

# THE 17<sup>th</sup> CENT. GTSANG RULERS AND THEIR STRATEGIES OF LEGITIMATION

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## INTRODUCTION.

The relationship between the Tibetan prelate Tāranātha (1575-1634) and his major patrons, the various sDe pa of gTsang is a most complex one. In studying it I am increasingly aware that the wealth of detail to be gleaned from the various relevant texts is not just limited to the narrow study of the lives of just a few people, in this case those of Tāranātha and the various rulers of gTsang. Indeed the various strategies to maintain their respective positions developed by both Tāranātha and the gTsang sDe pa in these fraught times, reflect a larger relationship, that of the ideal ruler and the ideal priest as it has been exemplified throughout Indian history. This brings in its train a broad range of baggage, not merely the spiritual aspects of the patron/priest relationship extolled in Buddhist texts, but also a series of strategically aimed skilful means through which the various power modalities, both internal and external, might be maintained or even ameliorated.

In this paper I will suggest, among other things, that Tāranātha was both a manipulator of the relationship between himself and the various sDe srid of gTsang, while at the same time, becoming a partial victim of it. In this paper my position is that, through his careful manipulation of their relationship, Tāranātha sought to maintain the apparently unlimited generosity of his patrons. The negative corollary to this pact was that his patrons sometimes drew the prelate ineluctably into their power struggle against the Mongols and their backers, the dGe lugs pa.

## THE PERIOD PRIOR TO THE CIVIL WAR (1557-1603)

An important point to note concerning this period is that it witnessed the end of what had been a gradual process of the decline of the older aristocratic families who had acted as 'binding agencies' for both the regions of dBus and gTsang. Through their unparalleled power and their historical links with ancient lineages, these families, specifically the Rin spungs and their successors the Phag mo gru pa, had held in check the ambitions of others who would rule those regions. By the time of Tāranātha's birth in 1575, this old order had largely deteriorated and atrophied, leaving a power vacuum in which the manipulation of armed force allowed those who sought mastery

of the regions to assert themselves. Those who were later to become known as the 'Kings of gTsang' were precisely such an ambitious and resourceful group. We will note their spectacular rise to ascendancy below.

Although the issue of competing sectarian beliefs is frequently adduced as a prime cause of pre-Civil War tension, it must be placed into a broader context. In this paper I propose that it was in fact a quite minor factor. As is well known, there had been and still was at that time, a great deal of fluidity between the different sectarian traditions. We frequently find reference to secular leaders being patrons to a very wide variety of prelates. For example, among others, the various sDe pa of gTsang supported the Ka rma bKa' brgyud pa, the Jo nang pa through Tāranātha, the Sa skya pa through the person of A mes zhabs and the rNying ma pa through Yol mo sprul sku, as well as many other religious figures whom they had relationships with. Each of these performed life rituals and other ceremonies for the gTsang rulers irrespective of their religious alignment. In my readings of some of the documents of the time I have found very few tensions of a level which might have led to active warfare.

The major factor leading to the contention between the gTsang pa and the coalition of forces supported by the dBus pa was the sense of outrage which the gTsang pa felt against the coalition of dGe lugs pa abbots centred in dBus, who had so effectively consolidated their relationship with the powerful Mongols. This move clearly thwarted the aims of the gTsang rulers among which were strategies aimed at placing them as the undisputed rulers of both dBus and gTsang and to establish a powerful kingdom based upon older Tibetan values. Ahmad (1971) refers to these ambitions as involving what he refers to as 'geopolitical visions.' Such broader aims were clearly present at the founding of the lineage of gTsang rulers in 1565 by Zhing shag pa (1510? – 1599) (Ahmad 1971: 94) and were also noticeable in the strategies of his sons, especially Phun tshogs rnam rgyal (1550 – 1620) and his son Ka rma bstan skyong dbang po (1606 – 1642). The various Mongol tribes who were subsequently brought into dBus and other parts of Tibet by the dGe lugs pa to counter the tightening power-grip of the gTsang pa, were regarded by the gTsang rulers as being utterly foreign, alien forces, and therefore implacably opposed to their own vision of a Tibet of older, more 'Tibetan' values. Indeed, for the gTsang pa the intrusion by those foreign tribes recalled nothing so much as the Mongol presence 'by proxy' exerted over Tibet several centuries previously.

#### FOUNDATIONS OF THE gTSANG DYNASTY (MID 16<sup>TH</sup> – EARLY 17<sup>TH</sup> CENT)

A recent historical work, *Bod rgyal khab kyi chab srid dang 'brel ba'i dmag don lo rgyus* ('Political and Military History of Tibet' hereafter referred to as BRKK) notes the almost unseemly rapid rise of Zhing shag pa Tshe brtan rdo rje, the founder of the dynasty which later became known by the epithet the 'Kings of gTsang.' It documents his transition from groomsman to the Rin spungs pa family, to official in

the Rin spungs hierarchy and eventually to primogenitor of what may be loosely called, the dynasty of gTsang rulers. The question to be asked here is what was the situation in gTsang at the time which would have permitted such an interloper (at least in the eyes of established families who held power) to have effected such a stellar arc.

In 1557 there existed both the threat of, and later on the eruption of, major fighting between the Rin spungs pa and the ambitious Zhing shag pa, now the Rin spungs governor of gTsang, appointed to that position in 1548. In 1557 he ruled from the fortress of bSam grub rtse in modern gShis ka rtse. We are informed that the scholar 'Brug pa Pad ma dKar po negotiated a stay of warfare between the opposing sides and delayed combat, bringing about a reconciliation between the would-be combatants. After this lull Zhing shag pa, still an official under the Rin spungs pa, was appointed a *dmag dpon*, or general of the army in 1565. In that year he finally defeated his aristocratic Rin spungs pa rivals. His cunning opportunism is outlined in a charming (but probably apocryphal) story involving needles and suits of armour, in Shakabpa: 89.<sup>1</sup> In public Zhing shag pa claimed to be the undisputed ruler of gTsang and also to be a relative of the great 'Brug pa Pad ma dKar po himself. In this process of linking himself to such an illustrious figure, which as far as I am able to see at the present stage of my research is unjustifiable, we can see nascent signs of a process of legitimation being evoked. Clearly his purpose was to consolidate the authority for his already spectacular and swift rise to renown by joining himself to a person already possessing the respect and authority he craved. Attached to this rise, we also find a spurious etymology of his name, relating the syllable 'Zhing' to his origin as a peasant, suggesting that there existed a special relationship between himself and the very soil of gTsang. I am not certain whether this etymology is from the times themselves or whether it is of more recent origin. If it is an early etymology then its purpose as a link between the person and the land is clear.<sup>2</sup>

Zhing shag pa (Ka rma) tshe brtan rdo rje, the first of the gTsang rulers (1510? – 1599) did not rise from a noble family and was therefore considered to be an opportunistic upstart by many. This sense of mistrust by the populace extended to Zhing shag pa's grandsons, of whom Bogin notes that the prevailing sense in gTsang was that they were merely usurpers, able to retain their seats only through their exercise of military power and economics. (Bogin 2005:70)

The patronage proffered by the old and noble families, although generally beneficial for the dGa' ldan pa (dGe lugs pa), as it had been previously for other religious traditions, possessed certain drawbacks. These became more evident to

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1 The story, now a part of folklore, says that to covertly access 500 suits of armour (*khra*) for his 'rebel' troops, Zhing shag pa wrote an order for 500 needles (*kh*) which was duly authorized by the Rin spungs chief. With the deft addition of the tiny stroke of the subscribed letter 'ra' to the word for 'needle', Zhing shag pa was able to access the armour required for his take-over.

2 BRKK:189.

others by the late fifteenth century. The large number of monasteries belonging to the dGe lugs pa was regarded as constituting something of a threat by certain aristocratic families who were not part of that tradition. What were potentially fortifiable sites swiftly became monasteries, funded by families with whom, for example, the gTsang pa had chequered pasts and uncertain futures. Other issues also worked against the gTsang pa. These included the disposal of buffer land-holdings as prebends to dGe lugs pa monasteries, the loss of taxation potential, radically altered access routes to trading marts and weaker guarantees of safe travel through alien principalities.

From the time of his 1565 victory, Zhing shag pa commenced the process of redefining himself and his family. He came to regard himself as the founder of a family which had been somehow newly en-nobled, thereby placing it in the more aristocratic company of the Phag mo gru pa and Rin spungs pa, both by then almost completely moribund. This sense of being what might be called the ‘new aristocracy,’ was achieved largely by virtue of his conquest and the consequent subservience of all potential rivals. Zhing shag pa’s ultimate objective, at least as far as we are informed from the writings of his sons, was to protect Tibet from the ‘foreign’ intervention of the Mongols. It was this primary aim which Zhing shag pa inculcated in his progeny, all of whom were to follow his vision of a united, Mongol-free, prosperous and well-governed gTsang.

Thus in a swift and decisive manner Zhing shag pa consolidated his replacement of the old aristocratic Rin spungs family and became the powerful and ambitious master of some of the most productive farm land in Tibet<sup>3</sup> and allied himself to the family of one of Tibet’s greatest living scholars, ’Brug pa Pad ma dkar po.<sup>4</sup>

Zhing shag Tshe brtan rdo rje’s overarching aim was to ‘revive the institutions of the imperial period and to bring peace and prosperity to the country by applying a five-point policy.’ (Karmay 2003: 66) This policy sought to revive the glories of the past through changes to Tibet’s legal and social fabric.<sup>5</sup> There was general agreement

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3 We are told of the rich productivity of gTsang by Tāranātha (TARAAUTOBIOG: 306) who notes that gTsang was both prosperous and a centre of dharma practice and by the observations of the Jesuit father Cabral, who in 1628 noted the richness and large population of gTsang. (Wessels: 152-155)

4 It appears that one of the Rin spungs pa princes was named after ’Brug pa Pad ma dkar po, being known as the Rin spungs sras, Pad ma dkar po. Dung dkar blo bzang ’phrin las (DUNKAR1: 2324) records that in 1565 the Prince was slain by Zhing shag pa, but I have not been able to find independent reference to this event.

5 The recent Tibetan historical work, *The Ruby Key* (PADMARAGA) informs us in some detail about some of the ambitious plans of Ka rma Phun tshogs nmam rgyal (1550-1620) to introduce a series of sixteen fundamental laws to gTsang. Little is known about these laws, or indeed the impetus to develop them, save for the oft-repeated observation that they were a revision of the earlier laws introduced by the Phag mo gru pa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century which in turn, reflected older legal and moral concerns. Kapstein observes of these earlier Phag mo gru pa law codes, ‘Like the old imperial law codes it was based on strictly hierarchical principles, and it provided

with the broad aims of this policy by the Jo nang, Sa skya pa, Ka rma bKa' brgyud traditions.

There is now so much new and previously unstudied archival and private material relating to gTsang in this period, as well as newly collected traditional oral accounts, that I am unable to vouch for either the accuracy or quality of much of it. Much of it, the ancient gTsang archival materials in particular, is now apparently stored in Beijing and may be in the process of being edited and published.<sup>6</sup> My point in mentioning this is that I employ for much of my argument, several new works which discuss this period in some detail, and which use material which does not appear to have been

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guidelines rather than well-formed procedures. A distinct innovation however, was the institution of a new system of local administration.' (Kapstein 2006:118.)

This system gave responsibility for governance of areas to what might be termed 'fort masters' (*rdzong dpon*) who, from their strongholds were responsible for all aspects of local governance. The intention of the laws was to maintain what was regarded as the valuable characteristics derived from Tibet's dynastic or imperial period of the 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. The most innovative aspect of this redefinition of societal structure was that it was to be inaugurated, championed and maintained by secular leaders. The characteristics to be exemplified by these secular rulers included for example, certain aspects of martial valour as well as a re-evaluation of the practical merits of demonstrating kindness and care to the aged, including for example the donation of silk fabric to aged women. Both *The Ruby Key* (PADMARAGA:803-4 and 808) and *The Translucent Mirror* (KGML:220) observe that the sixteen laws (*bca' khrims*) were a revision of the laws set down by the Phag (mo) gru (pa) and note that certain new values were additional to those earlier laws. Most of the sixteen fundamental laws (*zhal lce*) were primarily concerned with such things as bravery, statecraft, oath-taking and the means of controlling barbarians on the borderlands. In his approach, Ka rma Phun tshogs was possibly following in the footsteps of his father Zhing shag pa Ka rma tshe brtan rdo rje who in 1548 had applied the 'five-point policy' referred to above which sought to 'revive the institutions of the imperial period.' (Karmay 2003:66) Reference to Karma bstan skyong's formulation of the Sixteen Legal Edicts may be found in GANGSCAN:10. The list of the Sixteen Legal Edicts may be found in DUNGKAR1:28, as well as in BODRGYA:2379. The final Edict concerning control of the 'borderland barbarians' appears to have been added to the already existing series of fifteen edicts formulated by Phag mo gru pa. Nevertheless in formulating a series of injunctions for society, Ka rma phun tshogs was no doubt being mindful of the sixteen moral principles which were said to have dated from Tibet's imperial period and which, although differing in actual content, possess a similar overall tone and intent to his own formulations. (French:41 and 81) Although not completely backward-looking in their intention, the desire to return to the codes of behaviour of the 7<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> centuries was given impetus by certain of the noble families, some of whom were by then again (temporarily) in ascendancy. Their rather rearward-looking aim was to link themselves to Tibet's glorious past, as well as, by implication Tibet's future, which they regarded themselves as custodians of. Some noble families even had biographies created which demonstrated how their lineage extended backwards to that glorious period when Tibet ruled much of Central Asia, when at the peak of its power in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, it was said to have even forced the T'ang Dynasty Emperor of the time to cede his daughter in marriage to the Tibetan ruler. (Ahmad 1999:140.)

6 Oral Communication from Tashi Tsering, August 2009.

remarked on before. I suspect that much of this new material derives from these recently archived sources. Among the works I have used in this paper, two in particular, *The Ruby Key* (PADMARAGA) and *The Translucent Mirror* (KGML) appear to employ such archival records among their sources. One of the problems with these published histories is that they do not attribute dates or other critical apparatus to their studies and therefore such useful detail can become an exercise in speculation rather than history. Concerning the rise of Zhing shag pa, Tshe bstan rdo rje and the details of certain of his nine sons, we seem to be on firmer ground because we have older, texts written closer to the events, to supply us with much of the detail. These include the biography of the 9th Zhva nag, dBang phyug rdo rje (1556-1603) and that of the 6<sup>th</sup> Zhva dMar, Gar dbang Chos kyi dBang phyug (1584-1630), both texts written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and both containing small but invaluable vignettes concerning the gTsang rulers.<sup>7</sup>

#### CARD GAMES WITH TUTELARY DEITIES.

The combination of a lust for power and a measure of anti-dGe lugs pa sentiment seem to be among the foremost reasons adduced by historians for the gTsang expansionist policies. Although doubting the anti-dGe lugs stance, I do notice the presence of a certain religious sentiment which I believe was a contributing factor to, and which was a powerful informing agency, for the gTsang pa rise. This sentiment was largely roused through various predictions and other strategies of legitimization. *The Ruby Key*, presumably basing itself on the new sources referred to above, suggests that the gTsang pa hegemonists were not merely local adventurers out to assert a powerful and renascent gTsang. Instead it tends to give them a background which is far broader than the predominantly dark shadow of greedy self-interest which has lain over the image of the gTsang rulers until now. *The Ruby Key* tells us that there were certain spontaneous omens which heralded the rule of the gTsang pa kings. Here we can note that the theme of political expediency has become garbed in a mantle of religious justification through reference to these ‘spontaneous omens.’ This ‘window-dressing’ process of introducing a noetic dimension into what was basically a purely political realm, is in itself a common enough theme in many cultures. In it we can note how religious sentiments become simply another means towards legitimation of rule. *The Ruby Key* tells us that the rulers of gTsang were said to have been ‘mystically’ predicted. This ploy appears to add a certain foreordained *cachet*, a historico-spiritual inevitability, to their rule. Ka rma bstan skyong dbang po for example is said to have been predicted as being an earthly form of the *bodhisattva* Vajrapāṇi, as seen in a vision by no less a figure than the eminent Pad ma gling pa himself. This is recorded

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7 SITU.

in the latter's work *The Translucent Mirror*.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore in this process of linking Vajrapāṇi and Ka rma bstan skyong we can see another interesting issue arise. It appears that there was another claimant to the mantle of Vajrapāṇi in the person of Gushri Khan, the Mongol ally of the 5<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, implacable enemy of the gTsang rulers and the person who after 1642 became the so-called 'Ruler of Tibet.' In a similar process to that which recognized Ka rma bstan skyong, Gushri Khan was claimed by the Fifth Dalai Lama also to have been a reincarnation of that very same deity, Vajrapāṇi. (Ahmad 1995:193, and 5DALAI:190.)

Here we find ourselves in the rather curious situation where two of the main protagonists, who had struggled against each other in the very same period and in the same general location, on opposite sides of the conflict, are both claimed to be incarnate forms of Vajrapāṇi by their respective 'sides'. However, the most interesting aspect of this parallelism is that even in those difficult times, there appears to have been a sense of prevailing propriety which worked against both claimants being the identical deity at the identical time. In fact we find that Gushri Khan was recognized as Vajrapāṇi only after the death of Ka rma bstan skyong. I suggest that this was a Tibetan example of what would appear to be a case of 'deity capture,' a process in which the tutelary of a defeated opponent is adopted by the victor as a symbol of their defeat. The adoption of ones enemy's tutelaries, rather like the consumption of certain of their body parts in other cultures, demonstrates not only utter defeat, but that the victor has completely absorbed any power and prestige attached to the vanquished party's tutelaries.<sup>9</sup>

This interesting aspect of Buddhist involvement in the political arena merits a broader survey than I am able to attempt here, to discover whether there are other, similar occurrences of the same protective deity being so consciously invoked by opposing sides in Tibetan history. A question which might be addressed in such a

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8 This reference is cited *in extenso* in PADMARAGA: 810-811. This text of Padma gling pa is not to be confused with the more recent work, titled *The Translucent Mirror*. (KGML) Padma gling pa (1450-1521) was a renowned extractor and revealer of hidden texts who is still highly revered in Bhutan to this day as a national saint. As with other visionary predictions mentioned below, *sortilege* of one sort or another was a relatively easy and convenient way of legitimating political power. In the Tibetan tradition, most predictions made about the arising of great religious leaders tend to be quite non-specific, and to an extent can easily be interpreted in a variety of other ways. The retrospective understanding of predictions can often be explained by a sort of hermeneutic which privileges certain readings over others. We must in fact be extremely cautious about accepting this prediction of Padma gling pa and should not use it as a reliable source for our understanding of the times. Rather, we would be better off regarding it simply as a piece of adroit political justification.

9 The process of self-empowerment through deity capture is a common enough theme in Indian history where it became a routine affair in warfare. (R.H. David 1997: chapters 1-3)

study is whether such claims to the divine were adopted simply as a means of psychologically ‘unsettling’ the opposition by claiming the most powerful and ferocious deities as being incarnate on one’s own side or whether there were other dimensions. Such an investigation might reveal signs of what I might in fact call ‘deity escalation,’ a process in which incumbents become saddled with the *zeitgeist* of an increasingly awe-inspiring range of deities, rather like overbidding in a card game.”

Later, more sectarian historical texts have of course polarized such dualities into even more outrageously simple forms. One example of this genre portrays the Mongol Gushri Khan as a pious supporter of Buddhism and champion of the Fifth Dalai Lama, while on the other hand depicting the gTsang pa Kings as evil, possessing aberrant and intemperate habits and being implacably opposed to Buddhism. This latter point is claimed, despite the well known religious links of the gTsang pa Kings to both the Jo nang pa and the Karma pa, as well-attested believers and as major patrons. The above example of what might be termed ‘character assassination’ is taken from Sumpa written by Sum pa mkhan po in 1748, one of the prime writers of this *revanchiste* type of literature.

#### ANCIENT HEROES FOR MODERN TIMES.

According to *The Ruby Key*, due to his accumulated merits, Zhing shag

tshe brtan rdo rje the ‘dynasty’s’ primogenitor was claimed as a *nirmāṇa* form of Tibet’s great culture hero, the warrior Gesar. Moreover in ritual ceremonies he was bestowed with the power of the Ka rma pa’s own protecting deities (*dharmapālas*) themselves. (PADMARAGA:806.) According to a prediction of the Ka rma pa hierarch, Mi skyod rdo rje (1507-1554), as well as one made by Tāranātha’s immediate predecessor-but-one Kun dga’ grol mchog, Zhing shag tshe brtan rdo rje the primogenitor was to become completely victorious over the areas of dBus and gTsang. Almost following this as a model of precedence, the prediction then goes on to say that:

- Zhing shag pa’s son Ka rma mthu stobs rnam rgyal (died 1610) would in fact be a reincarnation of one the ancient Kings of Tibet.
- Kun spangs lha dbang rdo rje (often referred to simply as Kun spangs drung - died 1605/6) would be a reincarnation of the powerful Ka rma pa protector deity Ber nag can, and
- Ka rma bstan srung dbang po (died 1609 or 1611) would be a(nother) rebirth of Gesar. (PADMARAGA:807)

As if he had swiftly learned the importance of allying himself to eminence, even fictitiously as he had done with the person of ’Brug pa pad ma dkar po, Zhing shag pa Tshe brtan rdo rje appears to have been quite complicit in what might be called this game of creating appropriate antecedents, impressive tutelary deities and ancient mythic origins. According to the *The Ruby Key*, Zhing shag pa was born as a *nirmāṇa*



form of Tibet's great culture hero the mythic warrior Gesar, due to his accumulated merits. In a manner of speaking, the choice of Gesar is an entirely understandable one for Zhing shag pa to have been linked with. At one level both were similar in their physical attributes – both were skilled in the art of warfare, displayed incisive wit and skill, brought a new era of moral rectitude as well as heralding a sense of renescent 'Tibetan-ness.'

As mentioned above, Zhing shag pa is also said to have inherited certain powerful aspects of the protective deities of the Ka rma pa themselves. (PADMARAGA: 806.) We know from the biography of the 9<sup>th</sup> Zhva nag, dBang phyug rdo rje (1556-1603) that he met with Zhing shag pa in 1567, 1585 and again in 1590. (SITU: 161; 186; 201) It is likely that the Zhva nag's tutelaries were bestowed at the first of these meetings in 1567, two years after his victory over the Rin spungs pa. In this transfer of tutelaries, we are reminded of gTsang pa ruler Phun tshogs nam rgyal who, in 1620 requested that Tāranātha transfer his own tutelary deities to him to help him overcome an illness. (Zongtse: 1977, 352)<sup>10</sup> The transfer of one's own tutelary deities to another was not always a guarantee of success as may be seen in 1609 when even the transfer of Tāranātha's tutelaries to the ailing gTsang ruler, Ka rma bstan srung was ineffective and failed to prolong his life.<sup>11</sup>

That these tutelaries were actual entities for the people of the time, is demonstrated by the cataclysmic omens which followed the murder of the sDe pa of nearby 'Phyongs rgyas and his wife by a crazed Indian *yogi* in 1615. The tutelaries of the sDe pa and those of the young 'Brug pa rin po che, Ngag dbang nam rgyal were said to have been so aroused at this offence to natural order that they brought the area under a grip of gloom. There was a prevailing panic among the people and ominous glowing lights were seen above the town of gShis ka rtse, along with firebolts which shot through the heavens. A gathering of ravens, no doubt an omen of Ngag dbang nam rgyal's impending journey to Bhutan, hovered over the darkened fortress and howling dogs gathered in the streets. Partly out of a fear that the area had been somehow cursed, but also due to their love for the Zhabs drung, many people from both dBus and gTsang followed him to Bhutan. (GTS2:320-322) The renown of many lamas at that time was to an extent dependent upon their ability to manipulate their own tutelaries and those of their enemies. Tāranātha expresses his own opinions concerning the implications of the above incident and omens in his large Autobiography.<sup>12</sup>

Having established the powerfully appropriate antecedents for Zhing shag pa in

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10 To be noted here are the regular visits of the 9<sup>th</sup> Zhva nag to the various other sDe pa of gTsang, including not only Zhing shag pa, but also mThu stobs nam rgyal in 1601 and Ka rma bstan srung in 1602. Tāranātha visited the gTsang court on over 35 occasions throughout his life, sometimes at times which were of the greatest inconvenience to him.

11 ZONGTSE 1977:349

12 TARA AUTOBIOG:388 ff.

the person of Gesar, *The Ruby Key* goes on to note much the same retrospective divine placement for the case of his grandson, the gTsang pa hierarch Ka rma bstan skyong dbang po (1606-1642). The claim is made that Ka rma bstan skyong was in fact a *nirmāṇa* form of Vajrapāṇi. (PADMARAGA: 809) As with the juxtaposition of Gesar with Zhing shag pa, from what we know of the Ka rma bstan skyong's character it might be entirely appropriate to acknowledge that Vajrapāṇi was a suitable choice as his informing deity. The young King of gTsang was renowned for his hasty temper, his physical audacity, strength and impetuosity and several of these aspects of Ka rma bstan skyong's character inform the early legends concerning the deity Vajrapāṇi himself in his earliest known Indic forms.

The scholar Benjamin Bogin makes the point that, according to Yol mo sprul sku, the sDe srid Ka rma bstan skyong was a rank outsider employing dubious means to legitimize his family's past. Of course this may simply be Yol mo sprul sku's personal dislike of Ka rma bstan skyong formed into a *leitmotif* for some far greater ambition of his own. Bogin says,

The principal criticism of Bstan skyong dbang po is that he behaves in a manner unwarranted by his family's status in Tibet's elaborate social hierarchy. Despite Bstan skyong dbang po's own attempt to glorify his family lineage through tracing it back to Gnyags Ku mā ra, a disciple of Padmasambhava and member of the ancient Gnyags clan, many considered the Gtsang kings to be unrightful usurpers of power begrudgingly accepted because of their economic and military right. ( Bogin 2005:70) <sup>13</sup>

Bogin records Yol mo sprul sku's feelings towards the brash young ruler over a disagreement with Ka rma bstan skyong concerning expressions of appropriate politeness. Yol mo sprul sku notes that the gTsang rulers have,

'...crossed into excessive arrogance about their family lineage. They are renowned for quarreling over seats with the Red-hat and Black-hat emanations. He (Ka rma bstan skyong) expects all to perform prostrations to him...He rejoices in his great qualities such as the power of his blessings and magical abilities. Yet, he was unable to humble himself regarding (the height of the) seat and so forth. I heard that he remained worried about that for a fortnight.' (Bogin:167)

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13 We also note here that according to KGML, after the 1621 defeat of the Gtsang army nominally under the command of Ka rma bstan skyong, and the negotiated peace treaty of lCags po ri, the gTsang pa leaders were still proud even in defeat (Tibetan: *ske bcad nas 'og mar byul byul* which I translate as 'after their necks were severed they stroked their chins,' Even though no gTsang rulers were in fact executed at the lCags po ri surrender, this folk expression conveys something of the force of their arrogance. (KGML:221-2) The Jesuit Cabral's description of Ka rma bstan skyong's character which he recorded after their meeting in 1628 shows that there was a positive public side to the ruler, one which certainly appears at odds with the views of his Tibetan contemporaries. (Gettelman:273)

It was to this rather self-congratulatory family, with its fabricated genealogy, that Tāranātha was ineluctably drawn. He spent a great deal of time with the various rulers between 1595 and 1632. No doubt Tāranātha also felt something of the brashness of the family which, like so many other families, attempted to textually demonstrate that their own particular lineage extended back to the so-called ‘Dynastic Period.’ In Ka rma bstan skyong’s case, this retrospective genealogy extended back to the person of gNyags ku mā ra, scion of the ancient gNyags clan.<sup>14</sup> As if in some competition with his patrons, or simply establishing his special nature in an acceptably cultural manner, Tāranātha also made grand claims about his own family’s links with certain key figures in Tibetan history. A claimed lineage such as that of Ka rma bstan skyong’s links to gNyags ku mā ra would have appeared quite petty to Tāranātha, for in his own case, he had had visions of himself in a previous existence as being one of the actual dynastic rulers of Tibet, King Za nam ze lde, the son of A sho legs and rMu lcam smad legs.<sup>15</sup> However this relative superiority of Tāranātha’s antecedents was never a point he made anything much of, because the gTsang sDe srid were his most important patrons and he would have been unlikely to have upset them merely to establish himself as deriving from a superior family and a more ancient and more impressive antiquity.<sup>16</sup>

We find no statements by Tāranātha at all in his large Autobiography which might suggest that the populace in general felt any sense of dislike or resentment towards the gTsang rulers, either for their opportunism or their pretence to family antiquity. In a way this is not at all surprising because the various sDe srid were munificent supporters of Tāranātha. In one rather dubious case they even presented Tāranātha with stolen religious booty reminding us again of the importance of the capture of certain select items, even among Buddhists! In this act the *sDe pa* Phun tshogs rnam rgyal, in an act of patrician-like generosity and, it must be observed, considerable political audacity, gave into Tāranātha’s hands the three ‘supports’ of religion, holy images, a *stūpa* and sacred texts which had been purloined from the private shrine of the ruler of sNar thang whom he had recently defeated in 1617. Adroitly linking a religious act with his victories on the battlefield, those particular items were donated along with the specific request that they be incorporated as ‘supports’ into the newly constructed temple of rTag brtan monastery.<sup>17</sup> That Tāranātha appears to have accepted them without demurrals is a point of some importance here, for on several

14 Bogin (2005) cites Ka rma bstan skyong’s own legal text, the *Zhal lce bcu drug* as the source for this claim to family antiquity

15 Tāranātha’s vision of himself as one of the dynastic rulers of Tibet is found in TARASECRET: 677. However, apart from Tāranātha’s own words at the commencement of his Autobiography (TARAAUTOBIOG) we have no other independent verification for his claims.

16 Tāranātha claimed an even more impressive future for himself. He says in his Secret Autobiography (TARASECRET: 689) that he would be born in India as a mighty king and that he would cause the dharma to spread greatly.

17 ZONGTSE: 351.

occasions he had performed private rituals for the sDe pa of sNar thang and he would have been extremely familiar with the purloined ‘supports’ under discussion. Nevertheless he accepted them without any hesitation, finding among the cache several old Indian texts written in Sanskrit and which were said to have had come originally from the *mNgon dga’* (Abhirati) monastery at *rGyal rtse*. (TARAAUTOBIOG:399, line 7 –400, line 2.) It is in incidents such as this that we can note the awkward relationship which sometimes existed between the patron and the patronized, one which bent religion towards the secular and the other which employed religious justifications quite shamelessly at times. We should be in no doubt that this attachment to power even to the extent of collaborating in the creation of fictitious antecedents, was not just a stratagem adopted by lay families, and even ‘lay upstart’ families such as that of Zhing zhag pa.

Of necessity this stratagem of fabricating the past involved prelates and other religious figures all of whom had something to gain from the procedure. For example Tāranātha was painfully aware of the importance of the powerful patrons he worked with and had strategies in place to attach himself more firmly to them. This guaranteed for him the ongoing patronage for the building of the monastic complex of rTag brtan Phun tshogs gling (commenced 1617) a project which was so extremely dear to Tāranātha’s heart.

The extent to which Tāranātha ignored the warlike propensities of the gTsang rulers, his disinclination to discover the source of much of their wealth, his willingness to engage in dubious acts such as blessing troops before battle and in performing enemy-suppressing rituals suggests something of the compromise that he, like so many other Tibetan prelates, became involved in.

Buddhism always seems to have courted patrons, but too frequently has also compromised itself through meretriciously following the ideals and goals of those patrons. The case of Tāranātha and the rulers of gTsang is an example from among many which demonstrates that throughout its history Buddhism has been as much about its often fraught travels through social history as it has been about its lofty doctrines and ideals. More specifically, as this paper has demonstrated, Tibetan prelates have often allowed themselves to be drawn into their patron’s webs of deceit and have lent their authority to various suspect practices such as those of regnal legitimation, seeking spiritual justification through the invocation of tantric deities, tutelary deities and the creation of suspect lineages. In their employment of these practices Tibetans have acted in precisely the same manner as so many other rulers throughout history.

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