

Introduction

The Tibetan plateau may seem sparse, but it is overrun with the lives, adventures, and influences of innumerable gods and demons. These beings play a significant role in shaping the religious history of Tibet and continue to have a strong presence in the daily practices and worship of Tibetans. Such entities are elicited in every facet of Tibetan cultural history. If a king is oppressing Buddhism, as in the case of Lang Darma in the ninth century, he is believed to be possessed by a demon, and thus must be subjugated (i.e., assassinated). Conversely, the Tibetan Buddhist kings were believed to be possessed by demons by practitioners of Bön, who were being persecuted in the seventh and eighth centuries. The Tibetan people believe themselves to be descended from gods and demons from various heavenly realms, as well as from emanations of the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Tārā. The Tibetan landscape is thought to be teeming with spirits, which is the explanation given for the plateau's harsh environment. The very land is said to be a giant reclining demoness who was subjugated by temples constructed by the first Tibetan Buddhist king, Songtsen Gampo (557/617–650). A popular narrative trope in Tibetan ritual and mythic literature is of the eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava exorcising and converting indigenous spirits of the land to Buddhism, often through destructive means. Tibetan medical texts describe the various demonic species that cause numerous kinds of ailments, and how to expel them in the process of healing. To this day, gods and demons play a strong pragmatic role in the daily and annual rituals of both Buddhist and Bön, lay and monastic, communities.

A common thread in these various interactions with Tibetan spirits is that they are generally capricious and violent. They are often blamed for illnesses, considered harbingers of misfortune or karmic consequences, and can even kill as an act of retribution or by stealing an individual's soul. Anyone can fall victim to such violence, but it can also be quelled, harnessed, or directed by ritual specialists, and even interpreted toward soteriological ends. Part of containing or channeling the violence of Tibetan gods and spirits requires identifying and categorizing them in relation to one another. This is no easy task. Tibetans have at best developed loosely systematic spirit typologies and ontologies in an attempt to cope with the

dizzying assortment of nonhuman agents,¹ drawing from both Indian and indigenous taxonomies. More specifically, distinct Tibetan religious lineages and even individual masters have developed their own pantheons of divinities. In collected works and monastic ritual catalogs, these pantheons evince a hierarchy ranging from enlightened beings and tantric deities emulated to achieve enlightenment, to guardian deities converted to Buddhism and entreated for protection, and finally to local demonic beings warded off with apotropaic rites. This spectrum of nonhuman beings also makes it difficult to establish clear boundaries between transcendent beings that fit more comfortably under the label of soteriological divinities and those spirits better classified under demonology. The problem is further exacerbated by many such beings having once been living historical figures, and by several spirit terms referencing the divine origins of past Tibetan kings.²

The term “demon” has become popular in the secondary literature that refers to these beings, given their general penchant for pernicious activity. This is problematic because of the linguistic difficulty inherent in representing these various spirit classes with limited English vocabulary. While English has one overarching term for demons, there are numerous kinds of nonhuman agents that exist in Tibet, possessing vastly different attributes and qualities both beneficent and malevolent. There has been much scholarly debate on the utility of “demon” in Greek, Egyptian, Israelite, and early Christian religious contexts. In his exploration of the original Greek term *daimon* and its later Roman usages, Jonathan Z. Smith understands demons as ultimately liminal beings and the demonic as a locative and relational category that helps define boundaries. Through ritual action the “demon is ‘placed’ by being named, entrapped and removed to its proper realm (e.g. exorcism) or redirected to a ‘proper’ goal (i.e. to somewhere or someone else, as in so-called ‘hostile’ magic).”³ In his work on Tibetan spirits, Cameron Bailey uses the Greek term in hopes of recapturing its original breadth of usage, though he acknowledges that it does not completely

¹ I use the term nonhuman to refer to these spirits and their activities rather than the etic term “supernatural.” Tibetans believe that these beings are as much a part of the world as humans are, and are not thought to transcend nature but to exist within it.

² See Karmay 2003, pp. 69, 71, and Karmay 1998b, pp. 294–305.

³ Smith 1978, pp. 428–429.

map onto the Indo-Tibetan context.⁴ Others have attempted to recognize the individuality of these diverse spirit types by using European nonhuman terminology. For instance, the spirit type called *tse*n has been translated as “furies,” while *sinpo* spirits have been called “orcs,” “ogres,” and “gnomes.”⁵ While it is admirable to use distinct terms for each spirit, these etic labels also carry specific cultural connotations and convey characteristics that are not true to the original Tibetan concepts. A *sinpo* looks very different from the popular images of gnomes. Due to the various limitations of the above attempts at translating individual spirit types, it is ultimately best to render them phonetically. While initially cumbersome, this method has the benefit of using emic terminology for such distinct indigenous concepts. When discussing these beings, I continue to use the term “demon,” though more when referring to certain Tibetan spirits who are considered especially violent and harmful in nature. I use the broader term “spirit” more frequently, which speaks to the original nature of many of these beings as the restless spirits of past individuals.

The goal of this Element is to act as an introduction to Tibetan demonology, providing a brief overview of its primary structures, classifications, content, and scholarship, especially as they pertain to various kinds of violence, so that the informed and interested reader can explore deeper avenues of this robust topic. With a field of inquiry that could easily fill multiple volumes, let alone a short one like this, the focus of this work is inevitably on taxonomy, categorization, and summary. Nevertheless, it is important to be cognizant of the greater complexities and multivocalities hiding beneath and behind the illusory order presented. In his extensive exploration of Japanese pantheons – or what he more accurately describes as “polytheons”⁶ – Bernard Faure discusses the pitfalls of essentializing narratives while recognizing the need to occasionally fallback on accessible language for the sake of expediency. In describing Japanese divinities and their relation to the human communities in which they are found, Faure draws on the actor–network theory developed by Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and

⁴ Bailey 2012, pp. 11–12.

⁵ These definitions can be found in the Rangjung Yeshe Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Culture, now searchable online; see Rangjung Yeshe Wiki 2018.

⁶ See Faure 2016, p. 13.

John Law. The notion of actor–network emphasizes the relationships between human and nonhuman actors creating constantly shifting constellations of strategic interaction and intersection. As such, gods and demons are active agents as much as humans are, signifying equally important nodes in a larger network. Faure describes the Japanese gods succinctly in their capacity to act and change across personal and social contexts:

The gods are multilevel, kaleidoscopic phenomena (some would say *noumena* and *numina*): they exist both at the level of individual belief and at that of collective representations. At the level of society, they represent larger forces, institutions, or groups, which are often in conflict: temples, shrines, lineages, palaces, courtiers, warriors, itinerant priests and artists, Yin-Yang Masters, and so on.⁷

With some variation, this description could apply to the multivalent and often convoluted interactions between humans and nonhumans in the Tibetan milieu. Regardless, the following organization and taxonomic descriptions are meant to offer a limited but necessary demonological grammar upon which deeper reflection and scholarly exploration can advance.

Tibetan Demonologies

The difficulties and caveats of translation and organization aside, attempting to delimit and consolidate Tibetan demonology is still a valuable enterprise. Jonathan Z. Smith notes that taxonomy can help to clarify the shifting perspectives of the demonic – which he calls chaotic and protean – that nonetheless are presented in seemingly ordered systems within a culture (or cultures) across time and between regions. His observation that devotees themselves are “obsessed” with making distinctions and categories can certainly be observed in the examples below.⁸ As Rita Lucarelli explains, the use of “demonology” as a starting point for exploration, as well as a comparative exercise, is “useful in order to give a descriptive basis to analysis, stimulating issues of definition,

⁷ Faure 2016, p. 14.

⁸ See Smith 1978, pp. 437–438. I use “devotee” in place of the now obsolete and offensive “primitive” that Smith uses, though, he seems to have been aware of its negative shift in connotation at the time.

classification, religious and social function of demons and their interaction with humankind.”⁹ Bruce Lincoln likewise considers the concept a fruitful lens through which to explore the cultural intersections of threatening categories that are otherwise approached separately in the West, such as epidemiology, teratology, and criminology.¹⁰ Demonological schemes and catalogs are also found in the cultures surrounding the Tibetan plateau, such as Indian *bhūtavidyā* literature or Chinese apotropaic manuals such as the *Album of the White Marsh*.¹¹ For their part, Tibetans have themselves attempted, with only partial success, to classify their spirit types. One could perhaps more accurately speak of “demonologies” rather than a singular Tibetan demonology.

The earliest and most common Tibetan classification scheme for spirit types is the “Eight Classes of Gods and Serpent Spirits” (*lhalu degyé*) or “Eight Classes of Gods and Flesh-eating Spirits” (*lhasin degyé*), which are often used synonymously despite their different wording. The former expression appears in Dunhuang documents but does not enumerate what these eight spirit types are. However, a ninth-century Tibetan translation of the *Golden Light Sutra* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsasūtra*) offers a list of eight spirits, presented here with their Sanskrit equivalents:

1. *lha* (*deva*)
2. *lu* (*nāga*)
3. *nōjin* (*yakṣa*)
4. *driṣa* (*gandharva*)
5. *lhamayin* (*asura*)
6. *kyung* (*garuḍa*)
7. *miamchi* (*kimnara*)
8. *tochechenpo* (*mahoraga*)¹²

⁹ Lucarelli 2013, p. 22. Another valuable exploration in defining “demon” and “demonology” is Frankfurter 2012.

¹⁰ Lincoln 2012, p. 31. I am grateful to Matthew Goff for drawing my attention to this work.

¹¹ See, respectively, Smith 2006, pp. 472–530, and von Glahn 2004, pp. 84–91. For more on Indian demonology, see Bhattacharyya 2000. For more on the origins and development of Chinese demonographical and demonological literature, see Harper 1985.

¹² See Karmay 2003, p. 73.

Not surprisingly this list is Buddhist in orientation, offering the Tibetan equivalents of popular Indian deities and spirits rather than indigenous categories.¹³ By the fourteenth century, the list had not only taken on greater Tibetan characteristics but also came to include several levels. In keeping with common tantric doxographic practices,¹⁴ the *Chronicle of Gods and Demons* lists eight outer, inner, and secret classes of gods and flesh-eating spirits (*lhamasin degyé*).¹⁵ The eight outer classes are: (1) *gongpo*, (2) *teurang*, (3) *denma*, (4) *sadak*, (5) *yülha*, (6) *men*, (7) *tsen*, and (8) *lu*. The eight inner classes are: (1) *sokdak*, (2) *mamo*, (3) *shinjé*, (4) *dü*, (5) *nöjin*, (6) *mu*, (7) *dralha*, and (8) *gongpo*. Finally, the eight secret classes refer to the planetary deities: (1) *Jitripatra*, (2) *Jangöndrakpo*, (3) *Duwajukring*, (4) *Barrarotsa*, (5) *Drashenjin*, (6) *Jinuratsa*, (7) *Rähula*, and (8) *Kyapjukchenpo*.¹⁶

As Samten Karmay notes, while the authority of the Indian Buddhist list continued to be acknowledged, Tibetan categories became more prevalent. This is evinced in the work of the eighteenth-century Geluk master Longdöl Ngawang Lozang (1719–1794), who composed one of the most extensive and organized demonologies for Tibetan deities and spirit types. In this work, he describes the eight gods and spirits as follows:

1. the white *lha*
2. the red *tsen*
3. the black *dü*
4. the multicolored *za*
5. the brown *mu*
6. the flesh-eating *sinpo*

¹³ For an extensive exploration of the interplay between trans-Buddhist deities and Indo-Tibetan spirits, see Ruegg 2008.

¹⁴ For instance, see Dalton 2005.

¹⁵ See Karmay 2003, p. 75. In this variant Tibetan spelling, the negative *ma* is placed between *lha* and *sin*, and would be literally understood as “neither gods nor flesh-eating spirits.” However, in this context it is better understood as “both gods and flesh-eating spirits,” and so is synonymous with the aforementioned *lhasin*.

¹⁶ See Blondeau 1971, pp. 109–110. For the original, see Ö rgyan gling pa 1997, pp. 75–83.

7. *gyelpo*, the wealth lords
8. *mamo*, the disease mistresses¹⁷

While variations still exist, by modern times greater iconographic detail has been added to these spirits in an effort to standardize their categorization and representation. Françoise Pommaret offers the following description of the eight gods and spirits as they were relayed to her by the chant master of Lhodrak Kharchu Monastery in Bhutan, where they are illustrated on murals:

1. *lha*: mounted on a white yak, this is an armored warrior brandishing a sword.
2. *gyelpo*: mounted on a snow lion, this is a monk wearing a flat-brimmed hat and holding a bowl filled with grains and a mendicant's staff with bells.
3. *lu*: mounted on a sea serpent (*makara*), this is a half-human, half-serpent being holding a bag of diseases.
4. *nöjin*: mounted on a tiger, this is a terrifying black being holding a sword and jewel.
5. *dü*: mounted on a black ox, this is a terrifying black being holding a wooden score stick and a small sacrificial cake.
6. *mamo*: mounted on a dragon, this is a terrifying white being holding a mirror and an arrow adorned with a silken scarf.
7. *tsen*: mounted on a horse, this is a black being wearing armor and holding a bow and arrows.
8. *Mu*: mounted on a mule, this is a terrifying black being holding a wooden score stick and a black banner.¹⁸

Clearly the order and composition of these spirit catalogs changes depending on the text and time period.¹⁹ Other systems have tried to integrate these spirits more fully into Buddhist cosmology by assigning each spirit type to one or more of the six Buddhist realms of rebirth. For instance, *lu* spirits belong to both the god and animal realms, while *nöjin* reside firmly in the god realm.²⁰ As Ronald

¹⁷ Ngag dbang blo bzang 1991, p. 485. See also Karmay 2003, p. 74.

¹⁸ Pommaret 2003a, p. 46.

¹⁹ For other examples see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, pp. 253–317, and Tucci 1999, vol. 2, pp. 717–730.

²⁰ These classifications can be found, for instance, in the Rangjung Yeshe Tibetan-English Dictionary.

Davidson has observed, most of these deities were initially indigenous and only later assimilated into Indian Buddhist and tantric classification systems, yet they still retained many of their Tibetan attributes.²¹ Decades earlier, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz made a similar observation when discussing the Tibetan names for the Indian gods Indra (*Gyajin*) and Brahmā (*Tsangpa*). In certain Tibetan texts these names appear to refer to groups of autochthonous spirits or otherwise regional deities.²² Although Buddhist rhetoric treats the related Indic type as synonymous with their equivalent Tibetan terms, there are significant cultural differences between them. Certain texts speak more to the Indian versions of these spirits than to the Tibetan, and negotiations between Sanskrit and indigenous representations have been taking place since the imperial era.

Regardless, these hybrid lists are generally the product of religious professionals placing a patina of organization over organically shifting and regionally specific terms and concepts. Interwoven within these categorization schemes are territorially distinct spirits with deep cultural roots. Using Ladakh as their field site, both Sophie Day and Martin Mills note the triple-tiered cosmology commonly found across the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. This system divides the world into the realm above, inhabited by the *lha*; the middle realm, where the warlike *tsen* prowl; and the world below, where the *lu* reside.²³ In contrast to the Bhutanese description of *tsen* above, Mills notes that in Ladakh they are perceived as “half-beings who lack backs, and wander the roads at the edge of the village during the twilight hours, occasionally stealing the life-force (*sparkha*) of new-born children.”²⁴ Around Tibet’s Northern Plains (*Changtang*), it is the *nyen* spirit who is the denizen of the middle realm;²⁵ and yet for Kagyü ritualists in Eastern Tibet (*Kham*), the *nyen* reside in the realm above while the *sadak* reside in the middle.²⁶ Regional variations aside, the tripartite cosmology and the spirits who inhabit it are intimately tied to village and household spatial structuring.²⁷ Charles Ramble notes that such innumerable local variations make a universal and comprehensive classification

²¹ Davidson 2005, p. 217. ²² See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, pp. 99–100, 145.

²³ See Day 1989, pp. 58–64, and Mills 2003, pp. 151–164. ²⁴ Mills 2003, p. 151.

²⁵ See Bellezza 2011, p. 11. ²⁶ See Beyer 1978, p. 294.

²⁷ See Mills 2003, pp. 153–161.

scheme impossible, since how spirits are approached or understood in practice deviates markedly from textual descriptions. He further argues that “it may be that gods of place are associated with distinctive categories of activity not just insofar as they are individuals, or belong to classes, but to the extent that they form different configurations.”²⁸ Spirit typologies are ultimately less important than how a spirit’s role and function shift in accordance to their relation to the varying needs of the community. For instance, Ramble sees this network of relationships along vertical and horizontal axes, where local spirits act as bringers of rain, wealth, and abundance on a vertical plane and as defenders of the territory on a horizontal one. The various contexts of these geometric configurations are elicited depending on whether the deity is invoked through offerings, oracular possessions, or songs.²⁹ The positionality of these spirits is always connected to other spirit types and the human community in an ever-changing constellation of relationships.

Other overlapping indigenous demonological categories and types exist that were later incorporated into larger Buddhist and Bön contexts and corpora. For example, there are the “Nine Masang Brothers” (*masang püngu*) who ruled over the territories of Tibet. Treated as singular beings rather than spirit types, these brothers are: *nöjin*, *dü*, *sinpo*, *lu*, *tsen*, *lha*, *mu*, *dre*, and *gongpo*.³⁰ These and other brother groups are the subject of numerous stories, and especially permeate the rich oral and textual literature of the Gesar epic.³¹ There are also the “Five Personal Gods” (*gowé lhangsa*) that are believed to be born with every individual to act as their protectors. These divinities are described in predominantly Bön texts, but are also found in Buddhist sources, including the famous *Songs of Milarepa*. They include the “father god” (*polha*), “mother god” (*malha*), “maternal uncle god” (*ṣhanglha*), “enemy god” (*dralha*), and “life god” (*soklha*).³² There are minor variations of

²⁸ Ramble 1996, p. 141. ²⁹ See Ramble 2008, pp. 195–202.

³⁰ See Tucci 1999, vol. 2, p. 717, and Beyer 1978, pp. 292–301.

³¹ The recently published English translation of the Epic of Gesar is full of numerous examples; see Kornman, et al. 2015.

³² See Jovic 2010, especially pp. 12–17. See also Berounský 2007 and Dotson 2017.

this list as well.³³ There is also the nebulous label “Arrogant Ones” (*dre kpa*), which predominantly refers to lower ranking spirits in the retinues of higher deities, but it can also reference individuals.³⁴ There is even a classification scheme of a thousand gods and demons, according to one Nyingma tantra examined by Anne-Marie Blondeau.³⁵ Tibetans continue to make such lists of spirit types varying in number, length, and detail.³⁶

Spirit Typologies

There is a great deal of overlap and variation between these demonologies. Tibetan spirit types have multivalent and even contradictory characteristics, and some are notably more frequent in appearance than others. Taxonomic labels such as *lha*, *tsen*, and *nöjin* appear in several diverse contexts, while *denma* and *men* are much scarcer and their descriptions relatively vague.³⁷ Moreover, for other spirit types in these lists, there is some ambiguity in their usage as to whether they refer to a specific race of nonhuman beings or reflect a title of office. For instance, *sadak*, *zhidak*, and *yülha* are often used to refer to the local land deity, valley deity, or mountain deity, whatever their specific type or name may be otherwise.³⁸ It is also quite common for individual deities to belong to multiple spirit types at once. For example, the Buddhist protector deity Tsiu Marpo is by turns called a *tsen* and a *nöjin*. Finally, there are several other common spirit types that do not appear in these lists at all, or which only occasionally appear in ritual texts. These spirits, such as *kula* and *dri*, are predominantly found in Dunhuang texts, have either faded or come about in later usage, or have shifted considerably in meaning over time.³⁹

³³ See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, pp. 327–328. ³⁴ See Ibid, pp. 253–317.

³⁵ See Blondeau 2008.

³⁶ For a modern example, Ben Joffe has translated the second chapter of an anti-Dorjé Shukden Tibetan polemic published in 2006 that describes 28 distinct spirit types; see Joffe 2016.

³⁷ For some discussion of the latter term, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, pp. 181–183, 198–202, and Stein 1939.

³⁸ See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1998, pp. 203–230, and Heller 1996, pp. 138–139.

³⁹ The classification of *kula* as a mountain deity has especially been the subject of much scholarly debate; see Macdonald 1971, Blondeau 1976, pp. 241–242,