

A Tibetan Myth on the Origin of Bows

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This brief paper¹ is a means of expressing my personal thanks to Toni Huber for his ability to widen horizons in Tibetan Studies. I have been inspired by his numerous scholarly articles and books, whose common characteristic is to unfold new and principal areas of research.

One example of an area Toni has greatly influenced is research on Tibetan hunters.² Hunters in Tibet find themselves in a very specific environment dominated by Buddhist values. Given the general disapproval of killing animals their social standing is very low and nearing that of social outcasts. Nevertheless, their poor living conditions and contemporary social status contrast with the long tradition and past importance of hunting on the Tibetan Plateau. They are the successors of people who proudly maintained and developed an ancient livelihood, enabling human society to survive in the harsh conditions of an extreme natural environment.

A few years ago, I had an opportunity to see several fine exemplars of Toni's small collection of Tibetan bows in Berlin. Toni is an occasional hunter himself and his passion for bows is a natural manifestation of his sympathies with those with whom he shares this interest. Tibetan bows are fascinating indeed. They often embody wit and extraordinary craftsmanship. As well as being hunting tools, they are also surviving witnesses of the distant imperial past of Tibetan warriors. Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore the salient beauty of these seemingly simple objects.

I would like to wish Toni enduring inspiration and joy from his exploration of new horizons. Accompanying my wishes is the following short text and translation of a myth on the origin of bows. Their value is connected with understanding provided by accounts of their origin in Tibet. I hope that Toni's experience of collecting bows will be at least slightly enriched by this contribution.

The myth translated below appears in the collection of texts dedicated to the still little-explored ritual called *chadang* (*bya rdang*) performed as a part of the worship of *drabla* (*sgra bla*), who are often rendered as “warrior divinities” or “fighting gods” in English. These rituals are referred to in a number of Bonpo sources – for example, in treasure revelations of the Yak Horn cycle of texts revealed by Khyung

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² Huber 2005; 2019.

Gotsal (Khyung rgod rtsal, b. 1175),³ and in the *juthig* (*ju thig*) divination manuals.⁴ They figure in the section dealing with *drabla* of the influential 14th-century Bonpo text *Sutra of Immaculate Splendour* (*Mdo dri med gzi brjid*) as well. This extract has been translated into English by David Snellgrove and his learned Tibetan informants. They translate it as “bird-rack” and reveal in a footnote that this term remains enigmatic to both David Snellgrove and Tenzin Namdak.⁵ It must be stated that the references appear there along with an allusion to the *nyen* (*gnyan*) spirits, which could corroborate the argument relating to the involvement of these spirits that is described below.

All the sources mentioned here just list certain *chadang* without giving any details. In some cases, *chadang* even figure as divinities who are a subclass of *drabla* (mostly as *mgon po bya rdang*).

The *chadang* rituals were performed frequently on the north-eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau until the times of the Cultural Revolution in China (1966–1976). They were part of a repertoire of so-called *leu* ritualists present there. Besides referring to ritual specialists, the term *leu* is also used to name this ritual tradition. References to certain *leu* appear again in the large number of Bon sources produced from the 12th century on. Most frequently they mention “*leu* divinities” (*le’u lha*), but occasionally references to *leu* rituals/tradition (*le’u bon*) also appear. In other cases, *leu* is listed separately from *bon* (*leu* and *bon...*), and ritual masters called “owners of *leu* divinities” (*le’u lha bdag*) appear in the sources.⁶

This apparently eclectic lore has been persecuted from the side of monastic Bon since the end of 18th century in the regions of Thewo (The bo), Phenchu (’Phan chu), and Bozo (Bab bzo), from which time we have at least some references. The main reason was animal sacrifices performed there as a part of the *leu* rituals. But the times of repression were also followed by moments of symbiotic coexistence and a certain division of ritual service provided by Bonpo monks and lay *leu* ritualists.⁷

What is available now is mainly manuscripts collected in the households of the region stretching from Cone (Co ne) in the north to the region of Zitsa Degu (Gzi rtsa sde dgu) in the south. Some 100 volumes of facsimile of the collected manuscripts have been published so far,⁸ but there are many more texts available.

³ Known also as Dpon gsas khyung rgod rtsal. These rituals, entitled *G.yag ru dgra chos*, appear mostly in volume 186 of the *New Bonpo Katen Texts*; brief references to *bya rdang/sdang* are scattered in the lists of divinities and ritual items there.

⁴ For example, ’Ju mi pham 2007: 17.

⁵ See Snellgrove 1967: 53, 59, 65, 259 (note 19).

⁶ For information on *leu* see Ngawang Gyatso 2016; Berounský 2020; Huber 2020, vol. 2: 8–10. More information on older Bon sources referring to the *leu* will be published soon by the author.

⁷ Compare Berounský 2020.

⁸ See *Mdo kham s yul gyi bod yig gna’ dpe phyogs bsdus mthong ba ’dzum bzhad*, 60 vols; *Gna’ rabs bon gyi dpe dkon bris ma*, 10 vols; *Mdo smad Mda’ tshang yul gyi gna’ dpe phyogs bsdus mthong ba don ldan*, 30 vols.

Among the published manuscripts there is also a cycle of ritual texts dedicated to *chadang*. It consists of eleven individual texts on 210 pages. The manuscript belonged to the household in Bozo Valley situated to the south of Thewo, where it was photographed by Ngawang Gyatso, professor at the Lanzhou University.⁹



Fig. 1: *Leu* ritualist with typical headgear made from the strip of bear's skin (*dom ra*). Note the takin's horns as a ritual musical instrument. 2018 © Aben, Nyi 'od, Kha pa lung



Fig. 2: Simple "bird-poles" (*bya rdang*) construction during the ritual at *labtse*. 2018 © Aben, Nyi 'od, Kha pa lung

⁹ Ngag dbang rgya mtsho, *Tshe ring thar*, vol. 1 and 2. These texts are also available on Charles Ramble's website, <http://kalpa-bon.com/texts/leu>, accessed on 15 December 2020. For more details on them, the titles of the individual texts, and abstracts of their content see Berounský, forthcoming.



Fig. 3: Birds on the “bird-poles” with *khyung* bird on the top. 2018 © Aben, Nyi ’od, Kha pa lung

The name *chadang* could be rendered as “bird-poles”, or even “bird- perches”. It designates a ritual construction consisting of mostly horizontally layered wooden poles to which birds are invited. Depictions of birds are attached to them along with the weaponry of *drabla*, “warrior gods”, such as armour, shields, spears, arrows, flags, and bows. Simplified “bird-pole” constructions consist of two horizontal poles attached to the longer vertical one. Images of birds drawn on the paper are attached to the poles. The less frequent name for such a construction is *chamdoe* (*bya mdos*, “bird-thread cross”). The purpose of the ritual is to annihilate enemies, and besides the annual performance of it at *labtse*, or individual performances at home, surviving *leu* ritualists remembered its performance by village communities before they were dispatched for fighting.¹⁰ This was a rather frequent activity in this turbulent area in the times predating the Cultural Revolution.

The *chadang* ritual texts contain a large number of mostly brief myths describing the original conflict and performance of the ritual accompanied by animal sacrifices. The texts mention *drabla* and their subclasses of *cangse* (*cangs se*) divinities, but several texts also contain long lists of *werma* (*wer ma*), who are invited to the “bird-poles”. In most cases the birds mentioned are white *khyung* (bird resembling Indic Garuda, who is also often placed on the top of the construction), hawks, eagles and vultures.

This layer of the ritual is, however, rather incoherently blended with the frequent presence of the *nyen* (*gnyan*) spirits in the texts. *Nyen* are extensively worshipped in the area. They retain characteristics of *drabla* in some of the ritual texts and

¹⁰ Interview with Walse (Dbal gsas), an old *leu* ritualist of Bozo, recorded by Sherab Drakpa (Shes rab grags pa).

the birds mentioned as accompanying them include very different ones: white crane, cuckoo, skylark, etc.

A certain *leu* text dealing with the “artemisia-bird” (*mkhan bya*) could help to elucidate this confusion. It is used for a ritual dedicated solely to the *nyen* spirits and their power to deal with enemies. During such a ritual an image of a bird made of artemisia plant was used and the text itself associates it mostly with the white crane, the bird of *nyen*.

It seems likely that two once separate traditions met in the “bird-poles” ritual texts. One is related to *drabla* and another stems from the worship of the *nyen* spirits. Since birds mainly represent *nyen*, and a strong *nyen* cult is present in the area, I am inclined to see it as an inspiration for the bird component of the ritual. There are several cases to be found in the *leu* manuscripts, where it appears there has been an attempt to change the name of the crane (*khruṅg khruṅg*) into that of the *khyuṅg* bird. The written form, in “headless script” with frequent contractions (*khruṅg+ng*), makes this a rather easy task, since the written forms for both of the birds are very similar.

The setting of the myths contained in the “bird-poles” ritual texts is mostly provided by a dualistic cosmology opposing the realm of light, gods, and existence on the one hand, and the opposite realm of darkness, demons, and non-existence on the other. The realm of existence is called Ye (Ye), or Mon (Smon), and the contrasting sphere of non-existence is named Ngam (Ngam/Ngam). These terms are also present in the myth translated below. Hypothetically, a Manichean cosmology could stand behind it as inspiration, but more detailed research is definitely required in order to confirm this.

The realms Ye and Ngam are also the main setting of the amazing myths contained in the 14th-century *Sutra of Immaculate Splendour*.¹¹ This part is dedicated to the origin myths explaining some aspects of *juthig* divination based on the random tying of four knots on the six divinatory cords and subsequent analyses of their positions. Several surviving *juthig* divination manuals also reveal the strong presence of the dualistic cosmology connected with Ye and Ngam realms.¹² It might not just be a matter of chance that one of the old *leu* ritualists from Bozo mentioned in the interview that he learnt both the “bird-poles” rituals and *juthig* divination from an old man from Thewo. This might indicate that these two were considered to form a complementary part of a single tradition.

The text of the myth is contained in the manuscript entitled *Defensive fortress of “bird-poles”* (*Bya rdang srungs mkhar dbu bzhuṅgs s+ho*).¹³ This rather lengthy text deals first with “defensive fortresses” in the realm of existence and contains a long list of the names of various fortresses, weapons, divinities, and spirits. It lists

¹¹ *Mdo dri med gzi brjid*, vol. 6: 433–50.

¹² See 'Ju mi pham 2007. See also manuscripts contained in the 70th volume of the New Bonpo Katen Texts entitled *Ju thig*.

¹³ Tshering Thar and Ngawang Gyatso 2017, vol. 1: 95–149.

a large number of *werma* spirits, *nyen* spirits, *cangse*, etc. The white *khyung* bird is explicitly mentioned as being placed on the top of “bird-poles”. Starting from page 129, the text narrates interesting myths on the origin of weapons and armour where *drabla* reside: helmets, shields, armour, spears, sprouts of bamboo (arrow), and flags (*dar*). There is also a short myth on the origin of the bow. Ye and Ngam provide the setting of the myths in most cases.

The myths on the origin of the bow form the longest section of this part. They introduce bows and explain the names given to them, but an interesting account of their production is briefly provided.¹⁴ This section opens with narration on the wooden corpus of the bow, which could be a self-bow. The myth then continues, describing how several components from horns, antlers, and sinews are added. Such bows would have been expensive luxury items. They can be characterized as laminated composite recurve bows. The wooden core of the bow is made from the conifer tree (*thang shing*). It has its belly hardened by a piece of yak horn placed on the back. The tips of the limbs of the bow (so-called *siyahs*) are stiffened by antler or horn laths. White nocks from horns or antlers are added. The bow is then laminated using animal sinews and three layers of glue on the outer surface. This type of bow is called “white nocked one” (*mchog dkar*) and the meaning is that the bow has whitish (*dkar ba*) nocks (*thal mchog*).

The style of the myth features some elements shared with the non-Buddhist traditions. From time to time it also resembles oral exposition, since it is not always consistent in its form. It also seems to allude to the very rare animal called the takin, which lives in the area where the manuscript was found. If I am right in my assumptions, this would be an indication of a local provenance of the myth in the wider region surrounding Bozo, Thewo county.

Translation of the myth

(*Bya rdang srungs mkhar dbu bzhugs s+ho*, fol. 25a, p. 143)

(25a) How did this bow first originate?

What are said to be its sources and effects?

Why is the bow called “divine bow”?

Why is the bow called “divine bow of great bliss”?

Why is the bow called “takin bow”?¹⁵

(25b) Why is the takin bow called the “white-nocked one”?

There are reasons for calling them so.

¹⁴ For references to Tibetan sources on bows and an example of a fine Tibetan bow see LaRocca 2006: 188–96.

¹⁵ T. *rgya' gzhu*. The region from which the text originates is the home of a rare wild ungulate called the takin (*Budorcas taxicolor tibetana*). While in general the takin is called *ra rgya* in Tibetan, the locals of Thewo call this animal *shwa rgya*, which means “deer-antelope”. The antelope meant by *rgya* is the one known as saiga, which somehow resembles the takin. This text connects the origin of this