RESEARCH

# Inherited Stories, Timeless Wisdom: Intertextuality and Proverbs in the *Aché Lhamo Namthar*

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the textual basis of *Aché Lhamo*, the Tibetan opera. A close reading of multi-layered plays like the *Aché Lhamo namthar* reveals the elaborate processes employed by the mostly anonymous authors to embed specific Tibetan ideas into these texts. It highlights the importance of understanding the idiomatic language and the role of proverbs in Tibetan stories and narratives in order to fully grasp and appreciate the cultural knowledge they contain. The intertextual structures in the *Aché Lhamo namthar* show how the successful fusion of Indian and Tibetan culture was achieved by linking and anchoring Indian (Buddhist) tales within the specific Tibetan cultural and historical environment.

The Tibetan performing art *aché lhamo* (*a lce lha mo*)—typically rendered into English as Tibetan opera or theater—has been the subject of Western scholarly attention since the nineteenth century.[1] When Laurence Waddell, a colonel of the British army, first saw the performance of the *Maiden Nangsa Öbum* (*snang sa 'od 'bum*), he noted that these "crude Tibetan plays point to, in their own clumsy way, very much the same moral lessons as are taught by the Western Stage."[2] Other scholars after him, in turn, wrote off these stories as merely simple copies of Indian tales. In the 1940s, the Christian missionary Robert Cunningham compared the Buddhist concepts portrayed in the *aché lhamo* plays with Christian qualities. He wrote that only three sentences from the Sermon on the Mount would be enough to understand and appreciate this theater.[3] They were the first among many who would continue to study *aché lhamo* from various

1. I wrote an earlier version of this article for the conference proceedings celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA). Due to an indefinite delay, the editor Tashi Tsering Josayma has kindly agreed to let me publish this revised version in the *Journal of Tibetan Literature*. I would also like to thank my colleague and mentor Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy for her constant inspiration and support in keeping my curiosity for the performing arts of Tibet alive since my undergraduate days.
2. Waddell 1895, 565.
3. See Fitzgerald 2018, 149.



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angles.[4] The prolific scholar Horkhang Sonam Pelbar (hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar, 1919–1994) has quite pointedly remarked that

In the garden of the *eight lhamo* scripts
blossomed flowers are on vibrant display.
Bees, gathered in awe, witness the splendid scene,
each savoring the essence—a honeyed delight that captivates their mind.[5]

In this elegant quadrisyllabic, Horkhang acknowledges the work and interest of numerous scholars, all of whom have their own interpretations of the *aché lhamo* stories, their origins, influences, and so on. Horkhang also mentions the eight *lhamo* scripts or libretti (*lha mo'i 'khrab gzhung brgyad*)—a modern codification that only became popular in the twentieth century.[6] We must also distinguish between the actual performance, the *lhamo* libretti (*'khrab gzhung*), which differ from one theater troupe to another, and the literary model or version, the so-called *namthar* (*rnam thar*).[7] In this article, I focus on the *aché lhamo namthar* and the elaborate processes that the mostly anonymous authors used to localize specific Tibetan ideas in them.

In addition to the previous research which has indicated that the basic concepts of the plays are taken from the *jātakas* (Tib. *skyes rabs*), or birth stories of the Buddha, as well as the hagiographies of highly realized masters or famous historical figures,[8] the present study explores several of the (not necessarily religious) literary influences on the *aché lhamo namthar*. For this, Horkhang again points us in the right direction:

As we seek the roots of the great [*aché lhamo*] plays
[akin to tracing] a river's source,
we must ascend to the mountain's summit
to witness its origin and understand the course it takes.[9]

4. For a comprehensive and detailed overview of the performance aspects of *aché lhamo* the reader may turn to the outstanding work of Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy 2017.
5. Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar 1992, 8: lha mo'i 'khrab gzhung brgyad kyi ldum ra'i nang/ tshon mdangs sna tshogs bkra ba'i me tog bzhad/ ngo mtshar gzigs mo mdzad pa'i bung ba'i tshogs/ rang rang yid gar 'ong ba'i sbrang rtsi 'thung/.
6. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 242–43.
7. Usually nouns in Tibetan are understood in both the singular and plural. In this article I use the term *namthar* to refer to both forms equally. Further, the genre *namthar*—life story or liberation story—usually deals with an exemplary Buddhist life. See Roesler 2014, 116–17.
8. Padma dbang chen 2014, 209.
9. Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar 1992, 8: de la gzhung chen thos pas btsal ba na/ thog ma'i chu rtsa gangs ri'i rtser mdzegs [*'dzegs] te/ gang nas thon te gang du 'bab pa'i tshul/.

Horkhang wrote these lines to plead for a reflection on the multiple sources of *aché lhamo* texts. Only in this way would it be possible to trace the development of this popular Tibetan art form. Therefore, I am going to follow his invitation and explore the many intercultural influences of the *aché lhamo namthar* and take a closer look at the numerous proverbs found on almost every page, some of which are found in the vernacular language to this day.

Furthermore, I will examine some of the intertextual structures present in the *namthar*. Julia Kristeva's seminal study on intertextuality argues that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."[10] This is something we can also observe in this particular corpus of *namthar*, whose authors have successfully linked and centered Indian (Buddhist) tales within the specific Tibetan cultural and historical environment.

Although Buddhism has strongly influenced Tibetan culture, it has not defined it as a whole. It teaches a way of life and reinforces some of the values that society considers fundamental. However, the equilibrium and resulting popularity of Tibetan literature, based on Indian frameworks and (Buddhist) thematic elements, has been achieved through locally informed adaptation, including the use of proverbs and idioms. The use of proverb language in Tibetan stories has been described by Lhakpa Chomphel (lhag pa chos 'phel) as the "essence of common wisdom and wit created and collected over many generations and centuries by the Tibetan people [covering] every aspect of social life."[11] Thus, I seek to demonstrate that while the *aché lhamo namthar* reaffirm Buddhist norms and values, they also record uniquely Tibetan contextual elements, such as marriage customs, imagery inspired by both peasant and nomadic lifestyles, as well as shared historical legacies that have permeated and continue to permeate various aspects of Tibetan culture.

## Historical and Textual Influences

The *namthar* catalog of *aché lhamo* comprises about ten different stories.[12] The various Buddhist themes that run through these stories combine heroic drama, restyled episodes from the Buddhist canon, and elegant poetry into a unique dialogue.[13] Its central topics concern the responsibilities

10. Kristeva 1980, 66.
11. Cited after Sørensen and Erhard 2013, 283–84.
12. The *namthar* of Chögyel Norsang (chos rgyal nor bzang), Drowa Sangmo ('gro ba bzang mo), Dramzé Bumo Zukyi Nyima (bram ze'i bu mo gzugs kyi nyi ma), Nangsa Öbum (snang sa 'od 'bum), Chungpo Donyö Döndrup (gcung po don yod don grub), Khyeu Pema Öbar (khye'u padma 'od 'bar), Gyasa Belsa (rgya bza' bal bza'), Drimé Künden (dri med kun ldan), Rechung Dorjé Drakpa (ras chung rdo rje grags pa), and Depa Tenpa (dad pa brtan pa). Some of them have been expertly translated into English for which see Gavin Kilty 2019.
13. In live performances, this dialogue is often enriched with humorous interludes (*srub 'jug*) such as ribald jokes, slapstick, and social satire.

of the bodhisattva vow—altruistic thinking and acting for the benefit of every sentient being, as well as the strength of maternal love, mythological themes, folk legends, and the legitimization of (divine) kingship.

Horkhang Sonam Pelbar and others have already established that some of the texts are derived from well-known historical sources. For example, the authors of the story of Gyasa Belsa depicting the minister Gar Tongtsen's (mgar stong btsan) proxy courtship for the erstwhile King of Tibet Songtsen Gampo (srong btsan sgam po, r.617–649) drew on motifs from the Gesar epic, the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* (*mdo bzangs blun*),[14] and two episodes from the thirteenth-century *Collection of Jewel Instructions* (*maṇi bka' 'bum*).[15] This legendary tale became integrated into the Tibetan cultural and intellectual heritage for example via the fourteenth-century *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*[16] (*rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*) and the sixteenth-century *Magical Key to Royal Genealogies* (*rgyal rabs 'phrul gyi lde mig*). The opera Drimé Künden is equally inspired by another episode from the *Collection of Jewel Instructions*, which retells the legend of one of Songtsen Gampo's previous reincarnations as King Lokeśvara (rgyal po 'jig rten dbang phyug).[17]

The *Collection of Jewel Instructions* appears to be a result of Tibetans' assimilation of Indian literature into its own narrative corpus, a process which began in the eleventh century. While India was considered a major source of intellectual and cultural identity at the time of the Tibetan empire, the imported Indian concepts and traditions seemed foreign and somewhat alien to the Tibetans. As a consequence, this gave rise to the rearrangement of the Tibetan-Indian interface from the twelfth century in which Tibetans found themselves "within India and India within themselves."[18] This meant that important Tibetan figures became endowed with both an Indian and a Tibetan past through edificatory literature known as *jātaka*, depicting the previous incarnations of the Buddha and often also those of Tibetan masters and past kings.[19] Although various passages from the Indian Mahāyāna sūtras were taken as a basis because they were readily available in Tibetan translation, these *jātakas* were vernacularized by turning away from the formulaic and complex religious language (*chos skad*) and further "Tibetanized" with the help of traditional Tibetan rhetorical devices as well as particular narrative motifs such as the possession of magical powers or sorcery.[20]

In addition, the *Collection of Jewel Instructions*, but also Nyangral Nyima Öser's (nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, 1124–1192) Padmasambhava biography *Copper Island Chronicle* (*bka' thang zangs gling*

14. See Robin 2003, 130.
15. See hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar 1992, 7 and *Collection of Jewel Instructions* 2013, 286–312.
16. See Sørensen 1994, 197–249.
17. *Collection of Jewel Instructions* 2013, 325–30.
18. Kapstein 2003, 776.
19. See Kapstein 2003, 773–74.
20. See Kapstein 2003, 764–65.

*ma*), which inspired the *aché lhamo namthar* of Pema Öbar, are so-called treasure texts (*gter ma*) or "post-dynastic mythographic."[21] According to Ronald Davidson, these treasures emphasize the Tibetan imperial legacy (ca. 7th–9th century) and the development of the cults of Avalokiteśvara and Tārā, that is, a devotional system centered on both as the religious ancestor/ancestress of the Tibetan people. This resulted in the ideology of Songtsen Gampo and his two queens—one from China (Gyasa) and one from Nepal (Belsa)—as the emanations of these divinities.[22] Posthumously he was given the epithet "Dharma King" (Skr. *dharmarāja*; Tib. *chos rgyal*), thus reaffirming the divine rulership in Tibet.

These tenets were imperative in the period that followed the collapse of the Tibetan empire. The twelfth-century treasure revealer Nyangral Nima Öser contended that during this time the fragmentation of Tibet was brought about by the complacency of the last imperial king Langdarma (glang dar ma *alias* dar ma khri 'u dum btsan, r.841–842). Each minister would only protect "what was theirs" and social norms were eroded. Nyangral describes the decay as follows:

> the religious law that binds like a silken knot got untied, the golden yoke of the royal law was broken, the grass rope [that binds] people together like stalks of wheat were cut. [...] A son did not listen to his father, a servant did not acknowledge his lord, and the vassal did not hear the noble.[23]

Matthew Kapstein explains that the growing popularity of the Avalokiteśvara cult in the 12th century did much to solidify the power and authority of spiritual leaders in these times of unrest. He concludes that the mythical content of the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* "develops a distinctive view of Tibet, its history, and its place in the world."[24]

Further, Georges Dreyfus extends this argument by suggesting that the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* and other treasure texts possess identity-creating qualities. They evoke the "golden days" of the Tibetan Empire and contrast it with the decay of the present. Thus a new collective identity was imagined by Tibetans. The *Collection of Jewel Instructions* distinguishes Tibet as a Buddhist country and transfers the former Indian center of Buddhism to Tibet, primarily through the patron-deity of Tibet, Avalokiteśvara,

21. Sørensen 2018, 164. See also Blondeau 2011, 48.
22. Davidson 2005, 252.
23. Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1988, 446.13–20: bod kyi rgyal srid phyogs su chad pa ni/ [...] rang rang so so'i blon po rnams kyis bsrungs so/ chos khrims dar kyi mdud pa 'dra ba grol [read 'grol]/ rgyal khrims gser kyi gnya' shing chag/ bod dmangs mi sog ma'i phon thag chad/ [...] pha zer la bu mi nyan/ rje zer la 'bangs mi nyan/ dpon zer la g.yog mi nyan/ bod sil bu rang dgar song/. See also Davidson 2005, 71.
24. Kapstein 2000, 147–50.

> who manifests himself periodically throughout Tibetan history as Songtsen Gampo, Padmasambhava (c. 8th–9th century), Atiśa Dīpaṃkara (982–1054), and so forth. [...] The sense of being Tibetan comes to be in relation to the memories of Songtsen Gampo and other virtuous kings. These figures represent a strong Tibet.[25]

The Avalokiteśvara cult complemented the uniquely Tibetan innovation of religious masters and historical figures retroactively being furnished with past lives and a series of rebirths. As Sørensen notes, this concept resembles the case of the founding figure of the Kadampa (*bka' gdams pa*), Atiśa, who proffered his disciple Dromtön Gyelwai Jungné ('brom ston rgyal ba'i byung gnas, 1004–1064) as a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, depicting him as such in several "*jātaka*-style biographical adaptations later contained in the Bka' gdams glegs bam anthology" and thereby elevating him to the "status of royalty."[26] Although the dialogues in the *Book of Kadam* (*bka' gdams glegs bam*) are fictitious, the Drom (*'brom*) clan was heavily involved in promoting these stories. One strand of the *aché lhamo namthar* of Drowa Sangmo resembles the *jātaka* story of a previous birth of Dromtön preserved in the *Book of Kadam*.[27]

Several scholars have also noted that the stories contained in the popular work *The Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Avadānas* (Skt. *bodhisattvāvadānakalpalatā*, Tib. *byang chub sems dpa'i rtogs pa brjod pa dpag bsam gyi 'khri shing*, hereafter *Wish-Fulfilling Vine*) further influenced several *namthar* like Drimé Künden and Chögyal Norsang.[28] This compendium in 108 episodes was composed by the Kashmiri poet Kṣemendra in the mid-eleventh century and belongs to the *avadāna* genre (Tib. *rtogs pa brjod pa*), that is, narratives about the previous lives of prominent disciples of the Buddha. After its translation into Tibetan circa 1270 under the patronage of Phakpa Lodrö Gyaltsen ('phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–1280), it was added to the Tibetan Buddhist canon in the fourteenth century.[29] Nancy Lin pointed out that from the beginning, this large-scale translation project due to its sheer length could only be made possible by people of considerable political power and material resources. This pattern was later confirmed by the edition sponsored by the central Tibetan ruler Tai Situ Jangchup Gyaltsen (ta'i si tu byang chub rgyal mtshan, 1302–1364) up to the Fifth Dalai Lama (ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682), who constitute an assemblage of powerful agents in Tibetan history who actively promoted the dissemination of these literary compilations.[30]

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25. Dreyfus 1994, 208–09.
26. Sørensen 2018, 163.
27. See Kaschewsky and Tsering 1975.
28. Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar 1992, 2 and Wang 1985, 93.
29. See Lin 2011, 2–10 and Roesler 2015, 516.
30. See van der Kuijp 1994, 139 and Lin 2011, 12.

## Exploring potential authorship: Legendary masters or aristocratic novelists?

After we have gained a brief insight into some of the historical influences behind the *aché lhamo namthar*, I will next turn to some observations on the authorship of these works. According to traditional lore, the origins of *aché lhamo* are attributed to the polymath Thangtong Gyalpo (thang tong rgyal po, 1361–1485?) in the fourteenth century. However, studying the exceptional life dates of this Tibetan master, Tashi Tsering found no indication of the fact in his biographies.[31] In this context, Rigzin Gödemchen (rig 'dzin rgod ldem chen, 1337–1408) is also mentioned, said to be the original author of the Pema Öbar *namthar*.[32] Although both individuals shared geographical and philosophical connections, their involvement with the *aché lhamo* art form has been called into question.[33]

Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy has established that none of Tibet's dramatic works are the product of a single author, but rather stem from a progressive revision process throughout the centuries. The presence of a multitude of authors per work is certainly in line with most pre-modern Tibetan literature. Therefore, she and others have concluded that the *aché lhamo namthar*, as they are published in numerous anthologies up to the present time, could not have been created before the eighteenth century.[34]

It is important to emphasize that the narratives, both from the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* and the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine*, too, were developed over the centuries and became part of the "state-building project" of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his regent in the seventeenth century. A fundamental culture-making process was underway with the creation of a Tibetan polity which sought to systematize Tibetan cultural life and practice and to create a broad cultural hegemony in Tibet.[35]

In the course of these reorganization efforts, the various narratives, such as those of the *jātaka*-style life stories of Dromtön and the legacy of Songtsen Gampo as Tibet's first divine ruler were merged. Per Sørensen confirms that Songtsen Gampo "assumed the status of being the founder of the nation" and that "a major part of the new government's legitimization in fact hailed from the achievements ascribed to the 'golden days' of Tibet during the imperial period at the constitutive

31. See Tsering 2007.
32. Anne-Marie Blondeau (1973, 11–12) doubts that it was actually written by Rikzin Gödemchen, given its stylistic improbability.
33. Tsering 2001, 50.
34. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 239–42 and Tshe ring thar 1991–1992, 76.
35. Lin 2011, 19. Although it not entirely clear when the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* received its final redaction, Kapstein (2000, 147) suggests that it was universally known no later than the 17th century.

heart of which the king was seen."[36] The Dalai Lama institution continues this line of succession and is thought of as the manifestation of Avalokiteśvara and therefore casting itself as the heir of Songtsen Gampo and thus Tibet's "golden past." Dominique Townsend further notes that the formation of a "cohesive Tibetan polity [required] that the populace be drawn together as a community through the implementation of media [and] shared institutions."[37]

The Fifth Dalai Lama, for instance, taught publicly from the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine* during the annual Great Prayer Festival (*smon lam chen mo*), which was instituted by Jé Tsongkhapa (rje tsong kha pa, 1357–1419) in 1409 in Lhasa.[38] Another decisive factor for the development of *aché lhamo* was the staging of performances during the annual Shotön (*zho ston*) festival, first documented in the year 1635 and held at Drepung Monastery ('bras spungs dgon). The regent of the Great Fifth, Desi Sangyé Gyatso (sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, 1653–1705), also documented how the various festivals and performing arts of Tibet were part of the official ceremonies of the Ganden Podrang (*dga' ldan pho brang*) government.[39]

Then, during the reign of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kalsang Gyatso (bskal bzang rgya mtsho, 1708–1757), a standardization of the performances seemed to have begun and initiated a vivid interest in this performing art by governors (*rdzong dpon*), government officials (*rtse drung*), and aristocratic families (*ya rabs*).[40] For example, it was the governor of Shelkar (*shel dkar rdzong*), Dingchené Tsering Wangdü (sding chen nas tshe ring dbang 'dus), who composed the present version of the Chögyal Norsang *namthar* between 1770–1780.[41]

The 18th century marked a pivotal point in the sustained literary and artistic development of Tibet towards a new literary era. In particular, most sons of the lay nobility underwent a rigorous training program at Mindroling Monastery (smin grol gling dgon pa) in preparation for their service in the Ganden Podrang government. Here, they were taught Tibetan calligraphy, composition, grammar, and other subjects.[42] Doring Tenzin Peljor (rdo ring bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, b.1760) gives a detailed insight into his education at the monastery and the regular examinations that the students had to take. For one of the composition exercises in class, he admits to having been inspired by Tibet's first novel, *The Tale of the Incomparable Prince* (*gzhon nu zla med kyi bstan bcos*), written by minister Dokharwa Tsering Wangyal (mdo mkhar zhabs drung tshe ring dbang

36. Sørensen 2018, 171–72.
37. Townsend 2021, 30. Admittedly, this does not seem to be an unusual or uniquely Tibetan phenomenon, but rather a more global one. Nevertheless, we can again recognize strong parallels with India, where similar processes took place in the 17th century. See, e.g., Lefèvre 2013, 443–44.
38. Lin 2011, 21.
39. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 111–23 and Tsering 2001, 56–57.
40. See Tsering 2001, 57–59.
41. Smith 2001, 176 and Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 248.
42. See Tsepak 2021, 121–29 and Townsend 2021, 145–76.

rgyal, 1697–1763).[43] In later years, Tenzin Peljor wrote other works in the field of theatrical drama plays.[44]

Furthermore, the prologue of the Chögyal Norsang *namthar* features a song which was originally composed by the Tibetan politician Polhané Sonam Topgyé (pho lha nas bsod nams stobs rgyas, 1689–1747) as a song of praise to the Seventh Dalai Lama.[45] Could more of these lay literati have been involved in the composition of further *aché lhamo namthar*, by reworking miscellaneous *jātaka* and *avadāna* materials? It is certain that the *aché lhamo namthar* were later published by two printing houses in Lhasa and that "official" copies of the books were kept by government officials in the Treasury Office (*rtsis khang*) for the organization of the Shotön festival.[46]

Moreover, it seems that religious-political interests also played a role in the compositional approaches of *aché lhamo namthar*. In the piece *Chungpo Donyö Döndrup* (*gcung po don yod don grub*), for example, the power and influence of the Panchen Lama Lobsang Yeshé (paṇ chen blo bzang ye shes, 1663–1737) in the west-central region of Tibet (*gtsang*) and that of the Fifth Dalai Lama in Ü (*dbus*) are symbolized.[47]

Rolf Stein, on the other hand, considered religious figures, rather than laymen, responsible in particular because the *aché lhamo namthar* were first and foremost aimed at popular edification.[48] Sørensen's study on Tibetan folk literature lists several names of Tibetan masters who occupied themselves with fiction, such as Desi Sangyé Gyatso's contemporary Böndrong Khepa Tseten Yeshé (bon grong mkhas pa tshe brtan ye shes; fl. 1690–1730), who wrote the work *The Dispute between Tea and Beer* (*ja chang lha mo'i [rtsod gleng] bstan bcos*) featuring a mixture of literary and vernacular language and the occasional use of proverbs. Likewise mentioned is Gungtang Könchok Tenpai Drönmé (gung thang dkon mchog bstan pa'i sgron me, 1762–1823), who wrote, among others, a small work called *The Profound Teaching in Common Tongue* (*phal skad zab chos*).[49]

Notwithstanding such divisions into secular and religious, all of these writers had a common interest in making their writings more accessible to a broader range of people by using everyday language—a broader phenomenon known as vernacularization. In Victor Mair's opinion, the "Buddhist teaching contains a central precept that is conducive to colloquial language [namely] the concept of *upāya* (skillful means)," which encourages practitioners to use "whatever means are appropriate to ensure the salvation of all sorts of living creatures."[50] For him, the *jātaka* and

43. See bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor 1987, 290–91. I am indebted to Franz Xaver Erhard for making his numerous notes on this extensive work available to me.
44. See nyi ma tshe ring (2012, 112) for a list of Tenzin Peljor's works.
45. See Tsering 2001, 54.
46. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 162, 244–45.
47. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 262–64.
48. See Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 240.
49. See Sørensen 2010, 163–64.
50. Mair 1994, 713.

*avadāna* stories are a practical application of the *upāya* theory and he concludes that these stories functioned as "a kind of demotic empowerment"[51] for the dispossessed and less educated. By contrast, Sheldon Pollock argues that

> the process of vernacularization represents a profound and wholly active historical transformation in literary-cultural practices, as well as in the practices of political power that formed both the narrative substance and real-world context of so much of the literature in question.[52]

Similar to Victor Mair, he recognizes a kind of vernacular revolution throughout Asia from the eighth century, which in Pollock's opinion, however, came about primarily at the behest of court elites and "generally speaking, [have no] demotic spiritual origins, but rather courtly, political-aesthetic origins."[53]

Even though it is difficult to establish conclusively whether vernacular Tibetan literature from the thirteenth century onwards arose as a result of the inherent social values of Buddhism or as a strategic "aestheticization of the political"[54] (or a mixture of both), we can certainly conclude that the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* and the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine* both contributed to the Tibetan cultural imagination, resulting in widespread and enduring popularity among Buddhist monks and laypeople alike, as they contributed to a Tibetan sense of collective identity. The *aché lhamo namthar* seem to be in the same vein, with a framework based on Indian mythology and concepts, but whose contents are interwoven with motifs from Tibetan folklore, as will be shown in the following sections.

## Examples of Divine Kingship: The Story of Drimé Künden

Before we dive into the story itself, I will discuss the Indian influences on Drimé Künden's *namthar* and try to trace the many textual traditions of this popular story. There seems to be a basic consensus that the story evolved from the *Viśvantarajātaka,* which was translated and included in the sutra section of the Kangyur under the title *Sūtra of Prince Arthasiddhi* (*'phags pa rgyal bu don grub kyi mdo*).[55] Further, there are similarities with the third of the 108 episodes from the

51. Mair 1994, 720.
52. Pollock 2002, 30.
53. Pollock 2002, 35.
54. Pollock 2002, 37.
55. See "The Sūtra of Prince Arthasiddhi" 2006. Martina Wernsdörfer (2017, 178) rightly remarked that in contrast to

*Wish-Fulfilling Vine* called *The Previous Life Story of Tsugna Norbu the Crown Jewel Holder* (Skr. *maṇicūḍāvadāna,* Tib. *gtsug na nor bu'i rtogs brjod*) and the aforementioned *avadāna* of Songtsen Gampo entitled *King Lokeśvara* included in the *Collection of Jewel Instructions*. Common to all accounts is the great act of giving (Skr. *dāna,* Tib. *sbyin pa*) or, as Horkhang has it:

> Generosity is the wealth that will materialize in the next life,
> which will protect you from the great pitfall of poverty
> and repels the darkness [in the shape of] fearsome robbers and thieves.
> It is the resource to save yourself from unbearable suffering.[56]

It is through these merits and righteous behavior which ultimately provide the means to obtain nirvana and help to overcome the obstacles that stand in one's way. Pema Wangchen, too, underscores his own analysis with a Tibetan proverb that seems to consolidate this understanding even further: "The mind, origin of all, births auspicious stages and paths with intentions pure."[57]

For Drimé Künden's *namthar,* we have at our disposal an incredible wealth of manuscripts from various regions and religious traditions, as well as modern anthologies. The scholar Jacques Bacot for example used for his translation a Tibetan manuscript that was given to him in 1912 by a Tibetan lama of Urga monastery in Mongolia.[58] Further, through the preservation efforts of Patrick Sutherland, we have access to various manuscripts of the Pin Valley's Buchen tradition.[59] Also, the Bhutanese treasure revealers Pema Lingpa (padma gling pa, 1450–1521) and Taksham Nuden Dorjé (stag sham nus ldan rdo rje, 1655–1708) both discovered versions of this *namthar*.[60] Taksham even pays homage to the alleged template of the story, in the title of his work *The Story of King Lokeśvara Drimé Künden* (*'jig rten dbang phyug dri med kun ldan gyi lo rgyus*).

In all versions, powerful imagery is evoked through the use of poetry, metaphor, parable, repetition, and contrast. The many insertions connecting or interrupting the individual sections of the actual plot—such as prologues or epilogues, religious invocations, formulas or doctrines, but also seemingly poetic descriptions of the particular environment and atmosphere—associate and

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*Viśvantarajātaka*, Drimé Künden does not embody the "lone warrior" of Theravāda Buddhism, but stands in his altruistic thinking and acting entirely in the tradition of the Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhism with the bodhisattva as the central figure.

56. Hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar 1992, 5: sbyin pa 'jig rten pha rol lon pa'i nor/ dbul ba'i g.yang sa chen po srung ba'i rten/ 'jigs rung jag rkun mun pa rab tu gsal/ bzod dka'i sdug bsngal skyob pa'i longs spyod yin/.
57. Padma dbang chen 2014, 146: sems ni kun gyi rtsa ba ste/ bsam pa bzang na sa dang lam yang bzang.
58. See Bacot 1924, 14.
59. Two versions are preserved by the Endangered Archives Program (EAP) of the British Library, one block print (EAP548/3/1/3) and one manuscript (EAP548/3/1/4). The scans can be accessed through https://eap.bl.uk/collection/EAP548-3.
60. See Angowski 2019, 155–89.

localize this individual drama within the rich pool of cultural-historical and legendary building blocks from which it has grown and of which it is comprised.

Our protagonist, Drimé Künden, is the son of the king and queen of the ancient kingdom of Bheta. His father, the king, has an abundance of wealth—60 feudal kingdoms, 3000 ministers, 1500 royal wives, countless treasures—including a wish-granting jewel which secures his superior position among the adjacent kingdoms. As prince Drimé Künden begins to mature, he starts to exhibit great charity and compassion. The palace garden in full bloom is contrasted with the misery of the poor population staring over the wall "like sheep in a slaughterhouse," a condition that causes him to cry.[61] His father allows him to give away the valuables from the treasury if it will ease his pain. But when a spiteful minister starts complaining about the prince giving away the wealth of the kingdom, the prince, as an antidote, is married off to a girl called Mandé Sangmo (mande bzang mo). However, getting him "comfortable" in worldly matters could not stop Drimé Künden's urge for compassion.

Drimé Künden's generosity spreads quickly, and an ill-intentioned king of a neighboring kingdom sends a Brahmin to beg for the wish-granting jewel from him. He is faced with the choice of either stealing the jewel from his father, thus violating the Buddhist dogma of not stealing which is part of the "ten Buddhist moral precepts" (*mi dge ba bcu*), an essential system of morality for Buddhist laypeople, or not being able to fulfill his bodhisattva vow—the granting of generosity and compassion towards all living beings. And yet the seemingly real choice is, in reality, none, because the prince's nature is firm, his path is mapped out, and the message of the story allows for only one action: the surrender of the wish-fulfilling jewel, which was previously declared off-limits by the king.

This action not only promotes the narrative but also instills murderous wrath in his father: why wouldn't his son learn how to behave royally? Why can't he be happy with his marriage and the prospect of becoming a king one day? Giving up attachment to material goods, and generosity towards others are among the first values that Drimé Künden exerts. However, after giving away the wish-granting jewel, the prince is hard-pressed for an explanation and tries to reason with his father that attachment will bring no good. The king then says:

> Gold, silver, copper, iron, and stores of grain, horses, elephants, and buffaloes—
> these I agreed that you could give. I did not agree that you could give your life,
> and the all-fulfilling and all-conquering jewel.[62]

61. Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos 1989, 138.9–12: de nas nyin gcig rgyal bu me tog ldum rwar blon po'i tshogs dang bcas gzigs su byon pa'i tshe na/ pho brang gi sgo thams cad na mi mang po 'dus 'dug pa de rnams lug bshas rwar bcug pa bzhin mig ce rer rgyal bu la lta zhing 'dug pas/.

62. Kilty 2019, 60 and *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 147.1–4.

Drimé Künden answers in a proverbial fashion that "the bee with effort collects honey, but the fruit of such work is without great outcome."[63] There is a rather striking parallel which is included in Jé Tsongkhapa's *Songs of the Stages of the Path* (*lam rim nyams mgur*) that expresses the Buddhist intent behind Drimé Künden's reasoning, "being generous is the wish-granting jewel for fulfilling the hopes of wandering beings. It is the best weapon to sever the knot of stinginess."[64]

In this scene, we can see that upholding morality is the cause of trouble. Although the king clings to worldly pleasures and materialism, this will not help him on the path to awakening (in the Buddhist sense). The qualities of the ideal type of a bodhisattva are generosity and compassion towards all living beings. In his struggle for the right deed, which is located on the level of earthly moral concepts, Drimé Künden places himself on the same level as the reader and picks them up in their striving for "correct" conduct. The story, therefore, assumes not only a moral status but also an epistemic one, which is depicted through the built-in proverbs. The short aphorism, expressed in verse, sticks with the readership and also creates a bridge between the narrative and everyday life.

The king then asks his ministers to seek out an appropriate punishment for his offense and subjects him to the law. The subsequent deliberation of the ministers amounts to a terrible display of hellish torment: His skin should be ripped from him, his head impaled on a stake stuck above the palace gate, his limbs cut off, or his heart ripped out. The good-hearted minister Dawa Sangpo (zla ba bzang po) urges the others who are out for blood that their sanctions are too severe and again draws on a proverb:

Think again, king and ministers.
There are Mongolian and Tibetan [systems of] justice.
Is it right to put two saddles on one horse?[65]

This embedded proverb takes important memories of Tibetan history and locates them at the heart of the *namthar*. The minister Dawa Sangpo appeals to the Tibetan standards of the law, which refrains from capital punishment. This is commonly linked to the ruthless customs of the Mongols since the foreign overlordship of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty (mid-13th century to 1360s), became associated with (re-) introducing the death penalty, rampage, and injustice.[66]

63. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 147.6–7: sbrang mas 'bad nas bsags pa'i sbrang rtsi de/ 'bad kyang 'bras bu don yod ma yin no/.

64. Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa 1987, 104.12–13: sbyin pa 'gro ba'i re skong yid bzhin nor/ ser sna'i mdud pa gcod pa'i mtshon cha mchog/.

65. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 151.4–5: da dung dgongs dang rgyal blon 'khor bcas rnams/ da ni hor khrims gcig dang bod khrims gcig/ rta gcig thog tu sga gnyis rung lags sam/.

66. The fact that the reference is indeed to the 13th/14th century can be seen in the description of a New Year's festival for the 7th Karmapa Chödrak Gyatso (chos grags rgya mtsho, 1454–1506) at the end of the fifteenth century. As part of the

While the *namthar* illustrates Buddhist virtues and morality, the proverbs also express norms that are applicable in everyday life. Phrasing behavioral models in proverbs, or proving one's point through a pithy aphorism, is a deeply rooted cultural practice in Tibet. It is used extensively in Tibetan legal and contractual contexts and for conflict resolution. These particular and other law-related proverbs are still in use today. For instance, Fernanda Pirie recorded a variant of "the horse with two saddles" in her article of the same title, drawing upon her fieldwork among the Golok (mgo log) from Amdo.[67]

The proverb in Drimé Künden is used as a linguistic device to help create particular socio-historical associations, which is embedded in gruesome imagery and used with didactic force. Walter Capps has elaborated that religious traditions strive for a certain degree of conformity between the ideals they represent and the social order in which these ideals are to be expressed:

> [A]ll religious traditions have mechanisms to inspire their adherents toward objectives that their societies have not yet attained [and] provide some means by which individuals and communities can establish (or re-establish) their lives on the basis that is distinct from the social and cultural status quo.[68]

Further, Elizabeth Angowski established the fact that the story of *King Lokeśvara* in the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* contains details about the deliberations around the prince's punishment that are "otherwise absent from the Sanskrit-to-Tibetan [*jātaka*] versions,"[69] and resonate closely with Drimé Künden's *namthar*. Angowski also found many similarities with the *namthar* of Yeshé Tsogyal (ye shes mtsho rgyal ca.777–817), who was the female consort of Padmasambhava. Just like Drimé Künden, she is punished for excessive virtue by being exiled in the company of a confidant. The whole dialogue upon which Drimé Künden's punishment was decided and justified is reproduced almost *verbatim* in Yeshé Tshogyal's *namthar* (mid-14th century).[70] This would therefore place the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* at the base of both stories. In this way, the Avalokiteśvara myth informs foundational beliefs about its underlying cosmology and its place in Tibetan society, and the connections between these are identified, established, and internalized

celebrations, various performances were staged, such as *jātaka* stories concerning the kings of Tibet, China and the Hor (Mongols). See Tsering 2001, 53–54.

67. Pirie 2009, 230: myi gcig gi steng la khrims gnyis/ rta gcig gi steng la sga gnyis/. See also entries 4024 and 4027 in Cüppers and Sørensen 1998, 106. The missionary and proverb *afficionado* Marion Duncan (1967, 87n68) provided yet another reading, "Is it right to put two saddles on one horse? Can you get two taxes from one man?" Duncan unfortunately does not provide a source or the Tibetan for it, but I would reconstruct the second part as mi gcig thog la khral gnyis rung lags sam/.

68. Capps 2005, 8461.

69. Angowski 2019, 169.

70. See Angowski 2019, 171–79.

through its repetition across different media. In this respect, the *namthar* also qualify for the role of socializing literature.[71]

In the course of the Drimé Künden *namthar*, it is then decided to send the prince off into exile alongside his children and wife Mandé Sangmo. Drimé Künden's mother reminds him of her unconditional motherly love, and an intense and emotional dialogue unravels. The text plays here with repetitions and temporal-spatial connections. The images in these words of remembrance seem like a mantra, which are then repeated three more times and linked to particular moments in the course of the year: the roar of the blue thunder dragon in summer (*dbyar gsum g.yu 'brug sngon mo*), the rustling of the cold wind in winter (*dgun gsum skyi ser rlung*), and the singing of the blue cuckoo in spring (*dpyid gsum khu byug sngon mo*).[72]

On his way into exile, more tests of faith occur as he is asked to give away his children as servants. Although shocked by these actions, his wife continues to stay with Drimé Künden and follows him ardently into banishment. Later, the gods Indra and Brahma appear as two Brahmins and ask him to give away his wife. After he complies, both gods reveal their true identity and, convinced of his sincere devotion, grant the couple safe passage to their final destination.

When twelve years have passed, Drimé Künden, on his way back to the kingdom, undergoes a final test and gives away his eyes to a blind beggar. After these tests of character, the theme of reconciliation appears. The king and his entourage are overwhelmed by his principles and regret their previous actions. His children reappear, so do his eyes, and even the wish-granting jewel is returned to the kingdom's treasury. Drimé Künden is offered the sandalwood throne to the kingdom and handed the emblems of a king, beginning with a great wheel, the symbol of a *Cakravartin* king.

> The king spoke again: My beloved son Drimé Künden, take my wealth and offer it as you please, look after the vassal kings and their subjects. Make the royal law bear like a golden yoke and for the religious law, plant victory banners steady [in their places].[73]

The last line links up thematically and in terms of content almost identically with the historical account by Nyangral Nyima Öser quoted in the first part of this article and thus evokes the cultural remembrance of the "golden days" of the Tibetan Empire.

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71. On the general concept of socializing literature, see Salamon and Goldberg 2012, 125–27.

72. See *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 159.2–10.

73. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 187.18–88.3: tsan dan go shi śa'i khri la rgyal bu gdan drangs/ rgyal rigs 'khor lo che nas bzung ste/ rgyal bu dri med kun ldan gyi phyag tu phul/ de nas yang yab rgyal pos gsungs par/ yid brtse dri med gzhon nu khyod kyis ni/ bdag gi nor la ji ltar dgyes par mchod/ rgyal phran 'bangs dang bcas pa thams cad skyongs/ rgyal khrims gser gyi gnya' shing lta bur srongs/ chos khrims thar pa'i rgyal mtshan ma lus [par] tshugs/.

As the first result of this discussion, the following points can be made: Drimé Künden's *namthar* in its Tibetan version is representative of the hardship of a just and divine king embodying the bodhisattva ideal. Moreover, the localization and grounding of basic Buddhist morality through proverbs and Tibet-specific imagery (such as the thunder dragon) can be seen as an integral part of a comprehensive mythology revolving around Avalokiteśvara as the protector deity of all Tibetans. The myth itself "expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms [and] provides patterns of behavior to be imitated,"[74] and through the dramatic depiction in the *namthar*, it reflects traditional knowledge systems such as the Tibetan legal system.

Moreover, Ulrike Roesler suggests that while some of the more elaborate literary *namthar* could arguably be regarded as a form of novel writing, which might make us place them in the realm of fiction, "for a Tibetan audience these stories are 'true' in the sense of 'historically true.'"[75] Although both the hagiographies of Tibetan masters and the *aché lhamo* dramas share the *namthar* not only as a common concept but also in terms of structure (opening prayers, division into chapters, colophons, etc.), we must distinguish between their literary form and their content. The *aché lhamo* dramas transcend their textual boundaries and have found their way into folk songs and proverbs,[76] while the hagiographies are writings that manifest an academic learning that seems removed from everyday life and often from the practical, social engagement with lived experience. We should understand the *aché lhamo namthar* as a multi-faceted literary form as they convey religious messages as well as political information, provide an interesting collection of Tibetan cultural motifs, and constitute works of literary merit.

I would like to demonstrate this briefly with the example of the opening scene of the *namthar* of the *ḍākinī* (Tib. *mkha' 'gro ma)* Drowa Sangmo, who was forced to leave the world prematurely by demonic activity. The story begins in a time when humans lived to a hundred years.[77] An old Brahmin couple was suffering immensely because they had a long life and riches but remained childless. A *ḍākinī* heard her lament and granted them a miraculous pregnancy. The female Brahmin then says,

> When we were young with white teeth, we did not get a child. [Now] that we are old and our hair is grey, we got a child. How could it be an incarnation of a bodhisattva? I fear that it might be a magic trick of the *Pehar King*. The king of India is just and mighty. Therefore, I may bring forth an evil omen. The law of China, the law of Tibet, and the Mongol law will be upon me.

74. Salamon and Goldberg 2012, 125.
75. Roesler 2014, 118.
76. See e.g., Henrion-Dourcy 2017, Annex 5.
77. See *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 194.13–14.

Should I [accordingly] throw myself from the mountaintop?
Should I drown myself on the bottom of a great river?
Should I strike myself with my own sword?
To me, unfortunate one, give me a piece of advice.[78]

In this particular scene, the multitude of legal procedures and modes of punishment that prevailed throughout the course of Tibetan history are once again brought to the fore. Further, we learn about the Pehar King, who became the chief spirit of the Nechung (gnas chung) oracle, but is portrayed here in his other function as someone who causes nervousness, confusion, and anxiety in people.[79] Her husband tried to reassure her that this pregnancy was indeed a blessing,

> Wife, beautiful Brahmin, listen! *Oṃ maṇi padme huṃ hrī!* In the north of snowy Tibet, the Lord of Great Compassion Avalokiteśvara resides. His body is white and clothed with wild beasts' skins. And he proclaims the sound of the Dharma in six syllables. If we have a son, he will be the incarnation of the Lord of Great Compassion Avalokiteśvara. If it is a girl, it will be the manifestation of the primordial wisdom *ḍākinī*. So, now make your own food, wear your own clothes.[80]

Following James Obelkevich's definition, we should approach proverbs from their external, that is, moral and educational function. He suggests that "people use proverbs to tell others what to do in a given situation or what attitude to take towards it [as] strategies for situations."[81] These strategies have authority and formulate part of a society's common sense, its values, and its way of doing things. Seen in this light, the allusion to the reliance on and omnipresence of Avalokiteśvara suffices as reassurance of an uncertain tomorrow.

Both excerpts from Drimé Künden and Drowa Sangmo are tentative examples of how localization was achieved. They may also serve as an "indigenous learning system" for people to acquire and acquaint themselves with local knowledge required for active participation in socio-religious,

78. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 196.16–97.2: gzhon so dkar la byis pa ma byung bar/ rgan sgra dkar la byis pa yong ba 'di/ byang chub sems dpa'i sprul pa ga la yin/ pe har rgyal po'i cho 'phrul yin nyen 'dug/ rgya gar rgyal po khrims gnas sku dbang che/ da ni bdag la ltas ngan yong ba 'dug/ bdag la rgya khrims gcig dang bod khrims gcig hor khrims gcig ste gsum tsam yong ba 'dra/ brag ri mthon po'i rtse nas mchong dgos bsam/ chu bo chen po'i gting la lceb dgos bsam/ rang mtshon rang la brgyab nas shi dgos bsam/ sdug bsngal can ma bdag la slob ston zhu/.

79. See Norbu 2005.

80. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 197.3–8: yum gcig gson dang bram ze mdzes ma lags/ oṃ maṇi padme huṃ hrī/ zhes pa 'di/ bod kha ba can gyi byang phyogs na/ yi dam thugs rje chen po bzhugs nas yod/ sku mdog dkar la ri dwags pags pa bsnams/ zhal nas yi ge drug pa'i chos sgra sgrog/ bu ru skyes na thugs rje chen po'i sprul pa yin/ bu mo skyes na ye shes mkha' 'gro'i rnam phrul yin/ da ni rang zas bzo la rang gos gyon/.

81. Obelkevich 1987, 44.

cultural, and political events. Xaver Erhard noted that the insertion of proverbs and other folk literary elements calls on Tibetan tradition and thereby enforces "the example they bespeak with the heavy weight of tradition."[82]

## Gender and Hierarchy: The Tale of Maiden Nangsa Öbum

The story of Nangsa Öbum is often described as an indigenous Tibetan life story based on a historical precedent from the end of the eleventh century.[83] In many regards, her character resembles closely that of Drimé Künden but is changed from a male into a female protagonist. Just as Drimé Künden suffers at the hands of an uncomprehending world because of his charitable impulses, only to be finally vindicated, the story of the maiden Nangsa Öbum unfolds in a similar vein.

Set in central Tibet, the girl Nangsa is the daughter of a farmer's family. She is described as an unimposing, reserved and spiritually inclined young woman who takes part in a public spectacle and is wooed by the local governor Drachen (dpon po sgra chen) whose will is to marry her off to his son Drakpa Samdrup (grags pa bsam grub). She tries to characterize herself as low-caste and unworthy of this presumed honor:

> The poisonous rhododendron tree is very colorful, but who would use it to adorn the vase on the beautiful altar? The *dolo* stone is of a beautiful blue color, but how could it compare with the reddish luster of the turquoise? The little lark is very skilled in flying, but when it comes to soaring high in the sky, how could it ever compare with the great eagle?
>
> The maiden Nangsa may have an attractive form, but how could she be a bride to a noble? Please, I ask you to let this maiden go. She will not stay here but will go to the Dharma.[84]

The governor's proverbial refutation follows promptly:

> As the saying goes, "Pretending to like something that is unpleasant are the words of a young man going to war. Pretending to dislike something that is pleasant are

82. Erhard 2018, 138.
83. See Fitzgerald 2018, 147.
84. Kilty 2019, 315 and *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 52.9–15.

the words of a young woman becoming a bride."[85]

But all the arguing doesn't solve anything, and she is forcefully married to the governor's son. Rolf Stein remarks that in Tibet, marriage "has to overcome a certain opposition, sometimes marked by hostility. The ceremony includes a mock struggle or kidnapping, and a go-between is indispensable."[86] These elements of peasant life are beyond the pattern of the *jātaka* archetype, thus giving it geographical and historical individuality. Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy identified two proverbs that explicitly refer to these scenes. Firstly, "The one who does not listen to any objections, such is the Governor Drakpa Samdrup" (*zhus nas gsan rgyu med pa/ dpon po grags pa bsam grub*), and secondly, "When the 'monster bird' lands on the roof, [it is as bad an omen as] when governor Drachen shows up at the door" (*bya srin bya thog khar babs pa dang/ dpon sgra chen sgo rtsar 'byor ba 'dra*).[87] This shows how literary figures were identified with certain ethical principles and became not only part of the Tibetan vernacular but also cultural knowledge.

She soon puts up with her fate and accepts her role as a devout and diligent woman. After seven years, she gives birth to a son. Since Nangsa portrays all the virtues of a good wife, she is handed the keys to the treasury—a job once held by her sister-in-law, Ani Nyimo (a ne snyid mo). That is why Nangsa becomes the victim of her sister-in-law's jealousy and bullying, since all of the people belonging to the household speak fondly of Nangsa. The *namthar* again makes use of a proverb to situate the ensuing drama: "As the saying goes, jealousy [soon] arises between girls of equal [rank]."[88]

Nangsa cannot bear the toxic environment that has been created and wants to confide in her husband about the bullying and defamatory behavior of her sister-in-law. However, she decides against this course of action and instead explains her situation in the form of an inner monologue, for the reader only:

I bear no anger towards [Ani Nyimo, still] she paid for the wine I offered her with water.
If I do not speak, she says I am witless; if I reply, she says I am proud.
If I go outside, she says I am a loose woman.
If I stay at home, she says I am a wallflower.[89]

85. Kilty 2019, 316 and *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 52.18–20.
86. Stein 1972, 107. See also Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 275.
87. Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 812. Translation is mine.
88. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 60.5: 'jig rten gyi gtam dper chags sdang 'dra mnyam bu mos byed/.
89. *Tibetan Aché Lhamo Librettos* 1989, 62.21–63.3: lhag par a ne snyid mo'i dgongs pa dang/ ma bstun bsam pa'i gnong 'gyod bdag la med/ 'on kyang chang lan chu yis 'jal ba ltar/ kha rog bsdad na bu mo glen ma zer/ gtam lan byas na bu mo'i pher sha zer/ phyi la pyhin na mgo yangs 'chal mo zer/ nang du bsdad na lha khang logs ris zer/.

As she keeps silent and to herself, Ani Nyimo fabricates further lies, and Nangsa again feels the urge to explain her side of the story. When she is pressed for answers, she thinks to herself that if one is never tested, how is it possible to learn to practice patience?

She still would not point the finger at her sister-in-law regarding the nasty behavior towards her, and after Nangsa is accused of stealing and squandering the family's wealth, she is eventually punished and beaten to death. Nangsa then comes before the lord of death himself, Yama, who decides to send her back into earthly realms, and a magical resurrection happens. Even more determined, she sets out to visit her parents and inform them about her decision to finally become a nun. Again, she experiences a hard setback as her parents do not want her to give up this worldly life. Nangsa still leaves to become a nun and joins a Buddhist monastery.

Driven by jealousy and wrath, both her father-in-law and her husband wage war against the monastery in order to restore Nangsa to what they perceive as her "rightful" position in the household. It is only after she demonstrates her newly acquired spiritual abilities that the army and its leaders are convinced of her commitment and faith, leading them to cease further bloodshed. The theme of reconciliation emerges, as Nangsa is vindicated, and her previous actions are seen in a different and more positive light. Eventually, both her father-in-law and husband decide to become monks, while Nangsa's son assumes the throne.

The story of Nangsa's involuntary marriage and the injustices she suffered at the hands of her in-laws, which resonated with many Tibetan women in history, reveals that Buddhist ideals and social reality are often in opposition.[90] It is suggested that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a right-minded young woman. These characterizations imply that if a woman does not accept her patriarchal gender role, then the only role left for her is that of an evil foe. For women, the decision to renounce is portrayed as selfish, unnatural, or unreasonable. The *aché lhamo namthar* of Nangsa Öbum, therefore, allows us to take a more in-depth look into the attitudes and strategies for dealing with gender hierarchies in Tibetan society.

## Conclusion

"Speech (*gtam*) without illustration (*dpe*) is difficult to understand. A vessel without a handle is difficult to hold."[91] This popular Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) describes the appreciation of and the importance assigned to proverbs in Tibetan culture. This oral tradition is passed down from generation to generation and forms an essential part of language which also found its way into

90. Fitzgerald 2018, 159.
91. Cüppers and Sørensen 1998, xxvii: gtam dpe med de go dka'/ snod lung med de 'ju dka'/.

the *aché lhamo namthar*. The plays introduced in this article allude to and reaffirm social customs, institutions, as well as Tibetan legal and ethical systems. Every *namthar*, from this point of view, is a lesson, related to a principle of law, social role, or religious dogma. The resulting intersection between Indian mythology and Tibetan folklore found in these texts is evidence of a successful syncretism between these two cultures, and the proverbial logic of the Tibetan vernacular allows the reader to translate abstract themes into concrete meaning. The general topos underlying the *aché lhamo namthar*, whose origins mostly derive from India, are transported to Tibet by the addition of localizers. For example, in Nangsa Öbum, social references such as bridal courtship, marriage customs, female jealousy, but also the power of karma are incorporated.[92] In the case of Drimé Künden and Drowa Sangmo, part of the localization takes place via proverbs from the legal context and showcases noble rulers and their obedient and modest subjects. The *namthar* do not primarily derive their appeal from the character of the main protagonists who have almost unattainable levels of forbearance, faith, and devotion without any considerable emotional development throughout the narrative, but from the human relationships between the characters in specific situations. The abstract narratives tend to moralize the events they treat and help shape a common cultural imagination. We can observe that the humanization of Avalokiteśvara or the bodhisattva ideal in general facilitates access to mythological concepts allowing the reader to put themselves in their place.

Furthermore, the frequency with which reference is made to the underlying textual models, such as the *Collection of Jewel Instructions* or the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine* in the *aché lhamo namthar*, testifies to the dynamic development of Tibetan literature. To gloss Roland Barthes, the mythological framework functions as a core instead of a direct historical lineage or connection, which constantly localizes the ancient cultural context within Tibetan society and facilitates the anchoring of timeless wisdom and morality in a text corpus that has developed over centuries.

92. See also Henrion-Dourcy 2017, 275.

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