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► **To cite this version:**

Valentina Punzi. Dying Mongol and Being Reborn Tibetan': Otherness and Integration of Foreigners in the Landscape of Amdo (Qinghai, PRC).. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, 2017. hal-03890192

HAL Id: hal-03890192

<https://hal.science/hal-03890192v1>

Submitted on 24 Oct 2024

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“Dying Mongol and Being Reborn Tibetan”: Otherness and the Integration of Foreigners in the Landscape of Amdo

Valentina Punzi

Dost scholars (Kolas and Thowsen 2005; Dai 2009; Wellens 2010; Nietupski 2011; Hayes 2013; Haas 2013; Yeh and Coggins 2014) have defined Amdo, the north-eastern area of the Tibetan plateau that now falls within the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, western Gansu and northern Sichuan, as a geopolitical middle ground squeezed between Chinese and Tibetan polarities and shaped by the political, linguistic and cultural influences of Beijing to the east and Lhasa to the south. They have accordingly labelled it a frontier zone, where linguistic, cultural and religious hybridity and marginality prevail, in comparison with the assumed wholeness of Chinese and Tibetan centres. Roche (2015, 1-4) insightfully argues that this Sino-Tibetan frame cannot account for the complexity and variety of communities who have been living for centuries in this area, and that it is fundamental to shift the focus back to local agency. Clusters of communities have been interacting over history and have distinctively shaped their local identities beyond the ethnic and linguistic macro-divides that were imposed by the Chinese state’s classification of minority populations. On the other hand, western academia’s attempts to describe processes of cultural and linguistic change solely in terms of the Tibetanisation of these groups erase diversity in favour of the idea of the Tibetan absorption of local identities (Roche 2015, 13-14). Beyond the academic frame, a Tibetan civilising project oriented toward Tibet’s peripheral populations, aimed at stretching Tibetan political, linguistic and cultural influence to the marginal territories, reveals a long-term Tibetan agenda of assimilation (Huber 2010, 2011; Jinpa 2014).

The creativity of vernacular religion allows a space for expression that promotes local agency and highlights its specific social and historical context. At the same time, belief narratives redefine local instances of contemporary identities, alternative to those proposed by the Chinese state, into configurations of the Amdo kaleidoscope of cultural and linguistic identities. Although the prescriptive role of institutionalised Buddhism echoes the power of the state in its attitude of standardising and normalising religious beliefs and practices, and casts its shadow of disapproval onto heterodox systems, local

belief narratives reproduce meaningful connections with both the land and the past of the community.

This article will present a case study of a belief narrative concerning three mountain gods in a Tibetan community in eastern Amdo that is deeply embedded in the local landscape and history of the former Mongol occupation of this area.

Mongol armies ruled over Amdo at different periods between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries. Contemporary local accounts recall the activities of both historical and legendary Mongol characters, and suggest that Tibetans considered them to be the embodiment of an alien threat to their cultural and social order.

Belief narratives also bear traces of the Mongol occupation of Amdo, but tell a more complex story that, rather than straightforwardly depicting the Mongols as invaders, suggest their integration through an ontological shift from the human agency of the Mongol rulers to their divinisation in the local Tibetan pantheon. Based on three extracts from belief narratives recorded *in loco*, this essay analyses the negotiation between historical memory and vernacular religion in the emergence of a theogonic myth concerning a Tibetan mountain god as a cultural strategy aimed at making the Mongol foreigners fit into the local Tibetan landscape and worldview.

The cult of mountain gods is widespread on the Tibetan Plateau, where valleys, peaks, caves, and high passes are all topical *loci* for supernatural encounters and offerings of libation, fumigation and prayers to the local protector gods. A myes Brag dkar spun gsum (pron. Amye Drakar punsum, the three brothers of Amye Drakar) are among them. The origin and deeds of these mountain gods are inscribed in centuries of the turbulent history of Khri-ka (Chinese: Guide), rTse-khog (Chinese: Zeku) and Mang-ra (Chinese: Guinan) Counties, where the three brothers of Amye Drakar are believed to dwell in their underground mountain palace in the midst of grassy hills. Ranging from brief references to longer and more detailed storylines, belief narratives ascribe the origins of the three brothers of Amye Drakar to the death of a Mongol prince.

I recorded the first version of the story during one of my fieldwork trips in the area of the three brothers of Amye Drakar in 2012. The story was told by A-ku Ta, a ninety-year old man who had spent his monastic life in the local Gelukpa monastery of Banshul until moving to his family house at the foot of the three brothers of Amye Drakar mountain, in the homonymous village of Drakar (Chinese: Zhika) in Mang-ra County.



The three rocky peaks of A myes Brag dkar spun gsum.

While sipping his butter tea, he recalled episodes from his intense and personal relationship with the gods, who had been constantly present in his life through dreams, epiphanies, prayers and paintings.



Thangka painted by A-ku Ta after a dream about A myes Brag dkar spun gsum.

Not only did A-ku Ta claim a deep acquaintance with the three brothers of Amye Drakar, he also provided a lengthy narration on the gods' theogony:

[...] The son of the Mongol king wore a brocade robe and a fur-lined jacket with a shining golden upper part, like a foreigner. He rode day and night until he arrived in a place called The White Rock Mountain in the area of A-ma Zor-gu in Guide. He hid in a big rocky cave and though he didn't eat or drink for many days, he was not hungry or thirsty. One day, when some hunters passed by that place, they saw golden rays shining from inside the cave. At that point, the Mongol minister arrived with his army and asked if there was either a man or any other living being in the cave, so they all went to see. Then the prince said to the minister: "It would be good if you do not break the law and you do not do any black magic or killing and lead the army outside in happy and peaceful times." Such was the order given by the Mongol prince but they did not listen and were ready to take bows and arrows and shoot the son of the king. The prince was praying: "In the future may I be reborn as a Tibetan and cut the fringes of Mongol hats and the earrings of Mongol women! May the black tents¹ be as numerous as if black tadpoles covered the grassland! May those who will be born in this place conquer the three realms and cast down the enemies and obstructers with might and power!" And as soon as he finished his prayer, the Mongol minister killed him. After that, it is said that the son of the king was reborn in the area of Drakar mountain among the seventeen villages of the Tibetan black tents in the golden valley, and he became the mountain god, the oldest brother of the three brothers of Amye Drakar.²

Despite being primarily oriented by the aetiological aim of explaining the theogony of the three brothers of Amye Drakar, this narration also reveals the presence of Mongols in the region and inferentially sheds light on the ethnic and social context in which these narratives emerged and circulated. However, since the identity of the Mongol king, the prince and the minister remain vague, it is impossible to assess the timeframe of the narration. Notably, the reasons behind the conflicting relationship between the minister and the prince, which eventually ends in a murder, remain incomprehensible and lack a precise historical context. The apparent absence of historical references is indeed a characteristic of all the narratives I recorded, wherein Mongols' presence is not set in a specific chronological time,

¹ Black yak-hair tents are the traditional housing of Tibetan herders, easily distinguishable from the round white yurts used by Mongols.

² Recorded on August 13th 2014 in Drakar village (all translations by the author).

but is rather blurred in the mythical abstraction of taking place *in illo tempore*, which potentially applies to any segment of the Mongol occupation of Amdo and is generically opposed to the present. In contrast to the commitment to chronological order pursued by local histories, belief narratives subordinate the historical characterisation of Mongols to the more basic need of making sense not of specific momentous events during their past rule but of the enduring presence of these new occupants with whom Tibetan communities in Amdo had to come to terms.



*A-ku Ta during an interview in summer 2014.
He was one of the most knowledgeable informants and talented storytellers I met during my fieldwork trips in Amdo.*

The arrival and establishment of the first long-term Mongol rule in this region dates back to the thirteenth century and to the times of Kublai Khan and the institution of the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in China. Following Gengis Khan's conquest of Asia, for the first time the lay Mongol conquerors came into contact with Tibetan Buddhism

and Mongol princes established patronage relationships with Tibetan abbots, parcelling out their spheres of influence on the Tibetan plateau (Nietupski 2011, 3-8). During this time, some Mongol tribes settled on the shores of Kokonor Lake in Amdo, and contributed to maintaining the political fragmentation of the region that remained unchallenged during the Chinese Ming dynasty that followed (1368-1644).

The seventeenth century witnessed a new chapter of Mongol rule over Amdo. Coming from the Tianshan region, Gushri Khan migrated with his followers to the south, around Lake Kokonor, where they settled. He later became the main protagonist in supporting the Fifth Dalai Lama's establishment of Gelukpa rule over Tibet; his successful campaigns, which culminated in the triumph of the Gelukpa School in 1642, gained him the title of *Bstan 'dzin chos kyi rgyal po*, "King Protector of the Dharma". After his death, his descendants continued to promote the diffusion of the Gelukpas in Amdo.

This centuries-long history is the background to the theogony of the three brothers of Amye Drakar. Some narrations, like the two following passages, provide an imaginary historical frame that clusters around the emblematic figures of Kublai Khan (1215-1294) and Gushri Khan (1582-1655), whose lifespans serve as generic time markers and coincide with the two distinct periods of Mongol occupation in Amdo. These two historical periods, which witnessed the institution and the strengthening of Mongol presence in predominantly Tibetan areas of Amdo, are reflected in the use of differentiated ethnonyms to designate Mongols. The earlier Mongols of the thirteenth century are usually referred to as Hor, whereas the later Mongols of the seventeenth century are more frequently called Sog(po). Local Tibetans do not necessarily make a historically accurate choice between the two ethnonyms, but tend rather to use them interchangeably or even to merge them into a single combination, Horsog. Nevertheless, in the belief narratives presented here, Mongols are consistently referred to as Sog(po), suggesting that the first elaboration and circulation of stories in the area should be dated to the second period of Mongol occupation that occurred during the seventeenth century.

Not far from A-ku Ta's house, his neighbour A-ku Tshe-ring-rgyal, a 75-year-old herder, sat in the sun and told his version of the story:

In order to explain why the three gods of Amye Drakar dwell in a white rock, you should know that three sons were born to the Mongol king Kublai Khan, and that they were murdered. In our place they turned into the white rock of the three brothers of Amye

Drakar. Before dying the eldest brother said: "I will cut the fringes of Mongol hats and the earrings of Mongol women; I will protect the people living in the black yak-hair tents and destroy those living in white yurts." Such is the story. We say that in our valley the three brothers of Amye Drakar protect the people living in the black yak-hair tents and destroy those living in white yurts.³

In the village of Tonche, 40 km south of Drakar village, a third version of the story was told by A-ku bKra-shis, a 72-year-old farmer:

The three brothers of Amye Drakar in the past were born as the sons of the Mongol Gushri Khan. Afterwards, because they broke the Mongol law, they fled and were killed near Mtsho snying Island on Kokonor lake. Afterwards, they arrived at a place in upper Amdo with a three-peaked mountain. When they arrived in the village, they were chased by many wild yaks of the Mongols. They transformed a female yak with her calf into that place and it was named the Little Stone of the Female Yak. Because they were angry with the Mongols, the eldest brother said: "I will cut the fringes of the Mongol hats and the earrings of Mongol women." Afterwards, the three Mongols turned into mountain gods and stayed as the three brothers of Amye Drakar.⁴

Belief narratives concerning the origins of the three brothers of Amye Drakar did not develop randomly but according to the specific fear of the Mongols. Since the thirteenth century Mongols have embodied a concrete threat to Tibetans, who in turn have implemented various cultural strategies to construe their presence within the Tibetan landscape. The three extracts reported above reveal a creative way of deconstructing the Mongol historical encounter with Tibetans and their ambiguous role of being conquerors of a Tibetan land, whereas Tibetan Buddhism eventually culturally conquered them.

The narrations focusing on the three brothers of Amye Drakar's mostly end with an obscure statement that announces the return of the dying Mongol protagonist in a future Tibetan rebirth:

In the future may I be reborn as a Tibetan and cut the fringes of Mongol hats and the earrings of Mongol women! May the black tents be as numerous as if black tadpoles covered the grassland! May those who will be born in this place conquer the three realms and cast down the enemies and obstructers with might and power!

³ Recorded on August 17, 2014 in Drakar village.

⁴ Recorded on August 22, 2014 in Tonche village.

The epilogue of the story entails oblique meanings, covered by this inter-narrative cliché. By summarising both the cursing of Mongols and the blessing of Tibetans in a prophecy, this conclusive sentence adheres to Vansina's definition of cliché as "a highly compressed and deceptively simple statement of meaning that refers to a much more complex reality" (Vansina 1985, 139). The use of this rather fixed oral cliché indeed shows how the entire historical and social background of Tibetan–Mongol relations in Amdo is condensed into a few sentences. By triggering the deification of a Mongol prince into the Tibetan landscape, the cliché provides a frame for compensating the historical reality of Mongol domination, effectively subverting it. At its minimum development, the plot of the narration is emblematically remembered through this idiomatic repetition, which stresses the intrinsic alterity and the fierce condemnation of Mongols.

Discourses of distinguishing ourselves from the Other are rooted in the perception of a threat invading not only our physical space but also generating long-term memories of the past and affecting present worldviews. The gradual and pervasive presence of Mongols in Amdo from the thirteenth century onwards made Tibetans hesitant about classifying them as strangers or neighbours: through frequent and enduring contacts they became acquainted with each other, although ethnic and cultural borders marked the lasting division between the two groups. Caught in this liminal role, the intermediate position of the Mongols between their own ethnic cultural and linguistic background and that of the surrounding Tibetans contributed to portraying them as being at once close and remote. Rather than being projected in the genre of fantastic descriptions of faraway lands and people, the immediacy of the Tibetan experience of encounters with the Mongols did not fix them in the category of exotic foreigners; for Tibetans, Mongols were rather familiar strangers.

From the Tibetan standpoint, the Mongols' "otherness is always approximate and relational because total otherness would be unintelligible" (Olmsted 1996, 168). The otherness of the Mongols is relationally built up and fuelled by contrasting it with the self-perception of the Tibetans and through the definition of their putative distinguishing characteristics.⁵ Furthermore, since "strangers are not really

⁵ Regarding this attitude among neighbouring communities, anthropologists have labeled it the "narcissism of small differences", a concept first introduced by Freud in his *Civilization and its Discontents*: "I once interested myself in the peculiar fact that peoples whose territories are adjacent, and are otherwise closely related, are always at feud with and ridiculing each other, as, for instance, the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the North and South Germans, the English and the Scotch, and so on. I gave it the name of narcissism in respect of minor differences, which does not do much to explain it. One can now see that it is a convenient and relatively har-

perceived as individuals, but as strangers of a certain type" (Blier 1993, 375), the status of being Other implies a range of natural inherent qualities that are not characteristic of specific individuals but are broadly ascribed to those coming from outside the community. At collective and individual levels, all societies generate and transmit certain ideas about foreigners, which easily turn into stereotypical markers that anticipate the encounter with strangers and can be so deeply rooted that the real meetings do not deny but confirm them.

The red-fringed hat is the motif that is immediately recognisable across narrations as a mark of alterity, and reflects a tendency to stereotyping the ethnic identity and the social position of the Mongol rulers. Stereotyping through the symbolic act of dressing, which becomes "an overdetermined signifier of difference", is a transcultural way to elaborate gender, ethnic and social differences (Dwyer 1999, 7). More specifically, "clothing and jewellery are read as a clear visual marker of the divide between the local and the foreign population" (Holloway 2005, 357). Through a metonymic stereotype, the Mongol hats and earrings embody and suggest alterity; they are unequivocal marks of a different ethnic and cultural identity, which at once identify, authenticate, stereotype and potentially discriminate against the Other.

This is further projected onto the iconographic representations of the three mountain gods of Amye Drakar that are still circulating in the area centuries after the Mongol threat has dissipated. In general, the Tibetan iconography of the territorial gods who populate the overcrowded pantheon and geography of Amdo conforms to fixed repetitive models of representation. While a trained local eye can easily distinguish among the features of different territorial gods, the outsider can be puzzled by their superficial similarities. However, in the case of the three brothers of Amye Drakar, the red-fringed hat is the emblematic symbol of the god, which makes his Mongol background immediately discernable. In contemporary times, the red-fringed hat is still worn by Mongol-speaking communities in Amdo like the Tibetans who speak the Bonan and Wutun languages⁶ (Chinese: Tuzu) in the area of Rebgong and the Yellow Yughur (Chinese: Yuguzu) in northern Gansu during the annual festivals celebrating local mountain gods, weddings and traditional dances.

mless form of satisfaction for aggressive tendencies, through which cohesion amongst the members of a group is made easier."

⁶ I prefer this descriptive definition to the Chinese name Tuzu, which univocally identifies an ethnic distinction for this group, because most of them consider themselves to be Tibetans and many have actually changed their IDs to Tibetan (personal communication with Gerald Roche).



The red-fringed hat and the earrings worn in the area of Rebgong during the Lurol festival in Gnyan thog village

In the iconography of the three brothers of Amye Drakar, the red-fringed hat metonymically symbolises Mongol otherness and the cliché-prophecy embodies a reflection and a resolution of the destiny and the place to be occupied by Mongols in the local geography. No matter how threatening and unwelcome the Mongols might have been, they had to fit somewhere in the landscape and mindscape of the local Tibetans; their presence had to be elaborated and processed in the framework of the intimate Tibetan contiguity between people, landscapes and territorial gods that characterise their relationship to the land. It is precisely this epistemology that sustains the transposition of Mongols onto a legendary conversion and incorporation in the local pantheon.

Dynamic and creative ambivalence is at the basis of the elaboration of an historical event into a legend, a process that can lead to the same event being reported in diametrically opposite versions. The illustrative extracts portray Mongols' different identities, but always show them in a bad light that naturalises their evilness. The Mongols who appear in the stories about the three brothers of Amye Drakar are members of the aristocracy, whose violent actions are characteristic of an oppressive ruling agency; their different status from ordinary Tibetans is symbolised by the red-fringed hats worn by men and

the heavy earrings worn by women. The Mongol threat is culturally elaborated as an impersonal evil presence that switches to a positive existence only after their rebirth in the form of a mountain god.

The perception of evilness is often associated with ethnic and social otherness and reflects social contrasts merged in the collective imaginary of a community. "Evilness and furthermore, demonic evilness, is something alien and threatening for human beings, who therefore tend to project it outside themselves. We do not perceive, nor do we want to perceive anything evil either in ourselves or in the representatives of the social class we belong to" (Valk 2001, 74-75). Therefore, 'others' are easily stereotyped into evil characters, especially when they embody ethnic as well as social alterity. The confrontation between the local Tibetan folks and the Mongol rulers takes the shape of a socially unbalanced opposition between local and foreigner, in which ethnic and social statuses become coincidental categories in defining the two parties involved: Mongols are the ruling aliens, whereas Tibetans are the ruled locals; the overlap of ethnic and social identity reduces the possibilities of confrontation and dialogue. However, instead of maintaining a polarised antithesis, belief narratives suggest that the effective inclusion and incorporation of the Other into the local Tibetan geography was the preferred solution.

Based on the assumption that "civilised centres" have a mission to spread the values of civilisation and help the spontaneous or forced conversion of alien peripheral people to the ideals of the centre, this cultural mechanism of assimilation was common among other peoples, from ancient Greece to Han China (Segal 1974, 289-308; Harrell 1995, 3-36). Likewise, despite being in the socially dominant position of rulers, Mongols were considered uncultured aliens at the margins, upon whom Tibetans exerted a centripetal force of attraction to incorporate them from the borders to the core of Tibetan cultural and religious identity.

Putting a Tibetan territorial god's origins in relation to Mongol ancestry is a way to effectively incorporate the foreign invader in the present of the community, where the descendants of those who were once foreigners have intermarried with Tibetans and are now born as indigenous. "Since most groups maintain strong ethnic boundaries there is an unwillingness to come to terms with an ancestry, which may be as much foreign as native because such borders might become at risk to be subverted" (Ó Giolláin 1987, 72). By entering the realm of vernacular belief, Mongols become integrated into the past of Tibetan communities in Amdo; once the Mongols have been transformed into supernatural beings with a foreign ancestry, their

memory is imprinted in the present and revived through contemporary worship of the three brothers of Amye Drakar.

In their human life the three brothers of Amye Drakar embody several identities of ethnic, cultural and social alterity. Being a member of the restricted but dominant minority of Mongol rulers, they are characterised as extraneous figures to the local Tibetans. The turning point in the narration occurs in the passage from human life to rebirth as gods. The moment when the Mongol minister kills them marks the end of their secular power and a fundamental change of identity. The rebirth as mountain gods grants the opportunity to take revenge on the Mongol murderers and become protector gods for the Tibetans.

The end of the human existence of the three brothers of Amye Drakar comes with the prophecy in the form of a curse on the Mongols, foretelling a return after death with the power of a god, and offers enduring protection to the Tibetan community against the foreign invaders. Notably, the change of side takes place after the human existence; in order to take the Tibetan side they dismiss their human form and are reborn as territorial gods; thus their status is empowered by the acquisition of a divine identity. The rebirth of powerful characters into divinities is a widespread phenomenon that is referred to as *mi shi btsan skyes* (death of a human, birth of a *btsan*) (Ramble 2008, 137). Within the narration, the passage from life to death and the very condition of being foreigner itself conveys a liminal status at the edges of Tibetan culture as the precondition enabling the protagonists to cross the border between their human existence and their rebirth as local protector gods.

Through the enactment of this dynamic of cultural assimilation, the cult of many Tibetan territorial gods in Amdo stemmed from the after-death deification of foreign generals and rulers of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, i.e. Han Chinese, Mongol, Tibetan (Bufetrille 2002; Nietupski 2014). The deification of the Other entails that their domestication takes places through an act of submission that simultaneously elevate their status.

In the representations found in painted scrolls, a whole set of paraphernalia consisting of armour, arrows, bows and well-equipped horses are the clear reminiscent markers of past martial identity, and deceptively insignificant details, such as the red-fringed hat, provide fundamental clues that help any attempt at an assessment of the historical and social context within which particular theology-related narratives emerged. The after-human life incorporation of powerful and threatening foreigners into the already existent local Tibetan pantheon reconciles the Mongol presence within a Tibetan religious and cultural frame, which has been flexibly open to the introduction

of new territorial gods of both autochthonous and foreign origins down to the present day.

Following the revitalisation of Buddhism and the consolidation of monastic institutions during the later dispensation period in the twelfth century, Tibetan self-perception had shifted from that of a cultural periphery to a conscious role as an established Buddhist centre. This renovated confidence undoubtedly further affected and problematised the perception of outsiders in relation to Tibetans themselves. Dalton effectively notes how the Mongol arrival at that time triggered opposite reactions among Tibetans:

Throughout the later dispensation period, Tibetans regularly depicted themselves as a benighted people dwelling in a demonic land at the very edges of civilization. [...] Tibetans begin to portray their land less as a marginal backwater than as a Central Buddhist country under threat from its barbaric neighbours. Tibetans responded to the Mongol incursions in a variety of ways. Some portrayed the Mongols as long-prophesied protectors of the faith, while others wrote more ominous prophecies and developed large-scale ritual performances designed to repel the offending Mongol armies (Dalton 2011, 172).

Such a divergence of attitudes in dealing with the Mongols was manifested again upon the advent of Gushri Khan in the seventeenth century. In Central Tibet the severe conflict between Mongol supporters and opponents escalated as the on-going struggle for political power among Tibetans themselves intensified. Thus, in Central Tibet, Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624) performed ritual activities aimed at expelling the Mongols. In his *History of How the Mongols Were Turned Back* (*Sog bzlog bgyis tshul gyi lo rgyus*) he described twenty-five different ritual methods that could efficiently achieve the purpose of exorcising a foreign power from the Tibetan land (Gentry 2010, 132-136). The sponsors of these large-scale rituals were the rulers of Gtsang area, in south-west Central Tibet, who feared the rising power of the Dalai Lama and his Mongol patrons (Templeman 2012, 67). Ritual expulsion (*zlog pa*) exemplifies an alternative scenario to the deification of the Mongol prince in Amdo, who, once reborn as a mountain god, was appropriated by Tibetans rather than being banished. However, the approach to incorporation and acceptance is only superficially in conflict with the powerfully organised form of ritual expulsion expressed by the actions of Sog bzlog pa Blo gros rgyal mtshan. In Amdo there was no Tibetan centralised institution of power that could have directly confronted the pervasive presence of Mongols. The lack of central power in Amdo might account for the emergence of alternative cultural strategies of symbolic incorporation

of the Mongols that we still find traces of in oral narration. The three extracts presented above do not represent an unequivocally identifiable Mongol agency although different vernacular storylines converge on the Tibetan gods of Amye Drakar as a cultural-religious re-elaboration of Mongol invasion. The post-mortem divinisation of the Mongol prince in Amdo and the ritual expulsion of Mongol armies in Central Tibet both entail a clear demarcation of territorial and ethnic borders between the local and the foreign population.

In return for his support, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) granted his Mongol patron Gushri Khan the title of King Protector of the Dharma. However, honorary titles could only partially cover Mongol interference and legitimise their manipulation of local politics, openly denounced in the disconsolate verses composed in those same years by the abbot of Rongwo monastery in Amdo, Shar Skal ldan rgya mtsho (1607-1677):

In this time in which the Buddha's teaching, the origin of benefit
and happiness,
Is being seized by the Mongols,
Generally it is hard for the Tibetan people to be happy.
In particular, the lamas don't have independence.
The most beautiful clothes, the best cushions, and
The best horses, the best food and drink
Are in the hands of the Mongol masters (Sujata 2004, 2).

At this official level of discourse, the political and religious complexities of the time intermingled and disclosed conflicting interests and frustrations. At the same time, Mongols were penetrating Tibetans' daily lives and their presence surpassed the contingencies of time and became concretely, though invisibly, inscribed into the landscape.

The theogony of the three brothers of Amye Drakar recounts a story of formal ritual submission rather than foreseeing the total suppression of the Mongols. Contiguity between humans, landscape and supernatural beings prompted the deification of a Mongol, who was ethnically and socially extraneous to Amdo. Likewise, the geomantic analysis of the land that precedes the construction of any religious building is not only oriented towards the natural elements of the landscape but also detaches all classes of beings residing in it that should be both pleased and brought under control through offerings and violent actions, like pinning them to the ground with architectural components of the building itself. The identification and submission of demons and different autochthonous supernatural beings is a prescribed ritual action for turning the natural landscape into a

cultural space in which the dangerous power of demons is converted into a positive force serving the Buddhist dharma, subsequent to which monasteries, temples, shrines and stupas can be built.

Mountain gods and the mountains on which they dwell tend to merge into a single ontology, which suggests that the incorporation of a foreigner in the local pantheon also affects the perception of the local landscape and, to a certain extent, its re-arrangement. Despite coming from outside, Mongols are immobilised and neutralised in the physical landscape in the same way as local demons: their eternal instalment on the three local mountains of the three brothers of Amye Drakar stands as a mark of the everlasting presence of divinised foreigners and also of the successful incorporation of Mongol ancestry in the local community.

This instalment in the land is not limited to mountains and their resident gods. Today, Mongol toponyms are still widespread in Amdo, far beyond the Mongol Autonomous Prefectures in Qinghai province, and stand as a constant reminder of the pervasive former occupation by the Mongol armies. The longstanding presence of a multi-ethnic and multicultural population in the region is reflected by the syncretic character of many toponyms, which notably include the name of the largest lake in Amdo, Mtsho sngon po (Blue Lake), translated in Chinese as *Qinghai hu*, 'Clear Blue Sea' and originally referred to by Mongols as Kokonor, which reflects the same semantic meaning of its Tibetan and Chinese equivalents. Today, the lake gives its name to the entire administrative province of Qinghai.

Mongol toponyms were introduced *ex novo* for previously unnamed places in order to designate new settlements or Mongol army transit areas.⁷ Naming the landscape entails the expression of a political will of formal acquisition and incorporation of the land. Such examples of the Mongol wandering, fighting and naming activity in

⁷ For example, for a detailed account of the survival of Mongol toponyms in Henan Mongol Autonomous County, see Roche (2016, 10), who links the authority exercised by the Oirat-speaking Mongol princes with their naming activity of the landscape, and further to the Mongols' freedom of movement that was denied to the local Tibetan population: "the accumulated itineraries of the Henan princes throughout the polity over the course of nearly three centuries resulted in a thinly-spread residue of Oirat toponyms over a landscape inhabited primarily by a Tibetan-speaking population. Part of the reason for this was that the princes and their retinue were the only people who could move with impunity throughout Henan, whereas the rest of the population were subject to the strict enforcement of tribal boundaries, the transgression of which was seen as an infringement of community sovereignty and garnered violent retaliation."

Amdo are reported in the *Annals of Kokonor*, a work authored by the Mongol scholar Sum pa mkhan po Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704-1788):⁸

In that year (1636), Gushri Khan, leading an army allied with Pa thur te je⁹ of the Dzungars, came to this region. They passed through Yile¹⁰ and Tharim,¹¹ [and traversed] the river of Has tag and the Big Swamp ['Dam chen po]¹² over the ice between autumn and winter. After arriving at Bu lung ger on the border of Kokonor, the soldiers and their horses took a rest there. Having subsisted on many wild antelopes, they gave the mountain where they stayed the name of Gwan yam thu. In the first month of the Fire Ox New Year (1637), having arrived in the upper part of the Kokonor, (Gushri Khan's) ten thousand soldiers fought a great battle with Tshog thu's thirty thousand soldiers. Because two mountain spurs became reddened by blood,¹³ they are now known as the great and small Ulan Hosho.¹⁴ His son Ta yan the je,¹⁵ and others with troops, chased the remainder of Tshog thu's army across the ice of the Har gel and defeated them. Some soldiers went towards a valley on the east side of the Har gel and occupied it; so nowadays it is called Sha hai.

Mongol memory of the past has become spatialised in the oral description of the landscape and in the process of partial Tibetanisation and Sinicisation of Mongol toponyms, which make their original form and meaning almost unrecognisable in their present form. An example is a toponym like Ulan, a place on the northern bank of Kokonor. *Ulan*, a Mongol word meaning 'red', was later phonetically rendered in Tibetan as *Dbus lam* and thus semantically reinterpreted as 'The Road (*lam*) to Central Tibet (*Dbus*)'.¹⁶ Some other place names

⁸ The Tibetan title is *Mtsho sngon gyi lo rgyus sogs bkod pa'i tshangs glu gsar snyan zhes bya ba*. The translation of the following passage is mine; for the integral text in Tibetan and English see Ho-Chin Yang 1969, 69-70.

⁹ He was the ruler of the Dzungar tribes.

¹⁰ This is a phonetic calque of the toponym Ili, a town in today's Xinjiang Province.

¹¹ The Tarim Basin in today's Xinjiang Province.

¹² This place is the Tsaidam Basin in today's Qinghai province.

¹³ The red colour of rocks and mountains as a consequence of bloody fighting in the past is a classic motif in the folk etymology of place names in Amdo.

¹⁴ From the Mongol word *ulan qosu*, which literally means 'red promontory'.

¹⁵ He succeeded his father Gushri Khan in 1655.

¹⁶ This same Mongol toponym, reinterpreted in folk etymology as semantically Tibetan, is encountered in other areas of Amdo. For example, Chos bstan rgyal (2014, 37-38) reports the following about 'Dbus' as the alternative toponym for Smug po community in Xinghai County: "An enlightened monk named Klu 'bum mi rgod went to Dbus (Central Tibet) with some other monks. On the way, they rested in Smug po Valley. Klu 'bum mi rgod looked at the beautiful landscape and said,

have been more resistant to Tibetan semantic reinterpretation, like the still widespread Mongol toponym Bayan, which designates 'good grass pastures'.

From the Tibetan local perspective, the past Mongol presence on the grassland is also recalled by the division between areas occupied by black tents (*sbra nag*) and white yurts (*gur dkar*). In the stories focusing on the three brothers of Amye Drakar, the motif of black tents versus white yurts is a recurrent expedient to express the spatial tension between the two groups and to emphasise their diversity. Though invisible today, the enduring perception of this housing separation is emblematic of the past ethnic distribution of Tibetans and Mongols in Amdo.

The presence in the landscape of the three brothers of Amye Drakar is one among the numerous emblematic traces to be found in the past as well as in the contemporary complex distribution, settlement and migration of communities in Amdo. Different versions of this theogonic myth express a subtle articulation of ethnic borders, power negotiations, human *versus* non-human relationships and social interactions. The performance of propitiatory rituals to the three brothers of Amye Drakar at the foot of the mountain where they dwell is the embodied silent enactment of local history, elsewhere neglected or forgotten. Moving beyond the simplistic Tibetanisation of the past and present linguistic, cultural and ethnic identities of Mongol-speaking populations in Amdo, belief narratives, maybe unexpectedly for the historian with a restricted concern for 'proper' historical documents, are a rich source of knowledge that unveils complex, dynamic and creative cultural processes whose ultimate agency is embedded in the local context, from where they cannot be eradicated to serve theoretical models abstractly developed elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Per Kvaerne, Charles Ramble, Gerald Roche and Ülo Valk for their comments and suggestions on this paper.

"We are going to Dbus, the most beautiful and holy place on the Tibetan Plateau, but I have never seen such a beautiful place as this before. It's just like Dbus." Later, the valley became called Dbus Valley."

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