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On Tulku Lineages

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Lachen Kunga Gyaltsen's *History of the Kadam Tradition* recounts an interesting exchange that is said to have taken place between Atiśa and some of his disciples:

Some Tibetan teachers—Geshé Chakdar (Phyag dar) and others—once asked Atiśa to write down the story of how he had reincarnated in the past, how he would be born again the future, and how he would be enlightened. The Lord replied, “Have you never recited [the *dhāraṇī* of] *Uṣṇiṣa*?” “We have indeed,” they replied. Atiśa said, “In the *Uṣṇiṣa*, it says, ‘This will eventuate in destruction. It will plunge a dagger into your plans, which will be obstructed and rendered powerless.’ Likewise, when you use words to stab the scriptures and the lama’s special instructions, blessings degenerate. It is therefore inappropriate to write down either the literal words or implied meaning [of what the lama tells you].” It is said that Chakdar took this advice to heart, and accomplished his spiritual qualities in secret.¹

This slightly cryptic passage from a fifteenth-century history of the Kadampa tradition captures something important about attitudes concerning the identification of peoples’ past and future lives. Whether or not the repartée between Atiśa and his students actually took place, the passage shows, on the one hand, that Tibetans have long been fascinated with peoples’ reincarnations, especially the reincarnations of famous saints.² On the other hand, the passage

¹ Las chen, *Bka’ gdams chos ’byung*, 163.

² The historian Sönam Gyaltsen (Bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312-1347) preserves a story in which the Tibetan emperor Trisong Detsen (Khri srong lde’u btsan) asks Padmasambhava about where his deceased parents had been reborn. Master Padma replies that his father had been reborn as an Indian scholar and would later return to Tibet at the time of his grandson. The mother, he states, had been born to a poor couple in Zangkar (Zangs dkar). Sakyapa Sönam Gyaltsen 1996,

undercuts this fascination. Atiśa (b. 972/982) is being asked by some of his students to write about his own past and future lives. Atiśa never denies that he is privy to this information. Rather, he refuses to make the information public on the grounds that this would require him to divulge a secret that imperils the spiritual life.³ It is not so much that Atiśa's incarnation history is too personal to narrate—privacy, in this sense, is a modern notion, not an ancient one—but that the details of one's spiritual life in general, and one's incarnation history in particular, is something that ought to be kept secret.

Despite Atiśa's admonitions, Tibetans have long been fascinated with identifying peoples' past lives, both their own and others. Beginning, it seems, about a century after Atiśa, Tibetans begin to claim themselves (and others) to be the reincarnations of former Tibetan saints, of Indian masters, and even of enlightened beings. These narratives of incarnation over multiple former lifetimes would become an important part of hagiographies, but they would also give rise to a separate genre of literature, the incarnation lineage.⁴

Incarnation lineages are accounts of lamas' multiple past lives. A variety of Tibetan terms are used to designate them:

- *kutreng* (*sku phreng*): rosary of incarnations
- *kutreng rimjön* (*sku phreng rim byon*): the successive line of incarnations in the form of a rosary, where each "bead" represents a distinct life

234. Also see Kapstein 2002, chapter 3, on the tale of the reborn princess. While we cannot be certain of the antiquity of these stories, it is nonetheless a testament to the fact that Tibetans situate the fascination with rebirth as far back as the imperial period.

³ That this sentiment was widespread in Kadampa circles can be witnessed by Dromtönpa's ('Brom ston pa) objections when Ngok Lekpai Sherap (Rngog legs pa'i shes rab) asks Atiśa to reveal Drom's past lives. "Lord," says Dromtönpa, "what is the use of your teaching all of the ways in which I have wandered through saṃsāra? ... Please do not bring my heart out into the open" (*bdag 'khor bar 'khyams tshul mang po bstan pa la dgos pa ci bdogs/ ... bdag gi snying phyir ma 'don*). Despite Dromtönpa's protestations, Atiśa agrees to Ngog's request with the proviso that Ngok never reveal these teachings to others (*gzhan la bshad du mi rung*). This is to no avail, apparently, since Dromtönpa's past lives become the basis for a text known as the *Teachings Concerning the Son* (*Bu chos*). The Tibetan is found in *Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha'i gsung 'bum*, 158; see also Jinpa 2008, 455–56.

⁴ A lama's *kutreng* can often be explored using different media. For example, hanging paintings (*thang ka*) and mural art (*ldebs ris*) depicting a saint's past incarnations are one entrée into this subject. There are many such artistic examples. See the brief but important discussion on "Tibetan Lineage Paintings" by Jeff Watts. And for an example, see the set of seven thangka of the pre-incarnations of Longdöl Lama (Klong rdol bla ma ngag dbang blo bzang, 1719–94) on the website "Longdöl Lama Incarnation Lineage Painting Set." My sources in this essay, however, are classical texts, chiefly histories and hagiographies.

- *kyepairap* (*skye pa'i rabs*), or *trungrap* (*'khrungs rabs*): the narratives of rebirths
- *kyewa rimgyü* (*skye ba rim brgyud*), or *ku kyepai gyü* (*sku kye pa'i brgyud*): the lineage of rebirths

The tradition of writing about multiple past lives has Indian antecedents. The *Jātaka*, for example, are stories of the Buddha's own past lives as a bodhisttva, but the *Jātaka* does not claim to be an account of the Buddha's lives in chronological order, as the Tibetan *kutrens* purport to be.⁵ Tibet may be unique among Buddhist cultures in having created "historical" accounts of the lives of saints across multiple lifetimes.⁶

Kutrens or *trungraps* are sometimes independent texts, but they are more frequently found as an important part of many (although certainly not all⁷) Tibetan hagiographies. The lives of Tibetan saints often begin with accounts of such past incarnations. When does the tradition of creating *kutrens* begin, and how does it evolve? Who decides that someone is the reincarnations of one or more past masters? How are these decisions made? Is there a logic to them? What are the motivations for constructing *kutrens*? These are some of the broader questions that interest me. One of the most interesting sources for the investigation of the construction of *kutrens* is the incarnation lineage of the Changkya (Lcang skya) lamas. But before turning to that specific example, a bit of background is necessary.

Tibetans start to be identified (or they declare themselves) the incarnations of previous masters beginning, it seems, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. Although the Karmapa incarnations are frequently said to be the oldest incarnation lineage in Tibet,⁸ some Kagyü, Kadam, and Zhiché texts suggest that there were

⁵ The *Jātaka* is also highly stylized and reads more like a moral-didactic literature than as a historical account of the Buddha's past lives. There is little evidence that Indian Buddhists were very concerned with identifying their own or others' past lives, although see van der Kuijp 2005, 28, for a discussion of the phrase "the incarnation of the Lord" (*rje btsun gyi sprul pa'i sku*) that is found in the literary corpus attributed to Advayavajra.

⁶ Fabio Rambelli (personal communication) has reported to me, however, that there was such a tradition in Japan, certainly in regard to the emperor Shōtoku Taishi, but perhaps more widely.

⁷ To cite just one example of a hagiography in which this is missing, the life of Chak Lotsawa Chōjé Pal (Chag lo tsā ba chos rje dpal, 1197–1263/4) compares the signs that accompany his birth and death to those same events in the life of the Buddha, but it never identifies him as the incarnation of a past Buddhist master or bodhisattva. See Roerich 1959.

⁸ The tradition that the Karmapas are the oldest incarnation lineage in Tibet can be dated to at least the time of 'Gos lo tsā ba, *Deb ther sngon po* 1984, 615; Roerich 1976, 519—that is, to the fifteenth century. 'Gos lo calls the Karmapas the "first

instances of tulku identification that predate the Karmapas. Leonard van der Kuijp has mentioned two such instances among early Kadampa monks who flourished in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries; he considers these to be the earliest attested cases of Tibetans representing themselves as reincarnations of prior Tibetan masters.⁹ But there are other accounts of early Tibetans remembering their past lives (*sku skye ba dran pa*) or of being identified as tulkus.¹⁰ For example, Gampopa (Sgam po pa, 1079–1153) is said to have recognized Layak José (La yag jo sras) as a reincarnation of one of his former students: “You, José, are [the incarnation of] a disciple of my early life who, due to certain [karmic] conditions, died [at an early age] and was reborn as you; but this time around you should live a long life.”¹¹ An early biography of the Zhiché master Gyalwa Tené (Rgyal ba te ne, 1120/27–1217) reports that he remembered his past life as Mal Tsöndrü Lama (Mal brtson ‘grus bla ma) when he was just three years old.¹² Lama Zhang (Zhang g.yu grags pa brtson ‘grus grags pa, 1122/32–93), a contemporary of Gyalwa Tené, tells us that “people said” he was an emanation (*sprul pa*).¹³ Kyopa Jigten Gönpö

successive line of incarnations” (*sprul pa’i sku rim pa dang po*). He calls the Zhamar (Zhwa dmar) incarnations the “second successive line” (*rim pa gnyis pa*); ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 651; Roerich 1976, 552.

⁹ van der Kuijp 2005, 28–29. On some past incarnations of Chayulba (Bya yul ba), see also Roberto Vitali’s facsimile edition of Zhang chung pa dpal ‘byor rgya mtsho, *Chos ‘byung mkhas pa’i yid ‘phrog* in Vitali 2012, 29 and 76–77.

¹⁰ The twelfth-century Kadampa matser Chilbuwa (Spyil bu ba) is said to have remembered his past lives. The master Namkha Gyaltsen (Nam mkha’ rgyal mtshan) is also said to have remembered his past lives in both India and Tsang (Gtsang). And the first Shamar, Tokden Drakpa Sengé (Rtogs ldan grags pa seng ge, 1283–1349), is said to have had a vision of Gampopa which caused him to remember his past lives. See ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 283, 343, 625, 745.

¹¹ The particular source for this is, however, late: ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 561; Roerich 1976, 471.

¹² Tené’s biography, written by one of his direct disciples, states that one day, out of the blue, the child asked his mother about Lama Mal’s home district. The mother replied that Lama Mal hailed from Lhodrak Rong (Lho brag rong) and asked the boy why he wanted to know. Tené announced that it was because he was Lama Mal’s reincarnation. Tené was subsequently identified as the reincarnation (*sku skye ba*) of “a great adept” by several visiting lamas, including Gampopa and Loro Rechungba (Lo ro ras chung ba, 1085–1161). Each claimed that the child was a reincarnation and insisted on imparting to him their respective lineages. This can obviously be read as a way of rhetorically portraying Tené as a vessel for many different lineages popular in his day, including those of Milarepa (Mi la ras pa). At the age of twenty-two, Tené decided to make a trip to the home of his previous incarnation in Lho brag rong. The biography of Tené is contained in the *Zhi byed brgyud pa phyi ma*, 401–19. It was written by Zhikpo, the brother of Rok Bendé Sherap (Rog bande shes rab, 1166–1244). The relevant passage concerning Tené’s past life is found on pp. 402–03.

¹³ The line is found in Lama Shang’s *Self-Eulogy*; see Yamamoto 2009, 53.

(Skyobs pa 'Jig rten mgon po, 1143–1217), the founder of the Drigung Kagyü school, was also recognized as an incarnation by his teacher, Pagmo Drupa Dorje Gyalpo (Phag mo gru pa rdo rje rgyal po, 1110–70).¹⁴ Finally, the twelfth-century *Testament of Ba* mentions that the imperial period monk Ba Selnang (or in some versions Ba Sangshi) was recognized by “a clairvoyant Chinese monk” as the incarnation of a bodhisattva.¹⁵ The text also states that Śāntarakṣita recognized

¹⁴ There is a fascinating passage found in a work written by Phakmo Drupa direct disciple, Sherap Jungné (Shes rab 'byung gnas, *Chos rje 'jig rten mgon po'i rnam thar*, 1–2). The passage reads:

It was widely known that... the Lord [Phakmo Drupa] told the Precious Lord [Jikten Gönpö] that he was a tenth-level bodhisattva. But the Precious Lord did not believe it, stating, “Is there such a thing as being a tenth level bodhisattva without knowing it?” Geshé Trashi Gangpa (Bkra shis sgang pa, b. twelfth century), citing many reasons, also considered the Precious Lord [Jikten Gönpö] to be the Lord of Secrets, Vajrapāni.

The work goes on to provide further interesting details of Jikten Gönpö's response to his lamas' assertions that he was an incarnation:

Asked whether this was so, [Jikten Gönpö] replied, ‘While both [my lamas'] claims [concerning my status as an incarnation] are in agreement, what was their real purpose in claiming that I am a tenth-level bodhiattva or the Lord of Secrets? [By this claim they meant that] the nature of my own mind is [one with] the realization of mahāmudrā. Both the ultimate *bodhicitta* and the conventional mental resolve to reach enlightenment [for the sake of others] are the same in all of the buddhas of the three times... They are also the same in all sentient beings of the three worlds, and that is why they ripen and liberate all sentient beings.

The passage suggests that Jikten Gönpö reinterpreted his lamas' claims concerning his status as a way of making a broader doctrinal point concerning the immanence of buddhahood. On Jikten Gönpö 's life, see also Ta tshag, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 352–65. See also the fourth Shamar's homage prayer in 'Jig rten gsum gyi mgon po'i yon tan, 176. In that prayer, Jikten Gönpö is identified as having been prophesied by Tāra. The tradition of Jikten Gönpö as Nāgārjuna's incarnation appears to be quite old, dating as far back as Tropu Jampa Pal (Khro phu Byams pa dpal, 1172–1236). It is sometimes said to derive from a prophecy made by a Sinhalese arhat. See, for example, Shes rab 'byung gnas, *Chos rje 'jig rten mgon po'i rnam thar*, 6–7; Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 424–25; and van der Kuijp 1994, 599–600, 609–11. Van der Kuijp dates the tradition connecting Jigten Gönpö to Nāgārjuna to 1188—that is, to Jikten Gönpö's own lifetime. This is not the only case of someone being prophesied by a Sinhalese saint. Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 284, states that Sangyé Wöntön (Sangs rgyas dbon ston, twelfth century) had also been so prophesied.

¹⁵ Mgon po rgyal mtshan, ed., *Sba bzhed*, 24: *hwa shang mgon shes can na re/ khyod ni byang chub sems dpa' rta skad ces bya ba'i sprul pa yin*. Other versions of the text identify the bodhisattva as Wild Horse (Rta rgod) or Wild Horse's Neigh (Rta rgod skad), suggesting an association to Hayagrīva, the horse-headed, wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara. See Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 49. Of

Selnang as a disciple from a past life and, in another instance, that Śāntarakṣita caused the emperor Trisong Detsen to remember that they had prayed together for the conversion of Tibet at the time of Śākyamuni.¹⁶ Because the *Testament of Ba* was compiled centuries after the events that it portrays, we cannot of course assume that it represents actual imperial-period events or views. Nonetheless, the *Testament of Ba* provides us with something of a window into the views of twelfth-century Tibetans concerning the identification of incarnations.

Today, the identification of tulkus is a fairly routinized process. Although there are certainly exceptions, students of a deceased teacher will nowadays search for possible candidates and present the options to a high-ranking lama, who will then choose a specific child, often through some form of divination. But this procedure appears to be relatively late. I have found no old texts that describe the identification of tulkus in precisely this way. Instead, older sources suggest that incarnate lamas are usually identified in one of three ways: (1) a child declares himself to be a reincarnation;¹⁷ (2) the child is identified by his teacher as an incarnation;¹⁸ and (3) the child is

course the *Sba bzhed* and other early works like the *Bka' chems kha khol ma* also famously identify the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) as the incarnation (*sprul pa*) of Avalokiteśvara. The dating of the *Sba bzhed* is a notoriously difficult issue (see Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, xii–xiv), but given that the passage in question seems to be found in all versions, it can probably be dated to at least the twelfth century.

¹⁶ The passage concerning the emperor appears only in the *Dbā' bzhed* and not in the *Sba bzhed*; Wangdu and Diemberger 2000, 46. The lines concerning Salnang read: “You generated the mind directed at enlightenment many lifetimes ago. And those many lifetimes ago you were the best of my spiritual sons who generated the mind directed at enlightenment, and you were called Yeshé Wangpo.” *tshē rabs du ma'i sngon rol nas sems bskyed pa yin te/ tshē rabs du ma'i sngon rol nas sems bskyed pa'i chos kyi bu rabs yin/ ming yang ye shes dbang por btags so zhes gsungs*; Mgon po rgyal mtshan, ed., *Sba bzhed*, 12.

¹⁷ For instance, the fourth Karmapa Rölpa'i Dorjé (Rol pa'i rdo rje, 1340–83) is said to have declared himself the reincarnation of the Karmapa at age three; see Ta tshag pa, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 243: *dgung lo gsum pa la/ nga karma pa'i skye ba yin/ yab yum la dpag tu med pa gsungs*.

¹⁸ For example, at the beginning of the biography of his predecessor, Karma Pakshi, the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé (Rang byung rdo rje, 1284–1339) states that Pakshi was recognized as the reincarnation of the first Karmapa Dūsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa) by his first teacher, Pongrakpa (Spong rag pa) or Pomdrakpa (Spom brag pa, 1170–1249), and subsequently by other lamas and deities as well. Rang byung rdo rje, *Bla ma rin po che'i rnam par thar pa*, 257f. See also Ta tshag pa, *Lho rung chos 'byung*, 235; and Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 404. In the *Lho rong chos 'byung* the recognition is not very explicit: “You are someone blessed by the ḍākinīs.” Padma dkar po states that “[the child] was slightly unsure of his identity, and Rinpoche Pomdrakpa recognized him;” *ngo sprod cung*

identified by former students, who then build consensus for their view.¹⁹ These three methods are, however, neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.²⁰

Miracles often play an important role in the narratives of the identification of tulkus. Such is the case with Aro Yeshé Jungné (A ro ye shes 'byung gnas, tenth–eleventh century)²¹ and with Zurchungwa Sherap Drakpa (Zur chung ba shes rab grags pa, 1014–74). Regarding the latter, the *Blue Annals* of Gö Lotsawa ('Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal, 1392–1481) tells us that while Zurchungwa was still a boy, his father, Wugpa Lungpa ('Ug pa lung pa Shākya 'byung gnas, a.k.a. Zur chen, 1002–62), saw him circumambulating a stūpa without his feet touching the ground. This caused Wugpa Lungpa to think, “Well then, it seems like this [child] is an incarnation.”²²

zad ma mkhyen pa rin po che spom brag pas ngo sprad. On Pomdrakpa, see Alexander Gardner's entry in *Treasury of Lives*.

The third Karmapa himself is said to have been recognized (*mngon mkhyen*) by Orgyenpa (O rgyan pa, 1229/30–1309). Padma dkar po, *Chos 'byung*, 406, recounts the story of Orgyenpa's clairvoyant knowledge that the child would arrive the following day. The master prepared a throne higher than his own. When the boy arrived, he immediately climbed on the throne without any fear. Orgyenpa asked him, “Boy, why are you sitting my lama's throne?” The boy replied, “I am that lama, and I have a favor to ask of you.” According to this account, therefore, Rangjung Dorjé recognized himself.

¹⁹ For instance, the *Blue Annals* tells us that the second Shamar (Zhwa dmar Mkha' spyod dbang po, 1350–1405) “was accepted as the reincarnation of [the first Shamar] Tokden Drakpa Sengé by some of [Drakpa Sengé's] former students.” 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 637.

²⁰ Prophecy or scripture (*lung bstan*) can also play a role in establishing an individual as a reincarnation, but scripture is usually not the primary mode for recognition, being instead used after the fact to bolster a decision that has already been made. Nor is the identification of tulkus always put into the mouth of human beings. On occasion it is a supernatural agent who identifies someone as an incarnation. A biography of Marpa (Mar pa Chos kyi blo gros, 1012–1100) tells us that the translator Yönten Bar (Yon tan 'bar, eleventh century), while traveling in India, received the news that Marpa was the reincarnation of Ḍombi Heruka from a magical yogini. In any case, instances of identification of tulkus by supernatural agents, as in this case, are relatively rare. On the tale concerning Yönten Bar and the yogini, see Khenpo Khonchog Gyatsen 1990, 99. The origin of the tradition that Marpa was an incarnation of Ḍombi appears to be a terma, the *Mkha' ri'i zhus lan*, on which see Roberts 2007, 77.

²¹ See the famous story of the miraculous birth and miracles of Aro preserved in 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon* 1984, 1162f; Roerich 1976, 999f.

²² 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 148: 'o na 'di sprul pa'i sku zhig yin. Roerich 1976, 115. For a similar magical story serving as evidence of Zhippo Dütsi's (Zhig po bdud rtsi, 1149–99) status as an incarnation, see 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 172; Roerich 1976, 135. Similar claims are also made about the Kagyü masters Yang Gönpa (Yang dgon pa, 1213–58) ('Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 806; Roerich 1976, 688) and Trimkhang Lotsawa (Khrims khang lo tsā ba bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1424–82) ('Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 942f; Roerich 1976, 805f).

Eventually, almost every famous Tibetan saint gets incorporated into the *kutreng* of one or another later Tibetan lama. For example, among Kagyüpas, Marpa (Mar pa chos kyi blo gros, 1002/1012–97/1100) reincarnates as Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 1243–1311), and Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1040/52–1123/35) as Götsangpa (Rgod tshang pa mgon po rdo rje, 1189–1258).²³ Dromtönpa ('Brom ston rgyal ba'i 'byung gnas, 1004/5–64) incarnates as the Dalai Lamas, and Atiśa as the Pañchen Lamas. And with the rise of the treasure traditions in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a number of Nyingma lamas come to be identified as the reincarnations of Tibetan kings and imperial period scholars and saints.²⁴ I found, much to my surprise, that there was even an incarnation of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419), namely Shantipa Lodrö Gyaltsen (Shanti pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1487–1567), an important Gelukpa master and royal monk of the kingdom of Gugé.²⁵ Often, a single saint gets incorporated into more than one lineage—even into the *kutreng* of lamas of a different school—and this seems to have posed little problem, although there are exceptions.²⁶

The identification of Tibetans as the incarnations of *Indian* masters accompanies a shift in Tibetans' self-perception, for if Indian masters were incarnating in Tibet, it implied that the Land of Snows was becoming a bit less "barbarous," and perhaps even that Buddhism's center of gravity was shifting across the Himalayas from India to Tibet.²⁷ There are many accounts of Tibetan masters of the early *chidar* (*phyi dar*) or "subsequent dissemination" from the mid-tenth century being identified as reincarnations of Indian saints, but the texts that make these connections are often late, so it is difficult to know how old these traditions really are. For example, later biographies of the great translator Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958–1055) mention that he had five previous Indian

²³ This is mentioned in TBRC, but I have not yet found this in Götsangpa's biographies. The fourth Trungram Gyatrul (b. 1968) is also considered an incarnation of Milarepa. Milarepa also gets included, much later, in the Drakar (Brag dkar) incarnation line; see Roberts 2007, 76.

²⁴ The Dodrupchen (Rdo grub chen) lamas are said to be incarnations of Padmasambhava and the 'Khrul zhig incarnations of Śāntarakṣita, Thonmi Sambhota, and Vairocana.

²⁵ On this figure, see Vitali 2012, 53 and 159–164. See also Roberts 2007, 76, where Tsongkhapa is included (along with Milarepa) in the lineage of the Drakar Lamas.

²⁶ For example, the famous Sakya Lama Phakpa ('Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–80) gets incorporated into the lineage of the Dalai Lamas. Van der Kuijp 2005, 17 reports that members of the Sakya royal family were disinclined to consider the third Dalai Lama, Sönam Gyaltsen (Bsod nams rgya mtsho, 1543–99), the reincarnation of their ancestor.

²⁷ Kapstein 2003, 776.

incarnations,²⁸ but these Indian pre-incarnations are not mentioned in Rinchen Zangpo's earliest biography.²⁹ Likewise, Ju Mipham ('Ju mi pham, 1846–1912) records that Atiśa recognized Rongzom Chökyi Zangpo (Rong zom chos kyi bzang po, 1042–1136) as the reincarnation of the Indian yogi Kṛṣṇācārya, but we have no early source verifying this.³⁰

The third Karmapa's biography of his predecessor, Karma Pakshi, ends with a long discussion of the latter's previous Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan pre-incarnations, thirteen in all, but it is difficult to know whether these are the actual words of Karma Pakshi. In any case, this portion of the biography is extremely interesting. It is penned as a first-person report of what Karma Pakshi himself said about his past lives.³¹ The narrative is governed by a certain logic wherein most if not all the past lives are meant to account for some particular

²⁸ The five are: (1) Nyan thos chen po 'phags pa yul 'khor skyong, (2) the master Ka min chen po, (3) the master Spros pa med pa, (4) the siddha Shin ka ba chen po, and (5) De ba bha ma.

²⁹ The earliest biography of Rinchen Zangpo is probably the mid-eleventh-century work written by his direct disciple Gugé Trikhangpa (Gu ge khri thang pa dznya na shrī, *Rin chen bzang po 'khrungs rabs*, 51–128). The various editions of this text and related scholarly literature have been discussed by Martin 2008.

³⁰ Given Mipham's dates, the source of this story is therefore quite late. However, 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 207 (Roerich 1976, 164) also states that Rongzom was considered to be an incarnation (*sprul pa'i sku grags pa*), but 'Gos lo does not specifically mention either Atiśa or Kṛṣṇācārya. See also Rich 2008.

³¹ Another work attributed to a Karmapa—this time to the first Karmapa Düsüm Khyenpa—also purports to be an account of the Karmapa's ability to know past and future lives. The passage is found in the fourth chapter of a work by the third Karmapa: Rang byung rdo rje, *Dus gsum mkhyen pa seng ge sgra'i rnam par thar pa*, 20–24. Asked where “the great former lamas were born, how many disciples they had, and what activities they performed,” Düsüm Khyenpa goes on to identify different masters' incarnations. For instance, “Lama Marpa incarnated as a pandita near Śri Parvata in south [India], in the city of Trinakara (Phri na ka ra). Later he became a yogi and benefitted many beings. Lama Lhajé [Gampopa] incarnated in the Indian kingdom of Karnapana (Ka rna pa na), which is in between India and Kashmir. His name was *Śāntivarma (Zhi ba go cha). For a time he was in monks' robes; and for a time he was a yogi. He benefitted sentient beings through his various activities. It seems he had about forty disciples [and so forth].” The text seems to be concerned principally with establishing the reputation of the first Karmapa as someone who was gifted with the ability to know other people's rebirth, although it is also an important register of important lamas, a kind of “who's who.” The Fifth Dalai Lama also had the reputation of being able to identify the past lives of others, as witnessed by a host of small ritual texts in the form of “homage through past lives” (*khrungs rabs gsol 'debs*) that he composed on behalf of various lamas of his day. This is perhaps as good a point as any to make a point that should be fairly obvious: when a lama recognizes a tulku or identifies someone's past life, this act not only legitimizes the individual being recognized, it also reinforces the status of the recognizing lama as an extraordinary individual.

personality trait, ability, or even physical attribute that he possessed. For example, three past incarnations (the first, fifth, and seventh) are used to explain why Karma Pakshi had an interest in and mastery of the Nyingma tantras. Two other incarnations (the second and ninth) account for his expertise in exoteric Mahāyāna. His mastery over gods, demons, and protectors are explained by three other past lives. Consider a few examples of the rhetoric of this text:

The thought occurred to me that I must have been Shenré Thul (Gshen re thul). This is why, through the grace of Master Padma, I can [now] tame the gods and demons of Kham (Khams)...

The fact that nowadays I have repeated visions the Great Brahmin [Saraha], of Maitripa, and of Teüpuwa (Te'u pu ba) is due to my past connections to them...

After that rebirth, I was the Indian yogi Buddhobodhi (Buddha bod de). Having exhibited many signs of accomplishment and having converted many non-Buddhists, I helped many beings to accomplish the goal of putting an end to birth. It seems that it is because of this [rebirth as an Indian tantrika] that nowadays I have a black beard and a predisposition to tame the wicked.

In the very next rebirth I was the lord of yogis Nyaksewa (Nyag se ba).³² This is something that occurred to me while traveling in the mountains. It is because of these past propensities that nowadays I stay in the mountains and engage in various activities there.

Because of the residues of those past activities, in the present, when I wish to do the smallest activity, even foolish jokes are enough to forcefully bring about a result, whether beneficial or harmful.³³

The implicit logic here seems to be, "In order for me to be like this in the present, I must have had a connection to such and such an Indian saint in the past," or "I must *have been* so and so." I find this work fascinating because it hints at how some Tibetans thought about the process of deciding past incarnations—namely, that it was a way of explaining someone's personality, abilities, and even someone's

³² Many sources document the fact that Karma Pakshi claimed that Nyaksewa was none other than himself, perhaps the first instance of a lama claiming to have two simultaneous embodiments, in this case one as Nyaksewa and the other as Düsüm Khyenpa.

³³ The implication seems to be that because of his past propensities, he could accomplish all of his aims easily—even if he just joked about them.

physical appearance. The text is also interesting because of its rhetoric, which displays a certain modesty, and even hesitancy: “It *seems* that I was so and so.” Although focused chiefly on the past and on India, Pakshi’s biography ends with a brief discussion of his future incarnations in various Buddha fields. It is in this context, almost as an aside, that Pakshi declares himself to be the incarnation of the first Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa (Dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110–93).³⁴

In any case, many of the major saints and siddhas of India eventually came to be included in Tibetan incarnation lineages. One has only to think of the Phakpa Lha (‘Phags pa lha)³⁵ and Zhiwa Lha (Zhi ba lha)³⁶ lamas who were considered the Tibetan incarnations of Āryadeva and Śāntideva, respectively. Delek Gyaltzen (Bde legs rgyal mtshan, 1225–81), a student of Götsangpa (Rgod tshang pa, 1189–1258), was believed to be the reincarnation of Maitripa,³⁷ and Dolpopa (Dol po pa shes rab rgyal mtshan, 1292–1361) the incarnation of the Kalkī Puṇḍarika of Kālacakra fame.³⁸ Pañchen

³⁴ It is noteworthy that none of the five past lives of the Karmapas mentioned by ‘Gos lo tsā ba coincide with those found in Rang jung rdo rje’s biography of Karma Pakshi. ‘Gos lo’s list is found in, *Deb sngon*, 563; Roerich 1976, 474. It includes:

1. Prajñālaṅka, a disciple of Nāgārjuna
2. Kāmadhanu, a disciple of Saroruha
3. Dharmabodhi, a saint from southwest Jambudvīpa, who accomplished the siddhi of Avalokiteśvara
4. Gyalwa Chokyang (Rgyal ba mchog dbyangs), a minister of King Trisong Detsen, who received empowerment from Padmasambhava and obtained the siddhi of Hayagrīva
5. Potowa (Po ta pa [sic] rin chen gsal, 1027–1105), who was the immediate predecessor of the first Karmapa Düsum Khyenpa. Gampopa, Düsum Khyenpa’s teacher, studied under Sharawa Yönten Drak (Sha ra ba ton tan grags, 1070–1141), who himself had studied under Potowa. Hence, there is a teacher-student lineage connection between the first Karmapa and Potowa through the figures of Sharawa and Gampopa.

These five pre-incarnations of the Karmapas are interesting. The first associates the Karmapas with the founding figure of Mahāyāna Buddhism; the second with a tantric siddha; the third with the deity Avalokiteśvara; the fourth with the Tibetan imperial period and with the wrathful manifestation of Avalokiteśvara, Hayagrīva; and the fifth with an important master of the Kadampa school.

³⁵ The online biography by Samten Chöphel in the Treasury of Lives also identifies the first Phakpa Lha as the incarnation of the Indian saint Mitrāyogi and of the Tibetan translator Kawa Paltsek (Dka’ ba dpal brstegs). It was the lama himself who, while still a youth, declared himself to be the incarnation of Āryadeva.

³⁶ The Zhiwa Lha incarnations begin with Palden Chokdrup (Dpal ldan mchog grub, 1454–1523), a student of the first Phakpa Lha.

³⁷ ‘Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 805.

³⁸ This was the case, apparently, during Dolpopa’s own lifetime. See Sheehy 2007, 285n140.

Sönam Drakpa (Paṅ chen bsod nams grags pa, 1478–1554) was considered to be the reincarnation of the Kashmiri Pandit Śākyaśrī (Kha che paṅ chen Shākya shrī, 1127–1225) and also of Butön Rinchen Drup (Bu ston rin chen grub, 1290–1364).³⁹ And Butön, in his own lifetime, had been identified as the reincarnation of the Kashmiri Pandit. Paṅchen's biographer undoubtedly knew this, and by associating Paṅchen with Butön, he understood that he was thereby also "inheriting" Butön's past life as Śākyaśrī. This tactic of subsuming the past incarnations of a given lama into new lineages will be important when we examine more complex *kutrengs*, like that of the Dalai Lamas and the Changkya lamas.

A few Tibetans were considered not simply the reincarnations of human beings, but also the emanations of buddhas, bodhisattvas, or deities. The deification of important Tibetan masters, though often a later move, is nonetheless an important part of many *kutrengs*. Marpa, for example, is said in some sources to be an emanation of Cakrasaṃvara; Milarepa—probably much to his dismay—an emanation of the deities Vajradhāra, Vairocana, and Mañjuśrī;⁴⁰ and Gampopa was considered the incarnation of a bodhisattva.⁴¹ Palkyi Dorjé (Dpal kyi rdo rje, ninth century), the killer of Langdarma, was later portrayed as an emanation of the wrathful deity Vajrapāni.⁴² So too was Drophuḅpa (Sgro phug pa, 1074–1134), the son of Zurchungwa.⁴³ Three Tibetan students of Atiśa came to be identified with the so-called Threefold Protectors (Rigs gsum mgon po): Dromtön with Avalokiteśvara, Ngok Legpai Sherap with Mañjuśrī, and Khutön (Khu ston brtson 'grus g.yung drung, 1011–75) with Vajrapāni.⁴⁴ Yaktön Sangyé Pal (G.yag ston sangs rgyas dpal, 1350–

³⁹ Lha dbang blo gros, *Bsod nams grags pa'i rnam thar*. From the colophon, the work appears to have been written by a direct disciple shortly after Paṅchen's death. The biography (p. 49) also tells us that it was well known that Paṅchen considered himself "an incarnation of a great former Kadampa lama" (*bka' gdams gong ma chen po zhig gi rnam sprul yin*).

⁴⁰ See Roberts 2007, 76–77.

⁴¹ Indeed, in one song, directed at the three men from Kham, Gampopa proclaims himself to have been the bodhisattva Candraprabha (Zla ba 'od). The name of the bodhisattva is in fact part of Gampopa's Tibetan name (Zla 'od gzhon nu). See Stewart 1995, 98.

⁴² Sakyapa Sonam Gyaltsen 1996, 209.

⁴³ Roerich 1976, 12.

⁴⁴ This is found in a work by the second Dalai Lama; see Jinpa 2008, 521–22. There is another tradition that identifies Dromtönpa's three students, the so-called three brothers, as the incarnations of the *rigs gsum mgon po*—Potowa as Mañjuśrī, Chen Ngawa (Spyan snga ba, 1038–1103) as Vajrapāni, and Buchungwa (Bu chung ba, 1031–1107/9) as Avalokiteśvara. On the three brothers as the incarnations of three of the sixteen arhats, see Davidson 2005, 251.

1414) was considered an emanation of Maitreya.⁴⁵ So too was Tsongkhapa, according to his “Extremely Secret Biography,” but more important, Tsongkhapa eventually came to be considered an emanation of Mañjuśrī.⁴⁶ So too was the great translator Rinchen Zangpo⁴⁷ and the famous scholar Sakya Paṇḍita (1182–1251).⁴⁸ The Karmapas and the Dalai Lamas came to be considered emanations of Avalokiteśvara, and the Paṇchen Lamas emanations of Amitābha. It is worth noting that these association of historical persons with supernatural agents does not ordinarily happen immediately. The apotheosis of Tibetan saints usually occurs a generation or more after their death. Perhaps enough time had to pass so that the lamas’ human foibles could be forgotten.

What motivated Tibetans to take this additional bold step and claim that some individuals were manifestations of enlightened beings? It is possible that as more and more Tibetans came to be identified as reincarnations of former *human* beings, the greatest lamas had to be distinguished and set apart from ordinary tulkus, and hence the tradition of associating high lamas with divine beings. The highest lamas—what in the Geluk tradition are called the “great lamas” (*bla ma che khag*)—not only had long incarnation lineages as human beings extending back to India, but more importantly, their higher status was often guaranteed by suggesting that their lineage had a divine origin.

Most developed *kutrengs* or *trungraps*—which is to say ones that attempt to provide extended, quasi-historical accounts of the past rebirth of lamas—probably begin only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there are some earlier, important examples. One of the most interesting has to be a Kadampa work known as the *Teachings Concerning the Son* (*Bu chos*), the second half of the *Book of Kadam* (*Bka’ gdams legs bam*). The *Son Teachings* is a mammoth work that contains narratives of the past Indian lives of Atiśa’s chief disciple, Dromtönpa. No former Tibetan life is mentioned, which is understandable given the Kadampas’ Indo-centrism.⁴⁹ The past life narratives found in the *Son Teachings* are highly stylized, so much so

⁴⁵ This is mentioned in a verse of homage found at the beginning of Ngag dbang chos grags, *Pod chen drug gi ’bal gtam*, 4.

⁴⁶ The “Very Secret Biography” is found in *Rje’i rnam thar shin tu gsang ba*. The biography tells the tale of how, as a bodhisattva in a past life, Tsongkhapa received the prophecy of his future enlightenment as the Tathāgata Lion’s Roar. See also Ary 2007.

⁴⁷ Padma dkar po, *Chos ’byung*, 266.

⁴⁸ Rin spungs Ngag dbang ’jigs med grags pa (sixteenth century), *Sa paṇ rtoḡs brjod*, 34, 238. See also Padma dkar po, *Chos ’byung*, 287.

⁴⁹ The Tibetan is found in *Jo bo rje dpal ldan a ti sha’i gsung ’bum*, 157–591. A portion of the work has been translated in Jinpa 2008, 455–520.

that the work reads more like the *Jātaka* than like later *kutrengs*, which is to say that the lives described in the *Son Teachings* have little real biographical or historical depth. That being said, the *Son Teachings* are considered Dromtön's *trungrap*, making it one of the longest such texts dealing with the past lives of a Tibetan lama.⁵⁰

Very shortly after the death of the first Dalai Lama Gendun Drup (Dge 'dun grub, 1391–1474)—and perhaps even during his own life—he came to be considered an incarnation of Dromtönpa. Leonard van der Kuijp has explored some of the historical reasons for the association of these two figures, but there are also implications that bear on the topic of *kutrengs*. If the first Dalai Lama was an incarnation of Dromtönpa, it meant that the Dalai Lamas thereby “inherited” all of the past lives of Dromtönpa, which of course meant that later biographers of the Dalai Lamas could lay claim to the *trungrap* of Dromtönpa found in the *Son Teachings*. And this is precisely what we find. To take just one example, the five-volume collection of the lives of the first thirteen Dalai Lamas published in Dharamsala in the 1970s incorporates all twenty-two of Dromtön's lives from the *Son Teachings*, casting them as pre-incarnations of the Dalai Lamas without any hint that these lives have been lifted out of the *Son Teachings*. Whatever other implications there may have been to associating the Dalai Lamas with Dromtön, this decision had one important religious implication. It meant that the Dalai Lama's *trungrap* could, as befitting his rank, be greatly expanded and taken back to prehistoric times in India, to the age of past buddhas. We find a similar strategy in the case of the Changkya lamas.

Fully developed *kutrengs*, the way we have them today, as mentioned earlier, are a relatively late phenomenon, belonging mostly to the period after the sixteenth century. But we do have some earlier important examples. The earliest datable *kutreng* known to me

⁵⁰ The date of *Book of Kadam* is not altogether certain. The first to write down the work in its entirety, Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen (Mkhan chen nyi ma rgyal mtshan, 1225–1305), tells us that he completed the book in 1302, but Thupten Jinpa believes that there must have been an archaic version of the work that dates to earlier times. Jinpa also mentions the fact that the twenty-two stories of Dromtön's past lives are (at least according to later sources) are mentioned in a work by the early thirteenth-century Kadampa master Nam mkha' rin chen. See Jinpa 2008, 22–28. That being said, the earliest biography of Dromtön that I know of, written in the middle of the thirteenth century, does not discuss his past lives at all. This biography, written by Chim Namkha Drak (Mchims nam mkha' grags, 1210–85), is in fact a refreshingly straightforward and non-stylized work (Mchims nam mkha' grags, *Dge bshes ston pa'i sku mche ba'i yon tan*). It is noteworthy that the author of this biography, Chim, was a teacher of Khenchen Nyima Gyaltsen, the author/compiler of the *Book of Kadam*. In any case, the *Teachings Concerning the Son*, even if not written down until 1302, and even if highly stylized, contains one of the earliest lengthy sources of the past lives of a Tibetan lama.

is found in a short autobiographical work of the Kagyü master Nyaksewa (Nyag se rin chen rgyal mtshan, 1141–1201), one of the four chief students (*nye ba'i sras bzhi*) of Phakmo Drupa.⁵¹ The relevant lines from Nyaksewa's work read:

In the presence of Vajradhāra, [I was] Limitless Light of Good Qualities (Tshad med yon tan 'od).
 In the presence of Telo[pa], I was *Prajñakīrti (Shes rab grags pa)
 In the presence of Nāropa, they called me the translator Dromtön ('Brom ston).
 In the presence of Marpa, they called me Ngoktön Chödor.⁵²
 In the presence of Mila, I was Rechung Dorjé Drak.⁵³
 In the presence of Dakpo [i.e., Gampopa], they called me Saltön Gomsha (Gsal ston sgom zhwa).
 In the presence of Pakdru, I am like a son,
 One of the four men who benefits these teachings.⁵⁴

This brief but important passage is testament to the fact that even before the second Karmapa was born, there were already Kagyü masters who were tracing their incarnation lineages all the way back to Vajradhāra and associating themselves with the seminal figures of the early Kagyü lineage. The first two incarnations—Limitless Light and Prajñakīrti—are of course pre-historical, and the association of Dromtön with Nāropa is problematic since Dromtön (assuming this is a reference to Atiśa's disciple) never went to India. But the next two names *are* historical figures, important disciples of Marpa and Milarepa, respectively. In any case, even if not a very developed

⁵¹ Nyaksewa founded the monastery of Lé (Gles) or Né (Sne) in Kham. Much later, in the seventeenth century, he came to be included in the incarnation lineage of the Drakyp (Brag g.yab) lamas. For a compilation of the known texts of Nyag se ba, see Dge bshes gle dgon thub bstan byang chub and Bkra shis tshe ring, eds., *Grub thob nyag re se bo'i skyes rabs*, 106f. One of these contains the enigmatic claim, found in both the writings of Nyag se ba and in the *Blue Annals*, that the second Karmapa, Karma Pakshi, considered Nyaksea "to be Karma Pakshi" (*karma pakshi yin zhes karma pakshi rang gis zhal gyis bzhes so*), perhaps a reference to the fact that they were of a single mind-stream (*rgyud gcig*). Karma Pakshi is said to have implied that the Karmapas and Sharmapas were also of one mindstream. Nyaksewa's life story is also mentioned in Ta tshag pa, *Lho rong chos 'byung*, 341–42.

⁵² The Tibetan reads Rngog/Rdzogs ston chos rdor, which refers to Ngok Chökü Dorjé (Rngog chos sku rdo rje, 1036–97), one of Marpa's disciples.

⁵³ Ras chung rdo rje grags (1085–1161) is often considered one of Milarepa's two chief disciples.

⁵⁴ Dge bshes thub bstan byang chub and Bkra shis tshe ring, *Grub thob nyag re se bo'i skyes rabs*, 15–16.

kutreng, this must be reckoned as one of the earliest instances of a Tibetan identifying his past reincarnations over multiple lives. Through this rudimentary list of past lives Nyaksewa creates important associations with the transcendent past, with India, and with the generations of Tibetan masters that immediately preceded him.

We find a similar pattern in the case of the Shamar incarnations.⁵⁵ The first Shamar is reckoned to be the great Tokden Drakpa Sengé (Rtogs ldan grags pa seng ge, 1283–1349). He studied at the philosophical college of Sangpu (Gsang phu) for seven years before becoming a disciple of the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjé. By the time of Gö Lotsawa in the late fifteenth century, we find six figures—two Indian, one Nepalese, and three Tibetan—mentioned as the Shamar's pre-incarnations. These include:

1. *Dāsananda (Khol po dga'), a disciple of Tilopa
2. *Sarvavid (Kun rig), a brahmin from Jalandhara who was a disciple of Nāropa
3. Shönu Sangchö (Gzhon nu gsang chos), a Nepalese disciple of the Indian teacher Vajrapāni, who is said to have traveled to Tibet to meet Milarepa (1040/52–1123/35),
4. Tsultrim Pal (Tshul khrim s dpal, 1096–1132), a Tibetan who studied under Gampopa
5. Namkha Ö (Nam mkha' 'od, 1133–99), a student of the first Karmapa
6. Trashi Drakpa (Bkra shis grags pa, 1200–82), a disciple of the second Karmapa

The later tradition would also associate the Shamarpas with the deity Amitābha, but that is not found here. The motivation for this *kutreng* is not unlike what we find in the case of Nyaksewa: to cast the Shamar incarnations as direct disciples of the most important figures of the Karma Kagyü tradition: of the two Indian siddhas Tilopa and Nāropa (nos. 1 and 2); of two important Tibetan lineage masters, Mila and Gampopa (nos. 3 and 4); and of the first two Karmapas (nos. 5 and 6). Notice that great care has been taken to insure the historical plausibility of the three Tibetan figures (nos. 4-6) and the first Shamar Rinpoche, who was born in 1283, with neither gaps nor overlaps between the death of one individual and the birth of the next. This

⁵⁵ On the Zhamar incarnation lineage, see 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 617; Roerich 1976, 521f. The *Blue Annals* also tells us that late in life Tokden Drakpa Sengé had a meditation experience in which he recalled his former lives. 'Gos lo, *Deb sngon*, 625; Roerich 1976, 528.

kutreng, we might say, is truly elegant and aesthetically pleasing, a lineage that is beautifully symmetrical and also historically plausible.

Another relatively early *trungrap* is, ironically, not of a Tibetan but of an Indian saint. Dan Martin dates the collection known as the *The Early, Middle, and Late Pacification Corpus* (Zhi byed snga bar phyi gsum kyi skor) to the first decade of the thirteenth century.⁵⁶ The collection contains an interesting biography of Phadampa Sangyé (Pha dam pa sangs rgyas, d. ca. 1117).⁵⁷ The work recounts how Dampa first attained faith in Buddhism at the time of a bygone buddha and how he became a bodhisttva at the time of Śākyamuni, who prophesied that he would “subdue the beings of the barbarous region of Tibet.” After a stint in Tuṣita, the bodhisattva was reborn as pandits in various parts of India for seven successive rebirths. Later in the work, Dampa is also identified as the reincarnation of the Tibetan king Nyatri Tsenpo, of the Indian siddha Kṛṣṇācārya, and of various other Indian monks and yogis. Even if this is a kind of *kutreng*, as with Dromtön’s past lives in the *Son Teachings*, the depiction of Dampa’s former Indian incarnations is so stylized that it has little historical depth. Indeed, the biography as a whole is more concerned with geography than with biography or chronology. It’s chief goal is to show that Dampa lived and traveled just about everywhere in India and Tibet; that he chose to settle down in Dingri; and that the little village of Dingri should therefore be considered unique in the Buddhist world.

Finally we come to our last example, the lineage of the Chankya lamas’ past lives. The Changkya *kutreng* is especially interesting because it provides us with a window into the diachronic development of an incarnation lineage: how a lineage is manipulated and how it changes over time. The story of the Changkya lamas’ *kutreng* actually begins with a much earlier figure, Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup (‘Khon ston dpal ‘byor khun grub, 1561–1637).⁵⁸ Khöntönpa was born into the famous Khön (‘Khon) clan, whose members include the founders and present-day throne holders of the Sakya School, but both Khöntönpa and his father also figure prominently in the lineage of the *Magical Net* or *Secret Essence Tantra* (*Gsang ba’i snying po*), the most important text of the Mahāyoga class of Nyingma tantra. Khöntönpa also wrote an important work that,

⁵⁶ Martin, “Padampa’s Animal Metaphors,” (n8) states that the collection presently available to us dates to ca. 1240, but that it is based on gold-ink manuscript scribed between 1207 and 1210.

⁵⁷ ‘Dzam gling mi’i skyes mchog, 332–36.

⁵⁸ My research on ‘Khon ston dpal ‘byor lhun grub has appeared in two publications: (1) The Dalai Lama, Khöntön Peljor Lhundrub, and José Ignacio Cabezón 2011, and (2) Cabezón 2009.

while most closely resembling a Mahāmudrā practice manual, has a much broader agenda: to create a synthesis of Kagyü Mahāmudrā, Nyingma Great Perfection, and Geluk Madhyamaka.⁵⁹ Despite his interest in the teachings of other schools, Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup was a devoted Gelukpa. After the death of his father, he enrolled at Dakpo College (Dwags po grwa tshang) and later at Sera Jé (Se ra byes), eventually becoming the fifteenth abbot of the Jé College in 1605. He is also counted in the Geluk “stages of the path” (*lam rim*) lineage. Khöntönpa was one of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s early teachers, and the Great Fifth wrote his biography,⁶⁰ a work that contains a *kutreng*. Khöntön Peljor Lhundrup was, like the Fifth Dalai Lama himself, a Geluk master with strong pan-sectarian interests, something that the Dalai Lama himself confirms (*ris med chos la mkhyen pa che ba*). Here is the list of Khöntönpa’s past lives found in the fifth Dalai Lama’s biography of his teacher.

1. Arhat Chunda (Dgra bcom pa Tsunda), “a disciple of Śākyamuni”
2. Śākyamitra (Shākya bshes gnyen), a disciple of Nāgārjuna and a lineage holder of the latter’s Guhyasamāja teachings
3. Kawa Paltseg (Ska ba Dpal brtsegs, eighth century), one of the great Tibetan translators of the imperial period
4. The great Nyingma adept Dropukpa (Gsang sngags rnying ma’i grub chen sgro phug pa, b. eleventh century)
5. Chenrezik Wang Sisiripa (Spyan ras gzigs dbang si si ri pa), an accomplished Avalokiteśvara yogi
6. Sakyapa Lodrö Gyaltsen (Sa skya pa blo gros rgyal mtshan, 1235–80); that is, Chögyal Phakpa, the nephew of Sakya Paṇḍita
7. Lama Dampa Sönam Gyaltsen (Bla ma dam pa bsod nams rgyal mtshan, 1312–75)
8. Jamchen Chöjé Shakya Yeshé (Byams chen chos rje śākya ye shes, 1354–1435), a disciple of Tsongkhapa and the founder of Sera Monastery; but note that Jamchen Chöjé was born twenty-one years *before* the death of the previous incarnation, Lama Dampa
9. Sera Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltsen (Se ra rje btsun chos kyi rgyal mtshan, 1469–1544), the author of the textbooks (*yig cha*) of the Jé College of Sera

⁵⁹ That text is the *Wish-Fulfilling Jewel of the Oral Tradition* (*Snyan brgyud yid bzhin nor bu lta ba spyi khyab tu ngo sprod pa’i khrid yig*). I have translated the work in *The Dalai Lama et al.*, 2011.

⁶⁰ Dalai Lama V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Dpal ’byor lhun grub kyi rnam thar*.

10. Khöntön Paljor ('Khon ston dpal 'byor, 1561–1637)

A lot could be said about this fascinating *kutreng*, but suffice it to note that part of the Fifth Dalai Lama's agenda is to capture Khöntönpa's pan-sectarian interests. Indeed, this may be the logic that drives the list. The lineage contains two Indian lives (numbers 1 and 2), two Nyingma lives (3 and 4), two Sakya lives (6 and 7), and two Geluk lives (8 and 9). A life as a practitioner of Avalokiteśvara punctuates the *kutreng* in the middle (number 5). The incarnation lineage therefore perfectly captures Khöntönpa's ecumenicity—or *almost so*, for the fifth Dalai Lama's list notably contains no Kagyü or Jonang lives, and this despite the fact that the Fifth Dalai Lama acknowledges in his biography that Khöntönpa also studied these traditions. The absence of Kagyü and Jonang past lives is hardly surprising given that the text was authored during the period of Geluk-Kagyü political strife in central and western Tibet. There is one problem with a date (no. 8) but otherwise the *kutreng* is carefully constructed, being both historically plausible and beautifully symmetrical.

What does Khöntönpa's incarnation history have to do with the Changkya lamas? About 130 years after the death of Khöntönpa, during the lifetime of Changkya Rolpai Dorjé (Lcang skya rol pa'i rdo rje, 1717–86), the third Pañchen Lama Palden Yeshé (Dpal ldan ye shes, 1738–80) decided that the Changkya Lamas need a *kutreng* that they could call their own.⁶¹ He looked around and found an incarnation lineage that was available. It happened to be the *kutreng* of Khöntönpa.⁶² Palden Yeshé then "poached" this lineage, making two additional modifications: he added an Indian Yamāntaka Yogi (Darpana Acharya) and a Kadampa Geshé (Langri Thangpa).

Over the next 200 years, each successive Changkya incarnation was of course added to the list. Besides the Changkya Lamas, three additional modifications were made. Changlung Pandita (Lcang lung paṇḍita) added Buddha Amitābha at the head of the list around 1790, thereby suggesting Changkya's apotheosis, and the third Thuken (Thu'u kwan) added two Kagyü Lamas—Marpa and Tsangnyön Heruka—around 1793, thereby rounding out the *kutreng* so that it now included members of most of the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. By the early eighteenth century, there was obviously

⁶¹ Most of the discussion that follows concerning the incarnation lineage of the Changkya lamas is based on Karl-Heinz Everding's exhaustive research, found in Everding 1988, but see also E. Gene Smith's "Introduction" to *The Collected Works of Thu'u-bkwan*.

⁶² This is true despite the fact that the Changkya Lamas are not associated with Sera—a small price to pay for finding a suitable *kutreng*.

sufficient temporal distance from the rivalries between Gelukpas and Kagyüpas that Kagyü lamas could now safely make it into the Changkya *kutreng*. This is what the resultant *kutreng* of the Changkya lamas looks like today.

1. **Buddha Amitābha (Sangs rgyas snang ba mtha' yas, added c. 1790)**
2. Arhat Chunda
3. Śākyamitra
4. **Darpaṇa Ācārya (Darban ātsarya), an Indian Yamāntaka yogi (added by the Third Paṅchen Rinpoche)**
5. Kawa Paltsek
6. Dropukpa
7. Chenrezig Wang Sisiripa
8. **Marpa (added ca. 1793)**
9. **Kadampa Geshé Langri Thangpa (Bka' gdams pa glang ri thang pa rdo rje seng ge, 1054–1123; added in 1776 by the Third Paṅchen Lama)**
10. Sakyapa Lodrö Gyaltzen
11. Lama Dampa Sönam Gyeltzen
12. **Tsangnyön Heruka (Gtsang smyon he ru ka, 1452–1507; added ca. 1793)**
13. Jamchen Chöjé Shakya Yeshé
14. Sera Jetsun Chökyi Gyaltzen
15. Khöntön Paljor
16. Khedrup Drakpa Öser (Mkhas grub grags pa 'od zer, d. 1641), whose seat was at Gönlung Jampa Ling Monastery. Since he lived a long life, he must have been born substantially before Khöntön Rinpoche died. Drakpa Öser served as abbot of Gönlung 1630–33.
17. Changkya I Ngawang Losang Chöden (Lcang skya ngag dbang blo bzang chos ldan, 1642–1714), who served as abbot of Gönlung from 1688 to 1690.
18. Changkya II Yeshé Tenpai Drönmé (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i sgron me, 1717–86), a.k.a. Changkya Rolpai Dorjé, abbot of Gönlung in the last half of the 1760s.
19. Changkya III Yeshé Tenpai Gyaltzen (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, 1787–1846)
20. Changkya IV Yeshé Tenpai Nyima (Lcang skya ye shes bstan pa'i nyi ma, 1849–59/75)
21. Changkya V Losang Yeshé Tenpai Gyatso (Lcang skya blo bzang ye shes bstan pa'i rgya mtsho, 1860/78–1870/88)
22. Changkya VI Losang Palden Tenpai Drönme (Lcang skya blo bzang dpal ldan bstan pa'i sgron me, b. ca. 1871 or 1890/91).

23. Changkya VII Chöying Yeshé Dorjé (Lcang skya chos dbyings ye shes rdo rje, 1891–1957/58), who died in Taiwan.
24. Changkya VIII Dönyo Gyatso (Lcang skya don yod rgya mtsho, b. ca. 1980), identified at age eighteen by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who ordained him in 2004. He presently studies at the Gomang College of Drepung Monastery in India.

In his last meeting with Khöntönpa, the Fifth Dalai Lama asked his teacher, quite directly, where he intended to be reborn. The master replied that if he had any choice in the matter, he would *not* be reborn in China, Mongolia, or, for that matter, anywhere in Tibet. Lest the reader assume from this response that Khöntönpa had seen too much strife on the Tibetan plateau and was ready to exit the Central Asian sphere altogether, the Dalai Lama assures us that his teacher's words should not be taken literally.⁶³ Be that as it may, Khöntönpa's reply to his student may explain why no further incarnations of Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup were identified and why his *kutreng* remained dormant for over a century, ready to be taken up by the students of the Changkya lamas. I sometimes wonder what Khöntönpa would have thought about having his *kutreng* poached by the likes of Changkya lamas. As a final resting place for his past lives, this is surely not a bad one at all.

Conclusion

Research often begins with a hunch; mine was relatively simple. My initial hypothesis was that as one investigated the history of the institution of the tulku, one would find that the earliest instances of tulku identification would involve Tibetans identifying themselves (or someone else) as the incarnation of another single individual. I further expected that *kutrengs*, or multiple-life incarnation lineages, would be a later historical development. Although my research is still in its early stages, there is already reason to believe that this simple hypothesis is in fact false. The cases of Nyaksewa, of the early Karmapas, of the *Book of Kadam*, and of the life of Phadampa Sangyé suggest that Tibetans started to think about the multiple past lives of lamas from very early times, indeed from the beginning of the tulku

⁶³ Dalai bla ma V Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho, *Dpal 'byor lhun grub kyi rnam thar*, 40a: rang dbang 'dus pa zhig dka' bar 'dug kyang/ rgya hor dbus gtsang sogs su skye ba len 'dod ni med ces bka' phebs/ de yang thugs dbang mi 'dus pa sogs ni dgongs pa can du nges shing/.

tradition itself. Definitive conclusions about broad patterns cannot, of course, be made on the basis of a small sample, but so far the historical data suggests that multiple-life incarnation lineages are much earlier than I had originally presumed. In retrospect, this is not altogether unexpected. Once people begin to wonder who they (or their teachers) were in their last life, it is natural that they should also begin to wonder about who they might have been in even earlier lives.

How do Tibetans decide which individuals to include in a *kutreng*? As academics, the temptation is to always read these choices in strictly socio-political terms: "How do the politics of the day influence the choice of what lamas to include in a *kutreng*? What does the tradition stand to gain by including some lamas in a *kutreng* and excluding others?" Such questions are obviously important. As I have suggested, they are crucial to understanding the lack of Kagyüpas in Khöntön Paljor Lhundrup's *kutreng* and their sudden appearance in the *kutreng* of the Changkya lamas. That being said, it would be foolish to think that *all* such choices are politically motivated or that intersectarian rivalries always lurk in the background. Other motivations also obviously exist. While the authors of *kutrengs* rarely discuss their own reasons for their choices, we can often read between the lines to come to some conclusions. The emic view seems to be that such choices are motivated by three factors: (1) to establish teacher-student relationships between a tulku and important masters of the past, (2) to situate these high lamas within the lineage or vis-à-vis other institutions, like monasteries, and (3) to explain the idiosyncrasies of individuals' lives (why, in the present, a lama has certain abilities, powers, predilections, and even certain physical characteristics). As more incarnation lineages are explored, other motivations will undoubtedly emerge.

Kutrengs function to create a distinctive kind of personal identity, one that is obviously different from what we are used to in the modern West. These incarnation lineages suggest that to understand fully who people are, we must understand who they were. Most biographies, of course, are also interested in exploring lamas' past, as when they try to explain their adult life by reference to episodes in their childhood. But the *kutrengs* obviously go much further. Spanning many lifetimes, the *kutrengs* suggest that it is impossible to really know who a person is unless one knows who they were over their multiple past lives. This is undoubtedly true of everyone (we all have incarnation histories, according to Buddhism) but our texts are obviously not concerned with the string of past lives of ordinary people but only with that of lamas, those individuals whose identity is truly worth knowing. That identity, the *kutrengs* suggest, can only

be understood through fathoming the distinctive identity of other individuals: both who those individual tulkus *were*, and those with whom, over many different lives, they had important interpersonal relationships.

One can only imagine what it is like to have such a broad sense of identity that extends over hundreds and even thousands of years; what it is like to be the type of tulku who has a *kutreng*. Having a sense of identity spanning multiple lives has obviously proved burdensome to some tulkus. One has only to think of the case of the rebellious Sixth Dalai Lama. But I imagine that in some instances it must also have been liberating, providing tulkus with multiple models of a well-lived life from which to choose. The present Dalai Lama, for example, has on numerous occasions discussed his strong affinity to the Great Fifth. In any case, the investigation of first-person perspectives—what it's like to be the type of person who has a *kutreng*—brings us into the realm of phenomenology, which lies beyond the scope of this paper. Hopefully, this short essay will have provided some historical context for exploring this and other lines of inquiry concerning those unique individuals whose identity is believed to span multiple lifetimes.

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