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Both Fish and Fowl? Preliminary Reflections on Some Representations of a Tibetan Mirror-World*

Charles Ramble

1. Prologue

To the extent that Christoph Cüppers would never himself submit for publication anything that was not carefully thought through and rigorously argued, this contribution is surely an inadequate offering. The cautiousness that marks his work has nothing to do with a lack of adventurousness, but is founded in the wish to do justice to the fiendishly difficult subjects with which he tends to deal. I have had the pleasure of sharing with him some of his adventures, which ranged (geographically speaking) from cave exploration north of the Annapurnas to a particularly memorable search for a lost city in the heat of Nepal's Chitwan jungle. Often enough, trails lead nowhere, but sometimes there are enough signs around the place that we know that something must have been there, without being entirely sure what it may have been. If this article falls short of the standards of evidence Christoph Cüppers would demand of his own work, I hope that it does at least honour the recklessness of the spirit in which he follows his trails.

The following pages will deal with aspects of Tibetan cosmology, and specifically the possible existence of a world-view in which opposed poles are reflections of each other. Possible traces of such a cosmology will be sought in a variety of domains: folktales, the decoration of the Lhasa Jo khang, the etiological myth of the Tibetan kings, the cult of Avalokiteśvara and, finally, the ancestral Tibetan kinship terminology. The locations of this search are therefore widely dispersed, and the evidence inconclusive, but I believe that even with these fragments we can trace the shadowy contours of a Tibetan view of the world that has now been largely forgotten.

These may be areas that have little to do with Christoph Cüppers' best-known work—in sūtra studies, or the arcana of Tibetan administrative literature to which he has contributed in such important ways. However, the article will touch on certain themes that are relevant to his interests, quite apart from the verticality of the Himalayan landscape that he has made the arena of his research: the cultural commerce between the Tibetans and the Newars (Cüppers *et al*. 1996); Tibetan oral traditions and folk literature (Cüppers *et al*. 1998); and, to a lesser extent, art; because, in addition to his excursion into Tibetan iconometry (Cüppers *et al*. 2012), it is also a fact that the dedicatee of this collection is himself a trained and accomplished artist.

I would like to begin—with reference to the second of these three arenas that have attacted the interest of our friend and colleague—with brief summaries of two Tibetan folktales, the relevance of which will become apparent in due course. The first of these was told to me by Nyima Drandul of Mustang, in Nepal. He had heard it from his brother, Lama Karma Tsering, but beyond that I have not been able to determine its provenance. The second—which for a decade was inflicted on first-year students of Tibetan at Oxford University as a translation exercise—is the summary of a story published in 1975 in a collection of folktales from gTsang.

1.1. The Woodcutter's Tale

Once upon a time there was a man who went to cut firewood in the forest above his village in the depths of winter. As he was cutting branches from a tree on the edge of a cliff he missed his footing and fell into the gorge, and resigned himself to a certain death on the rocks below. As it happened, there was a hibernating dragon in the gorge, and it opened its jaws in a great yawn just in time to catch the falling woodcutter. The man survived the winter in the warmth of the sleeping dragon's maw, sustaining himself on the edible jewels that lay about the place in abundance. When spring came the dragon awoke and took to the air, carrying the man with him across the ocean until it landed in the Eastern Continent, where it deposited him unscathed before continuing on its way. Looking about him, the man saw that there was nothing for him to eat, and

* Much of the research that led to the present publication was carried out in the course of a visit to the Austrian Academy of Science, in June 2013, at the generous invitation of Helmut Krasser.

Note: the printed version of this article contains typographic errors that are listed in a sheet of errata. In this electronic version they have been amended in the text itself. The layout and page numbers are unchanged.

he again began to fear for his life. In his quest for food he came upon a village of the people who inhabited the place, but although he spoke to them they were unable to see or to hear him. However, he saw that their bodies seemed to be made of butter, and he proceeded to lick one of them. The villager's body was indeed made of butter, and for several days the man nourished himself happily on the body of his unwitting host.

But the butter-man's health began to suffer, as a consequence of his being slowly eaten alive, and he consulted the lama. The lama performed the divination, and called a meeting of the anxious community. "I have found the cause of the trouble," he announced. "We have in our midst an unwanted visitor: an evil spirit from the land of People that are Made of Flesh."

In spite of the gravity of the situation the assembled villagers fell about with laughter. "Oh, lama, how do you expect us to believe your stories? Of course there can be no such thing as people made of flesh—their bodies would stink and putrefy immediately!"

But the lama was insistent. "I know it seems strange, but there are indeed such things in the world. Look," he said, "I will show you." And he took off his rosary and gave it to the sick butter-man. "Wear this, and we will all meet again tomorrow to see if the situation has changed."

The next day the woodcutter went as usual to find the butter-man who had been sustaining him, but as he licked him his tongue was lacerated by unseen thorns—the effect of the lama's rosary that the butter-man was wearing. The man immediately relinquished his habitual prey and turned his attention to another butter-villager. When the community assembled again that evening the accuracy of the lama's diagnosis was obvious to all: the previous victim had begun to recover, and another villager had started to display the same disturbing symptoms.

"Don't worry," said the lama, "I will perform an exorcism." He made a dough effigy of a horse and a rider, and surrounded it with garlic, chillis, beans and other such foods, and began to perform the ritual. As he walked through the village the man saw a magnificent horse, standing near a table of delicious-looking food. He ate the food and clambered onto the horse, and no sooner was he in the saddle that the animal set off at a brisk pace, unresponsive to the rider's commands, and gathered speed until its hooves were off the ground and it was flying through the air with the terrified man clinging to its back. They flew across the ocean until at last they reached land, and the horse descended to earth and pitched the rider off its back. When the man came to his senses he saw that he was once more in the Southern Continent, near his own village, sprawling at a crossroads amid the debris of a ransom ritual, with tormas, thread crosses and the dough effigy of a horse.

1.2. The Flying Fish[1]

A wealthy landowner once went to inspect his estate in the company of his manservant. On the way he met his son-in-law's father, who greeted him respectfully and gave him a snack for his journey: a pot of cooked fish and a flask of arak. The landowner accepted the gift and continued on his way. They came to a big tree, and the landowner instructed his servant to sit in its shade while he went to inspect the fields. He left the fish and arak in his care, with the admonition that he should not open either container. "Inside the pot is a winged creature, and the flask contains a poisonous narcotic." He then set off on his round. It was a hot day, and the walk tired him, and on his way back he thought with eager anticipation of the food and drink that awaited him. But when he reached the tree a shocking sight met his eyes: the pot and the flask were both open—and empty—and beside them lay the slumbering manservant. In a passion of rage he gave the sleeping man a ferocious kick. The servant immediately awoke and jumped to his feet. "Oh thank you, Sir, thank you," he exclaimed.

"You enjoyed the kick?" asked the bewildered master.

"You have saved my life, Master! When you set off on your rounds and left me with the containers my curiosity got the better of me, and I opened the pot to peek inside. There was, indeed, a winged, golden-eyed creature that immediately escaped through the opening and flew off into the air. So filled with remorse was I by my action that I decided that I would rather kill myself than face the beating my master would surely give me for letting the creature escape. So I

[1] The title of the published story is *Nya sha gnam la 'phur ba*, literally, "Fish-flesh flying in the sky".

opened the flask and swallowed all the poisonous narcotic it contained. I felt myself going mad, and was aware of my speech becoming slurred, and then, sure enough, I dropped down dead. And there I lay, lifeless, until you, Sir, brought me back to life with that mighty kick. What power there was in it! I shall make sure that my master's extraordinary accomplishments are known throughout the land!" And he proceeded to tell this story to everyone in the surrounding villages so that the landlord was unable to punish him, and was at a loss to know what to do.

2. Introduction

The point of departure for the arguments to be presented below is one of the passages in the *rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* that also provided the inspiration for Dan Martin's contribution to the present collection.[2] The passage concerns the decoration of the floor and — possibly — the ceiling of the Jo khang after it was first built. I had read the Tibetan text before consulting the two published English translations of which I am aware (Sørensen 1994; Taylor and Yuthok 1996), and I understood it in much the same way as Sørensen and Martin do, that is, with the aquatic creatures featuring on the ceiling (*steng*). Later on, with considerable regret (for reasons that will become evident), I rejected this interpretation and concluded that the creatures must have been painted on the surface (*steng*) of the floor. Martin's arguments, among other evidence, have since persuaded me that they are in fact likely to have been painted on the ceiling. The two published translations are as follows:

> The divine mansion (*gzhal yas khang*) of the Victor [i.e. Ra-sa 'Phrul-snang], wonderous [*sic*]
> and peerless
> Is superbly embellished by limitless properties;
> The spontaneously manifested square ground structure (*gzhi ma*)
> [Is endowed with] four grand niches (*zur chen*) [in the] pattern of a svastika;
> And contructed with four doors like a maṇḍala.
> Its cement-floor is lapis lazuli-coloured,
> [In which] the drawings [on the ceiling] above (*steng*) [i.e.] the fish and water-creatures
> Are just like reflections in a mirror. (Sørensen 1994: 286)

> The Victorious Ones' celestial mansion of peerless wonder,
> Possessing infinite qualities and utmost beauty,
> Rested upon a spontaneously created square
> foundation. Its four great sides formed a swastika,
> The surrounds of the entrances were decorated with
> mandalas, And the floor was the colour of lapis lazuli,
> In the murals above (*steng*), fish and crocodiles
> Were as true to life as reflections in a mirror. (Taylor and Yuthok 1996: 179)

The difficulty with this passage is the word *steng*. Where exactly are the paintings in question? For Taylor and Yuthok they are above the floor and, insofar as they are understood as murals, presumably on the walls to the side. The conceit of mirror-imagery as a metaphor for close likeness is not uncommon in Tibetan writing, and in order to be "reflections" the images therefore do not *need* to be directly overhead.[3] To support his location of *steng,* Dan Martin discusses a similarly ambiguous passage in *mKhas pa'i dga' ston* (see Martin in this volume for references).

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[2] At this point I would like to acknowledge my considerable debt to Dan Martin. When it emerged by chance, in the course of an exchange of emails, that we were both interested in the topic that forms the subject of this section, he generously sent me a draft of the paper he has submitted here, and encouraged me to develop my own still-unformed ideas into a companion article.

[3] As Dung dkar points out, images on the surroundings walls would also of course be reflected. See Martin *ibid.*: fn 20.

> *de yang mthil zhal thams cad bai ḍūrya sngon po ltar ngang pa chu'i ri mo can la | steng gi nya dang chu srin dang | bya la sogs pa'i ri mo dang 'phrul gyi gzugs snang ba...*

This has been translated into English as:

> All the flooring, as blue as lapis lazuli, bore drawings of water fowl and water, on top of which appeared marvelous drawings of fish, crocodiles, birds, and so on.[4]

Although he praises the general quality of the translation, Martin takes issue with the rendering of this particular passage, proposing instead that "the forms such as fish, *makara*s, birds and so on that were painted *above* (*steng-gi*) were reflected in the pavement that had the water designs in it as well as ducks (*ngang-pa*) down below" (*ibid*.).

While admitting that the grammar of a Tibetan sentence is not necessarily a reliable guide to its meaning, I would like tentatively to suggest a third interpretation that follows the confusing syntax of this line more closely, if rather clumsily:

> "The entire floor was like lapis lazuli, and by way of (*la*) *ngang pa'i chu* paintings, these were to be seen (*snang*) on top (*steng*) as paintings of fish, water-sprites, birds and suchlike, and marvellous forms..."

What is *ngang pa'i chu*? In addition to the primary meaning of "duck", the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* gives, under the entry for *ngang pa*, the definition "the colour *li hang*" (*mdog li hang*), and *li hang* is in turn defined as "a pigment produced by mixing red and yellow" (*tshon dmar ser 'dres pa'i mdog*). *Ngang pa'i chu* does not appear in any dictionary available to me, but *Bod rgya*'s entry for *ngang chu* gives *sa sin dhur dang spyin bsres pa'i skyo ma*: "a paste made from a mixture of cinnabar and glue". *Ngang pa'i chu*, then, rather than referring to the ducks on the surface of the water, may simply denote the ruddy shelduck-coloured pigment in which the images "on top" were painted.

This still leaves us with the problem of locating *steng*. The most obvious interpretation would surely be that the term denotes the surface of the blue floor, and the "reflection" is simply the mirror-like naturalism of the creatures. However, the absence of unambiguous literary evidence notwithstanding, I am inclined to agree with Dan Martin that the aquatic creatures were depicted not "on top of" (*steng*) the floor, but on the ceiling "above" (*steng*), for two reasons in addition to those he himself proposes.

The first is that at least one such ceiling actually exists. It is to be found in the cave temple of Nyi dbang phug, in rTsa mda' rdzong, western Tibet. A small and rather indistinct photograph of it is to be found in the unnumbered plates at the beginning of Tsering Gyalpo's *mNga' ris chos 'byung* (Gu ge 2006). The corresponding description states that the murals include paintings of mandalas, dragons and "various kinds of animals: elephants, deer, lions, aquatic creatures and ducks of various sizes, as well as flying goddesses and dogs..." (2006: 253).[5] And indeed, among the various creatures depicted on this remarkable ceiling are a number of spectacular fishes.

The second reason why I think that Dan Martin's understanding of the decoration of the Jo khang is correct is that this arrangement is consistent with other evidence for a Tibetan mirror- world-view that may have had some currency at the time the temple was built, and it is this evidence I propose to set out in the remainder of this contribution.

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[4] Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang 2011: 203.

[5] The author proposes that the cave is likely to be contemporary with the Zara (or Za sgo) caves of nearby Dung dkar, which he dates to the twelfth century (*ibid*.: 231). I am indebted to Christiane Kalantari for drawing my attention to this image, and for very kindly sending me a wonderfully clear digital photograph of the Nyi dbang phug ceiling.

3. Mirror-worlds

Numerous authors have written about the Tibetan vertical ordering of the world and the wider cosmos. In one of the simplified forms of this scheme the world is stratified into three layers: gods above (white), humans/*btsan* in the middle (red), and serpent-spirits below (blue/black). In folksongs and some ritual narratives this triad is expanded into seven layers, beginning with the snow lion (snow peaks), down through various strata of a typical mountain — vultures on the rock cliffs, wild yaks on the slaty slopes and so forth — to the fish in the water below. Bonpo works with a cosmological component — and there are very many — suggest series of subdividied tranches in a more complex overall scheme.

The phenomenon of vertical deixis in Tibeto-Burman languages was explored by Nick Allen in a pioneering article (1972) that inspired a number of further studies, including Ramble (1996) and the contributions to the collection *Himalayan Space: Cultural Horizons and Practices,* edited by Balthasar Bickel and Martin Gaenszle (1999). The former article examined the significance of the disposition of certain categories of territorial divinities along a vertical axis. It was suggested that their positioning was determined not by the divinities' gender or their individual identity, but simply in order to establish a vertical axis. Verticality, it was suggested, introduced a temporal dimension, reflected in the language, in which "up" denotes the beginning of a sequence and "down" the conclusion: in this particular case, the order in which the various stages in the corresponding rituals were performed. Comparisons were drawn with the choreography of certain rituals performed by the Kham Magar (de Sales 1994) and the Mewahang Rai (Gaenszle 1994). More recently, the theme of verticality has been tackled by Brandon Dotson in a fine study of the Dunhuang manuscript PT1285. This text recounts a series of rituals that are performed with varying degrees of success by *bon* or *gshen* priests, and by identifying the territories in question Dotson plots them along a downward- or upward-moving continuum.

The reason why I was struck by the description of the Jo khang's ceiling when I first encountered it was that it put me in mind of an anecdote recounted to me by the anthropologist Carlo Severi more than a decade previously. The anecdote concerned a conversation Severi had had with a Kuna shaman in Colombia during his fieldwork. The shaman had made a reference to something situated "up in the sky", but in doing so had pointed to the ground. In response to Severi's querying of the appropriateness of the gesture the shaman replied to the effect that up and down were the same thing. This, Severi said, was an important clue to a Kuna cosmology in which the zenith and nadir were somehow the same.

Might the passage about the decoration of the Jo khang contain a clue to a similar Tibetan conception of the universe that had been superseded by more familiar topoi of straightforward vertical stratification? The Amerindian ethnographies I consulted for further details about how such a universe might look were inconclusive, but specialists from whom I sought advice — and here I am particularly grateful to Elisabeth Ewart in Oxford — suggested that I investigate some of the recent applications of perspectivist theory to indigenous models. This avenue of enquiry requires some explanation, and the next section will give a brief presentation of the theory. To anticipate my conclusions, I do not think that perspectivism has much explanatory value for the Tibetan narrative and ritual topoi that will be discussed below. However, some of the ethnographic examples on which the theory has been constructed contain themes that may be consistent with the mirror-world that we are in search of here.

4. The Limits of Perspectivism

The development of perspectivism in Western philosophy is generally credited to Nietzsche, who elaborated his ideas on the basis of the earlier work of Leibniz. As a phenomenological approach, perspectivism is concerned not with the inherent reality of things but the apprehension of them by individuals; each person's perspective is different. Nietzsche's argument is that there is no such thing as disinterested knowledge:

> The human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its perspective forms, and only in them. ...We are to-day at least far from the ludicrous immodesty of decreeing from our nook that there can

> only be legitimate perspectives from that nook. ...We cannot dismiss the possibility that [the world] contains infinite interpretations.[6]

Nietzsche refuted the notion that we might have access to the world from the perspectives of others, and while he denied that there might be such a thing as absolute truth, the possibility was retrieved by later writers, notably Ortega y Gasset, who proposed that absolute truth did exist in the form of the sum total of all perspectives.[7] An important landmark for the application of perpectivist theory to ethnographic observations is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's article "Cosmological deixis and Amerindian perspectivism" (1998). The author spells out the implications of this for the relationship between humans and the natural world:

> Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470)

Thus, "Jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish etc...." (*ibid*.: 470).

The occurrence of comparable beliefs in North Asian societies has also been taken by certain authors as evidence of perspectivism. Humans and "others" are confined to their perspectives by the bodies they inhabit, while it is only the shaman, who has the capacity to change bodies, who has access to multiple perspectives (and to this extent may also predate on humans). The worldview presented in Viveiros de Castro's formulation is, I believe, relevant to the Tibetan situation insofar as it posits a dyadic arrangement (the spirit and animal realms seem to be functionally collapsible into one), in which A is to B exactly as B is to A (more exactly, in fact, than Viveiros de Castro's formulation allows, because it fails to make the crucial point that spirits also see humans as predators, a perspective I shall return to presently). However, I do not think that perspectivism is a necessary framework in which to understand it.

The flaws in perspectivist theory when applied to these (and, for that matter, Amerindian) societies have been elegantly articulated by Charles Stépanoff (Stépanoff 2009). Although there is insufficient space here to do justice to Stépanoff's cogent critique of the theory, some of his main objections may at least be mentioned. The first is what he calls the "perspectivist paradox": stories about the relationship between humans and "others" are told by humans — and not just shamans — who must therefore, *ipso facto*, have access to perspectives that are not properly their own: "Strangely, the non-human perspective according to which humans are prey appears to be quite accessible to humans and, so to speak, not point-of-view dependent" (*ibid*.: 288). In fact, it is precisely the belief that spirits are restricted to their species-specific perspective that enables humans to get the better of them:

> Though they seem to postulate a symmetry between human and nonhuman, 'perspectivist' narratives create *de facto* an asymmetrical situation. For example, the Chukchi, although claiming to know the *kêly*'s [predatory spirits'] perspective consider that these spirits do not know the human perspective. (*ibid*.: 300)

Stépanoff also emphasises the importance of making "the distinction between practical and mythical knowledge", and invokes Shirokogoroff's caveat, regarding Siberian ethnography, that "the 'folkloric' and 'religious' complex 'cannot be identified with the general positive knowledge of ethnical units [groups]'" (*ibid*.: 290, quoting Shirokogoroff 1935).

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[6] Nietzsche 1910: location 20542. It is difficult, in the light of the forthrightness of such statements, to see how attempts to deny the inherent relativism of Nietzsche's perspectivism can be tenable. For an example of such an attempt see Clark 1998/2004.

[7] Sobrino 2011: location 925.

In discussing the "cosmological deixis" component of Viveiros de Castro's article Stépanoff makes another observation that is especially pertinent to the present investigation: that a given perspective is not rooted in a particular ontology but in a position, and that a position, unlike an ontology, can be changed; what appear to be ontological identitie are actually "relational notions". This, I propose, helps to explain the relationship between zenith and nadir, and fish and birds, in the Tibetan examples cited above. Like the humans, seals and spirits in the ethnographies cited, these categories have fixed ontological identities but when they are opposed in the "folkloric" or "religious" complex, they are mutually reflecting relational terms. This brings us to the important gap in Viveiros de Castro's formulation of the perspectivist schema: notably, that humans are not only the prey of spirits, but also their predators. Stépanoff again:

> One of the most beautiful expressions of Siberian concern for non-human perspectives is the widespread tale about a human going into the spirits' world. Different versions have been identified among every linguistic family in Siberia from Nganasan in the Arctic to Dukha living in Mongolia.... The framework of the tale is impressively stable: one man comes by chance in the world of spirits (inferior, superior, or other) through a hole or a cave. He encounters a camp where people cannot see him and step on him.... Only dogs notice him and bark. When the man touches people and when he teases girls, they fall ill. He gradually understands that he is among spirits and that he is a spirit for them. Suspecting the presence of the man, which they call a 'harmful spirit', spirits invite their shaman who performs a ritual and expels the man toward the humans' hearth. (*ibid*.: 292)

By now, I hope, the relevance of the two stories with which I began this article will have become apparent. The story of the woodcutter in the world of butter-people belongs unequivocally to this genre. The point is that humans can be as lethal to the inhabitants of the "other" world as ghosts and demons are to us: it all depends on where one stands. It is not our humanity that makes us prey or predator, but our location. In the story of the flying fish, the creature that the manservant finds in the pot is spoken about as neither specifically fish nor fowl, but a common denominator of the two. The master does not lie to his servant when he tells him that the pot contains "a winged creature" (*srog chags shog ldan*): the term for "wing", *shog pa*, also means "fin". Birds and fish are metonyms for the zenith and the nadir, but the fact that they can be conflated suggests that the identities of the realms they inhabit may also be relational, rather than absolute. Blurring the distinction between birds and fish is not uncommon in Tibet, and Figure 1, an illumination from a manuscript from Tabo monastery, is a further illustration of this.[8] In the remainder of this article I would like to pursue the quest for vertical mirror-imagery in Tibetan representations of the cosmos,[9] and to do this I shall concentrate on a set of myths that may have reinforced one another: on the one hand, narratives relating to the early part of the Yar lung dynasty and, on the other, the Tibetan cult of Avalokiteśvara.

5. The Bird King and the Fish King

5.1. gNya' khri btsan po and Dri gum btsan po

Eric Haarh devotes considerable effort to demonstrating the association between gNya' khri btsan po, the first king of Tibet, and birds. The main avian features are that the king has eyes that close

[8] The photograph is located in the Western Himalaya Archive Vienna (WHAV). I would like to thank Deborah Klimburg-Salter for informing me about this image, and Verena Widorn, the director of WHAV, for kindly permitting me to reproduce it here.

[9] Considerable clarity on the subject of Amerindian cosmology, and more generally on the equation of zenith and nadir, was provided for me by Stephen Hugh-Jones of Cambridge University. I am deeply grateful to Professor Hugh-Jones for encouraging me to pursue this line of enquiry, for his patient and thorough explanations in the course of our email correspondence, and for sending me the unpublished draft of a highly instructive paper entitled "Flying fish: why fish are birds and birds are fish", together with abundant illustrations. There is unfortunately insufficient space here to do justice to the opportunities for comparison raised by the rich ethnography and analyses contained in this work, but I hope that these many loose threads can be picked up and woven together together in the future.

from the bottom up (*mig mas 'gebs pa*), and that the name of the royal clan may have been Bya (meaning "bird"); and in reference to the dynasty after the death of Dri gum, the eighth king, Haarh mentions "the curious, as yet unexplained circumstance that in his capacity of progenitor of the Yar-luṅ Dynasty, sPu-de-guṅ-rgyal is identified with *Bya-khri*, Bird-Throne, while that member of the zoo-anthropomorphous triad, *Ña*-khri, who should be the natural prototype of the progenitor in the appearance of gÑya'-khri-btsan-po, is referred to Koṅ-po" (Haarh 1969: 210). While the evidence in favour of the birdlike nature of the king who descends from heaven is certainly persuasive, the sources Haarh cites are relatively late, and conceal another feature of gNya' khri that seems to have been largely unremarked.

In their *Cultural History of Tibet*, Snellgrove and Richardson give the following well-known account of the original royal descent:

> Because he came from the sky, they resolved to make him king, and carried him in a palanquin on their necks. So he was called the 'Neck-Enthroned Mighty One' (*gNya'-khri bTsan-po*). Popular as this story seems to have been, it was simply based upon a piece of folk etymology which sought to make sense of an unfamiliar name sounding something like *Nya*. As we learn from else in the documents from Tun-huang, the original name of this first king of central Tibet seems to have been *Nyag-khri*. (1995 [1968]: 23)

The source to which the authors are referring is almost certainly the *Chronicle*, PT1287. But the *Chronicle* is a post-dynastic work, composed perhaps as much as two centuries after what is actually the earliest record of the first king's name—the Kong po inscription. Here is a brief excerpt:

> (3) $ / / kar po mang po rje dang / ### / blon po gru'I zung gIs gsold ba' / / thog ma phyva ya bla bdag drug gI sras las /
> (4) **nya grI btsan po** myi yul gyI rjer / / lha rI gyang dor gshegs pa tshun chad / drI gum btsan po phan chad / gdung rabs bdun gyI bar du / / phying ba stag
> (5) rtse na bzhugs bzhugs / / drI gum btsan po'i sras / **gcen nya khyI** dang / gcung **sha khyI** gnyis las ...[10]

The earliest form—given in the fourth line—is not Nyag khri but Nya grI.[11] Nine generations later the elder son also has the name Nya. Bya khri, as is well known, is a later invention. If any animal has a right to be dignified as the totemic animal of the royal clan, it is not the bird (*bya*), but the fish (*nya*).

Let us move forward now to the events surrounding the death of the first mortal king, Dri gum. The story has been told in translation and in paraphrase often enough, and the main points can be summarised briefly. After Dri gum btsan po had died, his body is placed in a copper casket and flung into the river, where it is purloined by the serpent spirits who guard it jealously as a deterrent from attack by the *khyung*, who habitually prey on *klu*. Dri gum's widow gives birth to a boy, Ru las skyes, who has a dual identity as the son of the late king and also the offspring of the mountain god Yar lha sham po. When he comes of age he avenges his father's death by killing the usurper Lo ngam and restores the dynastic line. He sets out to recover Dri gum's body, but the serpent-spirits refuse to yield it, saying that they will return it only in exchange for a child with eyes that close from bottom up, like those of a bird. Ru las skyes eventually finds such a

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[10] The transcription here follows that of *Old Tibetan Documents Online*, http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp/archives.cgi?p=insc_Rkong

[11] The form *nya* appears in a few literary accounts, among them the untitled manuscript of a history of western Tibet that was recently discovered in Tholing. The manuscript, which appears to date from the early post-dynastic period, is the subject of a doctoral thesis currently being prepared by David Pritzker at the University of Oxford. The text gives the name of the first king as Nya khri. Although this is certainly not the place to undertake such a task, the relationship between the forms *khri, khyi* and *gri* in the variants of these names deserve closer discussion in the light of other related terms, especially *dri* and *sri*.

child, which the mother gives him in exchange for the assurance that royal funerals will thenceforth be conducted according to her specifications. The nagas accept the substitute in exchange for the king's body. Haarh was probably the first to point out that since the principle of ritual substitution entails rendering like for like, Dri gum must, in some sense, have been a bird — which is also, of course, why the *khyung* would have been reluctant to attack those who were in possession of the body.

> To recompense the corpse of the king, it must naturally have an equivalent value or significance. It must be a human being, and it must have eyes like birds' eyes closing from below. In the latter demand we must therefore see something which fundamentally characterized the king. ...the particular feature of the birds' eyes closing form below is identical with the most characteristic feature in the ornitho-anthropomorphous appearance of gÑa'-khri-btsan-po. ...we find in this strange feature and the birdlike nature involved by it, no other relevant significance than that of the clan characteristics or the clan-totem of the royal lineage. (Haarh 1969: 343)

But the matter is clearly more complex than that. Nya khri and Dri gum stand at opposite ends of the first section of the Yar lung Dynasty, the Seven Heavenly 'Thrones' (gNam gyi khri bdun), after which Dri gum is the ill-starred eighth: nominally, Nya khri is the fish who descends from heaven, while Dri gum is a bird who is raised from the water.

5.2. Avalokiteśvara

The myth of the Tibetan kings is connected to the complex of beliefs surrounding Avalokiteśvara, who is of course intimately linked to the Yar lung royal line. A later Tibetan tradition (notably the thirteenth-century *bKa' gdams glegs bam*) specifically identifies gNya' khri with the bodhisattva (Walter 2009: 224). Avalokiteśvara is associated with height and with mountain-tops. According to the dominant post-dynastic topos, the divinity pays his second visit to Tibet (the first being in the form of the ancestral monkey) when he emanates rays from his Indian residence on Mt Potala and takes human form as the embryonic Srong btsan sgam po. The latter himself resides on dMar po ri, the hill that also comes to be associated with Mt Potala. An even stronger case for the association of Avalokiteśvara with the Tibetan cult of height has been made by Michael Walter, who suggests that, far from being a distinctive feature of the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion, the cult of mountain gods may actually have *originated* with Avalokiteśvara (*ibid*.: chapter 4).

It is clear, in any event, that the association of Avalokiteśvara with height has come to overshadow a parallel complex of belief and ritual that places the god firmly in the camp of the nagas. While the link between the bodhisattva of compassion and Lhasa's dMar po ri is axiomatic, far less well known is his presence on lCags po ri, the hill below and to the southwest of the Potala, where, among other Buddhist images from the dynastic period, is "a relief of Avalokiteśvara in the 'Rock Cave of the Snake God' (Brag lha klu sbugs), a temple excavated in the Iron Hill (lCags po ri)..." (Lo Bue 2012: 35).[12]

The presence of the bodhisattva in this location is due to the influence of Newar artisans, who were present in Lhasa in very considerable numbers in the early days of the empire. To understand this largely forgotten aspect of Avalokiteśvara we need to know something of the significance of this god in Newar belief and ritual. Avalokiteśvara in Nepal is identified by Hindus with Matsyendranāth, a name that might be translated as the "Lord of the Fishes". But Matsyendranāth was a historical figure, a tenth-century Śaivite (Locke 1980: 424), whose name would obviously not have had any influence on the aquatic associations of Avalokiteśvara in imperial Tibet. Nevertheless, the question remains why the Hindus might have regarded Avalokiteśvara as an appropriate Buddhist counterpart to their own Matsyendranāth. Of the studies dedicated to the Newar cult of the divinity among the two most important are Locke's *Karunamaya* (1980), a detailed study of the literary sources, and Owens' "Blood and the bodhisattvas" (1993), based largely on ethnographic observation. The latter article is based on a

[12] I am grateful to David Pritzker for drawing my attention to this valuable article by Erberto Lo Bue.

chapter of the author's unpublished doctoral thesis (Owens 1989), and it is from this work that I derive much of the information that follows.

The story of the coming of Avalokiteśvara to Nepal—that is, the Kathmandu Valley—exists in numerous variants, and the version recounted by Owens is "a metamyth; it contains most of the components which are common knowledge, though it is unlikely that any one person would include all of the details given here unless prodded to do so" (Owens 1989: 147-48). Moreover, the name by which the god is referred to will vary according to the religious or ethnic identity of the speaker. Non-Newars are likely to use the name Matsyendranāth, while for Newars he is either Karuṇāmaya or Bungadya.

The story is generally set during the reign of the Licchavi King Narendradeva, which is particularly significant for the purposes of the present article, insofar as this monarch was a vassal of Srong btsan sgam po, who had effectively restored him to the throne of Nepal. The country at that time (the story goes) was in the grip of a drought, because the nagas responsible for the rain were being held captive by the ascetic Gorakhnāth. The sage Bandhudatta advised the king that Gorakhnāth could be induced to release the nagas by bringing Gorakhnāth's master, Karuṇāmaya, to Nepal from Kamarupa (Assam). After travelling to Kamarupa, Bandhudatta secured the assurance of the compassionate Karuṇāmaya that he would leave his home to alleviate the sufferings of the people of Nepal. However, his demonic mother, the queen of this kingdom, fiercely opposed the loss of her youngest and dearest son, and went in pursuit of the party. To speed their journey Bandhudatta transformed Karuṇāmaya into a bee, and sealed him inside a vase, and it was in this form that the entered the kingdom of Nepal. Goraknāth, recognising his master, rose to meet him, releasing all the nagas who promptly flew up to heaven and caused the rain to fall.

The god was enshrined in Bungamati, where even now, the priests responsible for bathing and clothing him report that, at close quarters, the hollow body sometimes emits the sound of sloshing water or the buzzing of a bee. In spite of the identification with Karuṇāmaya/Matsyendranāth, the divinity with whom we are dealing here is not Avalokiteśvara but Bungadya, who "is not simply a Bodhisattva *per se*, but a god with many attributes, those of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara among them" (*ibid*.: 144, fn. 4). Bungadya "has numerous important mythological, historical and contemporary ritual associations with water, including annual *pujā*s in which his spirit is drawn from a river (*ibid*.: 160). The aquatic association is implied in the very name, generally derived from the Newari word *buṃga*, "meaning 'watering hole', 'spring,' or 'watering place'" (*ibid*.: 160).

The association is sustained in the cult of the divinity. During the Great Sacrifice at Bungamati, a number of different animals are immolated for the god, but most significantly, at a certain point in the proceedings, "a bucket of wriggling fish-like creatures is thrown onto the array of bloody saucers to die" (*ibid*.: 231). The author adds in a footnote that the creatures "are referred to simply as '*nyā*', or fish, though they appeared to be more like large tadpoles or newt larvae. I know of no other sacrifice which includes these creatures and could solicit no explanation for their presence" (*ibid*.: 231, fn. 132).

This, then, is likely to have been the divinity that the Newars took with them to Lhasa, and which informed the Tibetan's understanding of the nature of Avalokiteśvara.[13] It is sometimes the case that myths, in the form in which we know them, are truncated survivals of more complex forms. A well-known example of this is the Biblical flood story, which is just one-half of the Sumerian original, in which the god Enlil first sought to annihilate humanity with a drought before (once that had failed) sending down the cataclysmic deluge (Lambert and Millard 1969: 10, 77). If the figure of Bungadya may have been the "dark twin" in a dyadic Avalokiteśvara

[13] A brief note should be added here concerning the chronology. Narendradeva came to the throne in 643. The construction of the Jo khang was completed in 640. If the cult of Avalokiteśvara was popularised during the reign of Narendradeva it therefore presumably came to Tibet after the construction of the Jo khang was complete, or else the cult had already been developed under an earlier Licchavi ruler. Locke presents convincing evidence to the effect that "the inauguration of a cult of Avalokitesvara at Bungamati, or the starting of a festival in his honour, in or about A.D. 497, is not impossible" (1980: 297).

complex, it is worth asking the question whether there might have been some correspondence in the etiological myth of the Tibetan kings. We have already seen a form of mirror-imagery between Nya khri and Dri gum, but what of the story of royal origins itself?

The most wide-ranging overviews of the various accounts of the first king, to the best of my knowledge, are Samten Karmay's study of the *Can lnga* and Chab spel Tshe brtan phun tshogs's patriotic polemic in favour of an indigenous Tibetan provenance (Karmay 1998b [1994], Chab spel 1989). Both these works omit an interesting account that is worth mentioning here. The earliest version of the story of which I am aware appears in the *Grags pa gling grags*, the oldest surviving Bon history that dates from the twelfth or thirteenth century.[14] Here, however, I would like to present a version of this myth as it appears in the sixteenth-century *Ya ngal gdung rabs*, the history of the eminent Bonpo priestly clan named Ya ngal. Most accounts of the arrival of the first king have him being received by two priests, Co'u and mTshe (variously spelled), but this account adds a third—Ya ngal, the eponymous ancestor of the clan. The *Ya ngal gdung rabs* is a compilation of excerpts from a number of different sources, and this sometimes leads to a degree of confusion in the genealogy. In this account, the god Bar gyi bdun tshig descends from heaven to rule the world as rTsug khri gtsan po or Mangs pos bskur ba, and after reascending to heaven via his sky-rope he marries the daughter of dMu rje btsan po (also known as lHa rabs gnyan rum rje), named Princess dMu lcam gro ma.

> On the nape of her neck the mother developed a goitre the size of a stomach. After nine months and ten days the sac ruptured, and out of it there came a crystal scorpion with turquoise spots, a golden frog with silver lumps, a turquoise fish with golden fins, and a conch-shell tadpole with a pearly crest. The parents were surprised but didn't take it amiss, and wrapped them up in a white cloth and set them on a silken mat, and placed them inside a golden container as a support for the essence of good fortune. After four days they looked inside and saw that there were four people who had manifested: the crystal scorpion had become a crystal man with turquoise hair and a white robe, and with a white turban protruding the length of an arrow. In his hand he held a white sceptre [sNya/rNya khri].[15] The golden frog had become a golden man [Ya ngal] with turquoise "bird-horns". The turquoise fish had become a turquoise man [Tshe mi] with a golden turban and a silken robe of five colours, beating a turquoise drum; and the conch tadpole had become a conch man with a pearly crown and jewelled cloak [bCo mi], ringing a golden flat bell. The parents asked them who they were and the Crystal Man replied: "O father and mother, we are sons of lHa rabs gnyan rum. I myself am gNya' khri btsan po. The reason I am called gNya' khri is that for nine months and ten days I dwelt at the nape of my mother's neck, and the reason I am called "*btsan po*" is that I shall wield power over the entire visible world." The golden man was Ya ngal, the priest of the phenomenal world... (the turquoise and conch men are, respectively, Tshe mi and bCo mi). (*Ya ngal gdung rabs* 12r-14v)[16]

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[14] A paraphrase of the corresponding passage in this version is provided in Bellezza 2005: 398, fn. 193.

[15] Interlineal notes in the text are presented in square brackets.

[16] The unedited text reads as follows:

yum gyis ltag khung du sba ba brod pa tsam 1 byung / de zla ba dgu ngo bcu nas bsdol pas / nang nas shel gyis sdig ba g.yu'i (18v) *thig le can dang / gser gyi sbal pa dngul gyi grang brum can dang / g.yu'i nya mo gser gyi shog pa can dang / dung gi lcong mo mu tig gis thor rtsug can dang bzhi 'byung pas / yab yum ya tshan skyes rkyon du ma zung bar / dar dkar gyis yol ba gris / dmu yad kyis dan bting / gser skur gyi nang du bcug nas / phya g.yang gi brten du bzhag nas / g.yang bskyobs bya'o / zhag sum gro bzhi nas ltas bas / ya mtshan sprul pa'i mi bzhi bda' / shel sdig las shel* (*rje snya khri*) *gyi mi la g.yu'i dbu sgra can / dar dkar gyi nam za dang / dbu* (19r) *la thod dkar po mda' tsam 'phro ba / phyag na shel kyis 'gying dkar bsnams pa 1 bda' / gser sbal las gser gyi mi la g.yu'i bya ru btsug pa* (*yang ngal*) */ gser gyi nam za gsol ba / shel gyis 'phreng ba dang dbyug pa bsnams pa 1 bda' / g.yu nya la g.yu'i mi* (*tshe mi*) *la gser gyis thod bcings ba / dar mtshon rna lnga'i nam za sku la gsol ba / g.yu snga 'ding ba bsnams pa 1 bda' / dung gi lcong mo la dung (bco mi) gis mi la mu tig gis thor btsug can / 'phra men gyis rlag pa sku la gsol ba / gser shang phrol ba bsnams ba 1 bda' / (19v) de la yab yum gsungs ba / ngo mtshar can gyis sras bzhi khyed / cha lug mdzad spyod ji ltar mdzad pa ci'i don gsungs bas / shel gyi mi pho na re / yab yum legs bdag cag lha rabs gnyan*

The four creatures that erupt from the sac on their mother's neck are, of course, varieties of naga. In this account, too, there is some circumstantial evidence of a link with Newars. The quasi- historical Bonpo sources on the Ya ngal locate the head of the three main branches of the clan in Central Tibet, from where one of the key figures migrated to what is now Mustang, in Nepal, around the 11th century.[17] The *dBa' bzhed* mentions the presence of the Ya ngal family in Phan yul, and states that a member of the family was one of 127 Bonpos who tried vainly to support the preservation of the traditional form of royal funeral during the debate that followed the death of Khri Srong lde btsan (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 94-95). The *Ya ngal gdung rabs* contains the intriguing suggestion that the very first Ya ngal was not a human but a *srin po* named Srin bon Ya ngal, who, with the rest of his kind (*srin khams*), occupied the middle circle of gShen rab's entourage when the latter manifested as "the king of the wrathful divinities, Padma zi rjid rta grin gar gyis dbang phyug (*sic*)"—who is, of course, generally considered to be a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara—at a gathering on Mt Ti se (fol. 29r). Now, the *srin po* are classically associated with the south-western continent rNga yab gling (Camaradvipa), that lies to the west of Jambudvipa. But the west is also associated with the Newars: when construction of the Jo khang began in 639,

> the temple was planned after an Indian model, rising in front of a square courtyard surrounded by buildings, but followed the Newar architectural style with some modifications, and *its main entrance faces towards the western direction, that is the Nepal Valley,* as pointed out by Tibetan sources" (Lo Bue 2012: 30; see also Sørensen 1994: 274; emphasis added).

"Ya ngal" is surely not a Tibetan name. During the time of Srong btsan sgam po, when large numbers of Newars were travelling to Lhasa to enjoy the benefits of Tibetan patronage, the territory that later became Kathmandu was the site of two distinct settlements. To the east was Yambu—the name by which the capital of Nepal is still know to Nepal's Tibetan-speaking highlanders—and to the west lay the city of Yaṅgala (Slusser 1982: 89ff.). The name of the city appears in different forms in Tibetan sources (such as Ya 'gal), but we should not overlook the possibility that this eminent Bonpo family is named after the native land of the first of its members to settle in Tibet.

6. Reciprocity in Kinship Relations

The philosophical roots of perspectivism notwithstanding, the obvious debt that its "exotic" avatar owes to structuralism is acknowledged in the epigraph of Viveiros de Castro's article, a partial quotation of a remark by Lévi-Strauss in *La potière jalouse* (1985):

> And so, the reciprocity of perspectives that I have identified as the distinctive feature of mythic thought, can claim a much wider arena of application.[18]

An underlying principle of structural anthropology is that the same configurations that are discernible in one domain of social life are likely to recur in others. The treatment that Tibetan cosmological representations have received in this article has hardly been purely structural, to the extent that the synchronic treatment that properly distinguishes the structuralist method has been compromised by a diffusionist strand. However, if an immigrant myth is to find a foothold in a new environment, it is likely to do so within an already established conceptual framework; and if

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rum sras / bdag ni gnya' khri mtsan bo legs (*sras bar la srid med de*) *ci'i phyir gnya' khri btsan po na / ma'i gnya' bar zla ba dgu ngo bcu bsdad pas gnya' khri / snang srid dkun la bka' btsan pas btsan po'o / gser mi 'di ni yang ngal* (*khyim* [?] *gong srid pa zhibs so*) *srid pa'i gshen /*

[17] For brief biographies of the members of the Ya ngal clan listed in the *Ya ngal gdung rabs,* see Ramble 1984: Appendix B, 357-65.

[18] Ainsi, la réciprocité de perspectives, que j'ai repérée comme la caractéristique propre de la pensée mythique, peut revendiquer un domaine d'application beaucoup plus large.

cosmologies and myths should arrange themselves so readily in reciprocal dyadic structures, it is possible that the organisation of society at this time made such arrangements seem natural.

I would like to make the tentative suggestion that this organisation was provided by a form of marriage that is no longer to be found in Tibet proper — where it would be considered incestuous — but may once have been the preferred matrimonial form. It is still practised, though not systematically, in several Tibetan-speaking areas of the Himalaya. The form in question is bilateral cross-cousin marriage, which, in its simplest form, entails the direct exchange of brides or grooms between just two groups. In more complex systems such as generalised exchange, a group (such as a clan) will not "take" wives from the same group as the one to which they "give" their own sisters and daughters: in relation to the group to which I belong, those to whom we give our sisters and daughter and those from whom we get our brides are two different groups. In the case of direct exchange, however, there is no such distinction: each group is *both* spouse-giver *and* spouse-taker with respect to the other.[19]

From examining the kinship terminologies of several Tibetan-speaking groups Nick Allen has proposed, in two other pioneering articles, that direct exchange may have been the norm in Tibet at some undefined period (Allen 1975, 1976). In most instances the terminology has been modified to reflect changing practice, but in the case of some groups (such as the Sherpa and the Byansi) who do not practise direct exchange, the system is recollected in a surviving, obsolete terminology.

In the most restricted case, my wife's mother (WM) is my paternal aunt (FZ) *and also* my maternal uncle's wife (MBW); likewise, my wife's father (WF) is my maternal uncle (MB) *and also* my paternal aunt's husband (FZH). My wife, therefore, will be my maternal uncle's daughter (MBD) *and also* my paternal aunt's daughter (FZD), since these two people are married to each other. In a group where direct exchange is no longer practised, the use of a single term for different relatives WM, FZ and MBW, and another single term for WF, MB and FZH, may be taken cautiously as evidence that each group of three would, in the past, have been the same person. Several Tibetan dialects do indeed have such terms: they are, respectively, *a ni* and *a zhang*. Figure 2 is a formal representation of two groups in a relationship of direct exchange, with the actual kinship relations that are covered by each of these two terms.

We do not know how widespread this form of marriage was, but it is worth considering the likelihood that this dyadic, reciprocal arrangement may have been a mutually-reinforcing element in determining how Tibetans once conceptualised the wider world.

7. **Conclusion**

All the examples discussed in the article have been presented and interpreted in such a way as to further the argument that they are suggestive of a particular Tibetan world-view. According to this view, identities are not inherent and immutable, but comprise multiple aspects that come to the fore according to their position in a relationship. The validity of this formulation could profitably be tested in other contexts, for example, in explaining the multiple identities of effigies in certain categories of rituals: as ransoms, malign demons, all-conquering divinities — often contradictory functions that commentators tend to rationalise as being sequential, rather than simultaneous. For the present, however, it might be advisable to conclude on a cautionary note. Individually, none of the examples given here provides conclusive evidence of the cosmological model I have proposed. The model emerges from the intersection of *possible* evidence from numerous domains. The real challenge is to determine whether those examples represent perspectives on a genuine social fact, or whether, like the spurious reality proposed by Ortega y Gasset, this Tibetan mirror-world is no more than the product of multiple strands of our own creative thinking.

[19] The existence of matrilineality and matrilocality in parts of Tibet, and tentative evidence that these may once have been more widespread in the past, suggest that the spouses who were "taken" and "given" may have been grooms rather than brides.

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PLATES

Figure 1: Fish with bird's feet. Unidentified manuscript illumination from Tabo. (Photo: Deborah Klimburg-Salter, 1994 © WHAV)

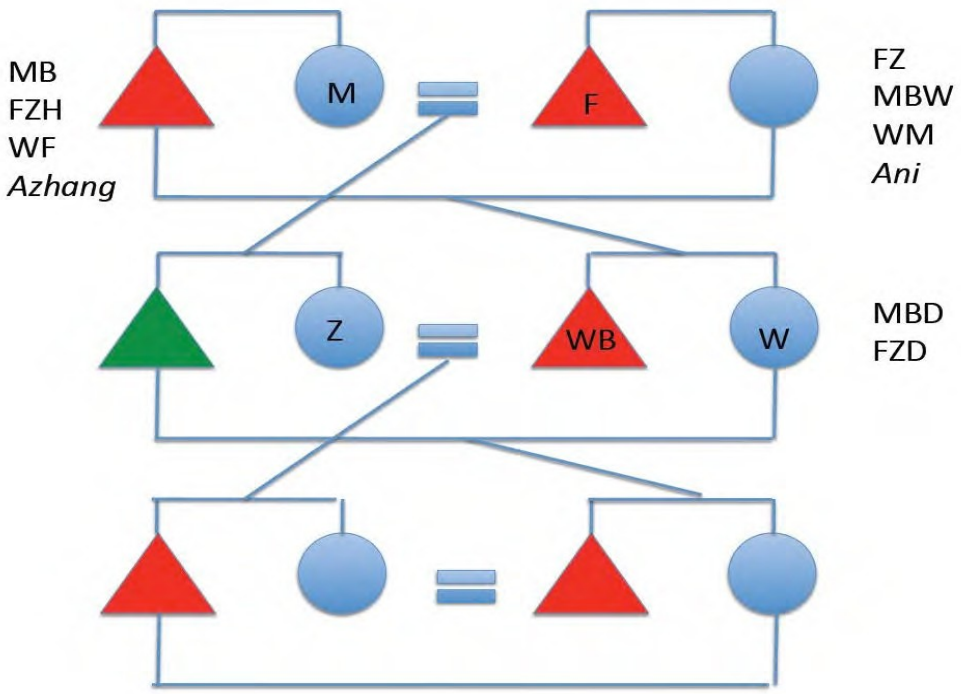

Figure 2: Schematic presentation of marriage patterns between two groups in a relationship of direct exchange: there is no logical distinction between spouse-givers and spouse-takers.