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## The Soteriological Context of a Tibetan Oracle

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# The Soteriological Context of a Tibetan Oracle

Katarina Turpeinen

This paper contributes to the study of Tibetan oracles by analyzing a distinctive case of a contemporary Tibetan oracle living in exile in India. The oracular practice and personal history of Lhamo, or 'Goddess,' present several unusual features compared to other ethnographic accounts of Tibetan oracles. The ritual of possession is performed behind closed doors hidden from clients, and the medium typically engages in oracular ingestion multiple times during every trance. Her trance sessions also appear orderly and lack an intermediary figure who decodes the oracle's enigmatic statements. What do these features of her oracular activities illustrate? How do they feature in her life story and relationships to other religious specialists in the area and the surrounding community? This paper outlines my ethnography of Lhamo's practice and situates it in the context of Tibetan oracles, arguing that Lhamo's oracular possession,

which is a practice of a village oracle often regarded as involving mainly mundane and pragmatic ends, is conspicuously integrated with the soteriological, supramundane orientation of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** Tibetan Buddhism, oracle, possession, trance, healing.

## Introduction

The Tibetan practice of oracles, or spirit mediums, is a form of ritualized possession that entails practitioners falling into trances and becoming possessed by mundane deities that speak and act through them. This paper discusses the distinctive practice of a Tibetan female oracle, Lhamo, whose case offers new information to the study of Tibetan oracles. Lhamo's trances demonstrate how the possession of a village oracle—often regarded as involving mainly worldly and pragmatic ends—is notably integrated with Buddhist soteriology, or the supramundane goal to transcend cyclic existence and attain *nirvāṇa*. After a brief introduction to oracles in the Tibetan cultural area, the paper then describes my ethnography of Lhamo's oracular possession, which includes an analysis of its distinctive features in the context of Tibetan oracles and an examination of how these features relate to the soteriological context of her practice. I also discuss Lhamo's social position and her life story as an example of reviving a non-monastic village tradition of possession rituals in exile.

This paper contributes to Himalayan Studies by presenting a distinctive case of oracular possession that broadens and diversifies our understanding of Tibetan oracles. Lhamo's case is significant in its notable soteriological orientation while it simultaneously contains many mundane elements similar to oracles in the Tibetan cultural area. The Buddhist soteriology is integrated in Lhamo's practice through three principal strategies. First, soteriological principles are used to explain mundane aspects of Lhamo's oracular possession and reframe the practice as serving the Buddhist goal of enlightenment. For example, oracular ingestion, or the practice of ingesting substances extracted from clients' bodies, is described in terms of karma and supramundane power. Second, Buddhist values influence the character of Lhamo's practice rendering it peaceful and orderly, conspicuously lacking the fierce, theatrical and unpredictable elements that frequently characterize Tibetan oracular possession. Third, Buddhist practices facilitate and enable Lhamo's possession, as the gods could successfully possess her only after she engaged in prolonged purification practices.

Lhamo's case also presents a new angle to the study of oracles due to the presence of an unusual, symbiotic relationship between the medium and the possessing goddess, both of whom utilize the possession ritual as a tool to accumulate karmic merit in order to achieve enlightenment. In addition, her case highlights both the continuities and changes occurring in the Tibetan oracular tradition due to the conditions of exile. As Lhamo revives her ancient family tradition in India, her possession is not only distinctive in the context of Himalayan oracles in general,

but is also different from oracles practicing in Tibet due to her greater access to the Buddhist establishment and keen engagement with it. These factors, in turn, influence the soteriological orientation of her practice.

## Oracles in the Tibetan Buddhist Cultural Area

In the Tibetan oracular possession, the medium becomes voluntarily possessed in a ritualized setting by one or more Tibetan gods and goddesses of mundane type. (Diemberger, 2005: 127; Day, 1989: 9.) The tradition distinguishes this type of possession from an involuntary possession by demonic spirits, since the oracles invite one of the gods with whom they have an established relationship to take possession of their body. The main tasks of the oracles are to act as healers and to give counsel. Both functions derive their efficacy from the presence of a god in the medium's body. Oracular possession is widespread across the Tibetan Buddhist cultural area in Tibet, Nepal, and the Indian Himalayas, and has attracted a growing number of academic studies, most notably Diemberger's research on Tibetan oracles (2005: 113-168), Sophie Day's work on possession in Ladakh (1989: 206-222; 1990), and Berglie's publications on Tibetan and Sherpa mediums in Nepal (1976: 5-108; 1983).

The main division of numerous supernatural beings in Tibetan Buddhist cosmology is that of supramundane (*jig rten las 'das pa*) and mundane (*jig rten pa*) deities. The gods and spirits that possess Tibetan oracles belong in the latter category (Diemberger 2005: 130). The supramundane deities are enlightened and thus synonymous with Buddhas that have transcended the suffering of cyclic existence, while the category of mundane deities contains different types of worldly gods and spirits of a varying and often volatile character. The mundane gods have supernatural powers beyond humans, but are still caught in the wheel of death and rebirth and subject to karmic laws.

The mundane gods are often associated with particular locations and are also hierarchically ranked. The gods and spirits worshipped in monasteries are higher ranked than the gods associated with various natural locations or enshrined in the edifices of the laity. Both categories of mundane gods contain a notable variety of different entities that are associated with the three layers of Tibetan cosmology: various gods (*lha*) inhabit the upper regions, somewhat fierce type of spirits (*btsan*) reside in the middle regions, and serpent spirits (*klu*) are linked to the lower regions, as they reside in water sources or underground terrains. The English words 'god' and 'spirit' are often applied interchangeably to these entities. The lowest in rank are malicious spirits, or demons (*'dre*). They are sometimes thought to be prone to harming people since

they lack food and a dwelling place. If provided with these necessities, demons can become protective spirits. The position of all spirits and gods in the hierarchy is also somewhat flexible, as their rank can increase if they are incorporated into a monastic *pantheon*. Monastic gods and spirits are generally protector deities of Buddhism (*chos skyong, dam can*), and some may progress to the rank of supramundane deities if they are believed to have attained enlightenment. (Day 1989: 113) However, Lhamo's case problematizes the rigidity of these categories of mundane (non-monastic) and supramundane deities. This is because the main deity that possesses her is a mundane, non-monastic lake goddess, who nevertheless has a strong soteriological aspiration to become a supramundane deity.

Similar to the internal hierarchy of the mundane gods, the oracles can be divided into institutionalized monastic oracles (*sku rten*) and local village oracles (*lha pa, lha 'bab, lha bka', lha mo, dpa' bo, dpa' mo*). The monastic oracles are considerably more prestigious than the village oracles, as their tasks are connected to the monastery such as giving advice and revelatory statements to religious specialists or appearing in monastic dances (*cham*). The village oracles also give advice to private clients, but their distinctive practice is healing physical ailments by sucking out disease-causing matter from clients' bodies. Lhamo's possession presents a characteristic example of this healing practice. At the same time, however, her trances are aligned with monastic and supramundane elements because she gives advice to religious specialists and may be occasionally possessed by a supramundane deity. I shall return to this detail later in the paper.

The highest ranking monastic oracles are Tibetan state oracles such as the famous Nechung, who becomes possessed by the mundane protector god Peihar. Nechung was made a state oracle by the Fifth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century. His successor is currently re-established in Dharamshala, North India, serving the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government in exile. While both men and woman act as village oracles, the state oracles are predominantly male, though there are exceptions such as Lobsang Tsedron, who functioned in Lhasa until 1959 (Havnevik 2002: 263), and Tseringma, a contemporary female state oracle living in Dharamshala.

Although there are differences in the individual practices of oracles, some general characteristics can be outlined. The trances of Tibetan oracles involve a mundane god or spirit taking possession of the oracle's body. Most oracles report that their consciousness leaves their body during possession and they have no awareness of the situation (Diemberger 2005: 137). The god or goddess takes possession of the medium in a ritualized setting where

he or she is invited by the medium. This is performed by chanting invocation prayers in front of an altar that contains offerings to gods and Buddhas, images of deities, a lamp, incense, and various oracular paraphernalia such as a mirror, hand drum, and emblems for divination. The mirror (*me long*) is the single most important item of an oracle. It is usually placed on the altar atop a bowl of rice. Many oracles practice mirror divination, which allows them to see into hidden aspects of both mundane and divine dimensions in the past, present, and future (Diemberger 2005: 134). The mirror is also a symbolic representation of the three-fold world of spirit entities: the upper realm of the gods (*lha*), the middle region of fierce spirits (*btsan*), and the lower regions of the serpent spirits (*klu*). Some oracles have three different mirrors to represent these three regions; if there is only one mirror, it is divided into three concentric circles. Often multiple gods and spirits arrive during a single trance session, and are thought to symbolically position themselves in their respective areas in the mirror (Berglie 1976: 94).

The arrival of a god into an oracle's body is typically indicated by sudden shaking and a radical change in the medium's voice. After which the medium dons a large headgear (*rigs lnga*). The headgear symbolizes possession and is usually made of five intricately carved metal plates ornamented by images of the five Buddhas. The gods that speak through oracles commonly express their divine utterances in enigmatic statements that require an intermediary figure, or translator, to explain the oracle's statements to the audience. Many oracles also exhibit some form of fierce or unpredictable behavior including violent convulsions, jumping, and falling (Diemberger 2005: 115, 121, 137; Berglie 1983: 164; Richardson 1993: 51). Monastic oracles are also said to brandish swords and even strike onlookers and thus require restraining.

In Tibetan Buddhism, oracles are understood to be different from most other Tibetan religious specialists because their practice is not a vocation chosen by them, but the god chooses a medium to speak through. When this occurs, the oracle-to-be begins to suffer from an initiatory illness, or 'god sickness' (*lha nad*), which is a sign of the god attempting to enter the medium through the subtle channels (*rtsa*) of the energy body. Typically, the channels of an oracle are not pure enough for the possession to occur successfully. As a result, they must be purified or opened up by a senior oracle or a lama, which acts as an initiation to the oracular practice. The life story of the oracle, including the turbulent period of initiatory illness, is commonly narrated to the audience as part of the trance sessions (Diemberger 2005: 121).

Since the Chinese invasion of Tibet, a lack of access to Buddhist lamas has led to considerable diminishment of the role of Buddhist institutions in the lives of remaining oracles in the rural Tibetan plateau. In contrast, oracles working in Nepal and the Indian Himalayas are more connected to Buddhist religious specialists due to the influx of Buddhist lamas from Tibet. The unstable realities of living under Chinese occupation or in exile have also caused the disappearance of literary traditions connected to oracular possession, so that the oracles today in the entire Tibetan cultural area can rely only on oral traditions. Oracles in Tibet also report substantial loss of ancient oracular paraphernalia in the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution (Diemberger 2005: 127). As we shall see in the section on Lhamo's personal narrative, her family's story contains a less typical example of losing sacred oracular items in exile.

### The Oracular Trance of Lhamo

The oracle of this study belongs to the category of local village oracles, and similar to many female oracles, she is called Lhamo, or Goddess. She was born in Ladakh, North India, where her family settled after fleeing Tibet, but currently lives in Rewalsar, a mountain village and Buddhist place of pilgrimage in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. During her trance sessions, she becomes possessed by several mundane gods such as Turu Salden Gyepo and Pama Ata, a war hero from the Gesar epic, and most frequently by a local goddess (*yul lha*) of Lake Manasarovar—southeast of Mount Kailash—the place of her ancestral origin in Western Tibet. When possessed, she acts both as a healer and counsel to her clients.

Research for this paper was conducted over a period of two months that I spent in the village of the oracle in the Fall 2012. I witnessed 23 oracular sessions that took place daily in Lhamo's humble room at six in the morning, interviewed Lhamo four times, and had casual discussions with her clients and the local people.

Lhamo allowed me to watch the otherwise private possession ritual several times at my request. As I came in, she was dressed up in the oracle's red silk cloak, but her beautiful, intricately carved headgear of the five Buddhas was placed on her bed next to the altar. She bowed in front of the altar that contained offerings and sacred items of possession such as a mirror and bowl of rice topped with a stone from Manasarovar, symbolizing Mt. Kailash. She started praying with a gentle voice *The Seven Line Prayer of Padmasambhava* (*Tshig bdun gsol 'debs*). Soon, her body jerked violently—considered to be the sign of the goddess entering her—and her voice transformed into a

high-pitched loud singing. She placed the headgear on her head and started playing her hand drum and bell while singing and dancing in a wild, ecstatic manner. After about ten minutes she stopped and gestured her son, who works as her aid, to open the door and let participants in.

The sessions I witnessed included about 15–25 clients. Most people came to seek help with an illness, with others coming for advice in matters of kinship, family, and life choices. For example, a monk came to ask whether he should engage in the study of Buddhist philosophy or go on a meditation retreat. He was advised to study first. Lhamo's advice and diagnoses were based on her clairvoyance and a divination (*rtsis*) that she performed by throwing rice on her hand drum (*damaru*). Causes of illnesses, diagnoses, and treatments are summarized in Table 1.

Similar to other Tibetan oracles, Lhamo is a healer whose main cure involves sucking disease-causing matter out of her clients' bodies with a thin metal pipe that does not pierce the skin of the client, but the matter is considered to enter the pipe due to the miraculous power of the goddess. Frequently, she also blows and spits on the inflicted area. A client always brings a bottle of water that she blesses by blowing on it for the client to drink afterwards. Similarly, she can bless oil, which is later spread on the skin to cure various ailments from skin rashes to joint pain.

Removing kidney and liver stones was one of Lhamo's standard procedures, although she stated she cannot extract large stones. Lhamo was also reputed to be particularly suited to heal people suffering from attacks of sorcery and problems caused by spirit entities. Usually, the cure was to instruct the client to commission a Buddhist ritual or recitation of a scripture, but notably, for a Hindu client, a part of the remedy for sorcery was to sponsor a Hindu fire ritual (*homa*). Lhamo herself also performed a short exorcism ritual for an elderly woman from Spiti who was diagnosed as being harmed by her own envy and gossip, which enabled a demonic (*dre mo*) spirit to enter her. Lhamo lured the spirit into a thin tuft of hair at the crown of the woman by saying mantras, and trapped it by tying the tuft of hair into knots and rolling it around a *vajra*, a tantric ritual emblem symbolizing the power and indestructibility of enlightenment. With a loud mantra shout, she yanked out the bundle of hair and *vajra*, and concluded with a lengthy discourse on Buddhist ethics.

Lhamo did not attempt to cure all potential clients, but mainly treated cases that could be cured by extracting the disease-causing matter. Occasionally, she sent clients to a hospital or Tibetan herbal doctor if her divination indicated that these might be of help. There were also a few

Table 1. Cases that I witnessed with the client's problem and Lhamo's diagnosis and prescribed treatment.

| Problem  | Diagnosis  | Treatment  |
|--|--|--|
| Nausea, vomiting   | Food poisoning   | Sucked the poison out.   |
| Pain, nausea, fever                                      | Kidney and liver stones  | Sucked small stones out.   |
| Pain in the leg  | Nervous system disorder arising from a karmic problem                            | Sent to a hospital but it will not be a complete cure. Meritorious Buddhist practice will help at least for next life. |
| Weakness, cough, fever                                   | Tuberculosis   | Sent to a hospital.  |
| Much sickness and poverty in a household                 | A family member stole a copper item from a monastery                             | Find and return the item. Do not sell your cow and goat, but look after them well.                                     |
| Much sickness in a household after moving to a new house | Caused by serpent spirits ( <i>nāga, klu</i> )                                   | Do not move again, but erect a shrine to <i>nāgas</i> and make offerings.  |
| Coughing up much phlegm                                  | Bronchitis   | Sucked out phlegm and sent to a Tibetan herbal doctor.   |
| Weakness, nausea   | Caused by local ( <i>sa bdag</i> ) spirit  | Commission monks to recite a Buddhist scripture.   |
| Stomach ache   | Anxiety, stress  | Relax and do Buddhist practice.  |
| Insatiable hunger  | Consciousness of a recently deceased person had entered his body                 | Commission a fire offering ( <i>gsur</i> ).  |
| Nausea, fever (Hindu woman)                              | Caused by sorcery arranged by a jealous woman in the household. Kidney stones.   | Commission a Hindu fire ritual ( <i>homa</i> ). Sucked the kidney stones out.  |
| Nausea, weakness   | Her own envy and gossip enabled a demonic ( <i>dre mo</i> ) spirit to enter her. | Did an exorcism ritual and gave a sermon on Buddhist ethics.   |

cases that were attributed to karma and she did not see a definite solution. For instance, Lhamo diagnosed one nun's leg pain as a nervous system disorder rooted in karma from a past life. She said that allopathic medicine would bring some relief but not a definitive cure.

### Distinctive Features in Lhamo's Possession

What are the distinctive features of Lhamo's oracular trances compared to other Tibetan village oracles? As noted above, many Tibetan oracles exhibit fierce behavior and speak in enigmatic statements that need to be explained to the audience by an intermediary figure. One

of the notable features of Lhamo's sessions is the absence of this type of intermediary figure. How, then, does the audience understand Lhamo's utterances without an intermediary? This points to another uncommon aspect of Lhamo's trances. It lacks the enigmatic language and uncontrolled features of Tibetan spirit possession; rather, it appears orderly and controlled. Lhamo speaks clear Western Tibetan dialect and her clients engage directly in long conversations with her.

Another uncommon feature in Lhamo's trances is the curtailing of theatrical aspects. Usually, the clients of Tibetan oracles are invited to witness the spectacle of the

god taking possession of the mediums' body. Many trance sessions also entail a narration of the oracle's life story for the purpose of generating faith in the oracle's legitimacy (Diemberger 2005: 121). In contrast, the life story of Lhamo is never narrated to the audience and the possession ritual itself takes place behind closed doors, which are opened to clients only after the goddess has taken possession of the medium's body.

What is not excised from Lhamo's trances is the conspicuous practice of oracular ingestion that occurs in astonishing frequency in her sessions. While Day records such a practice as taking place occasionally (Day 1989: 458), Lhamo ingests items extracted from the clients' bodies several times during her daily session. The matter that Lhamo extracts includes jelly-like substances, kidney and liver stones, and pieces of flesh. After she sucks something out, she spits it on to her hand, and if it is a stone, she gives it to the client. If it is a jelly-like substance, she lets the closest client rinse her hand by pouring water in a bucket of sand next to her. If it is a piece of flesh, she throws it in her mouth and swallows it.

Oracular ingestion also involves a spirit animal consisting of a wolf in the goddesses' entourage. Lhamo emphasized that it is neither her nor the goddess, but rather the wolf, who ingests the pieces of flesh. As with most Tibetan oracles, her consciousness is not in her body during possession and she remembers nothing of the sessions, but only finds out afterwards from her son. According to Lhamo, the wolf of the goddess eats the flesh for the client's benefit by establishing a stronger karmic connection between the goddess and client. This type of spirit animal is also recorded by Berglie. He notes that Tibetan and Sherpa oracles in Nepal claim to be possessed by a spirit animal such as a wolf, wild dog, or bird during oracular extraction (Berglie 1983: 163; 1976: 97-98), but no mention is made of oracular ingestion.

### The Soteriological Context

How are we to understand these uncommon features in Lhamo's trances? It seems that the controlled nature of her trances and the lack of an intermediary figure reflect a notable soteriological orientation of Lhamo's oracular practice. Village oracles in the Tibetan Buddhist cultural area commonly deal with people's pragmatic and mundane (*jig rten pa*) concerns that involve various types of afflictions in the form of disease, immaterial contamination (*grib*) and harm (*gnod pa*) caused by spirit entities (Day 1989: 460-467). These concerns are typically local, related to welfare in the present life, and often involve exchanges with the spirit world such as propitiation of spirits to avoid their retribution. In the context of Buddhism, the mundane aspirations

are contrasted with the supramundane (*jig rten las 'das pa*) orientation embodied by elite religious specialists in monasteries and hermitages. Though pragmatic concerns are pronounced in Tibetan monastic activities, monasteries nevertheless ideologically represent the supramundane, soteriological orientation of Buddhism with its universalist model of karmic retribution as well as ethical, scholastic, ritual, and meditative conduct as means to generate merit for the ultimate goal of enlightenment. Instead of worldly and local concerns, the soteriological orientation is trans-local, focuses on supramundane, enlightened deities, and emphasizes future lives leading to the ultimate release from the cycle of rebirths. Although understood as different, these orientations are often profoundly intertwined in Tibetan Buddhist life.

Lhamo's oracular trances contain many elements that are associated with mundane goals such as her divination practice for diagnosis and advice, intimate connection to the world of spirits and mundane gods, and healing practices to pacify afflictions including oracular extraction and ingestion by the spirit wolf. Lhamo becomes possessed by several local Tibetan gods, and interference from malicious spirits is a prominent cause of disease in her diagnoses. Although Lhamo's practice is replete with mundane and pragmatic elements, it is integrated with the soteriological orientation of normative Buddhism to an unusually high degree. While spirit entities appear regularly in her diagnoses, karma is also mentioned as a cause of disease, and Buddhist rituals and recitation of scriptures are among the most commonly prescribed treatments to many problems, including those caused by malicious spirits.

One of the most important ways Lhamo's practice aspires toward the soteriological model of Buddhism is the reason Lhamo ascribes to the lake goddess for taking possession of her body. The goddess, a mundane deity, possesses Lhamo in order to accumulate merit to advance her own goal of enlightenment. Lhamo herself also views her possession ritual as a great source of karmic merit, and when not in trance, she engages in Buddhist practices of mantra recitation, preliminaries of tantric meditation (*sngon 'gro*), and occasional pilgrimages. The narrative of the lake goddess's goal of enlightenment, together with the medium's own religious aspirations, creates a distinctive symbiotic relationship between the medium and possessing goddess, as they both rely on the possession ritual as a significant tool to advance their supramundane goals. This type of soteriological framing of possession, especially on the part of the possessing god or goddess, is unusual in the context of Tibetan oracular practice and may be one reason for the lack of theatrical features and the orderly, compassionate character of Lhamo's practice. The lake

goddess demonstrated notable commitment to resolving the problems of her clients evident in the long discussions, detailed advice, and rituals she performed on the spot for the clients.

In addition to possession by the lake goddess and other mundane gods, Lhamo related that she sometimes becomes possessed by Hayagrīva (*Rta mgrin*), a supramundane deity in the Buddhist pantheon. Tibetan and Himalayan oracles rarely claim to become possessed by supramundane deities and, as Diemberger points out, these claims are met with great suspicion in Tibet (Diemberger 2005: 130). This is probably the reason Lhamo does not publicly claim to become possessed by Hayagrīva, yet nevertheless stated in an interview that it occasionally occurs in separate, private trance sessions. Tibetan oracular practice is closely related to pragmatic aspirations and mundane deities, which is why the notion of an enlightened deity possessing a medium's body is striking. How does Lhamo retain her prestige while making such a claim? One reason is the private nature of the claim: most people did not know about it. Another reason may be the distinctively soteriological character of her practice. Those who know about her claim may find it easier to accept in the context of her soteriological inclination.

Buddhist soteriology also influences the diminishment of theatrical features and the frequency of oracular ingestion in Lhamo's practice. Since humility is valued in Buddhism, Lhamo places importance on keeping a low profile and not seeking additional validation. It seems that Lhamo's decision to curtail theatrical aspects increases her respect among the audience, not only because of her humble approach but also due to the emphasis it places on her oracular activities. Curtailing the theatrical aspects of Lhamo's possession directs attention to her performance as an oracle and adds to the power of her oracular activities.

Oracular ingestion is usually regarded as polluting (Day 1989: 467) and is therefore performed minimally by Tibetan oracles. However, Lhamo believes she is protected from pollution due to the purity of the goddess that possesses her. She evokes the seminal narrative about the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava binding the Tibetan gods and demons under oath, thus positioning her practice within this narrative of employing the local gods under the soteriology of Buddhism and drawing protection from it. Since the goddess is working for Padmasambhava and has herself attained sufficient power and purity on her path to enlightenment, she can safely ingest otherwise polluting substances.

The practice of oracular ingestion is a feature of Lhamo's possession that is most closely associated with affliction,

contamination and the volatile world of spirits, as it is the spirit wolf that eats the flesh extracted from the clients' bodies. Day notes that oracular ingestion is considered polluting in Ladakh since it increases the risk of the gods that possess the oracle turning into demonic spirits (Day 1989: 467). These associations with affliction and demonic spirits render it particularly interesting that Lhamo explains the oracular ingestion in Buddhist terms of karma and enlightenment. Lhamo, or the wolf connected to the lake goddess, ingests the flesh from the clients' bodies in order to strengthen the karmic connection of the lake goddess and the client, thus enhancing healing. As this occurs, the medium is protected from pollution due to the soteriological power of the lake goddess. This may be why Lhamo did not display any fear of her frequent oracular ingestion as having a demonic effect on her possession.

### Lhamo's Social Arena

Lhamo's oracular practice is respected among the local people. Her clientele are people from multiple religions and ethnicities: Hindus, Moslems, and Himalayan Buddhists from Spiti, Kinnaur, Ladakh, Tibet, and other neighboring regions. Since Lhamo does not have an intermediary figure and speaks clear Tibetan, she converses in depth with her Tibetan-speaking clientele during trances, and her son translates for those who know Hindi. Stories of successful recoveries are many, and she is renown as one of the most powerful healers in the area. It seems that her reputation precludes the need for additional validation, so she prefers to curtail the theatrical aspects of her trance sessions. In turn, the humble character of her sessions including direct interaction with the local people arguably adds to her good standing in the community.

Lhamo's clientele also includes monks and lamas, indicating that some elite religious specialists appreciate her services. However, attitudes towards her among lamas seem to vary. In the hierarchy of Buddhism, she is not ranked as high as the institutionalized monastic oracles (*sku rten*), and she is also lower in rank than clerical religious specialists. According to Day, it is the practice of oracular ingestion that sets the village oracles apart from and below other ritual specialists, including the monastic oracles (Day 1989: 466). A monastic scholar that I conversed with emphasized that the gods that speak through her are mundane gods, as he did not know about Hayagrīva. He also remarked somewhat condescendingly that many practitioners can do divination and high lamas have much more healing power. However, Buddhist lamas come to Lhamo for advice and healing at regular intervals and typically arrange private sessions with her. Their privileged position allows them to ask for such a favor.

Even though Lhamo is not as highly ranked as monastic oracles and clerical lamas, she is one of the prominent actors in the religious arena of the village. Day ranks the status of Ladakhi oracles below the monastic religious elite, but above the village people and their afflictions (Day 1989: 478-480). While this model is fitting to describe the rank of Lhamo in the Buddhist hierarchy, it does not capture the complexity of the local religious arena in relation to village afflictions. Lhamo's village features various kinds of monastic and non-monastic religious specialists who each deal with affliction in ways that overlap with Lhamo. Like Lhamo, tantric yogis (*sngags pa*) practice healing with mantras, by blowing blessings, applying saliva or blessed ointment, and perform divination. However, the yogis also carry out many kinds of tantric rituals on behalf of people. The village also has a practitioner who is both a tantric yogi and Tibetan herbal doctor. In addition, a female tantric practitioner known as Khandro is famed to have clairvoyant powers akin to Lhamo. While all of these specialists are non-monastic, clerical lamas within monasteries also directly deal with village affliction and may perform any of the above-mentioned practices in addition to their scholastic training. However, monasteries tend to deal with village affliction less often than local oracles and tantric yogis, due to regarding these kinds of problems as worldly. Clerical lamas and monks are also the specialists to whom Lhamo sends her clients for recitations of Buddhist scriptures for merit, because this is a particularly monastic enterprise that Lhamo herself would not perform. However, during possession, Lhamo may act similarly to a lama or a tantric yogi by confidently giving an ethical sermon or performing a short exorcism ritual, but when not possessed, she is a humble Buddhist practitioner identifying as a novice.

The roles and techniques of both monastic and non-monastic religious specialists overlap in many areas, and each specialist has their individual strengths. The unique talent of Lhamo that distinguishes her from other religious specialists is oracular extraction and ingestion, and many people in the area, including monastic specialists, also esteem her divination and advice due to the gods that are considered to speak through her. She has a distinctive position of expertise and prestige in the complex web of overlapping religious roles. Her social standing seems to extend beyond her low status as a village oracle, possibly due to her notable soteriological inclination and reputation of efficacy. By sending her clients to lamas, allopathic hospitals, or herbal doctors for further assistance, she also supports the authority of the Buddhist establishment and helps to integrate and validate the network of local religious and medical specialists.

## The Oracular Foundation Myth and Personal Narrative

Lhamo's personal and family history is an account of reviving a Tibetan oracular tradition in exile. Lhamo comes from an old oracular lineage based in Western Tibet, Ngari, near Lake Manasarovar. For thirteen generations, oracles in her family have been possessed by eleven different gods, most notably by the goddess of Lake Manasarovar. Lhamo is the current oracle in the family and the second female oracle.

Lhamo's family transmits a foundation myth about the first oracle in their line—a myth that evokes transcendent origins and is simultaneously and deeply localized in the ancestral land of the family. The first oracle is said to have lit a butter lamp, dived into Lake Manasarovar, and stayed underwater for two weeks with the lake goddess. When he emerged from the lake, the butter lamp was still burning and he was carrying sacred items symbolizing the newly established bond with the goddess. The most important item was a lake stone (*mtsho rdo*) that was reputed to have magical properties, such as the power to make rain. These items were passed down in the family from oracle to oracle until an unfortunate loss took place. The previous oracle in the family was Lhamo's maternal uncle, who passed away in Tibet before the family left for exile to India. The gods had not possessed anyone in the family for almost twenty years. The sacred items had been entrusted to Pema Khandro's paternal uncle, who sold most of them due to lack of money. Soon after this, his business suffered major losses and he and his family lived in extreme poverty for years until he became ill and passed away.

Since no one had become possessed for almost twenty years and the family had left its ancestral land, the tradition was thought to be lost. When Lhamo, an illiterate nomad girl, fell ill, no one suspected that her initiatory illness was one that oracles succumb to in the beginning of their career. Lhamo felt nauseous, crazy, and fainted several times for long periods while herding sheep, resulting in losing the flock and causing her alarmed family to search for her during the night. Finally, she went to ask for help from a renowned Tibetan lama, Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche, who fled Tibet in the 1960s, rebuilt his monastery in exile in Shimla, North India, and was residing in Ladakh at the time. Tsetrul Rinpoche identified her illness as being caused by ancestral gods trying to enter her and instructed her to do 100,000 prostrations and 100,000 mantras of Padmasambhava to purify herself in order for the gods to successfully possess her and benefit living beings. She did so, but her illness continued. In desperation, she went to another renowned Buddhist lama exiled from Tibet, Drubwang Rinpoche, to ask him to stop

the attempted possession—a power that high lamas are considered to have—but again received the same advice of more purification practices to perform.

After continued practice, one of her ancestral gods, Turu Salden Gyelpo, eventually possessed her for the first time while she was with her family. The god asked to bring the sacred oracular items that had been passed down in the family. The embarrassed family members explained to him that most of the items had been sold. Lhamo's mother rushed to the paternal uncle's house and brought the remaining items: a wooden picture holder and offering bowls. New oracular items were acquired and consecrated, and Lhamo was established as an oracle. Eventually, a pilgrim also brought her a new stone from Lake Manasarovar.

The initiatory illness is a phase that virtually all Tibetan oracles reportedly experience in the beginning of their career. In order to overcome it, the subtle channels in the energy body of the aspiring medium have to be purified either by an experienced oracle or a lama (Diemberger 2005: 133; Day 1989: 269). Lhamo's case is unusual in that the lamas she met did not purify her channels for her, but instead made her do it herself, which emphasizes her agency and soteriological aptitude.

Lhamo's personal and family histories reflect both pragmatic and soteriological aspects of the Tibetan religion. The mythical narrative of the first oracle's visit to the goddess inside the lake resembles shamanic journeys to the spirit world. The oracle brings back a new tradition of possession together with sacred items of magical and pragmatic powers. However, the goddess' aspiration for enlightenment and her oath to Padmasambhava to protect Buddhism frame the story in a larger soteriological vision.

Lhamo's narrative of her initiatory illness features a turbulent, unpredictable engagement with the spirit world as her ancestral gods attempt to possess her and she falls ill. This power can manifest properly only after her body is purified by Buddhist soteriological practices. Thus, the Buddhist religious practice of supramundane orientation acts as a tool that enables the possession by mundane deities to take place. The same idea of Buddhist soteriological principles facilitating spirit possession is evident in Lhamo's strict ethical conduct and rules of purity concerning diet, intoxicants and clothing. She does not consume alcohol or cigarettes, prepares her own food and does not wear other people's clothes. The stated purpose of these observances is to maintain her body and mind as a pure vessel for the gods to possess her.

After the initial assistance from the Buddhist establishment that helped Lhamo gain mastery of her spirit possession, she continued to seek guidance from lamas. When she was successfully possessed by several gods, she again went to see Taklung Tsetrul Rinpoche, who verified her oracular practice as authentic. Tsetrul Rinpoche also told her to primarily summon the goddess of Lake Manasarovar, because the peaceful tasks of healing and advice that the goddess specializes in would benefit more living beings than the wrathful abilities of her other ancestral gods. Lhamo later met Trulshig Rinpoche, who instructed her to heal everyone equally without regard to race, religion, nationality, caste, gender, social status, or wealth. Trulshig Rinpoche also told her not to charge money but let people make a donation. Lhamo adjusted her oracular practice accordingly, which illustrates how the elite Buddhist religion modified her practice of spirit possession as well as points to the degree of power the Buddhist establishment has over oracles such as Lhamo.

These types of interactions between oracles and the Buddhist establishment are also common in Ladakh and Nepal. Day reports that Ladakhi lamas aid oracles in overcoming initiatory illness and instruct them in Buddhist meditation so that they can refine their oracular abilities (Day, 1989: 269, 302). Berglie notes that most of the oracles he studied in Nepal were either vetted or guided by a lama, while the rest commonly relied on senior oracles (Berglie, 1983: 161). While Lhamo's case contains distinctive and conspicuous soteriological elements, other oracles in the Tibetan cultural area are also integrated with the Buddhist establishment to varying degrees. However, as Diemberger points out, many young oracles in rural Tibet do not sustain close connections with elite Buddhist religion, presumably due to lack of access to lamas (Diemberger, 2005: 117, 123, 127).

## Conclusion

The ethnography of Lhamo's oracular practice and the analysis of its distinctive features in the context of Tibetan oracles reveals Lhamo's notable soteriological orientation and points to three major ways that Buddhist soteriology contextualizes her possession. In the case of oracular ingestion, the soteriological framework of Buddhism acts as a paradigm that subsumes and explains the aspects of possession in Buddhist terms. The oracle ingests the flesh to create a stronger karmic connection with the client and is protected from the pollution due to the soteriological power of the goddess. We can also observe this soteriological explanatory paradigm in how the possession itself is explained as motivated by the goal of accumulating merit for enlightenment, both by the lake goddess and the oracle.

The second way is a question of influence: the normative Buddhist religion's principle of humility influences the decision to curtail the theatrical aspects of possession. Similarly, Tsetrul Rinpoche's advice influenced Lhamo's decision to become possessed mainly by the peaceful lake goddess, and Trulshig Rinpoche's advice made her carry out her practice free of charge and open to everyone. All these aspects contribute to her reputation as a healer and good social standing in the village.

Perhaps the most interesting way of soteriological contextualization is how Buddhist principles are employed to facilitate the expression of oracular possession. This is evident in Lhamo's initiatory illness and how she had to purify herself with Buddhist soteriological practices so that the gods could successfully possess her during trance sessions. Similarly, we can see this in Lhamo's observances of purity concerning diet, intoxicants and clothing. Thus, not only does the soteriological paradigm explain and influence spirit possession, but Buddhist soteriological principles are also appropriated as tools that create a foundation for the spirit possession to manifest and continue.

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## Endnotes

1. The information in this section comes from my ethnographic fieldwork with Lhamo.
2. Popular Tibetan historiographical narratives relate how a famous Indian tantric master, Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet in the 8th century by the king Trisong Deutsen to assist with the construction of the first monastery, Samye. Padmasambhava subjugated and bound under oath the indigenous gods and demons of Tibet including those that were hindering the construction project, thus enabling the king to fulfill his aspiration to establish Buddhism in Tibet.
3. The information in this section comes from my interviews with Lhamo.

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