe episode in someone afflicted with severe insanity. Perhaps this description refers to some kinds of seizure. A fire is made, and a mixture of iron, gold and copper filings prepared. Four people hold the four limbs of the insane person. The fire is stoked (*mye bo che bus*), and the filings are then scattered onto the person, and into the fire, while mantras invoking the yākṣas and rakṣasas are recited. This is repeated nine times.[16]

Then everyone waits through the three watches of the night. At the final watch, five phurbus are stabbed at the four limbs and head of the afflicted person. Finally, the text instructs the *vidyādhara* (i.e. the ritual master) to 'bind them with the five kinds of thread, subdue them by pacing along their sides, strike them with the whips of your sleeves (*phu dung gi lcag*)'. Finally the *vidyādhara* visualises himself as Vajrakhroda and recites another mantra, which contains the syllables *vajra yaksha mane padme hum*. If the insanity strikes again later, the text advises a simpler ritual, burning fragrant resin (*gu gul*) in a fire, visualising a deity and reciting another mantra.

This ritual is similar in principle to some of the 'shock treatments' prescribed for insanity in Indian medical texts.[17] Throwing the metal filings would create multi-coloured sparks and explosive sounds, creating a dramatic effect. The text itself indicates that this ritual is dangerous, stating that it is not to be performed on infants or pregnant women. More generally, this ritual clearly belongs to the

15 Paul 1979, 292.

16 Cantwell and Mayer (2008, 202) interpret the text as saying that the person is swung over the fire, but I am not sure this is correct.

17 See Wujastyk 2003.

category of homa (*sbyin sregs*), and as Cantwell and Mayer have pointed out, there is a connection with the Vajrakilaya ritual literature.[18]

A ritual practice with some similarities to this one is still practised for people afflicted with seizures. Larry Peters has described a ritual carried out by a ritual practitioner Mrs Dolkhar, also known by her title Abhi Lhamo, in which a case of seizures is addressed by using a fire altar, and stabbing the feet of the patient with a phurba. This practice is specifically directed towards expelling a hostile spirit, and such possession is not mentioned in the ritual in IOL Tib J 401 (perhaps surprisingly given the use of wrathful methods, mantras and symbolism). Moreover, the contemporary practitioner, Mrs Dolkhar, not only strikes the patient's extremities with the phurba but sucks on the end of it to remove impurities, a common practice among Tibetan and Mongolian shamanic healers. Despite these differences, both rituals are applied to a patient undergoing a seizure, and both feature the use of a fire altar and the stabbing of the extremities with a phurba.[19]

3.3 Diseases caused by *nāgas*

Following the ritual for insanity, and still in the same body of text that is written upside down, there are two rituals for illnesses associated with the *nāga*s (*klu*). The first is for men with 'obstructed waters' (*chus bgags*) or women with 'inverted wombs' (*mngal log*), the latter probably referring to a prolapsed uterus. The ritual involves the *vidyādhara* tying knots in a thread, around his waist, and handing it to the patient to hold. Compare the description of Palden Lhamo by René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz: 'The king of the nāgas is drawn around her waist as a girdle' (1996, 24).

Afterwards, this thread is wound around a shinbone and added to a torma, which is to be thrown into a road. The last element of the ritual – throwing of the shinbone wound with thread into a road – is also found in Tibetan rituals using a cross wound with thread (*mdos*). In the terms of later Bonpo medical rituals, the stick wound with thread is called *rgyang bu*, while the cross is called *nam mkha'*. In such rituals, as is the case here, the *mdos* are added to a torma.[20] The visualisation that is to be done when the shinbone wound with thread is cast away – as Cantwell and Mayer have pointed out – also contains elements found

18 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 202.

19 For the account of this ritual, see Peters 2016, 91–92.

20 On *mdos* see the detailed study in Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, 369–397; on the use of *nam mkha'* and *mdos* in a contemporary Bonpo medical ritual, see Millard 2015.

in Vajrakilaya rituals. The visualisation is that from every single pore of one's own body, a billion wrathful deities (*khro bo*) emerge, to overcome all hindrances and purify the illness.[21]

The second ritual in this section is for patients with aches and swellings caused by *nāga*s. The *vidyādhara* is to make a model of a frog out of barley flour. In a cavity in the barley frog made with a bamboo stick, an ointment is to be made, and applied to the point of the ache on the body of the patient. The visualisation is that Hayagriva Varuna appears with an entourage of black frog emanations, and destroys all illnesses. After this, the barley frog is examined for a prognosis:

> Lift up the frog, and if a golden liquid emerges from under it, they will definitely recover. If it is merely moist, then they will recover before too long. If there is only meat with gluey flour, they will be purified by the end of the illness. It is not necessary to do the ritual again. If there is only gluey flour, break it up and do the ritual again.[22]

After this, the frog is to be placed in front of a spring, and incense offerings made to it. A similar ritual has been described by Charles Ramble in a very different period and setting, by the lamas of Tshognam in highland Nepal:

> The last, and perhaps most interesting, of the rites performed by Tshognam for Te is the annual rain-making ceremony. Tantric techniques for controlling the weather are nothing unusual in the Tibetan tradition: weather-makers were even employed by the Lhasa government to ensure rain at appropriate times and to keep hail off vulnerable sites. The technique used by the senior lama of Tshognam, however, does not belong to the usual Tibetan repertoire but was assimilated by his grandfather, 'Doctor Dandy', from the 'outsiders' religion' (*phyi pa'i chos*) – specifically, from Hinduism: he learned it, it is said, from a mendicant Indian pilgrim. The ritual is performed in the summer, with the intention of ensuring that the pastures are well watered and that the snow-melt that irrigates the buckwheat crop is supplemented with rain. The procedure, briefly, is as follows. Two hollow wax models of frogs are made. Through a hole in the back, the frogs are filled with various ingredients, including the excrement of a black dog and magical formulae written on slips of paper, and the holes are sealed with a wax lid. One of the frogs is stuffed into the mouth of one of the springs to the east of Te, and the other is burned at a three-way crossroads. The principle of this method is apparently to pollute the subterranean serpent-spirits and the sky gods, and induce them to wash away the contagion by producing water from the earth and the heavens.[23]

21 Cantwell and Mayer 2008, 203.

22 IOL Tib J 401, 2v.3–5.

23 Ramble 2008, 174. For the use of a dough frog in another ritual related to the *klu*, see Charles Ramble's contribution in the present volume.

Though it is impossible to trace the connection between these two rituals, separated by over a thousand years, the similarities between them are too many to be dismissed. Further research may turn up records of such rituals in the period in between the tenth and twentieth centuries.

3.4 *Prasena* divination

The major divination ritual in this book of spells (fols 11^{v}–14^{v}) is associated with the deity Garuda (here called *nam ka lding* and *bya rje khyung*). At the beginning Garuda is visualised sitting or kneeling on a white lotus growing in a lake. He is golden in colour, wearing gold earrings and bracelets, and a red girdle. His legs are black and his face is like the light of a fire, very striking in aspect (*cha lugs*). He is to be visualised with a moon at his heart for peaceful rituals, and a sun for wrathful ones.

The divination practice itself uses a mirror to invoke a vision for the purpose of divination. The ritual space is set up as a four-cornered mandala, and two mantras, one of eleven syllables and one of six syllables, are recited. In the preparatory practice, the *vidyādhara* and the mirror are ritually cleansed, and offerings are made to the mirror. A 'pure' (i.e. pre-pubescent) child is placed in front of the mirror and instructed to look into it. The *vidyādhara* then questions the child, and the answers to the questions will appear clearly (to the child) within the mirror.

The text goes on to provide variations on this relatively simple ritual, mainly replacing the mirror with another focus for the child medium. These are the surface of the *vidyādhara*'s thumbnail, which is coated with a lacquer; a skullcup filled with moist barley flour; a sword or white wand. What is seen in the mirror, or other object, is said to be anything in the three times, that is, from the past, present or future.

The text here in the Dunhuang spellbook contains the earliest surviving instructions on Tibetan *prasena* practice. This ritual is also discussed in Chinese Buddhist ritual literature (the Chinese term is *bo so ni*), though the name seems to originate with Prakrit. As Giacomella Orofino has shown in a detailed study of the practice, there are several references in the *Kālacakra tantra* and its associated literature to *pratisenā*, which is probably a Sanskritisation of the Prakrit *prasena*.[24]

24 Orofino 1994. See also Newman 1988, 133. On the Chinese *prasena* rituals and their precedents, see Strickmann 2002, 206–218. He identifies the *Subāhuparipṛcchā* as the main scriptural

The *prasena* ritual, often abbreviated to *pra* (and pronounced 'tra'), has continued to be popular through to the present. As Orofino has pointed out, this ritual practice has an equally significant presence in both Buddhist and Bonpo traditions:

> As appears from the *gZi brjid*, in the *Phya gshen theg pa*, the 'Way of the *gshen* of Prediction', the first of the nine vehicles of Bonpo tradition, we find the term *pra* used as a standard term for prognostics. In the *sNang gshen gyi theg pa*, the 'Way of the *gshen* of the Visual World', the second vehicle for placating and repelling the gods and the demons, mention is made of the *pra ltas gsal ba'i me long thabs*, the 'method of the mirror of clear prognostics' which, if one gazes with acute concentration, allows the vision of the spirits who harm other beings.[25]

Lama Chime Radha has discussed various applications of this ritual in twentieth century Tibet, including its customary use in the identification of the rebirth of the Dalai Lamas. Lama Chime describes how the search for the fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1933 involved a *prasena* divination at Lha mo bla mtsho, a lake near Lhasa. He also describes other uses of the practice, including a woman who wanted to know how many sons would be born to her, and a lama helping a group of Tibetans fleeing the Chinese to find a path to Assam. In these accounts, as well as the traditional mirror, and the sacred lake, the use of a thumbnail painted with lacquer (as in IOL Tib J 401) is mentioned. However, none of Lama Chime's examples include the use of a child medium.[26]

3.5 Rain rituals

There are two distinct rain rituals in the Dunhuang spellbook, which I will deal with together here. The first rain ritual comes in the Garuda section, after the *prasena* divination practice. In the ritual, the *vidyādhara* visualises a water mandala as a sphere, in which the syllable *na* is flanked by two *huṃ* syllables to the left and right. The *na* represents the king of the *nāga*s, and the two *huṃ* syllables transform into vajras, which come together and crush the body of the *nāga* king. Water then comes forth from the body of the *nāga*, and fills the world.

source for the *prasena* rituals; this text is also discussed in Orofino 1994, 614.

25 Orofino 1994, 616.

26 Chime Radha 1981. The divination practice including a child medium is still used by Tamang shamans in Nepal (oral communication from Charles Ramble, October 2020).

Visualising this, the *vidyādhara* recites the mantra *huṃ nāga huṃ*. This brings the rain.

To stop a great rain, the visualisation is of a red *huṃ* blazing with flames that are also *huṃ* syllables. This fire spreads and burns up the world. If the *vidyādhara* can see clouds, he should visualise them being on fire as well. After this, the *vidyādhara* summons and binds the *nāga* with *mudrā*s. At the end of this ritual, the syllables *na* and *huṃ* should be written on wooden slips (*byang bu*) with a pen (*snyug po*) and stuck in the ground as appropriate – presumably in the same arrangement as in the water mandala described above.

We know that wooden sticks were used in rituals in early Tibet and Central Asia. Several of the wooden slips and four-sided sticks found at the Miran site in Central Asia, dating from the ninth century, were used for ritual purposes including funerals, propitiation of deities and divination.[27] At the end of this ritual, there is a further practice for 'to ward off hailstones, and incidents of illness, fierce harmful spirits, and other destructive entities'. This involves visualing a vajra mace (*tsher ma can*) with an angry head, with frowning wrathful eyes, which strikes the *nāga*s, dragons and demons and repels them all.

The second rain ritual in the manual is more complex than the first. The *vidyādhara* is instructed to set up a canopy or tent near a pool or clear spring. Inside, he creates a mandala with red ochre (*gtshag*), and draws or paints the *nāga*s of the four directions on cloth (*ras*) or paper (*shog shog*), as follows:

- East - white with five heads
- South - blue with nine heads
- West - red with seven heads
- North - green with eight heads

Then the mandala is to be ritually cleansed (*gtsang sbra*) with the five precious things, five seeds and five medicines.[28] The top portion of the food offerings (*smos*) is sprinkled for the *nāga*s and the protectors. Four arrows (*mda'*) are to be placed at the four corners of the mandala, and the mantra *na ga dzdza* is to be tied to the notch of each arrow. Once this is done, the ritual is performed.

The text then states that the *vidyādhara*'s cloak, monk's robe and crown are to be 'made blue'. He is then to gaze towards the *Mahāmegha sūtra* and read the text constantly, while offering the torma. The reference to 'making blue' is difficult to

27 See van Schaik 2013, 241–249.

28 On cleansing substances, see Bentor 1996, 110–111.

interpret, but actually occurs in the *Mahāmegha sūtra* itself: 'a blue canopy and blue dress, blue banner and all the offering is to be made blue'.[29]

Finally, the *nāga*s are summoned from the water. The *vidyādhara* visualises their presence, and rituals of offering and purification performed. The offerings are thrown into the water. Then the *vidyādhara* visualises a huge cloud coming from the mouth of the chief *nāga* and filling the sky, and rain pouring down, while reciting *hung na ga hung*. This is the end of the ritual, but further actions are suggested if rain does not fall. These include striking the effigies of the *nāga*s with a rod while reciting the *ki la ya* mantra, performing a fire ritual, and finally burning the effigies of the *nāga*s; the text concludes, 'if that does not suffice, then it is impossible'.

This ritual bears some resemblance to the one in the *Mahāmegha sūtra* and the presence of the sutra itself in the ritual practice shows that this is not accidental. A series of more complex rainmaking rituals found in the *Vajratuṇḍasamayakalparāja* also contain many similarities with the ritual here. Another similar ritual is found in a text translated into Chinese in the sixth century, which has been recently studied by Ronald Davidson. This text (Taisho 1007) prescribes a similar set-up of mandala and *nāga* effigies, but lacks the instructions on visualisation, and is not as clearly linked to the *Mahāmegha sūtra*.[30] It does have similar instructions on what to do if the initial ritual is not effective.

Again, the rainmaking (and stopping rain and hail) rituals in IOL Tib J 401 are the earliest surviving detailed instructions on such practices in Tibetan. Bringing rain, and even more importantly in Tibet, preventing hail, continued to be staple rituals of Buddhist and Bonpo ritual specialists through to the present day. Accounts of rainmakers working in Tibet and in exile are evidence for the continuation of many aspects of the rituals described here – for example, the Nyingma lama Yeshe Dorje, who performed rituals for bringing rain and for stopping hail in Tibet and then for the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. He describes the necessity of locating a body of water to perform the ritual, and pitching a tent next to the water in which the ritual is carried out.[31]

A study of hail prevention rituals in northeast Skya rgya in northeast Amdo by Rdo rje don grub provides some interesting points of comparison with the first ritual above, in which the prevention of hail is mentioned. In the village tradition observed by Rdo rje don grub, hail prevention is a serious business which

29 Translation in Bendall 1880, 309. I would like to thank Gergely Hidas for pointing this out to me, and for sharing his pre-publication work on the *Vajratuṇḍasamayakalparāja*.

30 See Hidas 2019.

31 Woolf and Blanc 1994, 26–29.

is handled by members of a lineage of hail protectors (*ser srung*) who are funded by a hail prevention tax. This social situation has been described in many other settings in Tibet. While the exact nature of the ritual and implements used in Skya rgya differs from the ritual prescribed in the Dunhuang spellbook, one of the main hail prevention rituals is said to be based on the meditation on *bya rgyal khyung*, almost the same name by which Garuda is called in the Dunhuang spellbook (i.e. *bya rje khyung*).[32]

3.6 A ritual for pregnant women

This ritual is for those who wish for a child from a childless woman (*bud med bu med pa*), and for the protection of a woman's life after giving birth. The ritual is performed in a mandala delimited with knives (*mtshon*) and five-coloured thread. On the eight and fourteenth days, she should take the eight vows of a lay devotee (*dge bsnyen ma*). Her body is to be cleaned and she is to be dressed in new clothes, ornamented with jewellery, and taken into the centre of the mandala. The *vidyādhara* should place mustard seeds on top of her head, and stay until midnight reciting aspirational prayers and confession, then knot the strings 108 times. The *vidyādhara* should recite the mantra and perform the *mudrā*s of the great king of the *yakṣa*s. Then he should write her name on paper and at attach it to his clothes and those of the woman.

If the woman comes to harm, the *vidyādhara* should quickly grab a five-pointed vajra, and make offerings and perform recitations for seven days. A vivid visualisation is described here. From the realm of the four great kings come many infants who have died in the womb; the *vidyādhara* is to bind them and send them back. Then fulfilling their commitments, many goddesses come from the sky to protect the womb and place a child there. Any demons are thwarted by this. Like the fruit of the *ajakarṇa* (*a dza ka*), their head bursts into seven parts.[33] This visualisation draws on many aspects of Buddhist mythology; in particular, the account of Queen Maya's conception of the Buddha, which begins with her dreaming of being taken away by the four great kings.

The care of women in pregnancy and childbirth, and children before and after birth, are key human needs and are found across all traditions of Tibetan medical and ritual practice. In recent years this previously neglected area has been the subject of a dedicated study by Frances Garrett (2008), and Thubten

32 Rdo rje don grub 2012, 76.

33 *Ajakarṇa* is a species of *Dipterocarpus* tree.

Sangay and Gavin Kilty (2011) have described a variety of rituals which cover the period from early pregnancy to late childhood.[34] The presence of this ritual in IOL Tib J 401 is important for our understanding of the social conditions in which it was used. In particular, it confirms that this book of rituals was intended to be used by monks working with lay communities, and not only in Buddhist monastic establishments.[35]

In contemporary Tibet, a Buddhist monk is often called upon to carry out rituals during pregnancy and after the birth of a child. However I have not seen a detailed account of the rituals performed on the behalf of a pregnant woman. An anthropological account of Tibetan customs from conception through to childhood, Brown, Farwell and Nyerongsha (2008) mention only relatively generic rituals practised during the gestation period that do not seem to be specifically formulated for this purpose: the reading of sacred texts and giving out of blessed protective strings; the making and casting out of an effigy to counteract malign spirits; and consulting an oracle to answer questions about the unborn child.[36]

4 Conclusion

Is there any more we can say about the owner of the Dunhuang book of spells, IOL Tib J 401? We know that he went by the Sanskritic name Prajñāprabhā. Taking into consideration the paper used in the construction of the manuscript, and the style of handwriting, it is likely that he was active in Dunhuang or one of the nearby towns at some point from the late ninth through to the mid-tenth century. Despite this location being far from the centre of Tibet, Prajñāprabhā was working in the idiom of Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice. His use of the title Bhikṣu (*big kru*) suggests that he was a monk, although as we have seem, the similar-sounding title Bichuwa is used by lay ritual specialists in highland Nepal. His status may have been something between monastic and lay, as is sometimes the case in smaller Buddhist communities.

The ritual repertoire of this book of spells is wide-ranging, but significantly omits funerary rituals – though these are found in other Dunhuang manuscripts.[37] In fact, what unites all of the rituals in the book is their focus on this life. They are

34 See Garrett 2008, Sangay and Kilty 2011.

35 On the archeological records of Buddhist monks carrying out rituals related to pregnancy with lay communities, see Rees and Yoneda 2013.

36 Brown, Farwell and Nyerongsha 2008.

37 See for example Stein 1970 and Imaeda 1981.

'this-worldly' rather than 'other-worldly'. Not only funerary matters, but the soteriology of Buddhism too are absent here. This suggests that the book was written to answer the everyday this-worldly needs of a community, and perhaps that its owner Prajñāprabhā specialised in catering to these needs, filling a social role comparable to modern ritual specialists in the Tibetan cultural area.

The above comparisons that I have made with twentieth and twenty-first century ritual practices show that functions and many of the specific ritual forms of these practices continued to be in demand over the centuries. Yet this is only a foray into the area. These comparisons do not cover all of the anthropological literature, and even if they did, there are surely ritual practices that have not been recorded which may offer further correspondences. The modern ritual practices that I have discussed observed tend to be on the periphery of the Tibetan cultural area (such as northeast Amdo and highland Nepal), but I do not know whether any conclusion can be drawn from this other than that anthropologists have found it easier to work in these areas.

A fascinating question raised by the correspondences between the Dunhuang spellbook and modern ritual practice is how these rituals have been preserved for centuries through the mechanisms of oral transmission and manuscript copying, often by individual specialists based in small communities, in the absence of major institutional support and canonical transmission. Research into the genre of minor ritual compendia (*be'u bum*), such as the one compiled by Bari Lotsawa in the twelfth century, will help, and the printed collections of Bonpo transmissions, as will the discovery and study of more manuscript books of spells from both Buddhist and Bonpo traditions.

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