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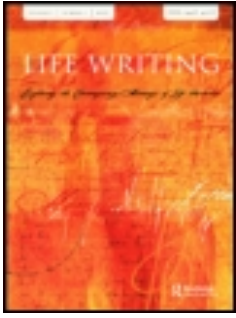
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Bearers of the Past, Bridges with the Beyond: The Complicated Lives of Ordinary Objects

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social history within the domain of Tibetan Studies in recent years has been marked by a closer interest in the lives of people who would not usually be the subject of biographical studies. While there is also a Tibetan tradition of writing about the lives of sacred objects that has in turn attracted a certain amount of scholarly interest, the anthropological practice of documenting the histories of everyday artefacts remains relatively undeveloped. Following an examination of some of the dominant themes that emerge from the life stories of famous relics in the Christian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, this essay will take the case of two objects that have acquired some fame in their village setting to illustrate how the same themes—such as the importance of the objects as links to a sacred past, the existence of conflicting narratives, and the device of substitution—all feature equally prominently in the narratives associated with them.

KEYWORDS

Tibet; Nepal; Tibetan hagiography; *namthar*; sacred relics; acheiropieton

Introduction

In his review of Franz-Karl Ehrhard's study of the Ārya Wati Zangpo (Wa ti bzang po) image of Kyirong (sKyid grong), Hubert Decler notes that the three main texts that are concerned with this statue of Avalokiteśvara all bear the term *namthar* (*rnam thar*) in their title, and remarks that 'it is rare, if not unique, to see the genre title applied to the life of a sacred image' (2006, 77). While it might be equally surprising to encounter the term 'biography' in the title of the history of an image composed any earlier than the late twentieth century, the idea that an object, and particularly a sacred one, might be the centre of a narrative that followed it over the course of time would be shared by Tibetans and European cultures, and many others besides. Such narratives, without being explicitly designated as *namthar*, have abounded in Tibetan literature over many centuries, and several of these have in turn generated a substantial amount of valuable scholarship. If, as Decler has pointed out, the *namthar* genre may include the life stories of objects, there is another feature that the latter share with the biographies of humans: the subjects of these stories are for the most part religious figures, whose exemplary or extraordinary lives reinforce the presence of Buddhism (or Bon) in Tibet. Biographies of secular individuals do exist, but apart from the fact that these accounts are more

likely to be called *tokjö* (*rtogs brjod*) than *namthar*, they are also usually about prominent national figures.

In much the same way as recent years have seen the emergence of Tibetan social history, with its characteristic emphasis on events and conditions in local communities, among people of little or no significance for national, regional or sectarian history, we may envisage a comparable exercise for objects of a similarly humble status. In the essay that has probably been the single most influential stimulus for biographical writing about objects in the field of anthropology, Igor Kopytoff sketches the life story of a hut among the Suku of Zaire, a construction that has a life expectancy of about 10 years:

The typical biography of a hut begins with its housing a couple or, in a polygynous household, a wife and her children. As the hut ages, it is successively turned into a guesthouse or a house for a widow, a teenagers' hangout, kitchen, and, finally, a goat or chicken house—until at last the termites win and the hut collapses. (1986, 67)

But this fleeting account of the life of a hut belies the dense social intricacies that its condition or use may articulate at any given point:

For a hut to be out of phase in its use makes a Suku uncomfortable, and it conveys a message. Thus, to house a visitor in a hut that should be a kitchen says something about the visitor's status; and if there is no visitor's hut available in a compound, it says something about the compound-head's character—he must be lazy, inhospitable or poor [...] Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure. (1986, 67)

As deeply as it may be embedded in its social environment, a biography such as this accounts for only one strand in the complex of sub-genres that life writing has to offer. It is temporally bounded, down-to-earth and historically verifiable, without any of the uncertainties and fantastic possibilities that the lives of certain humans may evoke. Yet the straightforward sobriety of the account has nothing to do with the fact that the subject of the story is a hut and not a human—non-human objects too may be the protagonists of multiple biographies that encompass the everyday and the miraculous to a degree that might elicit the same kinds of ambiguities about their ontological status. Nor is such complexity confined to the recipients of national reverence such as the Ārya Wati Zangpo; it may also characterise the narratives of objects of far humbler standing. In this article I would like to retrace the lives of certain local artefacts in order to discern how these stories may contain much the same themes as we find in the biographies of the most venerated relics.¹ First, however, we need to identify the themes in question, and to emphasise the point that they are not confined to the Tibetan Buddhist world, I would like to take the case of a relic that has nothing to do with Tibet—the Image of Edessa, also known as the Mandyliion.

The contested lives of a Christian relic

During the lifetime of Jesus there was a king named Abgar V Ukkāmā, who ruled over Osroene from the city of Edessa (now Urfa, in Turkey). This king contracted a dreadful illness for which no cure could be found. Word came to him about Jesus and the miracles he had performed, and he sent a delegation of painters to create a portrait of the master

from life. So overcome were the artists by the presence of Jesus that they were unable to carry out their commission.

No matter how hard they tried they were not able to produce an image of his form. Seeing their faith, Christ our saviour took hold of a linen cloth and with his own hands placed it on his undefiled face, and without paint or any other matter his undefiled image was imprinted onto the cloth. (From the *Nouthesi Gerontos*, cited in Guscini 2009, 154)²

In another account of the story, Christ sends the messengers back with the assurance not only that Abgar will be healed, but that the city of Edessa itself would be invulnerable to attack. This was borne out in AD 544, when a Persian attack on the city was repelled by a fire that the defenders had been able to light thanks only to the presence of the image. In 943, when Edessa had a Muslim ruler, the city was again besieged, this time by a Christian army under John Curcuas, who promised to spare the city and to return 200 Muslim captives in exchange for the image. After many attempts to fob the attackers off with fakes and copies, the defenders eventually gave up the true Image, which was taken to Constantinople amid much ceremony, after which it acquired its famous name, the Mandylion. Here it remained until 1204, when Constantinople itself was sacked during the Fourth Crusade. Although a great many holy relics and other treasures were carried off to Europe by the Crusaders, an inventory of the sacred loot written by a French knight, Robert de Clari, makes no mention of the Mandylion. The author does, however, cite a story he had heard about a man who had been repairing a widow's roof when Christ appeared to him and asked for a cloth that he was wearing. Jesus pressed this to his face, miraculously leaving an imprint on the cloth, which the man then hid under a roof-tile. No mention is made of Edessa. The subsequent fate of the Mandylion is not known; or rather it is dispersed into a plethora of competing claims. Although these are far too numerous to be enumerated here, they include the Mandylion of Genoa, and an image in the pope's private Matilda Chapel in the Vatican. Both are paintings, copies—or copies of copies—of the original. Many copies are known to have been made in Constantinople, since the relic itself was never shown outside its case (Dell'Acqua 2013, 152). Indeed, each of the three main Christian groups, the Melkites, Nestorians, and Jacobites, possessed a version that they claimed to be the original acheiropoieton, the work 'not made by human hands'. In other developments, the Mandylion has been conflated with the Napkin of St Veronica and the Shroud of Turin, both considered by believers to be acheiropoietia. One theory, proposed by Steven Runciman, is that the Mandylion was sold to Louis IX of France, together with numerous other relics, by the emperor Baldwin II in 1247, and remained in Paris until it 1792, 'when the godless revolutionaries sacked the Sainte Chapelle and destroyed or lost its contents' (1931, 252).

If the fate of the Mandylion after it came to Constantinople remains a mystery, the early part of its life in Edessa is even more intriguing. The account of a miraculous image created by Jesus pressing a cloth to his face first appears in the sixth century, but the development of the story can be traced through a series of earlier reports. In the Syriac *Doctrine of Addai*, King Abgar sends his secretary, the royal painter named Ḥanān, to paint a likeness of Christ. Ḥanān succeeds in his task and presents the painting to Abgar, who 'received it with great joy and placed it with great honor in one of the rooms of his palace' (Guscini 2009, 9). And if the first accounts of the Mandylion present the Image of Edessa as a painting, not an acheiropoieton, the very earliest versions of the Abgar story make no mention

of any image at all. The story first appears in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea (260/265–339/340), written between 311 and 325. In this account, the disease-ridden king sends a humble courier—not a painter—to Jesus bearing a letter. He receives a letter from Jesus in return, and later, a visit from the disciple Thaddeus, who heals the king and brings Christianity to Osroene. In 384 the nun Egeria visited Edessa and was given copies of the correspondence by the bishop. She noted that the version of Jesus’ letter was more elaborate than another one with which she was already familiar, inasmuch as it contained an assurance from Jesus that Edessa would be invulnerable to attack.

Whether there ever was an image in Edessa before the translation of the Mandylion to Constantinople is a matter that has been much debated by historians. It has been argued that Eusebius may have failed to mention it because he is known to have disapproved of relics, but the silence in Egeria’s account is more difficult to account for. André Grabar suggests that the Semitic population of Edessa were unenthusiastic about iconic representations and reserved their devotion for Jesus’ letter, whereas the idea of an image would have had much more resonance among the Greeks (cited in Guscini 2009, 194).

The story of the Mandylion as I have summarised it above is of course a very cursory simplification of an exceedingly complex story that has generated a considerable volume of scholarly literature. However, it provides us with a number of themes that are common to the biographies of people and objects, some of which will reappear in the case studies I wish to discuss below. The first consideration is the fact that there may be not just one but multiple accounts that may either complement one another by filling in blank areas on a single canvas, or else may be contradictory and incompatible. Second, there is the problem of silence, in the sense that it is always difficult, and sometimes impossible, to know why certain events, people or objects are not mentioned in a particular version: is it because they actually never happened or never existed, or because the author was either unaware of them or, perhaps, he actively wished to obliterate them from the record? Tibetan life writing offers us numerous examples of individuals who feature prominently in certain accounts of the same period but are conspicuously absent from others. This diminution or disappearance of Drakpa Gyaltsen (Grag pa rgyal mtshan, 1374–1434), one of the chief disciples of Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa, 1357–1419), from later biographies of the master, is just one example of this phenomenon. (The reason in this case seems to have been expressly to inflate the importance of another disciple, Khedrubje [mKhas grub rje, 1385–1438]), at his expense; Ary (2009). Third, there is the blurring of the boundary between biography and hagiography. The story of a human or an object may remain firmly within the ordinance of the here-and-now and still be thoroughly remarkable for all that; and while it may be contested that the line that an object traces over time is an arbitrary narrative that gives a spurious continuity to events where it happened to be present—like Kopytoff’s Suku hut—it is also true that human lives may be marked by a high degree of passivity and happenstance, while the perceived qualities of an object may be the motor for the direction political events take. But a life may also endow its subject with supernatural powers. In this case, the here-and-now biography and the hagiography may exist as unconnected traditions or they may inhabit a single text, in which the preponderance of each aspect will vary greatly from case to case.

If historical writing by definition requires narrative in order to set it apart from the more bare-bones, factual procedures of the annals and the chronicle,³ we are entitled to wonder in what measure narrative might be the result of selection, elaboration or

fiction. A biography may represent the aggrandisement of a minor figure who may in reality have borne little or no resemblance to the hypertrophied form we find in the life. This category may contain a number of variant forms. For example, the life in question may have been purloined from somewhere else—a case of identity theft—or else it may have been based on the merest kernel of historical fact. A good example of a famous life that was fabricated practically *ex nihilo* to become—and remain—a household name in China is that of Lei Feng. Lei Feng, an obscure PLA soldier who died in 1962 at the age of 22, is credited with an autohagiography in the form of a diary that was confected after his death to portray a perfect citizen, who wanted nothing more than to serve his comrades, the Party, and Chairman Mao with unstinting devotion.⁴ One or more of the variants outlined above have been proposed for figures as diverse as King Arthur (possibly a minor British chieftain under the Roman occupation),⁵ Padmasambhava,⁶ and Shenrab Miwo (gShen rab mi bo), the figure whom followers of the Bon religion revere as the founder of their faith.⁷ If the development of these figures may be seen as a component in the promotion of a sectarian or nationalist ideology, much the same may be true of objects. It has been suggested that the transformation of the Mandyliion from a painting to an acheiropoieton may have been promoted, if not initiated, by John of Damascus as part of the arsenal that was being assembled against the emerging Iconoclastic movement: ‘If this image had been made by Jesus himself, then how could there be any objections to icons?’ (Guscin 2009, 178).

Buddhist images: representation and manifestation

There are certain objects that are comparable to the Mandyliion with respect to the reverence they command among Tibetan Buddhists, as well as in the structure of the narratives associated with them and the types of details they contain. Whereas the last—post-Constantinople—phase in the life of the Mandyliion remains obscure, the present status of these Tibetan objects is, by contrast, well known. The images in question are two Buddha statues in Lhasa, respectively located in the Jokhang and Ramoche temples, and the Four Self-Originated Brothers (Rang byung mched bzhi) representing Avalokiteśvara, of which two are in Nepal, one in Tibet and the fourth—formerly in Tibet—now in India.

Concerning the first two, Sørensen makes an observation that, on the surface, seems to be paradoxical:

With their imperial-time origin and their well-documented role as symbols of Tibetan devotion, [they] surely must be considered the oldest and most precious statues in Tibet (notwithstanding that the present-day statues today must be considered replicas of now lost originals). (2007, 858–859)

In spite of the apparent contradiction in this assertion, Sørensen is perfectly right: the statues may be relatively recent replicas, and yet they are the oldest statues in Tibet—in the same way that the Mandyliia in Genoa and in the Vatican are both considered to be the original, even though they are clearly copies, and not the original acheiropoieton. It is as if there were a process of identification that was so powerful that distinctions between the copy and the original were effaced. After all, the originals themselves are considered to have been substitutes for the divine figures they represent. As Cameron Warner remarks, ‘the Jowo Śākyamuni’s devotees do not view him as simply a statue but rather a

manifestation of the Buddha himself (2011, 3). According to the oldest version of the myth that relates the construction of this image, known as the Lhasa Jowo (Lha sa jo bo), the divine craftsman Viśvakarman was commissioned to reproduce a likeness of the Buddha from life, but was unable to do so ‘because he could not reach the top of the protuberance, a thinly-veiled reference to the multidimensional and metaphysical nature of the Buddha’s body, which is beyond the comprehension of even a god-like being such as Viśvakarma [i.e. Viśvakarman]’ (Warner 2011, 7). (We may recall there the inability of the team of painters sent by Abgar to capture a likeness of Jesus because of the other-worldly nature of his countenance.) What the divine craftsman reproduces is an early form of the Buddha as he appeared to ordinary mortals, and yet the description of the image given in the text is completely at odds with his mundane appearance, inasmuch as it endows him with a host of attributes, disciples, auspicious and royal signs, the wrathful divinity Amṛtakuṇḍalin protruding from his neck, and a five-tined crown representing the Buddhas of the Five Families. Some authors have tried to reconcile these difference in terms of the spiritual capacities of their perceivers—a solution similar to that proposed by one writer to explain inconsistencies in what different pilgrims saw in the image on the Mandylion. Far from remaining a matter of metaphysical speculation, the contradiction became acutely politicised in the fifteenth century when Tsongkhapa incorporated a ceremony to crown the Jowo at the first Mönlam (*smon lam*) Prayer festival held in 1409. Considered by critics as an unwarranted transformation of the image that would have catastrophic consequences for Tibet—because the Jowo, like the Mandylion, was credited with having apotropaic powers—the controversial ceremony, that laid claim to a particular notion of the authentic original form of the Jowo, has been convincingly interpreted as a stratagem in the Gelugpas’ establishment of political hegemony over Tibet (Blondeau 1997; Warner 2011; see also Warner 2010).

The biographies of the Four Self-Originated Brothers also offer striking illustrations of the intersection of the religious and the political. The shared, ‘hagiographic’, part of their life stories identifies them not just as wooden representations but as actual manifestations of Avalokiteśvara. According to one account, the bodhisattva manifests in India as a certain Elder Prahangpa who, towards the end of his life, makes a prayer: ‘May my Yidam deity transform this sandalwood tree into the Great Compassionate one ...’ The Arhat who later finds this tree notices that it has ‘transformed into the Four Mahākaruṇika Brothers, materialized for the sake of sentient beings’ (Decler 2006, 87). The tree, and the four images that it is to yield, are as much manifestations of Avalokiteśvara as are, for example, Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) and the Dalai Lamas.⁸

As we might expect, the later part of the biographies of the Four Self-Originated Brothers is more mundane than the story of their miraculous origin, but the widespread acceptance of that story has, in certain cases, endowed them with considerable social and political agency. This is most strikingly illustrated by the life of the Ārya Lokeśvara in the seventeenth century, as described in Sørensen’s account of the image’s place at the heart of the power politics of the time. This image, the ‘principal statue’ (*tentso, rten gtso*) of the Potala, had officially been under the tutelage of the Karmapas since the fifteenth century, but in 1605 the effective ruler of the Lhasa area, the Kyishöpa Yulgyal (sKyid shod pa gYul rgyal, d. 1607), transferred the image to his estate at Drakar (Brag dkar), perhaps as ‘a sort of object of political bargain in an ensuing struggle for hegemony’ (2007, 865) between the Gelugpas, whom he supported, and the Karmapas. When the

forces of Tsang later successfully attacked Lhasa, the leading Kyishöpa took the image to Mongolia, where he gave it to the chiefs of Qutugtai in the Kokonor area. The recipients of this national treasure included relatives of the recently-deceased Fourth Dalai Lama, and Sørensen convincingly argues that the gift of this statue of Avalokiteśvara, ‘a substitute or replacement’ for their dead kinsman who was ‘himself the earthly manifestation of the same deity’ (2007, 871), secured the military support of the Mongols at a crucial point in the protracted conflict between Tsang and Lhasa. The image was subsequently moved to Kham for safety’s sake, and when it was eventually retrieved from its local wardens, the credit for its successful return to Lhasa in 1645 went to Gushri Khan and the first regent of Tibet, Sakyong Sonam Rabten (Sa skyong bSod nams rab brtan). While it is certainly true that ‘competing orders in their hegemonic ambitions [...] vied for the symbolic capital and national legitimacy vested in the Avalokiteśvara cult’ (2007, 864 fn. 17), it is also the case that the prestige associated with possession of the image was a significant fact in compelling its owners to military action that had far-reaching political consequences.

Evoking the invisible

All the objects we have considered so far—the Mandylion, the Lhasa Jowo, and the Four Brothers—are important relics of their respective faiths with accompanying biographical traditions that embrace hagiography and secular history. In the interest of furthering the project of social history it would be possible to take a completely mundane subject, the equivalent of Kopytoff’s hut—say, a nomad tent—and trace its life through the community. However, if we are to do justice to the complexities and contradictions in the narratives of these great relics, the exercise would be better served by local objects whose life stories also endowed them with some sort of sacred or magical powers. All the major relics discussed above, whether Christian or Buddhist, ostensibly derive their sanctity from being manifestations of the most revered figures in their respective religions. But there is another aspect of this sanctity that ought to be emphasised: these objects are intermediaries between the secular present and the sacred past and constitute a bridge between a mundane world and a distant, more sublime realm. The biographies of the Mandylion and the Jowo set the origins of these images in the time and presence of the very founders of the religions to which they belong; the tale of the miraculous birth of the Four Brothers offers a direct link to the dawn of the Buddhist Empire of Tibet. The examples I would like to consider in the next section will show how even objects of local significance can forge an important link with a foundational or sacred epoch.

If our appreciation of the meanings of objects has been enriched by this attribution to them of social, human characteristics, the reverse may also be true: notably, that in certain contexts humans can be most appropriately represented or understood in terms that are generally regarded as being a feature of inanimate objects. In his article on the biographies of objects that we have cited above, Kopytoff gives the example of trafficked slaves, who lose their social being to the process of commoditisation, only to recover it, at least in some cases, in an entirely different environment. The understanding of phenomena other than humans may also benefit from their being treated as objects. Elsewhere I have discussed the case of a cycle of 13 songs that used to be sung as part of an annual festival in a community called Te (gTer, among other spellings) in southern Mustang,

Nepal.⁹ These songs are bewildering for several reasons. They are sung over the course of three nights by the young men and women of the village, who are locked into a room and obliged to sing them at night with no audience. The only other listeners are the village headmen, who are present to ensure that the songs are word-perfect. Apart from a single rehearsal, it is forbidden to sing the songs at any other time. The same ceremony also entails certain other enigmatic performances that may be described briefly. In the middle of the village, a number of flat rocks are piled up and red clay wash poured over them. Beside this, the villagers place a slab of stone roughly the size and proportions of a low Tibetan table, and on this stone they set a plate of consecrated barley containing a number of sacred objects: a *vajra* (ritual thunderbolt), a ceremonial bell, and a volume of sutras. They are set up in the place where the ceremony is said to have been performed by its founder, a lama from a line of Nyingma tantric priests that died out about a century ago. All three items are functional, with the function in question being specified by the religious tradition that produced them: reading the text and manipulating the bell and *vajra* in the designated way, with the accompaniment of appropriate visualisation and mantras, help to achieve the efficacy of the ceremony being performed. To put it another way: within the terms of Tibetan Buddhism, the book, the bell, and the *vajra* have a primarily utilitarian value. As they figure in the present form of the ceremony, however, the three items have no such practical value, because there is no lama to use them as they should be used, and no Buddhist rite that they might make effective. They are, in a word, objects. But although they have no more Buddhist functional value, they obviously have a certain importance for the people of Te, who put them on display and set someone to guard them. What is the basis of their value? We can tackle this question by returning to the secret songs.

The language of the songs is not immediately recognisable, and no one in the community knows what they mean. It is likely, in fact, that they are in Classical Tibetan, and were composed as a set of devotional offerings by the tantric lama who probably choreographed the entire week-long ceremony as a Buddhist festival. Following the extinction of his priestly lineage, the ceremony was perpetuated, but without any of the meanings that had underlain its creation. We can reasonably assume that, as far as the lama who composed them was concerned, the value of the songs lay in the now barely discernible semantic content of the text, which conveyed a Buddhist message. While this original meaning has been lost, the importance of the songs for the community has not been compromised. On the contrary, the cycle is regarded as one of the secret treasures of the community.

The nature of the value of the objects and the song cycle, that is undiminished but nevertheless transformed, is perhaps best explained in the light of Krzysztof Pomian's study (1987) of collections and collectors. When functional artefacts have lost their utility, they sometimes acquire a new, far greater, value as objects to be exhibited. Why? The phenomenon of collecting in industrialised societies may be interpreted in terms of the usual gamut of more or less banal impulses: psychological reasons relating to acquisitive instincts; the gratification of an aesthetic sense or awareness of historical value; economic astuteness; socially motivated considerations of prestige; and so on. These are all insufficient as explanations, says Pomian, because they merely defer the problem: what is it that creates historical, aesthetic, social, or economic value in the first place? (As for the latter, while artefacts in collections lose their utilitarian worth, their exchange-value is both retained and greatly increased.) He suggests that an answer to the problem may

be found by examining the nature of collections ‘in societies other than our own’, in places other than museums and the hoards of private connoisseurs. The examples he cites include funerary objects interred with the dead; accumulations of offerings in shrines and temples; the spoils of war, which are often (as in ancient Rome) exhibited to the populace by the returning victor; sacred relics; and the treasure-houses of kings and princes. These ‘princely treasures’ were usually

shut up in chests or cupboards that were in turn placed in well-guarded chambers. They were taken out especially on the occasion of ceremonies and festivals. Following the king’s death, these regalia were paraded in funeral processions [...] It may be concluded [...] that the treasures were placed on view, and that this was their main purpose. (Pomian 1987, 29–30; my translation)

The true value of such objects is most obvious in the case of offerings:

While remaining intermediaries between the here-and-now and the beyond, between the profane and the sacred, offerings may therefore be present within the profane world itself as objects that represent what is far away, hidden or absent. (1987, 32; my translation)

And this, he concludes, is the essential feature of all collections: ‘They are intermediaries between the observer and the invisible realm from which they come’ (1987, 32; my translation). Insofar as it had the status of a precious object that had lost its original functionality, the song cycle is one of a number of treasures whose manifestation served to evoke the depth of the community’s past.

There is an obvious objection to representing the song cycle as an object: namely, while even the meanest object can be held up for inspection at any time, the songs have no permanent existence. But this objection raises a counterpoint: just how important *is* material existence for an object to qualify as an object? In all the examples considered above, the objects are venerated for the meaning that has been invested in them, and there is no reason why that same meaning should not be attached to immaterial vectors too—such as a cycle of songs that convey not a semantic content but the evocation of an era. And in the event that the object may not exist, it can be conjured into being by a narrative, supported by the precaution that no verification of its physical existence is actually carried out, or by the tacit acceptance of substitutes.

To explore these issues further I would like to consider the biographies of two objects that have a measure of notoriety in Mustang, Nepal. One is a turquoise vase and the other a ritual dagger, or *phurba* (*phur pa*) of the kind that is used in tantric rites. Both are locally well known, even though their claim to existence is at least as tenuous as that of the secret songs of Te.

The turquoise vase

The cycle of songs discussed above is sung in the village of Te, in southern Mustang. Like many communities, Te has certain items of communal property that are not normally shown to outsiders. In Tibetan societies, certain objects are valued not because of their commercial worth but because they constitute a support or receptacle for the mysterious property called *yang* (*g.yang*), a term that might be understood as the potential for good fortune, or the ‘quintessence’ of something (Karmay and Nagano 2002, x).¹⁰ *Yang* gives

certain things their essential character and ensures prosperity, but it is a fickle property that can easily be lost. Ritual texts for the retrieval of *yang* explain its nature by analogy with the defining qualities of other objects, such as the lustre of turquoises, the nutritional quality of food, or the inherent warmth of clothing (Ramble 2015, 507).

Reluctance to allow outsiders to see the treasures that guarantee the presence of *yang* can be observed at the level of the household and community alike: being seen by an outsider—especially on Saturdays—can cause the *yang* to be lost. During rituals for the retrieval of *yang*, a household will create a ‘*yang* box’ (*g.yang sgam*) that is filled with precious or simply unusual items: gold, silver, and turquoise, to be sure, but also certain oddities that nature occasionally produces, such as the egg of a cock, the top teeth of a cow, or a human tail.

The single most precious object in the collective possession of Te is a turquoise vase. The vase is said to be kept in the safe room of the community house adjacent to the village temple, along with things like the village archives and certain valuable ritual objects. Some of these items are produced on specified occasions. The land tax documents may be taken out only once a year, when the community is gathered. The legal constitution is unwrapped only once every 12 years, when it is due to be rewritten. The ritual bell, book, and *vajra* that belonged to the lama who officiated at the annual festival, mentioned above, are put on display only on the occasion of that festival. The turquoise vase, by contrast, is never put on display. A story relating to the last occasion on which the vase was revealed serves as a salutary warning about why it should not be displayed to outsiders.

The occasion was a visit by an eminent religious figure from Tibet, the Shang Lama, who was on a missionary expedition to the area. His activities and his zeal are well described by David Snellgrove in his *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, since Snellgrove met him in the course of a visit to southern Mustang in 1956 ([1981] 1989), 219–237). Among his other activities, the lama managed to persuade most of the communities in the area to abandon their traditions of animal sacrifice. One of the few not to have kept to their stated undertaking was Te, which still continues to sacrifice a number of animals each year to its territorial divinities.

The lama had heard about this remarkable treasure that was housed in Te, and during a visit to the village, while he was seated in the temple and being received with honours and veneration, he asked to be shown the vase. The villagers acquiesced. But as the vase was being removed from its wrappings and shown to the lama a terrible loud noise was heard: the main roof beam of the village temple had cracked. A lama from a nearby settlement added to this story a detail that I had not heard in the village itself: that the cracking of the roof beam had been followed by an even more dreadful sound: the howling of the Balmo, the demoness who represented the dark autochthonous forces of the area before her subjugation by Padmasambhava. The implication of this second detail is that the revelation of the vase was associated with the ascendancy of Buddhism over the wild and untamed gods of the place, as if the lama had succeeded in breaching their inner citadel. The more restrained version recounted by the villagers themselves does not, however, warrant such an interpretation. It is, nevertheless, interesting to see how the plainer account has been elaborated by a clerical narrator in such a way as to align it with the pervasive motif of the conflict between the Buddhist religion and the indigenous gods of Tibet. The cracking of the roofbeam was an expression of the anger of the Gola, the protective divinity who is the warden of the temple. There is nothing in the story to explain

the god's anger in terms of antipathy to Buddhism itself. Rather, the god was angry because the revelation of this most precious object to an outsider was an irresponsible act, since it carried the risk of compromising the prosperity of the village by causing a haemorrhage of its *yang*.

I tried to find out more about this turquoise vase. Where had it come from? What did it look like? Although I would not have dreamed of asking to be allowed to see it, I would have liked at least to know something more about an object that was so important to the village and that was spoken of in much of the surrounding area. One person told me it was not just turquoise-coloured but actually *made* of turquoise and had the form of a ritual Buddhist *kalash* (Skt. *kalaśa*). Another said that it had a long neck, and yet another that it was quite short and slightly greenish in colour, probably not turquoise at all but more like a jade bowl. When I pressed them for more details these informants replied that they were not sure. No one could tell me anything about the vase's provenance.

I tried to find out if it was kept together with other village valuables. The ritual objects of the lama who had founded the ceremony described above had become community property after the lineage had come to an end, and these objects were put on display once a year. Was the vase, that was never put on display, kept together with them? The headmen, who are responsible for village property, were not sure.

Gradually it became apparent that no one I spoke to had ever seen the vase. The last time it had been taken out had been on that catastrophic occasion in 1956, and none of the people I spoke to had been present at the time.

People in the villages adjacent to Te habitually say that, in spite of their tattered appearance, the Tepas are actually fabulously wealthy, and have huge hoards of silver coins under their mattresses. I am fairly confident that there are no such private treasure hoards in Te. It was very easy to reach a similar conclusion about the turquoise vase. No one had ever seen it, and no one knew where it was. There was, in fact, very little evidence that the vase actually existed. Everyone in Te and in the neighbouring communities knew about the vase, and many could describe its appearance and testify to its power. Functionally, at least in terms of its social impact, it made no difference whether the object existed. There may have been many differences of opinion about the object, but the fact of its existence was never called into question.

The ritual dagger of Yangtön Chenpo

Four hours walk south of Te is a small Bonpo community called Lubrak (Klu brag). The Lubrak valley was once inhabited by a group of non-Tibetan troglodytes when, in the early thirteenth century, a Bonpo lama named Tashi Gyaltzen (bKra shis rgyal mtshan) of the Yangal (Ya ngal) clan came from the north and established a religious centre there. The original estate that he founded has remained intact to the present day. The founder's father was a certain Sherab Gyaltzen (Shes rab rgyal mtshan), also known as Yangtön Chenpo (Yang ston chen po), 'the great teacher from the Yangal clan', who had come from Tibet in search of his teacher, Rong Togme Zhigpo (Rong rTog med zhig po), who was living in the caves of Upper Mustang. The night before Sherab Gyaltzen's epic quest for a teacher was to reach its happy conclusion, the lama he was destined to meet had a dream that is related in his biography:

That night, as Togme Zhigpo dreamed during the early part of the night, a woman came and said, ‘An emanation of [the saint] Pangla Namshen will come to be your disciple. Receive him and give him instruction [in the *Zhangzhung Nyengyu* spiritual system].’ During the latter part of the night, he saw in his dream a Bonpo dressed as a tantrist with some parts of his hair tied up on the crown of his head, other parts hanging over his shoulders, and long beard and moustache; he was wearing a white skirt with a blue top, and on top of that, a red garment. A ritual dagger made of iron was stuck in his belt at the waist. The next morning at sunrise, the attendant said, ‘There is a Bonpo coming from Dongkya who is asking for an audience.’

What does he look like?

He is wearing the clothing and bearing the ritual objects of a Tantrist.

That is what I dreamed of last night. Let him in! (Karmay 1998, 38)

One of the main distinguishing features of the lama, then, was his iron *phurba*. As mentioned above, his son travelled on south where he founded the Bonpo settlement of Lubrak. Tashi Gyaltsen had an older brother whom he eclipsed in spiritual achievements, and it is generally supposed that he was his father’s heir. The *phurba*, which he inherited, features briefly in his biography in the list of his phenomenal accomplishments: ‘As he was accomplished in his meditation, he was able to hang his blue garment on the sun’s rays; his ritual dagger, called Nyansa Trashi, produced flame by itself’ (Karmay 1998, 46).

The present heir of Lubrak’s original estate is a lama named Tshultrim (Tshul khrim). Insofar as several of the rituals Tshultrim performs entail the subjugation of demons, he makes extensive use of a particular ritual item he inherited with the estate: the famous *phurba*. I first saw Lama Tshultrim using this *phurba* in a ritual in a village outside Lubrak. He said it was the original, as used by Yangtön Chenpo, the father of Lubrak’s founder. Later, in the village of Lubrak itself, I saw another, larger *phurba* that was given pride of place on the altar and was used on the occasion of a major exorcistic ritual involving the whole community. When I asked Lama Tshultrim about this, he replied that in fact *this* was the original *phurba*. But the other one which he used in rituals for his patrons was ‘the same’. It was a substitute for the original one, since that one should never leave the village.

The concept of substitution is well known in the arena of Tibetan religion and ritual. A major class of healing rituals is based around the theme of a ransom for the patient, whose soul or vitality has been taken by demons, and who will release it only in exchange for something that is the equivalent of their human victim. The phenomenon is also to be found in the case of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage guidebooks will inform the reader that a mountain near to their village is an acceptable alternative for, say, Mount Kailash, and they can get just as much blessing from visiting their local hill as they would from crossing half of Tibet to circumambulate the prototype. In medicine, too, substitutes can be used for ingredients that are hard to get. The logic according to which the *phurba* that Tshultrim takes with him outside the village may be described as ‘the same’ as the founder’s ritual dagger is evident in the Tibetan nomad practice of dedicating animals to mountain gods. A sheep that is so dedicated is called a ‘divine sheep’ or *lhalug* (*lha lug*) and may not be killed but is left to die a natural death. (This idea may be a part of the inspiration for the Buddhist practice of ‘freeing life’ or *tshethar* [*tshethar*],¹¹ earning merit by buying animals from butchers in order to spare them from slaughter.) A certain group of nomads

in Nagchu Prefecture, in Tibet, have developed a tradition whereby the exigencies of piety and pragmatism have been deftly reconciled. A sheep is dedicated to the local mountain god and may thereafter not be used for its wool or meat. It is decorated accordingly with woollen tassels to show that it has been so dedicated. However, when it reaches a certain age, the decorations are removed and attached to another sheep, which thereafter functions as its substitute. Now that the divine character of the old sheep has been transferred, it can safely be butchered without incurring the wrath of the gods who own it. Rather as in the case of *yang*, as well as some of the major relics considered earlier, the essential identity of an object or animal is not intrinsic to it; rather, it is a detachable feature that may be cathected on to something else.

In the priestly lineage of which Lama Tshultrim is the present heir, there are two substitutions worth mentioning. The beginning of the short biography of Sherab Gyaltsen, the ancestor who had come to Mustang to find his master, tells us that his father died when he, the son, was still in the womb, and that for this reason he was known as ‘Tshabma’ (*tshab ma*) meaning ‘the replacement’ or ‘substitute’ (Karmay 1998, 29). The Yangal priestly lineage came to an end in Lubrak in the middle of the nineteenth century. The last surviving member of the family, a nun, bequeathed the estate to a young illegitimate boy who had taken good care of her in her old age. This young man, Pema Samdrup (Padma bsam grub), inherited the estate, its property and the Yangal family’s wide network of private patrons. Lama Tshultrim is in the fifth generation of the new lineage. As far as the patrons are concerned, the fact that Tshultrim is not member of the Yangal lineage is not a problem. He propitiates their household gods and performs the appropriate rituals for protection and prosperity, using the ritual paraphernalia of the Yangal estate.

The vase and the dagger: alternative lives

Much of the literature in the Tibetan *namthar* genre of life writing may be reasonably described as hagiography. This is not to say that literature that would serve as source material for the lives of lamas is always unavailable; but such sources are often hard to find, and in the overwhelming number of cases, Western life writing about religious figures is based on Tibetan *namthar*. As we might expect, when other, non-biographical literature is available to tell us about lamas’ lives, there is a risk that it will contradict the more pious narrative.

Quite a long time after I had satisfied myself that there was actually no vase, I came across a document in the archives of Te, that the community had allowed me to photograph in 1993. The document was a rejoinder in a legal dispute between a certain blacksmith and a lama who was connected with Te. In 1916 this blacksmith, a certain Kunga Hrithar (Kun dga’ srid thar) from the village of Tsherog (Tshe rog) in southern Mustang, ran into serious debt. The lama in Te at that time was someone called Tenpai Gyaltsen (bsTan pa’i rgyal mtshan). To raise badly needed funds, the blacksmith sold him a turquoise vase for 19 rupees. The sale apparently raised suspicions at the time, and the blacksmith was accused of having stolen the vase, but he defended himself in this written declaration—signed by three witnesses—to the effect that he had acquired the vase honestly. He had, he claimed, bought it from a certain Dorje Gyaltsen (rDo rje rgyal mtshan), the lama of the nearby convent of Tiri, for 100 rupees. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side, the blacksmith Kunga Hrithar signed an undertaking to refund

Lama Tenpai Gyaltzen's 19 rupees should it transpire that anyone successfully contested his right to sell the vase. The guarantor was his relative, Blacksmith Tagla (sTag la) from the nearby village of Kag.¹²

The whole affair is highly suspicious. Blacksmiths in Mustang are landless and indigent. In 1916, 19 rupees was a substantial figure; 100 rupees would have bought a small herd of yaks. Where would a blacksmith have got that sort of money?

We will probably never know the truth behind this transaction, but it is impossible *not* to suspect a link between the turquoise vase of this document and the mysterious treasure of Te. Tenpai Gyaltzen, the lama who bought the vase from the Blacksmith, was married to a woman from Te. He had only one son who died young, unmarried and without issue, and it is at least possible that the property of the estate went to the community after the lineage came to an end. Perhaps, after all, the vase does exist, in which case it has the status of objects that are 'supports for *yang*' that should never be revealed once they have been locked into their '*yang*-box'.

It so happens that, as in the case of the turquoise vase, there is a non-hagiographic source that adds an interesting twist to the story of the *phurba*. In 2008 Lama Tshultrim kindly let me photograph the will that was left by the last member of the Yangal clan to hold the founder's estate. This was an elderly nun named Chödze Nyishar (Chos mdzad nyi shar). The will is a fascinating document that tells the story of the nun's frustrated attempts to find a member of the Yangal clan to inherit the estate after her death.¹³ The succession of heirs she did manage to find—distant cousins from Dolpo—died shortly after taking up residence, and this seems to have acted as a disincentive for others to accept the invitation. But that is another story. The main purpose of the will was to bequeath the estate to Pema Samdrup, Lama Tshultrim's great-great-great grandfather.

The will ends with two columns. To the right is a list of all the debts that the young heir would have to pay off. The left-hand column is a list of the property that came with the estate. The list specifies all the domestic utensils as well as the items of ritual paraphernalia. The former category consists of a few pitiful entries such as 'a wooden rake'; 'a damaged frying pan'; 'one box'; 'one clay pot'; 'one wooden flask'. The ritual items are also meticulously itemised, and include 'a set of cymbals in perfect condition', 'fifteen images of different sizes'; 'two flat bells'; 'two conches'; 'one set of 108 butter-lamps', and 'two painted scrolls'. But among all these items, there is no mention of a *phurba*.

Conclusion

For all their provincial character and relative obscurity, the vase and the *phurba* are perfectly eligible candidates for biographical accounts that resemble those of the great relics discussed in the first part of this article. The *phurba* is a particularly good illustration of the processes of conflation and substitution that feature in the lives of the Mandylion and the Jowo, while also bestowing prestige on its possessor and establishing a link between the present and the foundation of the village. The *phurba* that Lama Tshultrim uses in his rituals is 'the same' as the *phurba* that was one of the distinguishing attributes of the twelfth-century Lama Sherab Gyaltzen. However, the continuity of this object's identity over time is achieved only by a number of leaps of faith. The *phurba* that Tshultrim uses in his patrons' houses is the same as that of the family heirloom only thanks to a

consensus about the validity of substitution. The heirloom itself is believed to be the same as the flame-throwing dagger of the village founder, because it came with the inherited estate. And the flame-throwing dagger that belonged to the village founder is considered to be the one that features in the hagiography of that founder's father. The will of Chödze Nyishar confronts us with the same problem concerning her ancestor's *phurba* as that raised by Eusebius' and Egeria's accounts of the relic of Edessa. Does the silence of these narratives concerning the objects in question mean that those objects were never there? Had the *phurba* been taken from the Yangal family house to be kept safely elsewhere at the time of the inventory, or was it only acquired in the late nineteenth century, after Pema Samdrub had inherited the estate?

There is no hagiography of Tenpai Gyaltzen, a provincial tantric lama about whom we know practically nothing. The only information we have about him in his family archives shows that he was involved in bitter property disputes with his cousins and that he could drive a hard bargain—as in the episode of the vase, which he bought from an indebted blacksmith for less than a fifth of its value. Clearly, the juxtaposition of official biographies and more prosaic sources can be instructive. In the case of the vase itself, the oral tradition surrounding it is comparable to the accounts of the great relics we have considered, and also to many Tibetan hagiographies, insofar as it tells us nothing about the vase's secular life but focuses on its miraculous qualities. In one sense, the brief biography of the vase is even more layered than the rich narratives surrounding the great relics, insofar as it passes through a phase that none of these ever experienced, and that it shares with the slaves of Kopytoff's account: from the document of 1916 we know that it was once a commodity, if we understand this term in the loose, non-Marxist sense of something that can be exchanged for money or some other goods in a discrete transaction; a valuable piece, as the enormous price of 100 rupees shows, but a commodity nevertheless. This material value was subsequently debased in the course of a sale as a result of the owner's dire need. Following the death of the last private owner—who survived his only son—it was decommoditised as part of the community's patrimony and underwent a process of sacralisation. And in this condition, as a corollary to its removal from the realm of saleability and exchangeability, its charisma and reputation have continued to grow—in spite of the real possibility that it may not exist at all.

Notes

1. Whereas in Classical Latin the word *reliquiae* 'refers specifically to the physical remains or ashes of a deceased human being', from Christian times it came to be extended to objects associated with the saintly deceased (McCulloh 1976, 153–154).
2. I am indebted to Sarah Teetor for drawing my attention to the references cited in this section.
3. For a discussion of the relationship between these different forms, see White (1980).
4. Writing about Lei Feng, John Fraser remarks that 'he never existed, at least not in the form served up by the Party' (Fraser 1980, 100).
5. Scholarly opinion continues to be divided on the matter of whether the Arthur of legend is based on a real figure from Roman Britain or if he is an entirely fictional character. For a discussion of the debate, see Charles-Edwards (1991).
6. The development of the Padmasambhava myth from what may have been a historical kernel has been discussed by numerous authors. See, for example Bischoff (1978); Dalton (2004).
7. Bon is regarded by Tibetans as the pre-Buddhist religion of their country. The prevailing form of the religion is a confluence of Buddhist and other influences from India and

Central Asia, with a stratum of indigenous beliefs and rituals. An overview of different views concerning the historicity of Shenrab Miwo may be found in Ramble (2019a).

8. The implication that the sandalwood images are somehow consubstantial with Avalokiteśvara may help us to resolve a conundrum in the text on which Ehrhard's study of the Jowo Wati is based. Hubert Decler (2006) draws our attention to a passage in the third stanza of the opening verses of praise: *ha ri tsan dan ljon pa'i sbub las rang byung ba'i / mtshan dpe'i dpal 'bar'gro sgrol phyir du ring bzhugs pa /* and he offers an English gloss of Ehrhard's German translation: 'Self-originated from a hollow in a Haricandan sandalwood tree, resplendently radiant with the Signs and Marks (of a Buddha), in order to liberate transmigrators, you have arisen [so as to be visible] from afar.' The words in square brackets are an attempt to get around the problematic *ring bzhengs pa*. Another witness of the text has *rings* for *ring*. Conceding that Ehrhard's reading of *ring* as '[so as to be visible] from afar' is 'a little forced', Decler goes on to suggest that the passage may have been based on an earlier text, in which *rings par* appears as an adverbial construction, meaning 'at great speed', and hence implying *rang byung*. While this alternative reading is perfectly plausible, I would suggest rather that *ring/rings* here is the Old Tibetan term for the corpse of a king; a body that is a sacred relic. In an article devoted to the term and its derivatives, Michael Walter points out that *ring/rings* may also be 'an abstract noun with the meaning of *ongoing* or *enduring presence*', and adds that, in certain contexts, '*sku* and *ring* are near synonyms' (1998, 64–66). In the present case, then, the syllables *ring(s) bzhengs pa* might therefore be glossed as '... you have arisen as an enduring physical presence'.
9. A more detailed account of the following example may be found in Ramble (2008a, chapter 7).
10. Concerning the concept of *yang* and associated rituals, see for example Berounsky (2014); Ramble (2015).
11. For a recent study of the Tibetan practice of 'freeing life', see Tan (2016).
12. The document, catalogued as HMA/Te/Tib/35, is presented in Ramble (2008b, 189–190).
13. A translation and discussion of the will are given in Ramble (2019b).

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