

Elders of Upper Tibet

Vital Link with a Vast Unwritten Tradition

by John Bellezza

As is so well known, in the last half century, Tibetan civilization has endured a period of intense degradation. Ancient monuments, libraries and other components of the Tibetan infrastructure were destroyed, and the very fabric of traditional society rent leading to overwhelming change. The dissolution of Tibetan culture continues unabated prompting an effort both inside and outside Tibet to chronicle as much of this unique human expression as possible before it is lost forever. As in any society, the propagation of Tibetan culture is dependent on the older generation, a vast repository of traditional lore and knowledge.

As a researcher specializing in pre-Buddhist civilization in northern and western Tibet (*Byang thang* and *Stod*), I am especially indebted to the senior citizens of Tibet for sharing what they know of archaic traditions and customs, local history, and archaeology. Without their help and guidance much of my research would not be possible because a great deal of Tibetan culture was preserved orally and not through writing. While Buddhist teachings, dynastic history and other important topics were the focus of a more than 1000 year old literary tradition, many traditions pertaining to specific locales were passed down from generation to generation in an unbroken chain of oral transmission (*kha rgyun*). Now, with the last generation reared in pre-Communist Tibet passing away, a significant portion of the nation's oral tradition is disappearing with them.

Time is of the essence if we are to prevent a further loss of our human heritage as represented by Tibetan tradition. It is, therefore, imperative that those interested in Tibetan cultural preservation respond rapidly by collecting what they can before it is too late. Like endangered animals which become extinct, this loss of traditional culture is irrevocable and an immeasurable long term loss for all of us. In most cases older Tibetans are happy to share their knowledge but the tragedy is that there are few people left willing to listen. Nowhere is this more true than in aspects of culture which fall outside the scope of mainstream religious doctrines. Glossed over as folk culture, or somehow of lesser value, a huge body of secular tradition, including that which originated in remote antiquity, languishes in obscurity.

An important link with ancient cultural traditions are the spirit-mediums (*lha ba / dpa'bo*) which have largely disappeared in the Communist period. Throughout western and northern Tibet (as well as in other regions) spirit-mediums, which primarily channeled mountain deities, were an indispensable part of the community. The acted as healers, psychological counselors, social regulators and diviners. The tradition of spirit-mediumship can be traced back to a very early stage in the development Tibetan civilization and includes diverse practices, lineages and types of deities nearly all of which are threatened with imminent extinction. Despite their social and historical value,



An 89 year old woman. The oldest person interviewed by the author.

spirit-mediums who serve as mouthpieces for the so called worldly deities (*'jig rten pa'i lha*) have been little studied.

What is not well appreciated is that the spirit-mediums frequently were also experts in local religious lore and history. For example, the well known Kha mer (of the *gZhung pa Ma mtshan* region of western Tibet), who died a generation ago, was highly respected for his knowledge of local pre-Buddhist archaeological sites and the pantheon of indigenous deities, much of which was subsequently lost. The spirit-mediums, all in their 70's and 80's, whom I have interviewed, have proven to be an extremely valuable source of information on the location and mythology of pre-Buddhist archaeological sites, a subject seldom addressed in Tibetan literature. They also have been an excellent source of information on lore surrounding mountain deities and other archaic religious traditions.

Another great repository of the oral tradition are the bards (*sgrung pa / sgrung mkhan*) who preserve localized versions of the Tibetan epic, as well as clan histories and indigenous mythologies. In the past virtually every region and encampment (*tsho ba*) had its story tellers. The bards were most active during communal assemblies such as those which took place at the New Year, horse racing festivals and harvest observances. Unfortunately, like the spirit-mediums, most of the bards have disappeared in the Communist period. Although many tales found in the *Gling Ge sar* epic have been published there are others which have not been put into book form. For example, the famous bard from *sTeng chen Sam grub* possesses many unique episodes that still have not been published. In 1997, during nine hours of interviews, *Sam grub* shared with me unusual epic stories set in northern Tibet (these are found in my new

book). Although the epic is legendary in nature, an analysis of its content demonstrates that it has retained pre-Buddhist cultural and historical elements.

Happily, as so much of the epic has been written down its future is secure, however, this cannot be said for other bardic traditions. It is believed that at one time each of the clans of the *Byang thang* and *Stod* possessed histories and lore which were passed down through the bards from one generation to the next. For the most part, this transmission is no longer active consequently, the local population is often ignorant of their genealogical history. This deficit cannot be entirely attributed to Communist rule because the attenuation of clan traditions in upper Tibet predates the modern period. A factor in this loss is that for many centuries, in the dominant central Tibet region, clan structures have held little importance for the mass of the population. The bards of Tibet (along with itinerants called *ma ni pa*) also preserved ancient hymns to the environment-based pantheon.

Recently, from an elderly *Byang thang* bard, I was able to collect hymns for *gNyan chen thang lha* and other local deities, which according to tradition, have been preserved from the time of the *Zhang zhung* adept *sTong rgyung mThu chen*. These hymns contain wonderful archaic imagery which lend credence to the tradition regarding their origin.

Each region of Tibet also possessed its own cycle of songs pertaining to marriage, local identity,



Spirit-medium

thanksgiving, festivals and other areas of everyday life. These songs are an important source of ancient culture as they often preserve language and customs which have been superseded by more modern traditions in other forms of cultural expression. Fortunately, some of these cycles are now in the process of being written down. For example, the songs of the *Rong chung* region of western Tibet have been recorded in *Karma mkhas grub* *Srib skyid's Glu gar phyogs bsgrigs* and a collection of songs recently published in Lhasa called *dMangs gZhas phyogs bsgrigs* documents a number of verses which can be attributed to pre-Buddhist religious traditions. The songs of *Ru thog* are the object of study by Lobsang

Shastri, a scholar with the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, who is a native of the region. The repertoire of songs from *Ru thog* is



Expert singer

diminishing rapidly and thus this effort to document them is especially praiseworthy. During a field trip to *Ru thog*, I was only able to locate one elderly man who still remembered a substantial portion of the songs and thus this rich source of ancient cultural traditions survives in its native land in a most tenuous manner.

Another excellent source for orally-preserved traditions are lay religious adherents (*sngags pa*) belonging to both Bön and Buddhism. In the sparsely populated areas of Northern and Western

the general cultural deterioration of the region which is the most pronounced in Tibet. This downward spiral, at least in part, is due to the general poverty of the region and harsh environmental conditions.

Elderly lay and ordained woman can also be excellent sources of information on local traditions. Woman in particular seem to be specialists in lore connected to both wild and domesticated animals, as well as the folklore connected to artesian products. Due to social differences related to gender female researchers are best suited to work with the woman of Tibet. In the *Byang thang* and *Stod* people of special religious ability and status

(*rin po che / sprul sku / bla ma*) can be both fully ordained monks and laymen. They are, however, no longer well distributed in the region. These highly adept practitioners are best known for a mastery of their respective religious traditions but it is not unusual for their expertise to spill over into other areas as well. There can be no generalizations made about their supplementary knowledge as it can range from local history to craft skills. Some high status religious practitioners have devoted much time and energy to salvaging both oral and literary traditions savaged during the Cultural Revolution. At their behest, texts memorized by heart were once again written down. A number of invocational texts to the environment-based deities were restored in this manner. These senior personnel were of course also responsible for the rebuilding of the monasteries and the restoration of the monastic communities. Resurrected monasteries serve as centers for the collection and sharing of local traditions by encouraging residents to assemble and exchange information. The monasteries are the seeds from which both Tibetan secular and religious culture will again spring up.

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John Vincent Bellezza conducts ethnographic, textual and archaeological research into pre-Buddhist civilization. His forthcoming book, *Antiquities of Northern Tibet: Pre-Buddhist Archaeological Discoveries on the High Plateau*, (Adroit Publishers, Delhi) documents the findings of his 1999 Changthang Circuit Expedition.