

Social History and Vampires: The Dark Continents of Tibetan Studies

Charles Ramble

I came to Oxford in 1979 to do a doctorate in Social Anthropology under the supervision of Nick Allen, whose friendship and wise counsel I continue to enjoy to this day. What I didn't know is that I had arrived a few weeks after an event that would later be designated the first seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies. The conference had been convened at St John's by a young historian who had recently been awarded a Junior Research Fellowship at the college. This was Michael Aris, who was teaching Tibetan for an hour a week at the Oriental Institute, and whose classes I joined when term began. At Nick's suggestion Michael became my co-supervisor, an ideal arrangement that enabled me to benefit even further from his considerable knowledge of all things Tibetan. It was also a valuable introduction to the world of editing, and more particularly of editing conference proceedings, because the contributions from the Tibetan Studies seminar soon began to come in, and Michael engaged me to compile a bibliography of works by Hugh Richardson, to whom the volume was dedicated. This was a perfect opportunity for me to explore some of the remoter corners of Oxford's libraries in search of Richardson's many publications, and also to correspond with the great man himself. Some years later Michael was to edit and republish Richardson's articles in a single volume entitled *High Peaks, Pure Earth*. The title is a reference to a well-known text from Dunhuang, that recounts the descent of the first Tibetan king from heaven. I'll remind you of half a dozen lines from the poem because I want to return to this story in a while:

He came from the heights of the heavens
 And the great massy mountain bowed low, bowed low.
 The trees came together,
 And the rocky boulders did him honour,
 And the cranes made him salutation.
 This centre of heaven,
 This core of the earth,
 This heart of the world,
 Fenced round by snow,
 The headland of all rivers,
 Where the mountains are high and the land is pure...¹

My brief employment in this task also introduced me to the repetitive but therapeutic drudgery that is an inevitable part of book production. Computers were not yet a feature of the academic landscape, and one of my tasks was to type out the Roman numerals v-xx and the Arabic numerals

¹ Snellgrove and Richardson 1995 [1968]: 24.

2 to 348, to cut them out with a pair of scissors and glue them to the upper corners of the typed pages before the whole stack was sent off to be photographed and transformed into a book. 1979 also saw the publication of Michael's first monograph, *Bhutan, the Early History of a Himalayan Kingdom*. Among other things, the book contained the most thorough account to date of the well-known Tibetan myth of the supine demoness. Just to remind you: the story goes that the 7th-century founder of the Tibetan Empire, Srong btsan sgam po, wished to introduce Buddhism to his realm. At that time the Tibetans enjoyed the reputation among their neighbours of being "Red-faced flesh-eating demons", a reference to their dietary habits and their practice of painting their faces with red ochre. The land itself was described as *mun pa'i gling*, a continent of darkness. To house an image of the Buddha he wished to build a temple in Lhasa, his new capital. His Chinese queen, a geomancer, determined that the land of Tibet was actually a supine demoness, and that the temple should be built on the location of her heart. And when the temple repeatedly collapsed while it was being raised, she recommended that temples be built on appropriate points of her body to prevent the destructive flailing of her limbs. She was not to be killed, but pinned down in such a way that her power might be used to energise the Buddhist mission. The myth is one of several accounts, set at different points in Tibetan history that recount the harnessing of Tibet's dark autochthonous forces to serve the interests of the new religion.

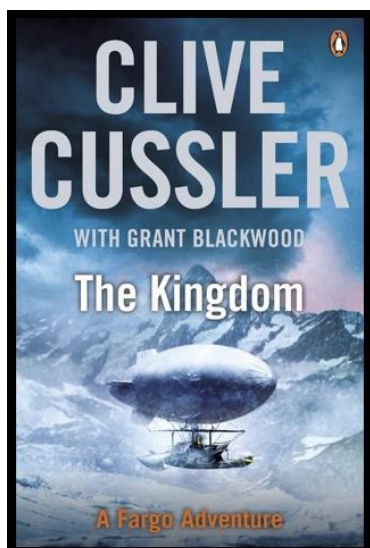
There is an interesting subtext to this story that might be summed up as follows. The religious antecedents of Buddhism in Tibet were not evil forces that had to be destroyed, but rather something incomplete and unformed. The more charitable Buddhist writers of a later age, notably the sixteenth-century dPa' bo gtsug lag, represented the early culture and its vectors as a kind of noble savagery that prefigured the arrival of the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet. The land had once been protected by three types of religious specialists: the *sgrung*, the *lde'u* and the *bon*. The *sgrung* were the bards of the Tibetan epic; the Bon were the priests of the old religion who, the story goes, would later contest the advance of Buddhism in Tibet and develop a similar, but opposed, system. As for the *lde'u*, until recently nobody really knew who they were, but I shall come back to them presently. The point is that the primitive system they represented was an intellectual and spiritual preparation for the time when the subtler and superior teachings of the Buddha would be introduced to the waiting land. In some respects the attitude was like that of the Christian church to the prophets of the Old Testament. Since these prophets had not had the benefit of hearing Jesus' teaching they could not, in all fairness, be condemned to hell, but were kept in a cosmic antechamber until the arrival of the Messiah brought them the possibility of full redemption. Once they had heard the teaching, however, there was no further excuse. In the Tibetan case, the followers of Bon resisted the new religion, and paid the price. In another respect, the story bears a certain resemblance to the Chinese Communist position regarding the folk culture of the minorities, a position that can be traced back to Lenin himself, notably, that folk culture is not culture: what you find among the people is the raw material for it. This rough ore must first be processed by the machinery of state and party, and suitably refined before being fed back to the people via the media and schools as the fully-developed form of their own native culture.

I think I was Michael's first doctoral student. In addition to setting stringent academic standards he was also a model that a young aspiring student might wish to emulate as an ambassador for his subject and as an institution builder. I sometimes fancy that there was a shadowy genie with a sense of humour that gave a shape to some unconscious pious aspiration my part, even to the extent of making me a caricature of one of a pair of twins. Like Michael and Anthony, I had done my first degree at Durham University; in 2003 I would also convene a seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies in Oxford. Michael had of course passed away by this time, but thanks to Anthony's legendary dynamism and collaboration, the event was as successful as one could possibly hope; and much the same could be said for the more general challenge of developing Tibetan Studies at Oxford.

Ever since I had known Michael he had campaigned to establish Tibetan as a subject at the University. He died in the knowledge that his wish would be fulfilled, and I had the privilege of helping to begin that process in collaboration with Anthony, and with friends and colleagues in related fields who were unfailingly supportive. Of these, I see here today Clare Harris, David Gellner, Cathy Cantwell, Per Kvaerne, Heather Stoddard and as always, somewhere in the background, the angelic presence of Marie-Laure. It's been a particular joy to see how Tibetan Studies has flourished since my departure in the highly capable hands of Ulrike and Gen Tsering, now supported by two research fellows, Lama and Xaver, and wonderfully nurtured here in Wolfson by our remarkable president Hermione Lee. The international recognition that this has achieved should not go unmentioned. To give you just one example, last year, when Peng Liyuan, the wife of the Chinese premier Xi Jinping, visited Oxford, her gift to the Bodleian was a 60-volume collection of reproductions of Tibetan manuscripts.

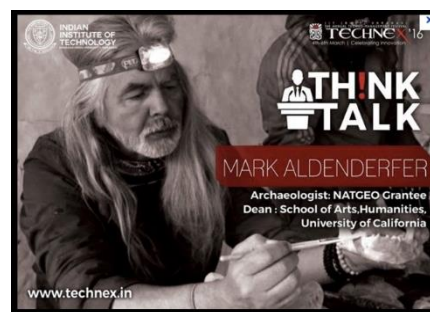
Let me return to my fanciful Aris-Ramble parallels. Michael was the world's foremost specialist of a Himalayan kingdom: Bhutan, an independent nation of nearly a million people. I was to become a specialist of the Himalayan kingdom of Mustang, now a district in the nation-state of Nepal, population 13,452 at the last count and steadily falling, and since 2006 no longer a kingdom even in name. Michael's association with Burma is beyond the ambit of my brief for this lecture and so I shan't speak about it here. However, it did provide an occasion for the further enhancement of his international fame with the release, in 2011, of the film *The Lady*, directed by Luc Besson. To be represented by a well-known actor in a semi-fictionalised account of a significant part of one's life – in spite of the other pale parallels, this, surely, was a door in Tibetan Studies through which I would never be able to follow Michael.

So imagine my glee when, not long afterwards, a friend contacted me to congratulate me for appearing, in fictionalised form, in a novel by a bestselling author. The novel was *The Kingdom*, by Clive Cussler.



It had appeared in 2011, the same year as *The Lady*. I ordered a copy. The kingdom in question was indeed Mustang. The author had clearly taken most of his inspiration from a *National Geographic* documentary that had been released two years earlier, and entitled *Secrets of Shangri La*, which concerned the discovery of mural paintings and manuscripts in a complex of caves north of the Annapurnas. I had appeared briefly in this film as a slightly ridiculous foil for a team of world-class climbers, manifesting genuine fear as I was winched into a cave in a sheer cliff several hundred feet above sharp rocks. The film itself did win me a small and short-lived following, of about half a dozen people, mainly older ladies from Kansas who wrote to me to say that they also suffered from fear of heights and found my example inspiring.

I leafed through the book and found myself on page 208. A pair of adventurers, Sam and Remi Fargo, had crash-landed their custom-built airship in Mustang and were taken to meet a resident foreigner: Jack Karna, an Englishman with long grey hair. Karna had gone to Mustang originally as a student of anthropology from the University of Oxford, but after completing his studies in England returned to Mustang to work on local archives. So far so good. I preened myself. However, as I read on I learned that he had been there for 38 years and as far as I could tell still hadn't published anything. But it got worse: he was described as being in his mid-sixties (I should mention that I was in my early fifties at the time), with a deeply-lined face, and frail. To go with his long grey hair he had a matching beard. Ignoring the other slights and inaccuracies I concentrated on the beard. Where had he got that from? And then it dawned on me that the author had conflated me with the archaeologist Mark Aldenderfer, who had also appeared in the documentary.



Clearly, the author of the novel had considered me too insubstantial a person to be the entire model for his fictional character, and had felt obliged to merge me with another person in order to make me worthy of his reading public – a kind of inversion of twinning, in which instead of a single template manifesting as two people, two individuals had been pounded into one.

So much for the tenuous parallels between the Aris brothers' life and my own. Mark Aldenderfer went on to make some intriguing discoveries in Mustang and adjacent areas. Here are two of his finds.



To the left is a golden mask from a tomb, dating from around the sixth century of the present era, and to the right a piece of wood from another burial cave, this one from around the third century BCE. The golden mask almost certainly has a connection with other funerary gold masks that have been found in Central Asia and western Tibet.

Whatever the route of transmission of the tradition of attaching gold masks to the faces of the dead, the function of the practice in early Tibetan belief is now understood thanks to the research of Samten Karmay. In a Bonpo funerary text he has found a clear statement to the effect that the mask is the temporary support of an aspect of the soul after it has departed from the body.² As we all know, there is no soul in Buddhism – it is the consciousness that establishes a link between incarnations – but in pre-Buddhist Tibetan belief the care of the soul after death was a crucial part of funerary rites. The standing stone that appeared in the introduction to this lecture is also a funerary monument connected with the soul; such standing stones are also intimately connected with vampires.



² Karmay (forthcoming).

In 1986, while I was living in Nepal, I went to visit Michael and the family in Shimla, where he and Suu were fellows of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. At this time, Michael was writing the book that was to be his most controversial publication: *Hidden Treasures and Secret Lives* (1988), a study of the lives of two historical figures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of the criticism was levelled at the first part, a study of the life of a Bhutanese saint, Padma gling pa. The criticism focused on his treatment of the Tibetan tradition of treasure discovery, according to which texts that have been composed in the distant past and concealed to await a more propitious era are rediscovered by qualified treasure-revealers many centuries later. The book declared unequivocally that the tradition was fraudulent, and that the reluctance of Western scholars to acknowledge this openly was a disservice to Tibet, since it contributed to the exclusion of the country from the global free market of historical scholarship. The criticisms were of a factual character on the part of a few reviewers, who pointed out that there were reliably documented accounts of concealed texts having been discovered, rather in the manner of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Most of the criticisms, however, had the character of outrage against the insensitivity of someone who was supposed to be a champion of the traditions that make up the cultural complex of Tibetan Buddhism.

But I think there was another reason for the particular virulence of some of the responses to the book. Michael had read between the lines of Padma gling pa's biography to discern, beneath the surface features of the account, the human character traits that he interpreted as the motor for his becoming a treasure revealer. The person who emerged from this reading was a very different one from the saintly figure who lived on the surface of the page. The slight to the character was no small matter, but more serious than this was the implicit challenge to the premises on which such official narratives are constructed: the analysis threatened to unpick the stitching in a small panel of the fabric that constitutes the dominant narrative of Tibetan history and religion. To support this point, let me take another example of a revisionist account that has elicited similar outrage. The official Tibetan account of the collapse of the empire in the ninth century has it that the last emperor, retrospectively named Glang dar ma, persecuted Buddhism until, for his own sake, to prevent him from accumulating yet more bad karma, a compassionate monk assassinated him in an act of mercy. The history books said that Langdarma was a follower of Bon, the old religion that had been persecuted a couple of generations earlier by another emperor. The followers of Bon themselves maintain that there is nothing in their sources to say that Glang dar ma was a supporter of their faith, but have generally been ignored. It was axiomatic that, if someone persecuted Buddhism, he must be a follower of Bon. But somehow, that was all right: it was all a coherent part of the prevailing picture. In the 1990s Samten Karmay published an article in a Tibetan periodical effectively demonstrating that Langdarma had not persecuted Buddhism. He had merely reduced the state allocations of funding for religious institutions to the more reasonable level that had preceded the reign of his zealous predecessor. And furthermore, he had actually undertaken the restoration of Buddhist monuments. All copies of the periodical containing the

article were collected and impounded by the Tibetan administration in India, but the article, which was reissued in another Tibetan publication, continues to elicit controversy.³

Recently I published the family archives of five generations of tantric lamas from Mustang. Some of these forgotten lamas were clearly larger-than-life characters with whom any of us would have been happy to spend an evening. In the nature of such private papers, the biographical vignettes that are recorded are not high deeds, but deal rather with money lending and land acquisition, disputes over inheritance, accusations of theft, violence and black magic. But none of these lamas was ever the subject of a biography, and so there was no risk of challenging an alternative, consecrated account of an exemplary life.

Bonpos may not subscribe to the Buddhists' allegation that Glang dar ma was an adherent of their religion, but there is a cross-party consensus on the general outline of the narrative: to wit, that Bon was the indigenous religion of Tibet, and that Buddhism supplanted it. The only real difference is that Buddhists see this as a good thing, while Bonpos of course do not. You can choose to support whichever side you want in the story, but the story remains fundamentally the same.

While carrying out research for a monograph of a settlement in Mustang during the 1990s I encountered a local variant of the ubiquitous demoness myth. Cults of animal sacrifice to wild gods had once been widespread here, but had been brought to an end by missionary Buddhists from Tibet in the 1950s. One village had resisted, and the village interested me because I fancied it as a bastion of resistance against the hegemonic tide of Buddhism that was spreading its dull uniformity across the Himalayas. All manifestations of autochthony and archaism had crumbled in the face of Buddhist expansion, but here was one community that was loyal to its traditions where all others had fallen. I had found a number of documents in the local archives that clearly revealed resistance and antipathy to Buddhism. These documents were supported by an anecdote involving the lama who had converted the area. He had visited the village and had asked to see a particular treasure, an exceptionally beautiful turquoise vase, that was kept in the community treasury. The villagers acquiesced, and as they revealed the vase to him the roof beam in the temple cracked, and at the same time the demoness could be heard wailing. But there were inconsistencies in the documents, and after much agonising I was forced to admit that none of these elements could be taken as unequivocal proof of hostility towards Buddhism or Buddhist institutions. The demoness's wailing, too, was susceptible of a completely different interpretation. My initial reaction was one of mild panic. The documents did not contribute to the reinforcement of one side or the other in a binary scheme that was both axiomatic in Tibetan histories and also widely accepted in the secondary literature: they were monads, representative of nothing other than the particular local issues with which they were ostensibly concerned. In the event, I was able to salvage the situation by proposing that Buddhism and the cult of wild gods were both peripheral

³ For the English version of this publication, see Karmay 2005.

to a ‘dark’ third manifestation of religion – civil religion – in a configuration to which these and other documents could be seen to contribute in a coherent way, although this could only be achieved over the ashes of the dominant narrative.

Depending on which of the two currently dominant narratives one accepts, Tibet before 1959 was a paradise on earth; or else it was a feudal hell. Knowledge of the reality of the situation cannot advance by simple reiteration of either position, but through the analysis of the administrative documents of that time. Literally millions of these documents were destroyed between the 1950s and the 1970s. The documents may have been perceived as symbols of fiscal and legal oppression, but their destruction means that the possibility of knowing the condition of the peasantry in the areas of Tibet concerned has been lost for ever. There are an estimated two to three million documents still in the National Archives in Lhasa. Once in a while, selections from this archive are released, but as long as the documents are chosen for publication in accordance with their support of the official position, such publications are all but useless.

There is, nevertheless, a very substantial body of material available for the Ganden Phodrang period – that is, from the mid-17th to the mid-20th centuries – not the least of these being the 4000 or so documents that are available on the website of the University of Bonn.⁴ It is only through the use of documents such as these that we will ever be able to nuance the polarised, black-and-white perception we have at the present time. In any situation where there is such a dramatic divergence it is certain that the picture presented by at least one of the parties, though more likely both, is based on ideology rather than evidence. Thanks to the patient work that is now being done in this domain by very few scholars, we are starting to get a clearer picture of the situation on the ground. What kinds of taxes were in force, and how were they managed? How much freedom of movement did different categories of farmers enjoy? How important and influential was the non-aristocratic elite? How much access was there to education outside the monasteries? All these questions can be grouped under the rubric of social history. Given the importance of the questions for our understanding of Tibetan society, and the wealth of source material available, why does it attract so little attention from researchers? Why is it still such a huge blank space on the map?

During the 1990s I was able to make a photographic collection of approximately 3000 Tibetan documents from the former kingdom of Mustang, in Nepal. In the ten years that I was teaching in Oxford, and the six I’ve been in Paris, I haven’t been able to interest a single student in using a selection of this material as the basis for a doctoral thesis, and there must be half a dozen theses in there. In 2006 William Dalrymple published a book that some of you will no doubt have read: *The Last Mughal*, which recounts events around the landmark crisis of 1857 that is variously known as the Great Indian Mutiny or the First Indian War of Independence. In the National archives in Delhi Dalrymple happened on a collection of 20,000 documents in Persian and Urdu concerned

⁴ *Digitized Tibetan Archives Material at Bonn University*. <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm>

precisely with the period, and nicknamed the Mutiny Papers. In the introduction to his book he makes the following observation:

As the scale and detail of the material available from the Mutiny Papers became slowly apparent, and as it became obvious that most of the material had not been accessed since it was gathered in 1857, or at least since it was catalogued when rediscovered stored in a series of trunks in Calcutta in 1921, the question that became increasingly hard to answer was why no one had properly used this wonderful mass of material before. For at a time when ten thousand dissertations and whole shelves of *Subaltern Studies* have carefully and ingeniously theorized about orientalism and colonialism and the imagining of the Other (all invariably given titles with a present participle and a fashionable noun of obscure meaning – *Gendering the Colonial Paradigm*, *Constructing the Imagined Other*, *Othering the Imagined Construction*, and so on) not one PhD has ever been written from the Mutiny Papers, no major study has ever systematically explored its contents.⁵

No one in Tibetan Studies in Oxford or Paris ever yet wrote a doctoral thesis with a title like that, but Dalrymple's question is a valid one. It is true that the handwriting and language of such documents makes them challenging, but these are hurdles that can be overcome with a reasonable investment of time and effort. The real difficulty, I think, is not so much the form as the content. It may no longer be necessary for a doctoral thesis to constitute an original contribution to knowledge; it can now be merely substantial; and there can be no doubt that a study of a collection of previously unexamined archives would by definition be both original and substantial. The problem is the knowledge; specifically the body or domain of knowledge to which such an undertaking would constitute an original or substantial contribution. Tibetan archives have occasionally been used in theses, but almost invariably as materials to supplement a core of ethnographic data. For anyone who sets out to work on a body of unprocessed material from scratch, there is no assurance whatever that the content will become more than the sum of its parts, in other words, that it can be made to tell a story that can be assimilated to an established narrative. The dilemma is one of circularity. In order to be academically legitimate a study of a collection of documents must contribute to a recognised body of knowledge; but that body of knowledge must first be created by working on such documents. There are in fact some quite substantial studies, but the great majority of them are in German, and German is no longer read as widely in the world of Anglophone scholarship as it used to be.

There *are* examples of both successful and unsuccessful pioneering efforts to establish subdomains in Tibetan Studies. An example of an unsuccessful project is Robert Paul's attempt to promulgate the psychoanalytic interpretation of Buddhist symbolism in the 1970s and 1980s. An example of a successful attempt is René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz's *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*, appropriately described by Ernst Steinkellner as a lonely work, that was rather rarely consulted for the four

⁵ Dalrymple 2006:

decades after its posthumous publication in 1956, until a wider interest in Tibetan protector deities came to be rekindled in the 1990s. Another successful attempt that we should mention here is Nick Allen's work on comparative mythology, which has always been of interest to Himalayanists, but is now, at last, being picked up by appreciative researchers in Tibetan Studies.

G. M. Trevelyan famously described the emerging field of social history as "history with the politics left out"; Mary Fullbrook equally famously described it as "history with the people put back in". Historians of Tibet have for the most part concentrated on precisely those things against which social history was developed in the 19th century: war, conquests, the lives of great men, sectarian struggles. That they should have done so is of course entirely understandable, in view of the fact that the basic gridlines for much of Tibetan history have barely been laid. Social history may have defined itself against big political concerns, but it is only at this local level that we can see the real consequences of certain large-scale politics, and it may be at this level, too, that the legitimacy and success of those processes are to be found and judged. But there are other arguments in its favour. To the extent that social history is history from below, that its main object is people without history, and its subdomains include microhistory, it provides a legitimising brand for all the maverick fragments that might be rounded up in the course of documentary research. They can serve to support or illustrate a broader argument, or else they can be left in peace as local facts of intrinsic value for anyone who may be interested in such minutiae.

Social History at least doesn't espouse the dogma whereby a historical detail has a value, and even a reality, only if it can be integrated into a higher-order narrative. We are reminded here of Hayden White's comparison of three modes of historical representation: the annals form, the chronicle, and the narrative history. In a well-known essay entitled "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality" he challenges the convention according to which annals and chronicles are seen as imperfect histories, a view exemplified by Croce's remark that where there is no narrative, there is no history. White suggests instead that the more austere annals and chronicle forms are, rather, "possible conceptions of historical reality, conceptions that are alternatives to, rather than failed anticipations of, the fully realized historical discourse that the modern history form is supposed to embody".⁶

The *sgrung*, the *lde'u* and the *bon* of Ancient Tibet would have liked Hayden White. They would have derived from his argument the general principle that we don't live in a teleological universe, and the particular reassurance that dPa' bo gtsug lag's characterisation of the cultural system they embodied was an inchoate forerunner of Buddhism was a polite travesty.

The collection of 60 volumes of Tibetan manuscript facsimiles that China's first lady donated to the Bodleian last year is in fact a fragment of a much larger body of such texts that has recently come to light in Gansu Province. These texts are the ritual repertoire of the mysterious *lde'u*,

⁶ White 1980: 10.

who, according to a plausible version of events, fled Central Tibet in the 8th century to escape Buddhist persecution and settled in the eastern marches. A selection of this material was incorporated into the official form of the Bon religion that took shape in Central Tibet in post-imperial times, in parallel with the emerging Buddhist schools. Among the vast array of strange *lde'u* rites that did not make it into the mainstream Bon Canon is the practice of fox-fumigation, in which a dead fox is burned as an offering to the mountain gods. In spite of the best efforts of my friend and colleague Daniel Berounsky, who has made an extensive study of these rituals, we still have little idea why foxes should have been considered an appropriate offering to the gods. After all, foxes were not highly regarded in ancient Tibet. In fact, they were regarded as the epitome of cowardice.

But here we are on much more familiar ground. In European folklore the fox stands for cunning; but we in Wolfson know that the Tibetans are right. Foxes are cowards because they know a great many things, but lack the courage to combine all their dispersed certainties into an overarching vision. On the other hand, perhaps they desist from doing so not out of cowardice but perspicacity. After all, hedgehogs, which know one big thing, are becoming an endangered species, whereas foxes are flourishing. There are no hedgehogs in Tibet.

While it is of course appropriate, on the fiftieth anniversary of Wolfson College, to invoke the spirit of our founder, it is especially appropriate to do so in the light of his little-known affinity to Tibet. Tibetan is sometimes characterised, not altogether accurately, as being a monosyllabic language; and C.M. Woodhouse did once say of Isaiah Berlin that “he was known as the only man in Oxford who could pronounce ‘epistemological’ as one syllable”.⁷ Berlin’s essay of 1953 on the Fox and the Hedgehog, to which my earlier animal metaphors are an allusion, is a reflection on Tolstoy’s frustrated longing to be able to gather local meanings into a single comprehensive vision, and his rage and despair that the complexity of each of these scattered occasions prohibited the formulation of a unifying doctrine.

Tom Lehrer once remarked that “the reason why most folksongs are so atrocious is that they are written by the people”. This is a sentiment that has been shared by many educated Tibetans, and they have addressed the problem of defective folk literature in different ways. To begin with, there is the problem of inappropriate content. The corpus of *lde'u* texts to which I referred earlier contains several works from which sections are missing. My colleague Ngawang Gyatso, from Lanzhou University, was able to establish that the missing folios contained references to animal sacrifice. An eminent Bonpo lama, concerned that the stigma of such sinful practices might rub off on the reformed Bon religion by association, simply removed the folios and destroyed them.⁸

⁷ Woodhouse 1982: 2.

⁸ Ngondzin Ngawang Gyatso 2016.

The orthography of such texts is also notoriously irregular. One of the commonest errors encountered – mainly, but not exclusively, in Bonpo works – is the confusion of genitive and agentive particles. Let me explain briefly. Tibetan is an ergative language, which means that – to use inaccurate but more familiar terminology – the subject of transitive verbs does not take the nominative case but the agentive. The case is marked by a particle that resembles the genitive, and in many texts the particles are reversed or used randomly. A curious fact is that this reversal is not confined to rustic literature but appears in the writings of erudite authors; men who should know better. Modern Tibetan editors and Western academics regard this as a mistake, and correct it. But what if it were not so much a mistake as an indication that the distinction between the two cases was meaningless to the writer? A world in which the genitive and the agentive are conceptually indistinguishable would be incomprehensible to me, although I could, if only in theory, imagine how controlling the action of a verb might be seen as tantamount to possessing it. But only in theory.

A category of text that seems to have attracted the editorial attentions of a number of scholarly lamas is the ritual for the subjugation of vampires, and especially the mythic narrative section that conventionally precedes the performance of the ritual. When such lamas compose new texts for these rituals, among the sources they say they have used in their compilations are texts that are used by village priests who, they insist, have little understanding of anything. These texts themselves do not make much sense and need to be reworked. The narrative that results from their attention can be summarised in a few lines. Vampires are predatory demons that have been reduced to this miserable condition as a result of bad karma accumulated over a succession of lives as human sinners. Typically, there is a group of nine or thirteen vampire siblings who set out to prey on human beings but quickly run into the hero, who in the Buddhist version is usually the Buddhist tantric master Padmasambhava. The spokesperson of the group is a female, the youngest sister of the others, who puts up a brief fight but eventually yields to the master's greater power.

As you might by now suspect, the narrative orderliness and moral simplicity of this account, even in this summary form, is the Disney version of a jungle of ambiguities spread over a wide range of texts. For now, the best I can do is to illustrate this complexity by citing examples from four sources. In one collection of old Bonpo funerary texts vampires are killers par excellence, the stealers of souls. They must be destroyed in a ritual involving the use of firebrands, and an accompanying myth recounts the origin of the use of fire. The reason why humans need fire at all is, precisely, to kill vampires. Fire is found at the boundary of being and non-being, and after several unsuccessful attempts to acquire it, it is brought to humans by a grasshopper.



Earlier on I mentioned a burial cave in the Marsyangdi Valley of Nepal that was discovered by Mark Aldenderfer. Among the items in the cave (tentatively dated to the third century BCE) were the remains of over twenty bodies, a dozen or so lengths of wood, charred at the end, and this curious wooden tablet that was obviously intended to be inserted upright in the ground.



The markings appear to be a stain, but according to Mark Aldenderfer, who has examined them closely, they are not. They are patterns that have been carefully incised in the wood, and filled with grit, and represent a humanoid figure, holding in its right hand a smoking firebrand.

The second example is the kind of incoherent village narrative about which the later lamas complain. The chronological sequence of the episodes is confused; the connection between the episodes is discernible, but tenuous; the forms of the verbs leave the reader guessing about the tense and the agent; the arch-vampire is a young girl who is less the villain of the piece than the unhappy victim of circumstances; characters are conflated, sometimes in quite unsettling ways. One of the best-known categories of vampires prey on young children. In this text, this category has the epithet *kha-dmar*, “red-mouthed”, which evokes the image of a creature whose mouth is red with the blood of the victims. But no: *kha-dmar* is an epithet of infants that do not yet have

teeth, and whose mouths are therefore entirely red. The creatures that prey on babies are themselves babies.

All this could conceivably be the result of clumsy compilation, or of the unformed elements of a story in the making. On the other hand, perhaps it isn't a degenerate or an anticipatory form, but an alternative form; something less obviously orderly but much subtler and more complex: a text composed by the kind of people who see no meaningful distinction between the genitive and the agentive. On another occasion I have suggested that this text may have been inspired by oneiric experience, since it bears so many resemblances to the structures and images that are the stuff of dreams; and dreaming, as Bert States remarked, is the *ur*-form of all fiction.⁹

The well-meaning clerical editors who rework these texts sometimes don't do a very thorough job, and we occasionally find telltale residues of the sources in their editions that they have omitted to smooth out, like lumps in badly-sieved flour. In one of these works, translated by Martin Boord, we are told that, while undertaking the exorcism of the vampires, the priest should recite the following two lines:

There are no leaders greater than the vampires;
There is no lineage more ancient than the vampires.¹⁰

In a work that is purportedly about the subjugation of vampires, these lines are incongruous, to say the least. Can we detect in them the traces of a belief that vampires might not always have been regarded as hellish fiends?

The last example I want to consider is also a short text from the *Mu cho khrom 'dur* collection that has been examined by John Bellezza. The verb most commonly associated with vampires is *lang*, meaning to rise, because they rise up from the lowest depths of hell to plague the living. But here we have the puzzling spectacle of a descent from heaven. The following is a paraphrase of the section:

In the beginning, from the lofty and pure land of the gods, she came down to earth. She, the vampire, the sharp-toothed one, cut the tip of the eternal rock, and to the rock she attached the souls of the sons and daughters of the gods. When they were alive it was the support for good fortune, and after death it was the support of their souls. She went to the border of being and non-being, and met the rock, the tree and the bird. The souls of dead humans were summoned into the standing stones, and here their relatives and friends could meet them.¹¹

⁹ States 1993: 3.

¹⁰ Rig-'dzin rdo-rje 2008: 293.

¹¹ *Bla rdo bal lam rten dang sprad pa bla rdo dkar po 'o*. A translation of the paraphrase offered here is given in Bellezza 2008: 415–17. For the transliterated text see *ibid.*: 618–19.

In this text we have as clear an explanation as we could hope for concerning the purpose of standing stones. Like golden masks, they are a support for departed souls. This vampire, like the others we have seen, is a trafficker in human souls. But here she conveys them in order to nurture them, and to comfort the bereaved. And now that you've heard this story, I'm afraid you may never be able to put it out of your mind whenever you reread that well-known tale of the first king of Tibet who came down from heaven amid the rocks and the trees and the birds for the sake of living beings. We have seen how Michael and Samten managed to incur the displeasure of the establishment by publishing ideas that rubbed the fur of the dominant narrative the wrong way. So if any of you who are present this evening would like to outdo them as figures of opprobrium I suggest that you publish just a short article proposing that the model for the divine founder of the Yarlung Dynasty may actually have been a female vampire who attached human souls to standing stones.

A ritual manual about vampires could not possibly take on board all the contradictions and complexities inherent in these accounts; we can perfectly understand that the later authors could achieve a unitary and doctrinally acceptable narrative only by editing out everything that didn't fit expectations. Whether we are dealing with historical or ritual complexity, the production of a substantial contribution to knowledge necessarily entails a process of simplification.

For at least the last two centuries Africa has dined out on the international misapprehension that it is the dark continent. In fact, anyone with a reasonable knowledge of Eurasian natural history can go to Africa armed with a copy of the *Observer's Book of Trees* and feel at home in a week or two. The much vaunted jungles that earned it this sobriquet are little more than an exaggerated version of the Forest of Dean. The dark continent is actually not Africa, but Australia. In Australia you can travel through a landscape that looks like Provence, but it is only when you get up close that you realise that in the case of half the plants you can't recognise the genus or family, let alone the species. There are mammals that have familiar names like bear and wolf and tiger, but what makes them scary is not that they are large dangerous carnivores, but the fact that they have pouches in which they carry their young. There are even mammals that look like hedgehogs; but they lay eggs. There can be fewer more noble aspirations than to shed light in dark places and to make sense of them. The danger is that, in our eagerness to do so, we might drag them too far towards what we already know, and run the risk of transforming their creatures into something else.

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