

Charles Ramble

# Notes on a Bonpo Manual for the Production of Manuscript Amulets

**Abstract:** Amulets are widely used by Tibetans as a means of protecting people, animals and property from a range of general or specific hazards, including diseases, threats from the natural world such as predatory animals and adverse weather, and attacks by supernatural beings. For the most part such amulets are made from xylographic prints on paper, to which further details, such as appropriate magical formulae, may later be added by hand. Although the vast majority of amulets may be block-printed, amulets that are drawn and painted by hand are by no means unknown, and are in fact considered to be superior to the former category. Not infrequently, ritual texts contain illustrations of devices that are to be used in their performance, and some of these objects may be amulets, though compilations of instructions for producing these are relatively uncommon. This chapter presents one such compilation, a collection of excerpts from a diversity of Bonpo manuscripts, from Dolpo in Nepal, that have been combined to create a makeshift manual.

## 1 Introduction: previous work on Tibetan amulets

The first illustrated scholarly account of block-printed Tibetan amulets is probably an article by W.E. Carte that appeared in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1840, under the title ‘Notice of amulets in use by the Trans-Himalayan Boodists’. In the opening lines the author explains how he found the items:

The accompanying scrolls were obtained by me at Rampoor (near Kotghur) in 1838, from some of the nomadic Tartars who visit that place for the purpose of traffic. The scrolls were enclosed in small copper cylindrical cases, with rings attached, and by means of a string worn around the neck, perhaps as amulets.<sup>1</sup>

Carte was, however, unable to read them, and most of the article actually consists of erudite notes provided by the librarian of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal – none other than a certain ‘Csoma de Koros, *Esq.*’ – who identified them

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<sup>1</sup> Carte 1840, 940.

as excerpts from Buddhist tantric works and assorted auspicious symbols. Reproductions and descriptions of amulets also appear in Emil Schlagintweit's *Buddhism in Tibet*.<sup>2</sup> A more substantial treatment of the form and use of such devices was published in L.A. Waddell's *Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, which devotes an entire chapter to 'Sacred symbols and charms'.<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of amulets with a number of accompanying illustrations also appear in chapter 26, entitled 'Protection against evil', of Nebesky-Wojkowitz's *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*.<sup>4</sup> Since then, apart from a number of relatively brief descriptive accounts in works on different aspects of Tibetan culture and in museum catalogues, the most extensive study is Nik Douglas' *Tibetan Tantric Charms and Amulets*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to reproductions of 232 block-printed amulets that the author obtained from private collections and from monasteries and temples he visited in remote areas of highland Nepal, each one with an extensive and informative caption, the book contains a substantial introduction with valuable information about the possible history of the use of such amulets, their varieties and function, the material aspects of their production and the rituals associated with their manufacture and deployment. The examples that are reproduced are grouped into twenty-one categories based on form or function, but the author suggests that these may be reduced to four basic types:

1. Lines, columns or patterns of letters, verses or phrases, often without any specific translatable meaning, enclosed by varied outer forms. Such magical formulae are: (i) folded and worn as an amulet of protection; (ii) made into scrolls and placed inside all types of prayer wheels; (iii) inserted into religious images during rites of consecration; or (iv) rolled up and eaten as a medicine.
2. Auspicious symbols or designs with magical phrases, enclosed by varied outer forms. Such symbols are: (i) prominently displayed pasted on walls or ceilings or in shrine rooms; (ii) flown as prayer flags, printed on cloth or cast to the wind on paper; or (iii) occasionally worn as a protection, in particular for attracting good luck, wealth and happiness.
3. Amulets, usually for getting rid of malefic influences [...] They commonly consist of a central figurative of a person, animal or particular demon surrounded by magical phrases in precise patterns. Such amulets may also be entirely abstract in design [...] Some of these may be 'empowered' by a lama, folded, bound with colored threads and worn as a protection.

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<sup>2</sup> Schlagintweit 1863.

<sup>3</sup> Waddell 1895, Chapter 15, 387–419.

<sup>4</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956, 503–537.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas 1978.

4. *Mandalas*, visual representations of esoteric teachings, [that may be] (i) used as base structures on altars; (ii) placed visibly on the ceilings of monasteries and shrine rooms; (iii) used personally as meditation aids [...]; or (iv) [...] worn as a protective amulet.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the functional differences that the author identifies, it is clear that all four categories have an apotropaic character; they may all be worn or otherwise used as protective amulets. And as far as their material aspect is concerned, most of the examples discussed above, from Carte in 1840 to Douglas in 1978, and even more recent publications, deal mainly with blockprints. An important study of Buddhist amulets that gives a particularly good idea of the extraordinary variety of these devices and the multiplicity of specific circumstances in which they are considered to provide protection or bestow power is Tadeusz Skorupski's *Tibetan Amulets*.<sup>7</sup> The book consists of translated excerpts from two works contained in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* (vol. 42), which was compiled in the nineteenth century by 'Jam mgon kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1813–1899). Although the original text is not illustrated, the translated descriptions of the 109 amulets contained here are accompanied by line drawings made by the author's friend, Ngawang Drodul.

## 2 Manuscript amulets

One of the commonest blockprinted images in Tibetan ritual contexts is the *lingga* (*ling ga*), an effigy of a demon, usually bound hand and foot, that features as the object of exorcism. The *lingga* may represent a particular type of noxious spirit, but most commonly it is a generic demon that is printed on paper and given the particular identity required by the ritual by the addition of handwritten syllables according to textual prescription.

In 2018 I took part in the documentation of one such exorcistic ritual in the Bonpo temple complex of Samling, in Dolpo. During the preparations, when the time came to make the *lingga*, I was surprised to see that the lamas did not use a wooden printing block – the only method I had ever seen in other temples and monasteries for creating two-dimensional paper effigies. Instead, a young novice was given a sheet of paper and a stylus, with which he proceed to make a copy of another hand-drawn image that was kept in the temple as an example (Fig. 1).

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas 1978, ix–xi.

<sup>7</sup> Skorupski 1983.



**Fig. 1:** A junior lama making a hand-drawn copy of a *lingga* for an exorcistic ritual (Samling, Dolpo, July 2018).<sup>8</sup>

This was all the more surprising since a great many of the prints that are reproduced in Douglas' work are from the temple in Samling. Nevertheless, the lama in charge of the proceedings felt that such a painstakingly produced image was superior to a mechanical reproduction. Two collections of Bonpo texts I have seen in the neighbouring district of Mustang also contain examples of protective amulets that are drawn and painted by hand, apparently as templates to be copied. In one case, in the village of Lubrak, the lamas now invariably use block-prints for the purpose, and the amulet that is kept in the community archive is an obsolete relic from bygone days. In the other case, the Drangsong household in the city of Lo Monthang, the manuscripts belonged to a family of Bonpo priests who died out in the late 1950s or early 1960s, and it is therefore not known if they ever made the transition to printing technology in a ritual context. Amulet pouches discovered in debris in caves in Mustang have been found to contain such hand-painted devices. According to Jeff Watt, the practice of drawing and painting amulets was largely supplanted by block-printing after the seventeenth

<sup>8</sup> All photographs in this article were taken by Nick Yates and Kemi Tsewang.

century, so the fact that it continues to flourish in Samling today may be a rare survival of a relatively archaic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

A preference for using hand-drawn reproductions over blockprints implies that there should be clear instructions for producing the different images as the need arises. Samling library does indeed contain such a set of written prescriptions, and the remainder of this article will be devoted to presenting the main features of this collection. As unusual as it may be, the practice of hand-drawing amulets is by no means unique to the present case. Other collections of ritual texts that contain illustrations of ritual artefacts may also include templates for manuscript amulets: the example of the works examined by Tadeusz Skorupski has already been given, the *grimoire* discussed by Marc des Jardins in this volume offers a number of other instances, and I have seen others in villages and temples in Mustang and Dolpo. For the most part, however, these amulets appear in compilations where the illustrations refer to a range of ritual items, and tend to be rather simple, whereas the manual with which the present article is concerned is devoted exclusively to amulets, some of which are quite complex in terms of both graphic structure and textual content.

### 3 A collection of Bonpo amulet-making manuals from Dolpo, Nepal

Although the title of this article refers to it as a ‘manual’, the collection considered here is in fact a compilation of short extracts from several different works.<sup>10</sup> It consists of roughly twenty different texts or other items ranging in length from single sheets of paper to sixteen folios, with over thirty illustrations. The texts are apparently self-contained items consisting one or more folios, or subsidiary texts belonging to larger works. The only thing they have in common is that they almost all contain illustrated instructions for drawing amulets. Since the volume and range of the material is too great to permit a presentation of all the items in the collection, I will select a number of examples that represent the variety of

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<sup>9</sup> Jeff Watt, personal communication, August 2009.

<sup>10</sup> The collection was photographed in Samling, in Dolpo, in 2018 with the kind permission of the owner, Lama Sherab Tenzin. The trip to Samling and subsequent work on the manuscripts are part of a more general programme of research on Bon rituals that is generously funded by the Kalpa Group.

forms of the devices, the purpose for which they are intended and the procedure for producing and using them.

Most significantly, almost all the textual descriptions are accompanied by drawn or painted illustrations. The images are not full representations of the amulets described in the accompanying text, but small-scale reproductions. The graphic features of the amulets are usually shown in their entirety but the text is inserted only partially, to indicate to the maker where and how it should be positioned, while the full-length text is supplied on the adjacent folios. For the most part the texts are written in a large headless (*dbu med*) script, while the instructions are given in a smaller script. In a number of cases, mantras and other text to be inscribed on the amulets are written in headed (*dbu can*) script.

Two of the texts contained in the compilation are relatively short works that form part of a longer cycle entitled *Rin chen sgron ma 'khor ba dong sprug*, 'The Precious Lamp that Shakes Samsāra to the Depths'. The first of these works is entitled *Btag (Btags) chog 'khor lo*, 'Wheels that it is Sufficient to Attach [to Ensure Efficacy]', and the second is *Btag (Btags) chog 'khor lo'i lag len*, 'The Ritual Use of the Wheels that it is Sufficient to Attach'. The *Rin chen sgron ma* is one of the texts that make up the *Bka' rten* part of the Bonpo canon, of which it constitutes the whole of volume 175. According to the colophons of several of the component texts, it was received as an aural transmission by Blo ldan snying po (b. 1360).

The *Btags chog 'khor lo* contains instructions for drawing three amulets: the Amulet that it is Sufficient to Attach (*Btags chog 'khor lo*) itself, the Wheel of Long Life (*Tshe grub 'khor lo*) and the Wheel for Repulsion (*Bzlog pa'i 'khor lo*). Illustrations of these are provided at the end of the text, together with a fourth amulet for the repulsion of hail, for which instructions are given in the illustrated folio itself. The following summary of the contents will begin with a description of the general procedure to be observed, since this contains information concerning the material aspects of the manufacturing process. This will be followed by excerpts from instructions for drawing two of the amulets: the 'Wheel of Long Life' and the 'Wheel for Repulsion'.

At an auspicious date and time, the worthy individual should draw the Wheel that it is Sufficient to Attach as follows: ideally, to make the image you should use [pigments made of] precious substances, or failing that vermillion, or at the very least, pure Chinese ink. Fold it three times into a square, and perform the ritual for closing the doors to rebirth in the lower realms. Smear it with water containing a suspension of precious substances, and paint it with fragrant paints. Then recite the mantra of Rnam par rgyal ba,<sup>11</sup> and insert it into a tent of rainbow light of all five colours. Put on clean clothes, (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>) and together

11 A manifestation of Gshen rab mi bo; see Kvaerne 1995, 33–34.

with ritual items of the bodhisattvas place the amulet-wheel on a bed of grain. Pray for the doors to rebirth in the lower realms to be closed and for obscurations to be purified in the buddha realm known as 'the Glorious'. Pray that there should be no obstructions to your life, and for the attainment of realisation in the buddha realm of Manifest Joy; pray that you should have your heart's desire in full, and for the achievement of extraordinary and ordinary aims in the buddha realm of the Accumulation of Good Qualities; choose the place where you wish to be born, and pray for the attainment of manifest buddhahood in the Realm of Great Bliss. It is important that you should be free of doubt or uncertainty. You should avoid impure things such as human flesh. Cover [the amulet] with a cloth of *shang shun* silk,<sup>12</sup> and perform recitations to consecrate it, and then, during the constellation of Pushya [in January/February] you should attach it around your neck. It will bring inconceivable benefits in this life, (fol. 2<sup>v</sup>) and when the body and awareness are parting company [at the moment of death], if it is removed and [placed on] the crown of your head, it will result in liberation from fear on the path of the intermediate plane, and your body will produce rainbows and relics. In the next life, you will achieve full enlightenment in the three buddha bodies. Although the *Btags chog rin chen sgron ma* says that a recitation of the benefits would surpass comprehension, a few brief words may be said here. The Wheel of the Lotus, the supreme seat, will bring about the closing of the doors to rebirth in the lower realms and the purification of obscurations over a succession of lives. The magical Wheel that Wields Power will achieve mastery of the nine levels and dominance over the billion realms; the Wheel of the Victory Banner that Never Declines will enable the spontaneous achievement of the three buddha bodies with no decline in the past, present or future....<sup>13</sup>

12 The meaning of *shang shun* is unclear. It may be a scribal error for *sha shun*, 'skin', perhaps in reference to the softness of the material.

13 *btags chog rin chen sgron ma yis / lung dang man ngag bshad par phyag 'tshal lo / gang zhig skal ldan skyes bu yis / dus tshod tshes grangs bzang po la / btags chog 'khor lo 'dri bar bya / rab ni rin chen 'bring mtshal dkar / tha ma rgya snag dag gi bris / gsum lteb gru bzhir ldan par bya / ngan song sgo bcod sgrub pa bya / rin chen 'dus pa rtsi'i byugs / dri ngad ldan pa'i tshon gyi btab / rnam par rgyal ba'i snying po rtsal / gzha' tshon sna lnga'i gur du zhugs / dri ma med pa'i na bza' (fol. 1<sup>v</sup>) gsol / byang chub sems pa'i sdzas dang sbrags / 'khor lo 'bru'i gdan la bzhag / dpal dang ldan pa'i zhing khams su / rigs drug skye sgo gcod pa dang / sdig sgrib sbyang pa'i smon lam btab / mngon par dga' ba'i zhing khams su / tshe la bar bcod med pa dang / rtogs pa shar ba'i smon lam btab / yon tan tshogs pa'i zhing khams su / ci 'dod phun sum tshogs pa dang / mchog thun rdzogs pa'i smon lam btab / bde ba can gyi zhing khams su / gang mos gnas sgo bsdam pa dang / mngon sangs rgyas pa'i smon lam btab / re dogs med pa gal che'o / mi gtsang sha chen spangs nas su / shang shun dar zab ras kyi g.yogs / bzlas mchog 'don la rab gnas bya / skar ma rgyal la mgul du btags / 'dir yang yon tan bsam las 'das / (fol. 2<sup>r</sup>) bem rig bral dus spyi bor 'don / bar do 'jigs pa'i 'phrang las grol / phung po gzha' dang ring sel 'byung / phyi mar sku gsum rdzogs sangs thob / btags mchog rin chen sgron ma las / yon tan brjod na bsam las 'das / 'on kyang 'di sru zur smos tsam / gdan mchog pad ma'i 'khor lo yis / rigs drug skye sgo bcod pa dang / tshe rabs sdig sgrib dag par 'gyur / dbang bsgyur rdzu 'phrul 'khor lo yis / khams gsum sa dgu gnon pa dang / stong gsum dbang du 'dus par 'gyur / mi nub rgyal mtshan 'khor lo yis / sku gsum lhun gyis 'grub pa dang / dus gsum nub pa med par 'gyur /* Note: the Tibetan text of translated passages given in the main text will normally be presented in footnotes, in roman font; italics will be used (as here) to represent the smaller script in which the instructions that accompany the recitations are written.



The spiritual benefits to be obtained by wearing amulets of the five other auspicious symbols are then similarly enumerated. The instructions for the ‘Amulet that it is Sufficient to Attach’ contain a warning about the need for secrecy as well as the observation of certain other protocols:

There is no effort of meditative practice involved, but at the moment you affix the amulet that features in this teaching about the Amulet that it is Sufficient to Attach, you should perform offerings of consecrated food and tormas; (fol. 3<sup>v</sup>) You should not do it openly but rather perform it in secret, since showing it to all and sundry will result in repercussions by inducing the annoyance of the hosts of dakinis. Accordingly, you should keep it secret from inferior people or those with wrong views; you may transmit it in full to worthy individuals with good karmic propensities who practice Bon with faith and reverence, and you should exercise judgment about how much you reveal and how much you keep secret.<sup>14</sup>

Detailed instructions for drawing each of the eight auspicious symbols that have been introduced earlier then follow.

### 3.1 The amulet of long life

The prescriptions for drawing the amulet wheels follow a similar series of steps in each case. The text first specifies the number of concentric circles that are to be drawn, and then, beginning at the centre and proceeding outwards, details the text and any other content that are to be inscribed in the spaces between successive circles. Two further spatial divisions that recur are *rtsibs* and *dpal kha*. The first of these refers to the spokes of wheel, but in these amulets a spoke is not simply a line radiating from the hub to the rim but has a form resembling a curly bracket { with the central protuberance pointing outwards. The number of spokes accordingly increases with the size of the successive rings. The other expression used is *dpal kha*, which in the present case denotes the spaces in the interstices between two adjacent spokes. The term will be translated here as ‘intermediate space’. The numbers preceding each of the steps have been added to help the reader to identify the place in the wheel where the text or other motifs are to be inserted, with reference to the accompanying diagram (Figs 2 and 3).

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**14** *sgom sgrub rtsol ba mi dgos par / btags pas chog pa'i gdams pa 'di / btag dus tshogs dang gtor ma bya* (fol. 3<sup>v</sup>) *kun la mi bstan gsang la spyad / ga gar bstan na chad pa 'bebs / ma sring mkha' 'gro'i rko long gdams / de phyir rigs ngan dman pa dang / log lta can la gsang rgya btab / dad ldan mos 'dun bon la spyod / las phro skal pa ldan pa la / snyan rgyud man ngag tshang par byin / bston tshod sbas tshod mkhas par mdzod / (fols 2<sup>v</sup>–3<sup>r</sup>).*





Fig. 2: Amulet for ensuring long life.

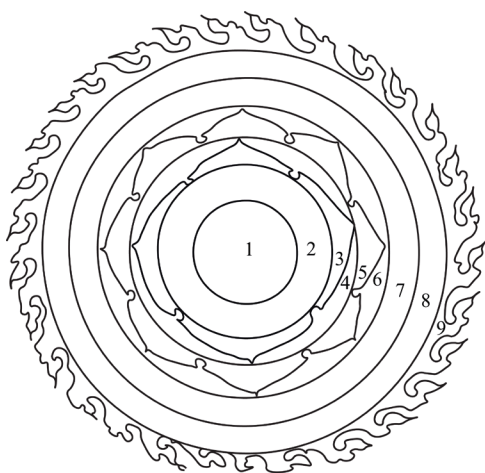


Fig. 3: Key to components of the amulet for ensuring long life (drawing by Olga Ważny).

Regarding the wheel for the Long-Life Protection ritual according to the *Rin chen sgron ma 'khor ba dong sprug*: draw six concentric circles.

1. In the middle write the syllable BRUM, and emanating from it the following formula: OM MA TRI MU YI SA LE 'DU / A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU / May the Buddha Gshen rab, the father and mother, protect and preserve me, and bestow on me the accomplishment of everlasting life.

2. In the circle outside that, write: A OM HUM RAM DZA SAD SA LE LHAN NE SANG NGE 'DU / MA MA SA LE LHAN NE KHRI LE 'DU / A MA SA LE (fol. 10\*) LHAND NGE LHAN NE 'DU / OM MA TRI MU YE SA LE 'DU / May the hosts of luminous benign divinities protect and keep me; bestow on me the accomplishment of eternal life.

3. On the four spokes outside that, write: OM MA TRI MU YE SA LE 'DU / A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA NA SHRI DZA BRUM DU. Write this on all four [spokes].

4. In the intermediate spaces, write: Gshen rab Gto bu 'bum sras, protect and keep me. Bestow on me the accomplishment of eternal life. Gshen rab Yid kyi khye'u chung (Youth of [the] Mind), protect and keep me, and bestow on me the accomplishment of eternal life. (fol. 11<sup>v</sup>) Gshen rab Sras bu rma lo, protect and keep me, and bestow on me the accomplishment of eternal life. Gshen rab Gsas bu g.yu lo, protect and keep me, and bestow on me the accomplishment of eternal life. Write this in all four intermediate spaces.

5. On the eight spokes outside that, write the following. OM, A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me. MA BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU / Protect me. TRI A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me. (Fol. 11<sup>v</sup>) MU A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me. YE A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me. SA A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU / Protect me / LE A BRUM CHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me. 'DU A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU. Protect me.

6. Then in the intermediate spaces, write as follows: (*mantras on the last two lines*) (fol. 12<sup>v</sup>): that is what you should write.

7. On the circle outside that, write: OM MA TRI MU YE SA LE 'DU / A BRUM TSHE BRUM A YU GNYA' NA SHRI DZA BRUM 'DU / 'Od dkar dpag med (Boundless White Light), god of long life, victorious father and mother, please bless me; enhance my life and prosperity; cause the glorious and famous doctrine (fol. 12<sup>v</sup>) to flourish; the four groups of fierce wrathful ones, please remove from the four directions whatever might harm or impede our lives; may the seventy-two glorious protectors gather up the essence of our life and prosperity and bestow on us the accomplishment of long life, and preserve and protect us, the wearers [of this amulet]. This is what you should write.

8. Then outside that draw a circle of swastikas, and outside that a ring of left-leaning fire-mountains. This is how you should make a long-life disc as a protective amulet. Blessings.<sup>15</sup>

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15 (1) *dbus su brum las snying po ni* / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du rgyal ba gshen rab yab yum gyis / bdag la srung zhing skyobs pa dang / g.yung drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / (2) de rgyab mu khyud la / a om hum ram dza / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / sad sa le lhan ne sang nge 'du / ma ma sa le lhan ne khri le 'du / a ma sa le (fol. 10<sup>v</sup>) lhang nge lhan ne 'du / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / rnam snang zhi ba'i lha tshogs kyis / bdag la srung zhing bskyab pa dang / g.yung drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / (3) de rgyab rtsibs bzhi la / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / ces bzhi ka la bris / (4) dpal kha la / gshen rab gto bu 'bum sras kyis / bdag la srung zhing skyobs pa dang / g.yunga drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / gshen rab yid kyi khye'u chung gis / bdag la srung zhing skyobs pa dang / g.yung drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / (fol. 11<sup>v</sup>) gshen rab sras bu rma lo yis / bdag la srung zhing skyobs pa dang / g.yung drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / gshen rab gsas bu g.yu lo

This is followed immediately by the instructions for drawing the next amulet.

### 3.2 The Wheel for Repulsion

The wheel for repulsion according to the *Rin chen sgron ma*. Draw six concentric circles. In the centre write the syllable BSWO and around it the following mantra: OM MA TRI MU YE SA LE 'DU / DRUNG MU TSA KRA RATNA MU MAR HRIM DZA /<sup>16</sup>

The procedure is broadly the same as in the preceding example, whereby passages of text are written in specified locations beginning at the centre, and moving outwards. However, the content of the text is of course different since the purpose is not specifically to obtain long life but to repel hostile forces, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

[In the outermost circle] write: OM MA TRI MU YE SA LE 'DU / DRUNG MU TSAKRA RAD NA MU MAR HRIM DZA BHYO BZLOG. Chief of the wrathful ones, king of repelling, mighty one who subdues all, repel all curses and afflictions that lie beyond the weapons of this disc, and repel evil sorcery. All hate-filled enemies and obstructive afflictions that beset me and

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yis / bdag la srung zhing skyabs pa dang / g.yung drung tshe yi dngos grub gsol / *bzhi ka la bris* / (5) *'de rgyab rtsibs brgyad la* / om a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / ma a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / tri a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig (fol. 11<sup>v</sup>) mu a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / ye a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / sa a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / le a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / 'du a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri dza brum 'du / bdag la bsrungs shig / (6) *dpal kha la* / om a yam ram mam brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / ma a yam ram mam kham brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / tri a yam ram mam kham brum nyi ri bha ra tri 'du (fol. 12<sup>v</sup>) mu a yam ram mam kham / brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / ye a yam ram mam kham brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / sa a yam ram mam kham brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / le a yam ram mam kham brum nyi ri bha ra tram 'du / 'du a yam ram mam kham brum nyi bha ra trang du / *ces pa bris* / (7) *de rgyab mu khyud la* / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / a brum tshe brum a yu gnya' na shri brum 'du / 'od dkar dpag med tshe yi lha / rgal ba yab yum sras bcas kyis / bdag la byin gyis brlab tu gsol / tshe dang bdod nams 'phel ba dang / dpal grags bstan pa (fol. 12<sup>v</sup>) dar rgyas mdzod / dbal gyi khro chen ru bzhi yis / phyogs bzhi tshe yi gnod pa dang / tshe'i bar bcod bsal du gsol / dpal mgon bdun cu rtsa gnyis kyis / mi tshe phyas g.yang bcud bsod la / tshe yi dngos grub stsal du gsol / 'chang ba po la srung skyobs mdzod / *ces pa bris* / (8) *de rgyab g.yung drung ra bas bskor* / *de rgyab me ri'i g.yon bskor bya* / *de ni bsrung ba tshe grub 'khor lo bya'o* / *dge'o* /

**16** *rin chen sgron ma'i las kha bzlog pa'i 'khor lo ni* / *mu khyud rim pa drug tu bskor* / *dbus su bso la snying po'i bskor* / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / drung mu tsa kra ratna mu mar hrim dza / (fol. 12<sup>v</sup>)

our beneficent patron – summon them, liberate them and do not let them abide here; by the blessings of truth of these *dhāraṇīs* and mantras, let this be quickly accomplished.<sup>17</sup>

Following the directions for the inscription of the mantras and other formulae along the circles, on the spokes and in the intermediate spaces, the sections ends with precise instructions concerning the positioning of the text that evoke its ‘oppositional’ function of the relevant formulae:

Outside this, ring it with a circle of swastikas, and beyond that encircle it with left-leaning fire-mountains. The tops of letters in text intended for protection should be towards the outside, and the text should run in a clockwise direction. The top of letters in text meant for repulsion should be oriented towards the inside, and the text should run in an anticlockwise direction.<sup>18</sup>

This reversal of direction can be seen clearly in the illustration (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4:** Amulet for the repulsion of all categories of harmful agents.

**17** *de rgyab mu khyud la* / om ma tri mu ye sa le 'du / drung mu tsakra rad na mu mar hrim dza bhyo bzlog / bzlog byed rgyal po khro bo'i gtso / thams cad 'dul ba'i stobs po che / 'khor lo mtshon chas pha rol gyis / bya dang gnod pa bzlog par mdzod / sbod btong ngan pa bzlog tu gsol / bdag dang rgyu sbyor yon bdag la / sdang ba'i dgra dang gnod pa'i bgegs / bkug nas bsgral zhing mi gnas pa / bzungs sngags bden pa'i byin rlabs kyis / nyur du 'grub (fol. 15<sup>v</sup>) par mdzad du gsol / (fols 15<sup>r</sup>–15<sup>v</sup>)

**18** *de rgyab g.yung drung ra bas bskor* / *de rgyab me ris g.yon bskor bya'o* / *srung ba'i yig mgo phyi ru bstan la g.yas bskor bya* / *bzlog pa'i yig 'go nang du bstan la g.yon bskor bya'o* / (fol. 15<sup>v</sup>)

### 3.3 Ghosts, demons and forces of nature

A number of items deal with devices for protection from particular categories of harmful beings. One well-worn folio – suggesting, perhaps, that it saw frequent use – assures protection against ‘ghosts of the living’ (*gson 'dre*) through the invocation of the goddess Srid pa'i rgyal mo (Fig. 5). After prescribing the placement of the text on the concentric circles, the instructions specify that, on the outside of the circle, we should draw ‘an image of a demoness with a red body and wild tresses, with its four limbs bound with iron chains’.<sup>19</sup> It goes on to list the various substances that should accompany the paper when (although this is not stated) it is stitched into its pouch. These include frankincense, asafoetida, sulphur and musk.

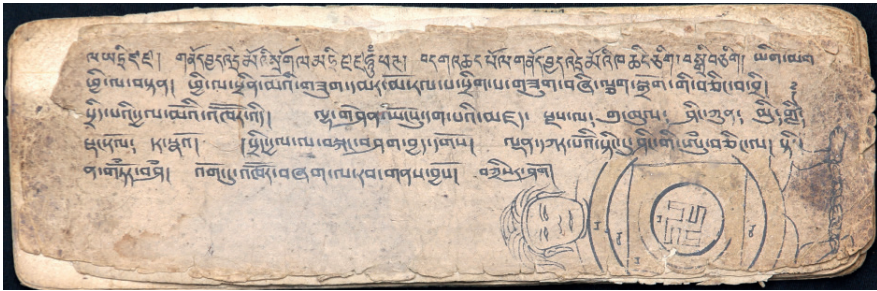


Fig. 5: Amulet for protection from ‘ghosts of the living’ (*gson 'dre*) (fol. number illegible, verso).

In certain cases the text is simple enough that it can fit entirely into the illustration: Fig. 6 shows an amulet that provides protection against a much-feared type of demon, called *chung sri*, the ‘vampire of the little ones’, that preys on young children (fol. *shog cig v*). Although the caption to this image, positioned to the upper right of it, specifies that this is a ‘wheel for the *chung sri*’, the *chung sri* is only one of six types of demons that are named in the red intermediate spaces between the spokes. The text in the top left of the folio specifies the colours that should be applied: Centre: yellow; spokes: yellow; the intermediate spaces: red; the water motif (*chu ris*): blue; the fire mountains: red; the surrounding: red.

<sup>19</sup> *phyi la srin mo'i gzug dmar mo ral pa srig pa gzug bzhi lcag sgrog gi bcing ba bri* / (fol. number illegible, verso).

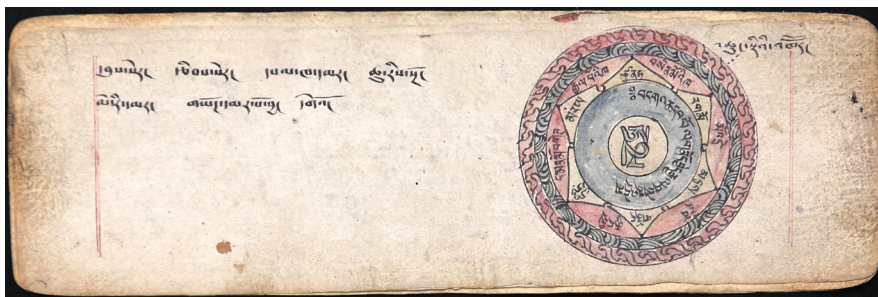


Fig. 6: Amulet for deterring *chung sri* and five other named classes of predatory demons (fol. *shog cig v.*).

### 3.4 Animals: prey, predators and protectors

It is not only humans that can benefit from the protection afforded by amulets. A collection of short biographies of Nyingmapa lamas belonging to the Rdo dmar pa family line recounts how a woman who found herself in mortal danger escaped with her life by appropriating an amulet attached to the family cow. Earlier in the day, her husband, 'Brug pa ring mo, had gone hunting and had accidentally fallen to his death from a cliff, but had come to life again as the type of demon known as *ro langs*, a 'rising corpse'.

As dusk gradually fell, Drukpa's wife lit a fire in the house. As she was preparing dinner Drukpa Ringmo appeared, with his hair hanging down and matted with blood. He sat in his usual place, keeping his eyes down as he could not bear to look around when the light from the fire was too strong. When the brightness of the fire diminished he looked around. His face was like the colour of blood and swollen, and too awful to look at. His terrified wife piled wood on the fire, and as it burned more brightly she fled from the house in fear. Near the door was a cow that was wearing a protective amulet that had been provided by the Rdo dmar pa Lama. The wife took this and affixed it to herself, and was sitting there when the revenant emerged from inside the house.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> de nas ngang tsam nas sa rub pa'i skabs su bza' zla khyim du me btang ste lto bzo ba'i skabs 'brug pa ring mo khrag ral nyi le bar yong nas nam rgyun sdod gnas su bsdad de me 'od che ba'i skabs su phar tshur blta mi bzod par gdong smad de sdod cing / me 'od chung ba'i skabs su phar blta tshur blta byed cing / gdong pa khrag mdog ltar rgyas shing blta mi bzod pa'i 'jigs tshul gyi rnam pa can du 'gyur 'gro ba bzhin byed pa la bza' zla 'jigs shing skrag ste me la shing mang tsam bcug nas me od rgyas pa'i skabs 'jigs skrag gi ngang nas phyir bros te sgo phyugs ba mo zhig yod pa de'i lus la rdo dmar pas gngang ba'i srung 'khor zhig yod pa de blangs de lus la btags nas bsdad skabs ro langs phyir thon yong... / (Brag sne Kun bzang chos 'phel 1996, 66).



The strategy worked, and her dead husband walked past her into the night to wreak havoc elsewhere.

The *sri* demons mentioned above are divided into numerous categories identified by their preferred prey. In addition to the *chung sri* there is another, known as *god sri*, ‘vampire of loss’, that preys on livestock. The Samling collection does not seem to have a template for an amulet against *god sri*. Such amulets do exist; however, they are not usually inscribed on paper but on a horse’s skull before being buried at a designated location. It is highly likely, therefore, that the text and any illustrations it might contain are kept separately in Samling from the collection of items that are intended to be reproduced on paper, cloth or – as we shall see presently – wood.<sup>21</sup>

The Samling collection does, however, contain at least one amulet that is intended specifically for the protection of animals. The short text, comprising just over one folio side, is entitled *Ye (yo) ma’i khyu srung gis (gi) ’khor lo*, ‘Wheel for the protection of herds of mares and foals’. The relatively simple device, illustrated on the verso of the folio, comprises ‘three concentric circles with the syllable HRI at the centre; [...] there should be four spokes, and four jewels in the intervening spaces’. As we have seen in the preceding examples, the text and the motifs that feature in the amulets bear some relevance to their intended function, the opaque character of the mantras notwithstanding. In this case, the jewels are likely to be a reference to the jewel-bearing horse that is such a ubiquitous Tibetan motif, while the protection is stated to be assured by Jambhala, one of the gods of wealth. Furthermore, the text itself contains short Tibetan injunctions such as *rta phyug spel zhig*, ‘Cause our horses and cattle to increase’, and several occurrences of the syllable *hrang*, the Zhangzhung word for ‘horse’.

Another wheel with a simple composition consisting of just two circles with the *nam bcu dbang ldan* monogram of the Kālacakra tantra at the centre is described simply as a ‘cattle protector’ (*phyug bsrung*, Fig. 7). The accompanying instructions, comprising just three short lines, state that the symbols should be painted on a wooden tablet and affixed to the door of a cattle pen; if drawn on paper, should be affixed to an arrow. It also states that displaying the monogram

<sup>21</sup> For the text and translation of such a *god sri*-subjugation ritual, together with an illustration of the motif to be inscribed on the skull, see <http://www.kalpa-bon.com/texts/sri/god-sri-mnan-pa> (accessed 29 November 2020). The illustration appears on fol. 5v. Images of a horse’s skull bearing such apotropaic motifs may be seen in Heller 1998, 89, fig. 13 and Tong 2008, 414, fig. 6.2.10–5. The skull depicted in these works was found in an imperial-period tomb at Dulan, but is likely to have been buried at this location as part of the ritual procedure long after the tomb itself was constructed and sealed.



on a building (*mkhar*, lit. castle), will overcome inauspicious geomantic indications (*sa pra phyogs ngan thub*).



**Fig. 7:** Amulet featuring the *nam bcu dbang ldan* monogram of the Kālacakra, used here as a device to protect cattle.

The principle of targeting certain harmful agents with customised amulets is not confined to meteorological phenomena (such as hail) or designated types of demons but applies also to natural predators. Wolves, which have always been the main threat to livestock throughout Tibet, feature in one of these amulets. The device belongs to a category that is described not as a ‘wheel’ (*’khor lo*) but as a ‘binding’ (*’ching*), the intention apparently being to immobilise the designated threat and neutralise its capacity to harm. In the present case, the amulet is described as a *spyang ’chings*, a ‘wolf-binding’. The instructions specify that one should draw an image of a wolf and surround it with lettering that includes mantras and the injunction ‘bind the muzzle of the noxious wolf’ (*spyang gdug pa can gyi kha’ ’chings shig*). The prescription goes on to state that one should ‘draw it with its muzzle bound and its four limbs chained to stupas in four directions’ (*kha dang rkang lags lcags thag gis skyigs mtshams bzhir mchod rten bzhi pris [bris]*). A cross and certain syllables should also be drawn on the wolf’s tongue. The collection also contains a single folio with a drawing that apparently represents this prescription (Fig. 8). On the side of the wolf are written the words *cad* (for *cang*, i.e. *spyang*) *khu’i kha ching*, ‘bind the wolf’s muzzle’.

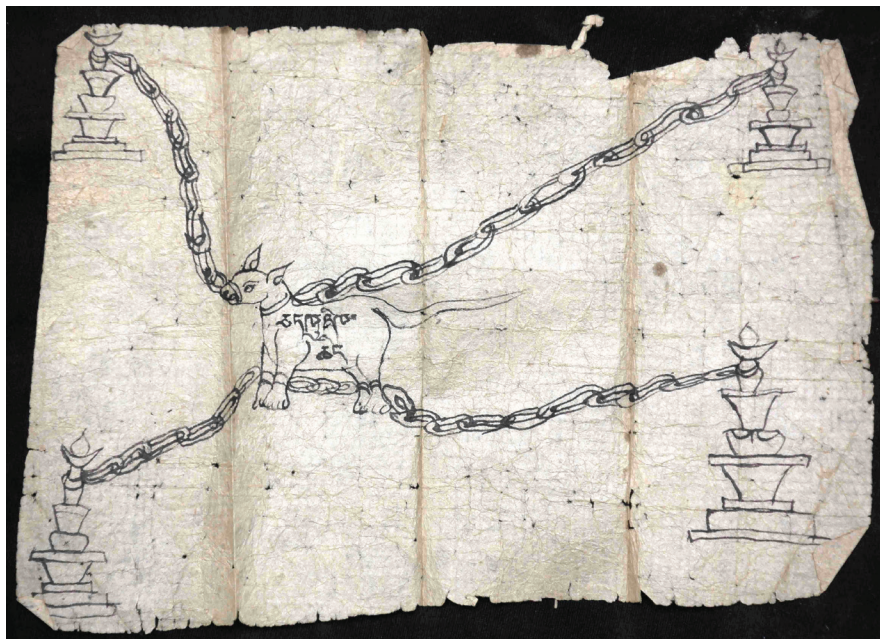


Fig. 8: Amulet for preventing wolves from biting.

A set of rather crudely-drawn devices is intended to ensure protection against three other animals that might raid human settlements. The first of these is a bear, featuring a rough drawing of the animal in question with its limbs chained and its muzzle bound (Fig. 9). Surrounding it is a circle of text written clockwise and featuring several repetitions of the formula *rakṣha na*, representing the Sanskrit or Nepali *rakṣaṇa*, meaning ‘defence’, or ‘protection’. In spite of the absence of intersyllabic dots (*tsheg*) and a number of spelling irregularities the meaning of the text is clear enough:

*lo zan mche ba can dom gyi nod (gnod) pa thaṃs cad bsrung shig (zhig) /*  
 ‘Protect us from all harm from bears with fangs that eat our crops’.

*’chang ba po’i zhing ’di la dom gyi gnod pa byed pa thaṃs cad rakṣhana na na na na /*  
 ‘Protection from all harm that might be caused by bears to this field, which belongs to the wearer [of this amulet]’.

It is not entirely clear from the formulation whether the amulet is to be attached to the owner or placed in or near the field itself, but the expression *’chang ba po* does rather suggest a human wearer. Along the side of the animal are written the

words *bha lu mu kha bamdha raksha*, which corresponds to the Nepali ‘Bind and protect [us] from the mouth of the bear’.<sup>22</sup> The fact that this inscription, as well as other short passages in the surrounding text, are in Nepali, suggests that this amulet was either not made locally or was prepared for patrons in the middle hills of Nepal, where crop depredation by black bears is a serious problem.

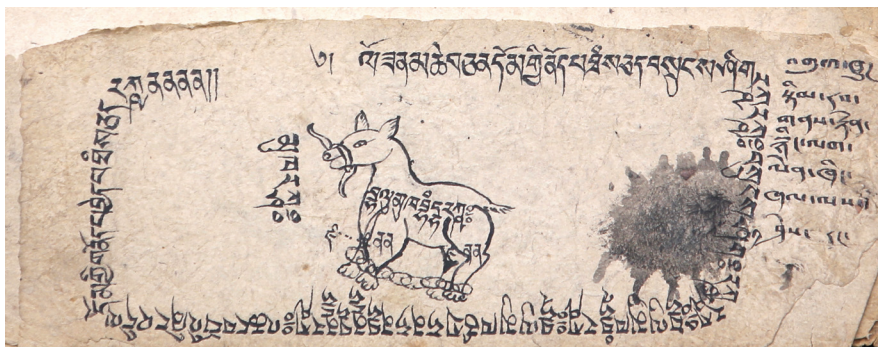


Fig. 9: Amulet for deterring bears from crops.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the second amulet in this group, which is intended to protect crops against monkeys – animals that are not found in Upper Dolpo. Like the bear, the monkey – also apparently an animal with which the artist was not very familiar – is depicted bound with chains (Fig. 10).

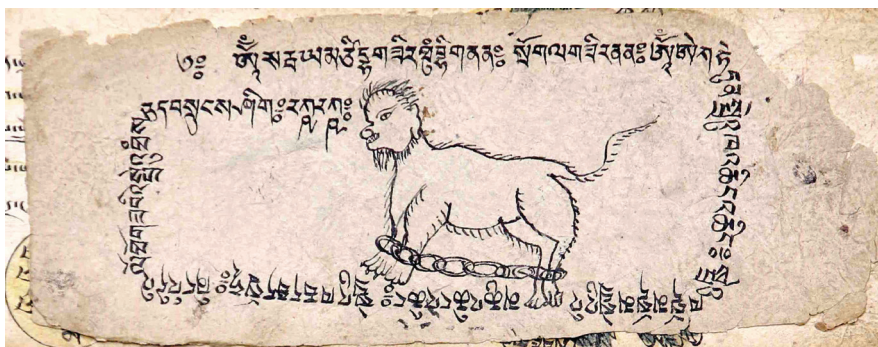


Fig. 10: Amulet for keeping monkeys away from crops.

<sup>22</sup> The Nepali term *rakṣā-bandhan* itself denotes an amulet.



The third amulet is intended to deter birds that feed on crops, and features a bird with its legs and beak chained to two stupas (Fig. 11). The structure of the surrounding text in both cases is broadly similar to that of the bear, though monkeys and birds are of course named as the specific targets.



Fig. 11: Amulet for preventing flocks of birds from harming crops.

Animals appear in a number of amulets not as objects of repulsion but as agents of empowerment. One folio bears illustrations of amulets for the development of each of four particular forces that are combined in humans, the vital force (*srog*), body (*lus*), power or prosperity (*dbang thang*) and well-being (*rlung rta*). While the animals that usually represent these are, respectively, the mythical eagle (*khyung*), the tiger, the dragon and the lion, in the Samling set they feature a bird that may be a *khyung*, a peacock, a bovid (probably a yak) and a horse (Figs 12, 13). While the presence of the peacock is difficult to explain, in an article devoted to these four forces Samten Karmay points out that the lion came to replace the yak in this configuration, and that the latter is found in older Tibetan works and in Naxi depictions of the motif.<sup>23</sup>



Fig. 12: Amulets to increase well-being, power, the body and the life-force.

<sup>23</sup> Karmay 1998, 418.



Fig. 13: Amulets to increase well-being, power, the body and the life-force.

The other example of an empowering animal that we may briefly consider here is the motif of a two-headed parrot (Fig. 14) that can endow mutes with the power of speech. According to the accompanying text, ‘This wheel that opens the mouths of those who are dumb’ contains syllables that have manifested from light emanating from the syllable *kham*. These syllables should be smeared with poisoned blood, and then the paper itself infused with the antidote to this poison. The amulet should be tied around the neck of the mute person, who should then also consume water containing a variety of medicinal substances.



Fig. 14: Amulet to endow mute people with the power of speech.

In addition to being a mythical animal associated with the vital force, the *khyung* also has the status of an important tantric divinity in Bon. A form of this divinity that has an especially prominent position in Samling is the Powerful Red Khyung (Dbal khyung dmar po). One of the texts in the collection gives relatively detailed instructions for creating the amulet of the divinity, which is intended to protect practitioners of this tantric cycle from harm that might be inflicted by a wide range of human and demonic powers. Precipitation is caused by the *klu* (corre-

sponding to the Indian *nāgas* in later Bon literature), who are the enemy of the *kyung*, and the text includes a ritual for preventing or stopping snow, rain and hail, that includes the use of a dough frog (a type of *klu*) into which a small scroll of mantras is to be inserted.<sup>24</sup> The text is followed by a partial illustration of the complex Red Khyung amulet described in the text (Fig. 15).



Fig. 15: Amulet of the Powerful Red Khyung (Dbal khung dmar po).

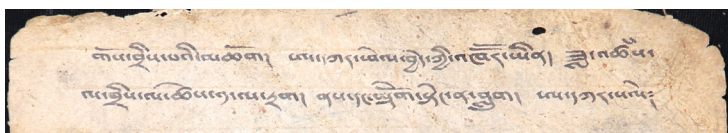
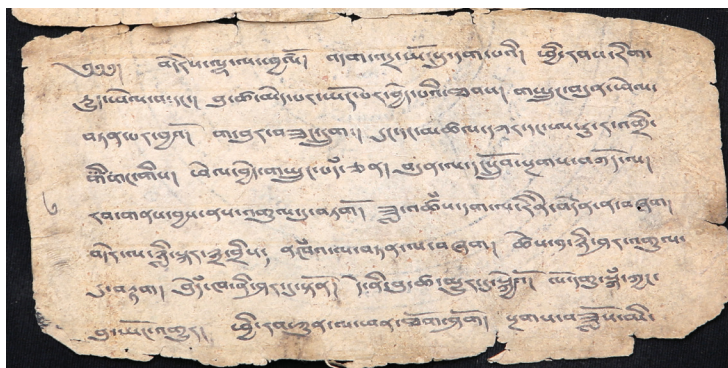
The collection contains amulets based on the tantric cycles of several other major Bonpo divinities, but for reasons of space, and in the interest of presenting a diversity of themes, they will not be considered here.

### 3.5 A ritual to enable conception

The final example to be considered here is a device that affords not protection but empowerment, in this case the ability of a woman to bear children. Identified as the ‘Wheel of the White Letter A that Brings Increase’, the amulet bestows on the wearer the benefits of seven different swastikas that are manifestations of the white letter A. The item is folded along a horizontal axis with the image of the wheel on one side and the main text on the other. The text begins in the lower half and continues from the top, as follows:

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of rituals for the control of weather involving the use of effigies of frogs, see Sam van Schaik’s contribution to this volume.





**Figs 16, 17a and 17b:** Amulet to enable women to bear children (recto and verso; the text begins on the lower half of the sheet and continues on the upper part).



Homage to the gods, the blessed ones. As a means of increasing future generations of all those such as myself, and to enable those without sons to have sons, the 'Increase of the Seven Swastikas' is presented here. With one measure ('gri = 'bre?) of camphor, the six excellent [ingredients], conch-shell, bright vermilion and myrobalan, write the mantras for [obtaining] the accomplishments on the seven lotus-endowed Swastikas of Increase, and after performing the consecration, tie it around [the woman's?] neck. At a pure moment between two months, place it on a bed of precious things. On a plate (*bder* = *sder*) draw the threefold motif of the sun, the moon and the stars, and place it so that it is facing the sky. At sunrise on the first day of the month, tie it around [the woman's] neck. The woman should face east. She will very soon bear sons. Even if she has been barren for nine years she will have a son. May this be of benefit for all future generations.

There is no need to recite the mantras – it is enough just to write them down. This is the Wheel of the White Letter A that Brings Increase. Write it down at the cusp between two months and attach it on the first day. Place it on top of barley and flowers. A DKAR SA LE (etc.).<sup>25</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

The text considered here is a compilation from an assortment of manuscripts consisting of illustrated instructions for the production of amulets. In some cases, the texts are entire (albeit relatively short) works dedicated to the topic, whereas others comprise one or more folios, excerpted from larger works, and dealing with the production of amulets relating to the ritual cycle from which they were extracted. Although we do not know who the compiler of the collection was – presumably an ancestor of the owner, Lama Sherab Tenzin – the purpose of the exercise is likely to have been to concentrate manuscripts related to amulet-making in a single location for the sake of convenience, even if this may have meant, in certain cases, dismembering the parent text. We should also consider the possibility that this compilation was intended an intermediate step in a longer process. Archival collections in Mustang often contain single items consisting

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25 *bder gshegs lha la phyag 'tshal lo / bdag 'dra yongs su dag pa'i / phyi rabs rig rgyud phel ba dang / bu tsha med par yod par byed pa'i thabs / g.yung drung bdun phel btan par bya'o / ga bur bzang drug / dung dang mtshal dkar dang a ru ra 'gri {gi} gang gis / phel byed g.yung drung padma can / bdun la dngos grub sngags bkod la / rab gnas byas nas 'gul du btag go / zla 'tshams dag la rin chen bden na bzhag / bder la nyi zla skar 3 bris / nam mkha' la btan la bzhag / tshes 1 nyi shar 'gul du brtag / bu med kha ni shar du ston / de ni bu tsha myur du skye'o / lo dgu skam kyang bu yong 'gyur / phyi rab kun la phan thog shog / sngags bzlos mi (supra) gos bris pa'i mchog / a dkar phel byed kyi 'khor lo yin / zla 'tshams la bris la tshes 1 la rtag / nas dang me tog steng na blug / a dkar sa le...*

of transcriptions of short legal notices and memoranda covering an extended period. The purpose of these works is to preserve a record of proceedings that have been inscribed on a multiplicity of scraps of paper that are often then discarded. Copies of this sort can be confusing, since the impression of homogeneity created by the uniform handwriting and, quite often, the omission of dates, may mislead readers into thinking that they are dealing with a single event or a series of closely-related cases. It is possible that the collection with which we are dealing here was intended as the source material for a manual that the compiler had intended to make by copying the illustrations and the text in a single neat hand, with due stylistic harmonisation, before returning the folios to the sources from which they had been drawn. The result would have been something akin to an illustrated version of the two texts, considered above, that were incorporated by 'Jam mgon kong sprul into the *Rin chen gter mdzod*, whose consistency of style gives the impression of single authorship (as of course may well be the case). Even if there ever was such a hypothetical project – though to the best of my knowledge no such work exists – we are very fortunate that the source materials were not again dispersed to their rightful places, and we are able to enjoy the profusion of interests, literary styles, scribal hands and graphic inventiveness that have been condensed into this short but extraordinarily diverse compilation.

### Acknowledgements

I am indebted to Christine Boedler for drawing my attention to Nik Douglas' *Tibetan Tantric Charms and Amulets*, and for kindly providing me with a copy of the work, at the outset of my investigations. Research on the Drangsong manuscript collection of Lo Monthang, which contains a number of manuscript amulets, is funded by the National Science Centre, Poland, through project no. 2018/30/M/HS3/00372, entitled *Protecting the kingdom with Tibetan manuscripts: codicological and historical analyses of the royal Drangsong collection from Mustang, Nepal* (PI Agnieszka Helman-Ważny).

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