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# Real and imaginary Tibetan chimeras and their special powers

Charles Ramble

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**Mongolo-Tibetica Pragensia '14**  
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# Real and imaginary Tibetan chimeras and their special powers<sup>1</sup>

CHARLES RAMBLE, EPHE/CRCAO, Paris

**Summary:** Animals that transgress culturally-sanctioned taxonomic boundaries are often the object of special beliefs. Tibetan ritual texts, especially those of the so-called ‘Lower Vehicles’ of Bon, sometimes feature semi-divine animals that play an important role as protectors. These creatures, though natural, are perceived as concatenations of the body-parts of numerous other natural species, and may be understood as different varieties of chimera. The two examples considered here are the bat and the camel. In addition to real animals the literature also features imaginary creatures that exhibit the physical or behavioural characteristics of several natural species. Each of the animals that provides a component is presented as wielding a specific type of capability, and it is the concentration of these multiple capabilities that gives the chimera, whether real or imaginary, its extraordinary power. While the particular form that the cult of these chimeras takes may be indigenous to Tibet, the similarities they bear to the divinities of Tantric Buddhism may ultimately have led to the usurpation of their role and their marginalisation.

## Introduction

All cultures have more or less elaborate schemes for the classification of animals, and animals that do not fall neatly into one category or other are often treated as strange or sacred. The culture of Linnaean taxonomy is no exception. The first specimen of a duck-billed platypus to reach the zoological establishment in Great Britain was long suspected to be the work of a forger. The sense of strangeness may also betray itself in taxonomic nomenclature, as in the case of the Indian nilgai. The nilgai, or blue bull, is an antelope – the largest in the world – but it does not look like one. It is blue-grey in colour, and though it does vaguely resemble a cow it has an elongated neck and is a good deal more fleet-footed. The scientific name for the animal is *Boselaphus tragocamelus*, which means ‘Bull-elephant goat-camel’.

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1) Part of the research leading to this article was carried out with the generous support of the Austrian Science Fund in the context of the project “Text, Art and Performance in Bon Ritual” (FWF-P24702).



More often, category-crossing animals are the object not so much of donnish wit as of fear and loathing – or reverence. The anthropological literature offers many examples of such creatures. The pioneering scholar in the field of anomalous animals was Mary Douglas, who began her investigations with a landmark article on animal symbolism among the Lele of the Kasai, and singled out the pangolin – a terrestrial creature that has fishlike scales, and gives birth to a single offspring, like humans – for special attention (Douglas 1957, esp. pp. 50–51). Most famous, perhaps, is her study of forbidden foods in the Bible (notably, the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus), which are mentioned in this work but much developed in subsequent studies. The impurity of certain animals, Douglas famously argued, derives from their anomalous character: the camel, the hare and the rock-badger are prohibited because they “chew the cud, but divide not the hoof”, whereas pigs have cloven hooves, but unlike bovids, are not ruminants. “The baboon, the scaly tail, the tortoise, and other animal anomalies are to the Lele as the camel, the hare and the rock-badger to the ancient Hebrews” (*ibid.*, p. 50).

It may be the fascination with the idea of such categorical confusions that lies behind the drive to invent marvellous beasts, but whatever the case, such creatures are present in mythology everywhere. Tibetan attitudes towards anomalous and composite animals would surely be a rewarding field of investigation, and here I would like to consider the example of a number of chimeras – both real and imaginary – to see what tentative conclusions we might reach about Tibetan attitudes to categorical violations in the animal kingdom.

The Tantric Buddhist pantheon offers a vast array of divinities that combine anthropomorphic and theriomorphic features. However they may have evolved in Tibet, these forms originated in south or central Asia, and the fact they are now such a well-established feature of the iconographic landscape conceals the possibility that their arrival may not have gone unopposed. Ra lo tsā ba, one of the main vectors of the cult of Vajrabhairava in the eleventh century, reports that he was execrated because, his enemies said, “he received from a heretical lama called Bha-ro [the cult of] a divinity of the heretics with the head of a beast” (cited in Ramble 2010, p. 313).

If Ra Lo tsā ba’s critics were shocked by this bull-headed god, then it is likely to have been because of the Buddhist context, since there is ample evidence to suggest that animals played an important part in the metaphysical life of humans, especially in the realm of the afterlife. These imported tantric gods differ from the examples with which I shall be concerned here in a number of respects. The theriomorphic component rarely, if ever, exceeds the incorporation of more than one animal (though wings are a common enough

embellishment); secondly, however important their animal nature may have been at their origin, they have largely transcended this feature. Hayagrīva originated as a Central Asian horse god, but Tibetan Buddhism came to revere him as a form of Avalokiteśvara (van Gulik 2005 [1935]).

## The Capable Bat

The first Tibetan chimera I would like to consider is the bat. Bats are rather obvious candidates for treatment as liminal, composite creatures, both because of their physiognomic features and also their behaviour, which includes crepuscular activity and the habit of hanging upside-down. For the Bonpos, the best-known appearance of the bat is in the fourteenth-century *gZi brjid*, where the creature emerges as the foremost avian at the conclusion of a lengthy conference of the birds. The bat also features in the Bonpo funerary cycle of the *Mu cho'i khrom 'dur* as one of a trio with a monkey and a badger, collectively known as the 'three blocker brothers' (*thub chod spun gsum*).<sup>2</sup>

The text that forms the basis of the present examination belongs to a corpus of Bonpo ritual texts from Amdo, collected and partly edited by Ngag dbang rgya mtsho of Lanzhou University.<sup>3</sup> The text concerning the bat is available to me in two forms. One is an *dbu can* transcription, with minor edits, by Ngag dbang rgya mtsho, and the other is a set of photographs of a manuscript taken by the same researcher. The first is entitled simply *Pha wang bzhugs so* and the second *rGon po pha 'am dbu bzhugs s+ho*. They will be referred to henceforth as *Pha wang* and *Pha 'am* respectively. Since the manuscript of the former is unavailable to me, I cannot of course vouch for the absence of 'silent' editing by the collector; it is clear, nevertheless, that the two texts are related, but that *Pha wang* has far fewer irregularities than *Pha 'am*, much of which is incomprehensible. For reasons of space, the text of *Pha 'am* will not be reproduced here.

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2) Bellezza 2008, p. 381. On the same page, Bellezza provides a reference to another Bonpo work in which "the bat (and lark) act as emissaries for the ritual veneration of the original Tibetan clans" (*ibid.*, p. 381, fn. 80).

3) Ngag dbang rgya mtsho made this material available to me via Samten Karmay, with a view to a collaborative study of *le'u* texts that is currently in progress. I am grateful to these two scholars for their generosity.



Fig. 1. Bat, from wooden print-block (*par shing*) owned by Lama Tshultrim of Lubrak, Nepal. Photo Kemi Tsewang.

*Pha wang* belongs to a branch of Bon in which the main exponents are the hereditary priests known as *le'u*.<sup>4</sup> It is worth pointing out that there is an unmistakable kinship between these *le'u* texts and the Dongba tradition of the Naxi. For the latter, the bat is the divine messenger. One of the *dto-mba* (Dongba) recitations discussed by Rock in his monumental study of Naxi ritual is entitled “<sup>1</sup>Ha-<sup>2</sup>yi-<sup>2</sup>dzi-<sup>1</sup>boa <sup>1</sup>ssu <sup>1</sup>k'v the Bat Invites the Nāgas”. Rock observes that <sup>1</sup>Ha-<sup>2</sup>yi-<sup>2</sup>dzi-<sup>1</sup>boa “is apparently his name for bat in the

4) A number of articles on the subject of this sacerdotal class have been published by Ngag dbang rgya mtsho; see, for example, sNgon 'dzin Ngag dbang rgya mtsho 2006. An English translation of this work will appear in a future edition of this journal.

colloquial language is <sup>2</sup>bi-<sup>1</sup>boa, in Tibetan pha-wang...” (Rock 1952, p. 187). He adds that “There is little in this *ms.* which deals actually with the bat, except that a family was ill and the bat told them to invite five regional Nāgas and perform [the ritual called] <sup>2</sup>Ssu <sup>1</sup>gv.” (*ibid.*, p. 187).

A Naxi pictographic text translated and analysed by Pan Anshi deals with the myth of the killing and dismemberment of a demon called Ssù. Among other things, the dismemberment provides the charter myth for competition over food resources between various wild species, but we are also told that “the messenger bat brought the flesh of the demon to the white gate of the Tibetan land” (Pan 1998, pp. 301–302). There is an episode in a Naxi myth, examined by Michael Oppitz in the same volume, in which the hero Dtô-mbà Shí-lô

is visited by a messenger from earth, named La-wú-là-ssàw-zò. This figure is mentioned in many Naxi manuscripts as a transcendental go-between. He is said to live on the meat of the unicorn, to carry an ever-burning torch and a bag full of food that never empties, and to ride on a white horse in the company of a bat named Hà-yí-dzi-boà-p’èr, mounted on a female garuḍa-bird. The bat, too, is a customary go-between in Naxi mythology. (Oppitz 1998, p. 314)

In Anthony Jackson’s study of Naxi ritual texts, too, wherever the bat appears it is as a message-bearer between gods and humans (Jackson 1979). Since the mediatory role of bats features in the myths of numerous cultures it cannot alone be diagnostic of kinship between the *le’u* and the Naxi Dongba. Much more telling in this regard is the name of the bat. The Naxi name features the element Dzi, while *Pha wang* opens with the information that the protagonist is the offspring of the king of the (homophonous) rDzi. The word *rdzi* in Tibetan means ‘herder’ or ‘keeper’, but in the context it clearly denotes a people or a clan of some sort. In Naxi mythology, Dzi is a name (literally meaning ‘people’) associated with the inhabitants of the second of three heavens, personified by the figure of Dzi-la-ä-p’u (Jackson 1979, p. 215), and although the protagonist of *Pha wang*, Capable Bat, is invoked as a keeper and protector (*rdzi*) of various categories of wards – including brigands – it would be difficult to dismiss an association with a people called Dzi as a mere coincidence. In a narrative concerning Dzi-la-ä-p’u, there is even a bat named Dzi-boa-dzi-lv (Jackson 1979, p. 226).

Before turning to the translation, a few words should be said about the epithet of the bat in this text. In *Pha ’am* it is *rgon po* while *Pha wang* has *rgos po*. *rGon po* could be an error or an archaism for *mgon po* (‘protector’), an allusion to the tutelary role of the bat. *rGos po* should probably be understood as

*rgod po*, usually meaning ‘wild’ or ‘fierce’. While this seems to be an improbable sobriquet for the bat, *rgod po* also means ‘clever’ or ‘capable’, and it is this reading that seems most appropriate in the present context.

Since the text is relatively short, and Tibetan works dealing with the propitiation of bats are apparently rare, the work is translated in full. Although it is a good deal clearer than *Pha 'am*, *Pha wang* also contains numerous obscure terms and passages. The opening section – immediately following the birth of Capable Bat – is particularly confused, and the translation at this point is a loose interpretation based on the probable intention, deduced from the rest of the narrative, rather than an accurate rendering.

Hey! In the beginning, the rDzi king and the Ngad queen coupled, and had a son, Capable Bat. If both gods and people had [this bat], everything that was done but incorrectly related [would be related correctly]; if gods and people had this bat, all that was done but misunderstood might be accomplished according to their wishes. Word went around about the existence of Capable Bat. Capable Bat was caught in a net, and presented to Wise King Kongtse;<sup>5</sup> a creature of such great dexterity, but at the sight of it Kongtse was revolted. “The various bat-features of its body: with the five kinds of superior knowledge inside him he is very clever; his body has the five kinds of superior knowledge – there is not a single place about which there is nothing to say!”

Thus did Kongtse extol it. Capable Bat said, “Don’t kill me, don’t annihilate me! If you kill me I’ll be a grey corpse. If you don’t kill me, there will be five recompenses. My body has five fine qualities – propitiate Capable Bat! Propitiating me will have its benefits in time to come. If you don’t propitiate Capable Bat, the sky and the earth will be turned upside-down; the black-haired humans will fall ill, and the cattle will die; rain will not fall from the sky, plants will not germinate on the earth, and the six kinds of grain will not grow; the flocks that you tend will not flourish, and strong sons will not be born; the rivers will not flow properly, and horses, kine and sheep will not increase. The protectors will not accompany you, and you will be unable to overcome armies, wild yaks, enemies and demons; there will be no more work of digging the earth and raising castles, and the dead shall not meet the gods. So, rather propitiate Capable Bat. As quickly as you can, offer Capable Bat cows, sheep and yaks, and the sweet essence of delicious ninefold nectar!”

Kongtse the King replied, “Creature, it is said that upon your body are five evil signs: you have the body of a man and the head of a rat; this is the first omen signifying that you ought not to have been born; you have the wings of a bird and the claws of a rat – the second omen signifying that you ought not to have been born; third, your avian body has the ears of a rat – the third omen etc.; fourth, your finely-veined wings have claws – the fourth omen etc.; fifth, your upper lip is cleft into two parts – the fifth omen etc.; sixth, your ears stand upright – the sixth omen etc.; seventh, you’re

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5) Concerning the significance of Wise King Kongtse in Bonpo works, see, *inter al.*, Lin 2007.

small but eloquent – the seventh omen *etc.*; eighth, you have great knowledge and long ears – the eighth omen *etc.*; ninth, you have an animal form but you are endowed with human speech; and you have a little body but you're covered in wrinkles. Creature, you have all these ominous signs in full! You are the messenger between gods and humans; and you live among humans and gods."

Capable Bat replied: "My extraordinary body has nine great qualities – listen to me, O Wise King Kongtse! I have the wings of a bird because my father is the white-tailed eagle, and the body of a rat because my mother is the grey mole; that head [...] you have, son of four mothers (?).<sup>6</sup> The claws on my wings are a sign of guidance out of the lower realms – that is what their quality is said to be. That I have a small body with many wrinkles is a sign of removing suffering – that is said to be its quality. My great eloquence is a sign of hospitable attendance – that is said to be its quality. That my upper lip is in two parts is a sign that I am endowed with method and wisdom – that is said to be its quality. That my ears stand upright is a sign of the suppression of the enemies in the phenomenal world – that is said to be their quality. That my ears stand firmly erect is a sign of the endurance of the established truth – that is said to be their quality. That I have the body of a beast is a sign that I host the five siblings.<sup>7</sup>

*bSwo!* As a son of the heavily-armed *ma sangs* spirits, my powers of suppression are such that I can conquer the nine levels; my powers of destruction are such that I can destroy an adamantine rock. My ability to steal is such that I can steal the ambrosia of immortality; there is none that I, the bat, cannot overcome in debate.<sup>8</sup> Propitiate me with gold and turquoise; when you make me offerings, offer me conch-white rice. Protect our patron; hold the sky-cord of this, his child; be the guardian of those who go raiding; draw various curses to the hateful enemy! Bat's upper lip is like a tooth of adamant. Repel the curses of Buddhist monks; propitiate Bat with gold and turquoise. Capable Bat is like the blue sky: repel thunderbolts and hail! Capable Bat, with eyes like the sun, repel the red levin! Bat's ears are like victory banners: repel *rgyal po* demons! Bat's teeth are like ritual stakes: repel the demons of the lord of death. The membrane of Bat's paws are like a golden spoon: repel the evil weapons of the demonic hosts! Bat's wings are like goblets (*nal ba < nal ze?*): repel the advancing demon-*btsan* of the demons! Bat's claws are like iron hooks: repel any of the demons' torturers that come. Bat's wings are like talons: propitiated Bat, repel greyness and baldness! The bones of Bat's wings are like the vulture's wings: propitiated Bat, repel the curses of Buddhist priests! Propitiated Bat, repel any illnesses that may come! Propitiated Bat, repel epidemics! Propitiated Bat, repel diseases of cattle! Propitiated Bat, repel diseases of horses! Propitiated Bat, repel diseases of livestock! Propitiated Bat, repel diseases of goats! Propitiated Bat, repel diseases of sheep! Propitiated Bat,

6) The meaning of *mang na stong ba* is obscure. In the corresponding passage, *Pha 'am* has *lo nad ltang pa'i ghoo' yod pa de / ma 1 bu la yad pa yin*.

7) The implication may be that Capable Bat can reconcile differences even among a group of quarreling siblings.

8) *Pha 'am* here reads: *'paṃ'aṃ shagis (?) mi thub mes*.

preserve our lives! Propitiated Bat, repel our various enemies! Propitiated Bat, repel various conflicts! Propitiated Bat, protect the land! Propitiated Bat, look after our guests! Propitiated Bat, look after our qualities! Propitiated Bat, with your qualities guard the protectors who travel abroad, the women who remain in the village, and the cattle and sheep that are taken to graze. Escort those who travel abroad and welcome those who come to us. Propitiate Bat with offerings of barley and rice! Propitiate Bat with the first-offering of nectar! Hey, Bat, face east and repel the maledictions of the Bonpo and Buddhist priests in the east. Repel all kinds of enemies and conflicts. Face south, Bat, and repel the maledictions of the Bonpo and Buddhist priests in the south. Face north, Bat, and repel the maledictions of the Bonpo and Buddhist priests in the north, and turn back all kinds of enemies and conflicts. Thanks to the benefits of propitiating you, Bat, with your upward gaze you repel thunderbolts and hail that come from above; look down, Bat, and repel the harm of the great serpent spirits, lords of the earth.

The divine judgment-stone of the world,<sup>9</sup> the yellow-headed white monkey of the world, and Capable Bat – these three are the judges of the world. Since you are the judge, act as the judge! We offer you presents and gifts in full – do not falter in your task! If our beneficent patron is unwell, cure him, and take care of the lives of his children. Nourish the enfeebled, and care for the lives of horses, yaks and sheep; and protect me, the *bon po*. The end.<sup>10</sup>

## The Camel

The second chimeric animal to be considered here will be the camel, which features in a text devoted to a ritual known either as *gTo nag mgo gsum*, “the Three-headed One from the Black *gTo* Rites”, or *Mi nag mgo gsum*, “the Three-headed Black Man”. There are many variants of this ritual among both Buddhists and Bonpos, but the particular text referred to here is entitled *Srid pa'i gto nag mgo gsum bzhugs pa legs+hō*, “The Three-headed One from the Black *gTo* Rituals of the Phenomenal World”, henceforth abbreviated as *mGo gsum*. The central figure of this ritual is the three-headed monster of the title, who will be given particular attention presently. The effigy, described as a *mdos* (though the ritual in which it is set is classified as a *gto*), is made of black clay and placed in a roasting pan, and surrounded by moulded dough images (*zan par*) of the sort that often feature in *mdos* constructions, such as the eight planets, the twelve years, the eight trigrams, the nine magic

9) Presumably a reference to the archaic (though still surviving) Tibetan custom of holding a rock when swearing an oath.

10) For the transliterated text, see Appendix, text 1.



Fig. 2. Camel, from wooden print-block (*par shing*) owned by Lama Tshultrim of Lubrak, Nepal. Photo Kemi Tsewang.

squares and so forth. In the present case, the list of items for incorporation includes an image of “the camel of the vampires of decline (*phung sri*)”.<sup>11</sup> The composite nature of the camel is not unique to Tibetan perceptions: there is even an Anglo-American adage (attributed to a variety of sources) to the effect that a camel is “a horse designed by a committee”. However, unlike the case of the bat, our text does not itemise the animals that have gone into the production of the camel, but states merely that “its body is the body of all animals”.

As for this ill-omened camel of the vampires of decline: as for its origin, it originated in the five elements; as for where it came from, it came from the land of splendour; as for where it settled, it settled in the realm of the gods; its body is the body of all animals; as for its appearance, it has the appearance of an ominous, inauspicious body; as

11) Various meanings of the term *phung sri* have been proposed by different writers, but these do not concern us here.





Fig. 3. Lama Tshultrim of Lubrak prepares to make a dough print (*zan par*) of the camel (third image from left) for use in a performance of the Three-headed One from the Black Rituals (*gTo nag mgo gsum*).

for portents, there is nothing more portentous than this: it is the demon of degeneration that brings low the thrice-thousand worlds; the demon of downfall that destroys kingdoms – the mighty one that will bring an end to ill omens. Its energy is as great as that of the wrathful gods; its strident roar is (21v) as loud as the thunder; from its mouth spew forth a host of impurities, and its neck is hung with diverse adornments. A myriad offerings for the *'gong po* demons are loaded on its back. I pray you, repel all the various ill omens!<sup>12</sup>

The ambivalence with which the text treats the camel is obvious. As in the case of the bat, its composite character is a part of its dire aspect that includes impurity and has the potential to wreak universal destruction; but it is this same power that is harnessed with a view to putting an end to our own enemies. Figure 2 shows a print-block (*par shing*) negative of the camel that is used in the performance of this ritual by Lama Tshultrim of Lubrak. Clearly

12) See Appendix, text 2.



Fig. 4. Effigy of the Three-headed Black Man (*Mi nag mgo gsum*) under construction in Lubrak, Nepal.

visible in front of the camel's ears is a pair of horns. While we might be inclined to attribute this curious feature to the likelihood that the wood carver had never seen a camel, a more compelling explanation is provided

in a forthcoming article by Daniel Berounsky. The article features a narrative concerning a deer in the context of a ritual of ransom offering (*glud*). At one point the deer asks a priest about the origins of his antlers, and is told that he originally had none, and that he was given them by “the camel with a short lifespan” (*rnga mong tshe thung*) (Berounsky forthcoming).

While bats and camels are of course real flesh-and-blood creatures, it is possible to discern the same principle of combining the components of several creatures into a single entity in the case of imaginary monsters. A patient search through Buddhist and Bonpo ritual literature would probably yield further examples, but here I shall limit myself to two.

### The Three-headed Black Man

The first is the central figure in the ritual that features the camel of the vampires of decline: the Three-headed Black Man. Since the text and performance of this ritual will form the subject of a separate study, the present article will deal only with the physical features of the monster and the significance attributed to them. The Old Man of the Sky (associated with the trigram Khen) and the Old Woman of the Earth (Khon) coupled, and:

After nine months and ten days [there was born a creature] unlike either its father or its mother, with the body of a human and three heads. Its mother, the elderly Khon Woman, cursed it in these words: “It would seem that your two elderly parents incurred bad karma in a previous life, and that the fruit of that is now ripening. Alas, the like of such a creature has not been seen in the world! Oh, what an extraordinary thing – it terrifies me! This black man with three heads has iron talons, a gaping maw with bared teeth and eyes wide open in rage. This blue tiger’s head to the right is made of anger; this yellow bull’s head in the middle is lustful and stupid-looking; one of its heads is the head of an indolent pig. Its gaping maw, its bared fangs, its wide hate-filled eyes! The ring-fingers of its two hands are eager to kill, and its garuḍa-wings are ready to take flight. It has a belt of a poisonous snake wound around it, and the winding tail of a monkey; its talons, the claws of an ominous bird, are bared! If you would prevail, prevail over our hateful enemies, prevail over the harmful demons that obstruct us. Put our misfortunes into the skillet, and at the place where the ways meet at a crossroads, eat these ransoms and this gossip as your food!” With these words she took it to a crossroads. Whatever the Three-headed Black One met on the way it reduced to dust; it devoured people till their lands were emptied, so that the world with as many people as it has in it, was brought low, and the three worlds were emptied.<sup>13</sup>

13) See Appendix, text 3a.

But thanks to the intervention of (again) the Wise King Kongtse, the monster is induced to apply its powers against evil:

May the tiger's head to the right transform the harm caused by *rgyal po* and *'gong po*; may the pig's head to the left transform all *byur* and demons of livestock-loss; may the bull's head in the middle transform all the great obstructions and all despair; may your wingbeats transform the *gdon* demons that soar in mid-air. Cast the torma-missile at our enemies with your ring-finger; with your tally-stick lay these hostile obstructions on the whipping-board. With the serpent belt that's tied around you, transform all harmful kinds of serpent-spirits; with your winding monkey's tail repel all calamities, illness and *gdon* demons; with those bared talons of the baleful bird, repel all hostile evil omens and inauspicious signs. Act today as the king who averts! Avert all ill omens and inauspicious signs, and the different kinds of human afflictions; dispel the hunger and thirst of the *pretas*; (6v) dispel illnesses of humans and cattle; repel [negative] circumstances and suffering.<sup>14</sup>

### Little Tiger-Bee the Vampire God

In the narrative of *mGo gsum* we find a theme that featured in *Pha wang*: each of the features from different animals that it embodies has a specific power, which together serve to make their bearer a highly versatile and multifunctional defender. This concentration of powers is especially marked in the last of the chimeras to be considered here: *Sri gsaṅ bung ba stag chung*: Little Tiger-Bee the Vampire God. Several versions of this text are available, but I shall refer exclusively to the one published by Samten Karmay and Yasuhiko Nagano in the *The Call of the Blue Cuckoo* (Karmay and Nagano 2002, pp. 185–98). Since a near-complete French translation of the work has also been published by Samten Karmay (Karmay 2013), there is little point in presenting a full-length English rendering here, and I shall confine myself to examining the physical characteristics of Little Tiger-Bee and the powers they represent.

The narrative opens with an account of the forebears, the birth and the early development of the main figure before shifting to the ordinary human world. Here, two unattended children fall prey to a vampire, and priests are called to perform a ritual in which the predator is hunted down and destroyed by Little Tiger-Bee. The latter's father is the white eagle of the ICe lcan (ICe rgod dkar po) his mother the grey (*sngon po*) *dbiyig dbal*, a name about which

14) See Appendix, text 3b.

I shall have more to say presently. The mother gives birth to a pea-sized egg which the parents bless and then take around various realms for benedictions by the resident divinities – the *dbal*, the *bdud*, the *dmu* and the *btsan* – before proceeding to solicit empowerments from the animal denizens of the different vertically-layered strata of the world, beginning with the snow lion on the glaciers and working downwards to the conch in the ocean, before concluding with the *gnyan* and the *klu*. The final blessing is provided by gShen rab mi bo. The egg eventually hatches out and a strange little creature emerges:

A body with tiger stripes  
 A head with the horns of the dancing wild yak  
 The wings of the white-tailed eagle  
 And the sharp teeth of the white snow lion;  
 A medicine bag of nectar  
 And a sharp [sting like a] spearhead;  
 A pleasant voice with a full range from loud to soft,  
 The hands of a *gnyan*  
 And the garb of a human *gshen* priest.<sup>15</sup>

The special merits of this complex inheritance become apparent later on when Little Tiger-Bee is unleashed against the vampire. His quarry tries to take refuge in the different realms and at each level of the world, but because Little Tiger-Bee has been empowered by the inhabitants of these territories he has the power and weaponry appropriate to each. The vampire is hunted from the top of the snow-mountains in stages into the underworld, until he is eventually brought to bay under the rock of the vampires, precisely where he had taken shelter after killing the two children.

Little Tiger-Bee struck it with his pointed spear[-like sting],  
 Gored it with his wild yak horns  
 Savaged it with his white snow-lion fangs  
 Battered it with the white eagle wings  
 Rent it with his claws of the striped Bengal tiger  
 And completely annihilated it with his copper mandibles.<sup>16</sup>

This presentation of four chimeras was prefaced with the remark that two were real animals and two were imaginary beings. Functionally – that is to say, as far as their role in rituals is concerned – the distinction is probably

15) See Appendix, text 3a.

16) See Appendix, text 3b.

meaningless. Animals, as the anthropological axiom has it, are ‘good to think’,<sup>17</sup> and it makes little difference whether the chimera is based on a real creature or not, since the significance of its composite character is of course not inherent but attributed. Bats do not talk, but it is also the case that Little Tiger-Bee is a less fantastic creature than he might at first appear to be. The version of the text cited here identifies him as a *bung ba*, whereas in another he appears as *’brong ma*, which Karmay convincingly suggests should be read as *sbrang ma*. According to Karmay, the two terms respectively mean *abeille* (bee) and *bourdon* (bumblebee): “from the iconographic description of the divinity which is quite terrifying in the text, I have chosen to translate the Tibetan term as ‘bumblebee’ rather than ‘bee’” (2013, p. 722, fn. 8).<sup>18</sup>

While such a distinction between *bung ba* and *sbrang ma* may well be a regional nicety, Karmay is surely right that the Vampire God is something other than just a honeybee. In view of his fearsome characteristics, a more likely candidate than a bumblebee is probably the hornet, which delivers a more ferocious sting, and is a voracious predator on other insects, which it kills with its (conceivably) copper-coloured mandibles.

Little Tiger-Bee has a more narrowly-defined function than Capable Bat insofar as he specialises in the destruction of vampires, but the two share certain iconographic and behavioural features that suggest that they are variants of a single type. Apart from their incorporation of the physical characteristics of other animals, both are notable for their mastery of all levels of the vertically-tiered world, and their ability to liaise between zenith and nadir. There is also an intriguing suggestion of common parenthood. The opening lines of Capable Bat inform us that Bat was the offspring of the rDzi king and the Ngad queen. However, when explaining his powers to Kongtse, Bat mentions that he has the wings of a bird because his father is the white-tailed eagle, and the body of a rat because his mother is the grey mole. Little Tiger-Bee’s father is the white eagle and his mother is described as *dbyig dbal sngon po*.<sup>19</sup> Karmay remarks that this creature “is clearly not the female of the eagle, but some other sort of unidentified bird” (2013, p. 723, fn. 10). It is worth considering the possibility that Little Tiger-Bee’s mother is in fact not a bird at

17) As is well know, the adage is a distillation from Lévi-Strauss’s remark that “species are chosen [as totems] not because they are ‘good to eat’, but because they are ‘good to think’” (1962, p. 89).

18) “A partir de la description iconographique de la divinité qui est assez terrifiante dans le texte, j’ai choisi de traduire le terme tibétain par ‘bourdon’ plutôt que par ‘abeille’.”

19) *dByig* denotes a jewel, while *dbal* is a peculiarly Bonpo term with connotations of sharpness or heat.

all but some subterranean creature: the name dByi dbal sngon po is suspiciously similar to Byi long sngon po, the mother of Clever Bat, and it is at least conceivable that, before the attrition of textual transmission had taken its toll, the Vampire God's mother was none other than the grey mole herself.

I am not aware of the existence of any prescriptive text of the ritual for which this narrative provides the charter myth. Vampire subjugation (*sri mnan*) ritual texts are not uncommon, but most of those with which I am familiar differ from *Sri gsas* in one important respect: mastery of the different realms is not concentrated in a single figure but apportioned out to the animals that inhabit them. When, during the recitation of the ritual narrative, the fugitive vampire tries to hide in a given location, the priest instructs the appropriate mammal or bird to go and flush it out. Logically, vampire subjugation rituals featuring Little Tiger-Bee are likely to have evolved from earlier forms in which creatures of the natural world are called on to carry out tasks that are, later on, allocated to a single composite figure. But why is it the earlier forms that have survived?

Indigeneity is a complex notion that has a strong and a weak sense. Examples of the former – institutions that have flourished *ab origine* in the places where they are celebrated – are probably rarer than we would imagine (cuckoo clocks were invented in the Black Forest and not – *pace* Orson Wells – in Switzerland, Scots clan tartans were a creation of the Victorian textile industry, and so forth) whereas the ‘weak’ form accepts a combination of home-grown and imported structure or content. The four chimeras we have seen are monstrous combinations of different animals, and three out of four of them (Little Tiger-Bee being the exception here) conform to the topos of anomalous animals to the extent that the sense of danger elicited by their monstrosity also evokes revulsion. In the case of Little Tiger-Bee, his composite nature is given an intriguing inflection: while he is eagle on his father's side and some identified creature – possibly mole – on his mother's, his multiple features are the result of the empowerments he receives while he is still in the egg. In terms of form, if not content, his trajectory is comparable to that of a tantric neophyte who develops spiritual and thaumaturgic powers by accumulating initiations. The Three-headed Black Man is classified as one of the *gto* rituals, which belong to the lowest of the Nine Ways of Bon; the camel is a minor player within this same ritual; if rituals featuring Little Tiger-Bee and Capable Bat are still performed, I am not aware of them. If these chimeras are marginal in modern Tibetan religious belief to the point of obsolescence, perhaps it is not because they are alien to Buddhism but, on the contrary, because they are *too similar* to tantric figures; the fact that

other monsters, such as the beast-headed god imported by Ra Lo tsā ba, could do all the things they could do, and more besides, may eventually have rendered them redundant.

## Appendix: Transliterated Text of Tibetan Excerpts

### 1. Capable Bat

**Note:** Ngag dbang rgya mtsho's *dbu can* transcription of *Pha wang*, presented here in its entirety, includes occasional emendations; these are represented in the roman transliteration in round brackets, while my own suggestions for improved readings are given in square brackets. Emendations have been limited to passages in which the translation may not otherwise seem justified.

Kyai dang po rdzi'i rgyal po dang / ngad kyi rgyal mo gnyis 'tshol ('tshos) pa la / bu ni rgos po pha wang srid / lha myi gnyis la 'di yod na / chi byas thams cad log par bshad / lha mi gnyis la 'di yod na / chi byas thams cad log bsams pa grub / bsams (bsam) pa'i don rnams yid bzhin grub / pha wang rgos po yod pa zer / pha wang rgos po rtsags gis gzung / kong tse 'phrul rgyal phyag tu phul / yang rtsal che ba'i sems can cig / lta' na kong tse skyug re grog (bro) / lus la pha wang mtshan sna tshogs rnams / khog na shes pa sna lnga 'drin [sgrin] / lus la shes pa sna lnga yod / smras pa mis (min) sa gcig kyang med / gong tse zhes pa zhal nas stod (bstod) / pha wang rgos po zhal na re / nga ma bu ma bsad ma bcad do / bsad nas shi khog skya bo yin / nga ma bsad pa la gting (gtong) dang lnga yod / lus la yon tan sna lnga yod / pha wang rgos po brngan no skad / phyi ma brngan pa phan pa na / pha wang rgos po ma sngon (rngon) na / gnam sa gnyis kyang steng 'og 'gyur / 'gho (mgo) nag myi la na tsha yod / sems can phyugs la god kha yod / gnam las char chu 'bab mi nyan / sa le [la] rtsi gto (tog) 'khrung ('khrungs) mi nyan / 'brus phrug ('bru drug) lo tog skyes mi nyan / bso (gso) ba'i be lug 'phel mi nyan / dbang thang bu tsa skye mi nyan / tsha (chu) bo bzhung bzhin babs mi nyan / rta nor lug gsum 'phel mi nyan / mgon po grog dang spyod mi nyan / dmag g.yag dgra srang [srin?] 'dul thab (thabs) med / sa skos (rkos) mkhar las byas mi nyan / shi ba lha dang 'phrad mi nyan / de bas pha wang brngan no skad / 'phras gis byed lug g.yag gsum gis / bdud rtsi zhim dgu mngar bcud 'di / pha wang rgos po brngan 'tshal lo / gong tse rgyal bo 'di skad gsung / sems can khyod kyi lus steng la / ltas ngan sna lnga snang ba zer / mi lus bya yi mgo bo can / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan gcig / bya shog (gshog) byi ba'i sder mo can / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan gnyis / 'dab chags lus la 'chi bar na [byi ba rna?] / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan gsum / brdos phra bo shog (gshog) pa'i sder ma can / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan bzhi / yar chu shog re 'dug pa de / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan lnga / rna ba (28) hed gis 'dug pa de / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan drug / lus chung la kha rtsas [rtsal] che / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan bdun / shes pa



che la rna ba ring / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan brgyad / byol song lus la mi skad smras / mi skyes pa'i ltas ngan dgu / lus po chung la gnyer ma mong (mang) / ltas ngan rnam par sna tshogs de / sems can khyod las [la] tshang gnyis [nas] 'dug / lha mi gnyis gis (kyis) 'phrin pa byed / mi dang lha ru 'dug pa gnyis / de skad yin nas gsung pa de / pha wang rgos pa'i zhal na re / ya mtshan che ba'i lus po la / yon tan sna dgu yod pa yin / 'phrul rgyal kong tse nga la nyon / bye'i [bya] yi shog (gshog) pa 'dug pa de / pha thang dkar rgod po'i bu yin pa / bya'i [byi'i] lus por 'dug pa de / ma byi long sngon po bu yin pa / de'i yod tan de'i zer / mang na stong ba 'go bo de / ma bzhi bu la yod pa yin / de'i yod tan de'i zer / shog (gshog) pa sder mo yod pa de / ngan song gnas nas 'dren pa'i rtag (rtags) / de'i yod tan de'i zer / lus po chung la snying [gnyer] ma mang / nyon mongs sdug bsngal sel ba'i rtags / de'i yod [yon] tan de'i zer / kha chen [rtsal] che ba 'dug pa de / 'gron po gnyer las chags pa yin / de'i yod [yon] tan de'i zer / yar chu (mchu) shog re 'deg pa de / thabs dang shes rab ldan ba'i rtags / de'i yod tan de'i zer / rna ba hed gis 'dug pa de / snang srid dra [dgra] la rnon pa'i rtags / de'i yon tan de'i zer / rna ba sres tshug 'dug pa de / bden pa shag gi thub pa'i rtag (rtags) / de'i yod tan de'i zer / byon song lus po 'dug pa de / spun lnga 'gron po byed pa'i rtag / de'i yod tan de'i zer / bso ma sa nga [bswo / ma sangs] tshon che'i bu / bnon na sa bcu zil gyis gnon / bshig nas rdo rje brag kyang bzhig / skus nas 'chi med bdud rtsi skus / pha wang shag gi mi thub na [med] / brngan no gser dang g.yu'i brngan / mchod nas dung 'bras gis mchod / yon bdag 'di'i mgon skyabs mdzod / sri'u 'di'i dmu dag gzung gzung / jag 'gro rnam kyis rdi'u gyi / sdang ba'i dgra la byad sna drong / pha wang yar chu (mchu) rdo rje so ba 'dra / bande byad kha phyir la zlog / brngan no gser dang g.yu'i brngan / pha wang rgos po dgung sngon 'dra / gnam gi thog ser yong ba zlog / pha wang spyang dmyig nyi ma 'dra / glog mdhar dmar po yong 'dra zlog / pha wang sna ni rgyal mtshan 'dra / rgyal bo (28) yod pa zlog / pha wang so ni rtsang phur 'dra / 'chi bdag bdud gi bar chad zlog / pha wang lag pags gser thur 'dra / bdud dmag gi phyag cha ngan pa zlog / pha wang shog (gshog) pa nal ba 'dra / bdud gis bdud btsan phros pa zlog / pha wang sder mo lcags kyu 'dra / bdud gis shan pa yong ba zlog / pha wang gshog pa sder mo 'dra / skya bo ral yul [yol] yong ba zlog / pha wang shog (gshog) ru rgod shog (shog) 'dra / pha wang brngan pa ban byad zlog / pha wang brngan pa bon byed (byad) zlog / pha wang brngan pa nad yong zlog / pha wang brngan pa rim yam (rims yams) zlog / pha wang brngan pa phyug nad zlog / pha wang brngan pa rta nad zlog / pha wang brngan pa nor nad zlog / pha wang brngan pa ra nad zlog / pha wang brngan pa lug nad zlog / pha wang brngan pas tshe srog 'tshos / pha wang brngan pa dgra sna sgyur / pha wang brngan pa gyod sna sgyur / pha wang brngan pa yul kham srung / pha wang brngan pa 'gron po 'tsho' / pha wang brngan pa yon tan srung / pha wang brngan pa'i yon tan gis / 'gon po gses [byes] la 'gro ba dang / bud med yul du 'dug pa dang / be lug zan la skyong ba dang / pha 'gro rnam kyis skyel [skyel ma] gyis / tshur yong rnam kyis bsus ma gyis / brngan no gser dung g.yu'i brngan / mchod mchod nas dang 'bras kyis mchod / bdud rtsi phud gis brngan yon 'bul / kyair pha wang kha shar du bstan pa yi / shar phyogs ban byad bon byad zlog / dgra sna gyod sna yong ba zlog / pha wang brngan pa phyir la zlog / pha wang kha nub du bstan pa yi / nub phyogs ban byad bon byad zlog / pha wang kha byang du bstan

pa yi / byang phyogs ban byad bon byad zlog / dgra sna gyod sna yong ba zlog / pha wang brngan pa'i yon tan gyis / pha wang kha steng du bstan pa yi / steng phyogs gis thog ser yong ba zlog / pha wang kha 'og du bstan pa yi / sa bdag klu chen gnod pa zlog / srid pa'i gzu bo gsos rdog dang / srid pa'i sprel dkar gser mgo dang / pha wang rgo po de dang gsum / de gsum srid pa'i gzu bo yin / gzu bo yin pas gzu mdzod cig / brngan yon tshangs ba khyed la 'bul / khyed kyi 'phrin las ma bcod cig / rgyu sbyor yon gyi bdag po'o / nad pa yod na gsos pa gyis / sri'u yod na tshe rdzi mdzod / (30) rgus [rgud] ma rnams kyi sur ma [gso ma] gyis / rta nor lug gsum tshe rdzi gyis / nga bon po bdag gis 'gon (mgon) skyobs mdzod / tshar ro /

## 2. The Camel

**Note:** In the transliterated passages 2, 3a and 3b, material in round brackets represents the expanded rendering of the contracted form that immediately precedes it. The texts have not been emended.

Kyai ltas ngan phung sri rnga mong 'dir / srid pa 'byung ba lnga la srid / yongs ni rngam gyi yul nas yongs / chags ni lha yi yul na chags / gzugs ni semn (sems can) kun gyis gzugs / 'dra ni ltas ngan than gzugs 'dra / than la 'di bas che ba med / stong gsum phung pa'i phung 'dre yin / rgyal kham sbrlag pa'i sbrlag 'dre yin / ltas ngan stong pa'i stob po che / ming yang phung sri rnga mong zer / mthu stobs rtsal ni khroo (khro bo) rnams dang mnyams / 'ur sgra ngar skad namkha'i (nam mkha'i) (21v) 'brug dang mnyams / kha nas mi gtsang sno^gs (sna tshogs) 'thor / mgul du rgyan cha sna tshogs btags / rgyab tu 'gong yas sno^gs (sna tshogs) bkai / ltas ngan sno^gs (sna tshogs) bsgyur duol (du gsol) / (*mGo gsum* fols 21r–21v)

## 3. The Three-headed Black Man

a) zla dgu ngos bcu song ba dang / pha ma gnyis ka mi 'dra ba'i / milus (mi lus) nag po mgosum (mgo gsum) pa / ma gcig khon ma rgan mo des / 'di skad ces ni dmod mo bor // pha ma rgan rgon nged gnyis kyis / skye ba sngon ma las ngan byas pa 'dra / de'i 'brus ('bru 'bras) da ltar smin / kye ma semn (sems can) 'di 'dra ba / 'jigten ('jig rten) 'di na mthong ma nyung / e ma ya mtshan nga re 'jigs / mi nag mgo bo gsum pa 'dir / sder mo lcags kyis sder mo la / kha sdang mche gtsigs sdang mig bsgrad / g.yas kyi stag mgo sngon po 'di / zhe sdang sgyu las grub pa'i mgo / dbus kyi glang mgo ser po 'di / 'dodgs ('dod chags) che la sha rtsa glan / mgocig (mgo gcig) gti mug phagis (phag gis) mgo / kha sdang mche gtsigs sdang mig bsgrad / lagnyis (lag gnyis) srin lagsod [?] la rngam / khyung gi gshog brdab 'phur la khed / dug sbrul gdub pa'i sked reg can / spre'u'jug ma khyags ma 'khyug / than bya'i sder mo 'jigs pa bsgrad /

khyod che na sdang ba'i dgra la che / che ni gnod pa'i bgegs la che / byur mgo slang nga'i nang du 'jug / gnas ni rgya gram lam mdo' ru / zasu (zas su) glud dang mi kha'i zos / de skad brjod nas lam mdor skyal / mi nag mgo bo gsum po 'di / 'phrad tshad thamd (thams cad) thal bar brlag / yul gyis mi rnam's zad par zos / de kyang mi tshad 'jigten ('jig rten) phung / srid pa gsum po stong la chad / (*mGo gsum* fols 3r–4r)

b) g.yas phyogs stagis (stag gis) mgo bo yis / rgyalo (rgyal po) 'gong po'i gnod pa bsgyur / g.yon phyogs phagis (phag gis) mgo bo yis / byur dang god kha thamd (thams cad) bsgyur / dbus kyis glang gis mgo bo yis / skeg chen nyam nga thamd (thams cad) bsgyur / khyung gi gshog pa brdab pa yis / mkha' la lding ba'i gdon rnam's bsgyur / srin lag gtor zor dgra la rgyob // khram shing dgregs (dgra bgegs) khram la thob // sbrulyi (sbrul gyi) sked rag bcings pa des / klu rigs gdug pa thamd (thams cad) bsgyur / spre'u mjugs ma 'khyug pa yis / rjes ngan nad gdon thamd (thams cad) bsgyur / than bya'i sder mo bsgrad pa yis / than dang ltas ngan dgra la bsgyur / de ring bsgyur ba'i rgyalo (rgyal po) mdzod // than dang ltas ngan thamd (thams cad) bsgyur / mi nad sna tshogs khyod kyis bsgyur / yi dwags bkres skom khyod kyis bsgyur / mi nad phyugs nad khyed kyis| rkyen dang sdugngl (sdug bsngal) khyed kyis bsgyur // (*mGo gsum* fols 5v–6v)

#### 4. Little Tiger-Bee

a) Lus po stag ris khro bo can / mgo bo gar gshog 'brong ru can / thang dkar rgod po'i gshog pa can / seng ge dkar mo'i dbal so can / bdud rtsi man gyi rkyal bu can / rno ngar dbal gyi mdung rtse can / che chung kun gyi skad snyan can / gnyan gyi lag pa can / gshen bon mi'i chas byad can / (Karmay and Nagano 2002, p. 185)

b) rNo ngar dbal gyi mdung gis rgyab / gar gshog 'brong gi ru yis rdung / seng ge dkar mos so yis mur / thang dkar rgod pos gshog pas brlabs / rgya stag khra bo'i spar mos brad / zangs kyi mchu yis sbad kyis bcad / (Karmay and Nagano 2002, p. 188)

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