



**HAL**  
open science

# Why Hair Needs to Be Long. Religious Identity, Embodied Divinity and Power among the Repkong Tantrists (North-East Tibet)

Nicolas Sihlé

► **To cite this version:**

Nicolas Sihlé. Why Hair Needs to Be Long. Religious Identity, Embodied Divinity and Power among the Repkong Tantrists (North-East Tibet). *Ateliers d'anthropologie*, 2018, *Trichologie tibétaine: Les cheveux et leur traitement dans l'aire tibétaine*, 45, 10.4000/ateliers.10562. halshs-01974068

**HAL Id: halshs-01974068**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01974068v1>**

Submitted on 3 Jan 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Preprint, accepted for publication – 6 Aug. 2018**

**Final, published version accessible online at:**

<https://journals.openedition.org/ateliers/10562>

**Why Hair Needs to Be Long.  
Religious Identity, Embodied Divinity and Power among the  
Repkong Tantrists (North-East Tibet)**

Nicolas Sihlé

(Centre d'études himalayennes, CNRS, [nicolas.sihle@cnrs.fr](mailto:nicolas.sihle@cnrs.fr))

Abstract:

Tibetan tantrists (non-monastic Buddhist practitioners of tantric rituals) attach great importance to keeping their hair long. The importance of tantrists' hair is particularly striking in Repkong county (northeastern Tibet), which is famous for its large numbers of tantrists, many of whom wear dreadlocks wound around their heads. This study of the Repkong tantrists' capillary culture will argue that we have in their hair, at the interface of the bodily, the social and the political, an overdetermined religious identity marker. Bromberger's analytical approach to hair, which focuses primarily on sociological factors such as group belonging or normativity vs. margin, is here relevant, but leaves aside key cultural dimensions of the phenomenon. Tibetan notions of embodied divinity and ritual power attached to the hair point towards the importance of including questions about cultural perceptions of the nature of hair and of its relationship with the person or with the beings that can inhabit it.

Keywords:

Hair, tantric Buddhism, religious identity marker, tantric deities, ritual power, Tibet.

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

As a common, albeit rather literary formulation has it, in Tibet the Buddhist clergy is twofold, composed of “the category of the saffron-robed monks, and the category of the long-haired [ones] clothed in white”.<sup>2</sup> The former hardly need an introduction. The latter are most commonly known by the name of *ngakpa* [sngags pa],<sup>3</sup> “mantra/tantra practitioners”, or *tantrists*, as the term is often rendered in Western languages.<sup>4</sup> These non-monastic religious specialists are typically married and very often constitute family lineages, from father to son. Although their religious activities overlap to a large extent with those of their monastic counterparts, they also appear across Tibetan areas as the primary specialists of tantric practices situated at the powerful, violent end of the ritual spectrum, such as strong exorcisms.

---

<sup>1</sup> My warmest thanks go to my Tibetan hosts, assistants, interlocutors and friends (too numerous and, for some, too exposed to be named here) who have helped me in my exploration of this theme, as well as to my co-editors and the anonymous reviewers of this text.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in a text devoted to Padmasambhava we find the wording: rab byung ngur smrig gi sde dang gos dkar lchang lo'i sde zhes dge 'dun gyi sde gnyis. See: [http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/pad\\_ma\\_'byung\\_gnas](http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/pad_ma_'byung_gnas) (accessed 22 Jan. 2016).

<sup>3</sup> In order to make the reading of Tibetan terms easier for non-Tibetanists, I provide (except for terms already commonly used in English, such as Ladakh) phonetic transcriptions according to the relatively standard “THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan”, proposed by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre (2003). (For terms specific to the language of Amdo [A mdo], or northeast Tibet, I sometimes adapt the transcription slightly to the Amdo—or more precisely Repkong—pronunciation; when the term is not a toponym, for clarity I add the indication “Amdo: ...”) I add the transliteration in square brackets at the first occurrence of a term, following the version of the so-called “Wylie” system (with capitalization of root letters) used mainly in European academia (see Cantwell and Mayer, 2002). Terms for which a spelling could not be ascertained are preceded by an asterisk. Sanskrit terms are marked by “Skt.” and Tibetan terms by “Tib.” whenever the context is not explicit enough.

<sup>4</sup> See Stein, [1962] 1987: 65; Karmay, 1998: 9 and *passim*; Ramble, 1984: 30; Sihlé, 2013a: 15-16. The tantra are core texts of what is known in Western languages as tantric Buddhism, which in Tibetan Buddhism constitutes a major component and is characterized by the centrality of ritual, ritual power, the use of mantras, initiatory practices, deity visualization and the like. For a recent discussion of attempts at defining the Buddhist and Śaiva tantric traditions, see Wallis, 2016.



Fig. 1: The dual clergy of Tibetan Buddhism: tantrist and monk (Khyunggön temple, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

The popularity of the above-mentioned literary formulation notwithstanding, the available empirical evidence suggests that most tantrists have never worn white clothes (nor, for that matter, do Tibetan monks generally wear saffron robes). However the long hair, which also appears in this formulation as a defining characteristic of tantrists (in implicit but very clear contrast to the short or shaven hair of the monks), is in effect a key element of *ngakpa* subculture. This is particularly true in Repkong [Reb-kong] county in northeastern Tibet, an area known for its particularly large numbers of Buddhist and Bönpo [Bon po] tantrists, for the awe-inspiring ritual power that, collectively and sometimes individually, they are perceived to command, and—not unrelatedly, as we shall see—for the equally impressive signature hairstyle that many Repkong *ngakpa* sport: a massive coil of twisted dreadlocks wound around their head.<sup>6</sup>

### *Aims and methodology*

The present article aims at analyzing and interpreting from an ethnographic perspective the cultural grammar of this particular religious and capillary

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned, the illustrations are copyright of the author.

<sup>6</sup> This style is similar to the “turban of matted hair” worn by many Hindu ascetics (Hausner, 2007: 27).

subculture, focusing on the Repkong case. What makes the study of Tibetan tantrists' hairstyle(s) of particular interest is that we find in these capillary entanglements, at the interface of the bodily, the social and the political, an *overdetermined* religious identity marker. This paper will also argue that Bromberger's powerful comparative analysis of "hair logics" (or *trichologies*), with its four key dimensions of analysis (gender, social identities, norm and order vs. margin, and finally aesthetic norms),<sup>7</sup> leaves us intriguingly somewhat ill-equipped to appreciate certain key associations of tantrists' long hair: embodied divinity, and ritual power. A somewhat wider range of analytical/theoretical concerns is called for.

It should be stressed that we are dealing here, in matters of tantric hair practices and ideas, with a weakly or inconsistently codified domain. Texts called "explanation of the dreadlocks", *relshé* [ral bshad], such as the one studied by Bogin (2008), are neither always precise in matters of actual hairstyles (as acknowledged for instance by Bogin, 2008: 108), nor always consistent with one another. This latter difficulty was pointed out to me one day by one of my Repkong *ngakpa* friends, who had spent quite some time trying in vain to identify consistent, standard norms in this respect in the various literary sources at his disposal. Similarly, actual local practices, norms and ideas vary to some extent, as we will see. This highlights the importance of what a precise ethnographically based enquiry can contribute in such matters. One of the more highly educated tantrists I met emphasized that common ideas and textual religious sources regarding tantrists' hair are very different in content. The domain we are about to start exploring should thus be seen as located at the complex juncture of regional and more local traditions of practice, learned literary traditions, and the play of interpretation and constitution of meaning.

### *Socioreligious context*

In religious terms, the Repkong tantrists are not a very homogenous group. They live in dozens of villages scattered across the county, some of them boasting several dozen tantrists, while others have more modest contingents. Most of them follow Nyingma [rNying ma] traditions of tantric practice with a very substantial minority, however, belonging to the Bön [Bon] tradition.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Bromberger's introduction to this special issue, as well as a fuller exposition of his work in Bromberger, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> The Nyingma order is literally that of the "Ancient [translation of the tantras]". Most tantrists belong to this order; the other Tibetan Buddhist orders emphasize monasticism more. Bön is a religious tradition that is extremely similar to Tibetan Buddhism, and in particular to the Nyingma order, in both religious and sociological matters.

The latter form a somewhat more unified group, as they are all followers of the same revered Bönpo master, known as Alak Böngya [A lags Bon brgya], the head of the Böngya monastery in Repkong.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the Nyingma tantrists are more divided. They are all followers of one or several masters among a handful of local religious figures (some very active, others less so), the main criterion being the practitioners' primary associations with one or the other of the locally dominant ritual traditions: to simplify somewhat, tantric cycles of the Minling [Smin (grol) gling] tradition on the eastern side of the main valley, and of the Longchen Nyingtik [Klong chen snying thig] on the western side.<sup>10</sup> The major temples of the Repkong Nyingma tantrists were established starting in the early eighteenth century (Dhondup, 2011: 47).

As opposed to monks who generally lead cenobitic lives with daily religious collective activities, tantrists are primarily householders who only occasionally get to meet other tantrists in religious contexts. They congregate for a few monthly or annual collective rituals within their respective villages, as well as for a limited number of annual larger, supra-local ritual gatherings (often just one or two), which may last three or four days, rarely more.<sup>11</sup> During their initial training, they may spend substantial time—the equivalent of several months over a period of a few years—in contact with one or two teachers (typically knowledgeable tantrists from their own villages), but besides that, it is only on rare and irregular occasions that they gather to receive teachings or tantric initiations. In Repkong, these are given by Alak Böngya in the case of the Bönpos, but in recent decades often by teachers and masters traveling from other areas of eastern Tibet in the case of the Nyingma tantrists. There is thus a certain diversity and irregularity in the patterns of flows of religious content (ideas, practices) among tantrists—features which are quite conspicuous, as we shall see, with regard to their somewhat inconsistently codified “hair culture”.

The basic socioreligious (and trichologically relevant) categories among

---

<sup>9</sup> In Amdo, “Alak” is a respectful term of reference and address for (in particular reincarnate) masters. It functions somewhat as an equivalent of the term Rinpoché [Rin po che, lit. “Precious”] used in many other Tibetan areas, but some Amdo speakers consider that it is to be used only for local and regional masters, and does not befit the highest masters of Tibetan Buddhism, who should be addressed by “Rinpoché”. Another linguistic difference with “Rinpoché” is the fact that when “Alak” is followed by the master’s name, in very polite speech one might affix the respectful ending *-tsang* [tshang] to the name, as in “Alak Böngya-tsang”.

<sup>10</sup> The former tradition spread from the Mindröling monastery, a major Nyingma monastic institution in Central Tibet. The latter, one of the most widespread Nyingma traditions, was revealed and authored by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century visionary Jikmé Lingpa [’Jigs med gling pa].

<sup>11</sup> On the various factors at play in tantrists’ decisions to take part or not in these supra-local ritual gatherings, see Sihlé, 2013b.

which the people of Repkong operate extend of course beyond the simple duality of the (shaven-headed) monk versus the (long-haired) tantrist. One first needs to bring into the discussion the figure of the layperson. Today, laymen in Repkong generally keep their hair short, but up until the 1950s they often had long hair. It was actually very common at that time (as well as, to some extent, again in the 1980s) to wear a braid or queue in the Chinese style, made with the hair from a disc-shaped area at the crown of the head, the rest of the hair being kept short—this even applied to a number of tantrists, at least in their early years. As such, long hair was thus not a sufficient criterion for identifying a tantrist; if external differences were present at all, they were to be located in the different hairstyles (something we will return to later). Today however, among Repkong men, long hair as such has become a quite distinctive marker of the tantrists—at least at a normative level. In practice, we will see that some young adult tantrists, for instance those with jobs like taxi-drivers, often keep their hair relatively short. (Conversely, some young lay intellectuals and artists like to sport long hair, as Robin mentions in her article in this issue.) As for elderly tantrists, who were forced to cut their long hair in the period ranging from 1958 to the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), some of them note that their hair growth has been weaker as they advanced in age, which has made it difficult if not impossible for them to grow long hair again. We will see below the creative solutions that post-Mao tantrists have found to meet the imperative of wearing long hair.

The situation is, however, slightly more complex than a simple triad of (roughly in increasing order of hair length) monk, layman and tantrist. In a few Repkong villages an additional socioreligious category of more modest non-monastic practitioners is recognized—practitioners called *amchö* or *amchö gyawo*<sup>12</sup> depending on the village. They are described as not being held to the same levels of religious/ethical discipline as *ngakpa* (they can kill livestock, for instance, as some tantrists point out) and they are not obliged to wear their hair long: the association between (real) tantrists and long hair is thus indirectly reaffirmed.

Some exceptional figures also transcend somewhat the duality between (short-haired) monk and (long-haired) tantrist, the most famous example in Repkong being without a doubt the great yogi and saint Zhapkar Tsokdruk Rangdröl [Zhabs dkar tshogs drug rang grol] (1781-1851), himself a native

---

<sup>12</sup> The first term, *amchö* [a mchod], designates commonly in Repkong a monk who enjoys privileged patronage relations with a given lay household; however, the present specialists are non-monastic. The second term, *gyawo*, could be derived from *kyawo* [skya bo], meaning a layperson, although the phonetic shift would be unexplained; it might also be the term *gyawo* [rgya bo] meaning a bearded man; in any case, its etymology was highly unclear to my Repkong interlocutors.

of Repkong. Although born into a community comprising numerous Nyingma tantrists, he became a monk, but let his hair grow long again during his extended meditation retreats.<sup>13</sup> As he was still wearing the lower dress characteristic of the fully-ordained monk, his mixed appearance left many of the people he encountered during his travels unsure of the manner in which they should classify him. A number of the songs spontaneously composed by Zhapkar and recorded in his autobiography answer these people's queries by extolling the concrete benefits or symbolic associations of his long hair—and of his categorical in-betweenness in itself (Ricard, 1994: 107-108, 129, 359; Zhabs dkar, 1985: 207-209, 255-256, 707-708).

This in-betweenness is expressed in the questions and Zhapkar's responses as a hesitation between (or play on) two opposed categories, sometimes with a third category bridging or resolving the tension: once he is asked whether he is "a Bönpo or a [Buddhist] tantrist" (*bönpo am ngakpa* [bon po'am sngags pa]) (Zhabs dkar, 1985: 208); on other occasions he states that he is a yogi (*neljor* [rnal 'byor]) who is "neither Nyingma nor Geluk" (*ibid.*: 707-708), or yet a "Nyingma [who is] neither a [Buddhist] monk nor a Bönpo" (*ben min bön min nyingma* [ban min bon min rnying ma]) (*ibid.*: 256). One of my local interlocutors, quoting the autobiography from memory, inadvertently reformulated this last passage in a sociologically suggestive way: Zhapkar was neither a monk nor a tantrist; he was a hermit, *ritröpa* [ri khrod pa]. Another educated interlocutor, preferring to think the problematic duality in Zhapkar as a conjunction rather than a logically exclusive duality, claimed that Zhapkar should be called a *ngak-tsün* [sngags btsun], literally "tantrist-monk"—a rarely used term, which seems to refer sometimes to a tantrist, sometimes to a monk with tantric activity, but which ultimately does not solve the issue posed by Zhapkar's highly unusual hairstyle for a monk.

Adding mythological and other similes to the above-mentioned formulations, Zhapkar's songs also play on the categorical irresolution produced by the combination of his monk's robe and long hair to hint at higher truths beyond apparent dualities. Basically, the Tibetan duality between the short-haired monk and the long-haired tantrist appears to be a cognitively and symbolically (or poetically) powerful one—and Zhapkar's transgression of these categorical boundaries, an unsettling sight.

Last but not least, let us now bring gender explicitly into the picture. Laywomen keep their hair very long, and nuns keep theirs shaven or very short. As for tantrists, they belong throughout Tibetan areas to a very

<sup>13</sup> Similar hairstyles are to be found among monastic virtuoso yogis of the Drukpa-Kagyü ['Brug pa bka' brgyud] tradition at the Tsari [Tsa ri] sacred mountain (Huber, 1999: 85 ff.), as well as among some monastic retreat practitioners of the Drigung-Kagyü ['Bri gung bka' brgyud] tradition in Ladakh [La dwags].



masculine part of the religious field: according to most Tibetan understandings, tantrists are always men, and non-monastic female members of the Buddhist clergy are virtually unheard of in many areas.<sup>14</sup> In Repkong, however, and to a lesser degree in some neighboring areas, the last generation has seen the powerful emergence of a new phenomenon (with modest roots going back at least to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century): female non-monastic tantric practitioners, trained in the same ritual traditions as the local tantrists. These are now increasingly called *ngakma* [sngags ma], a term that until a decade ago was still highly uncommon in Repkong, and which remains unknown in most areas beyond the neighboring counties. Nyingma masters who have been providing support to the Repkong *ngakma* have advised them to wear their hair in a single braid, as many (male) tantrists do, instead of the common female hairstyle with two braids, one on each side of the head. Not all *ngakma* have followed this recommendation however: most women have a large amount of long hair, and some *ngakma*, arguing that a single, thick braid is too stiff and unwieldy for domestic work, have preferred to keep their two braids.



Fig. 2: Several *ngakma*, wearing their hair in a single braid (Repkong, 2013).

<sup>14</sup> See however some examples mentioned in Schrempf and Schneider (eds), 2015.

*Terminology and typology of forms*

Beyond these larger sociological distinctions, tantrists' hairstyles in themselves vary in complex ways. There are recognized regional variations. Thus Repkong tantrists are renowned far beyond the bounds of the county for their taste for very large coils of dreadlocks wound on top of their heads. However, for instance, both in neighboring Labrang [Bla brang] to the east and Tsekhok [rTse khog] to the south, these bulky coils of dreadlocks are far less common. Within a county or even a single village community, hairstyles vary to quite some extent according to age, as we shall see, but also in more personal ways. It is essential, at the outset, to set up a working typology and to pay close attention to local terminological usage.<sup>15</sup>

In Repkong and probably far beyond, the single most important category in tantrists' discourse is *relpa* [ral pa] (pronounced *rawa* in Amdo). The primary meaning of the term is hair that has been left unkempt and allowed to grow long and matted (for instance while the person is engaged in a prolonged meditation retreat): in other words, hair that has taken the shape of dreadlocks (see for instance He ru ka, 2003: 88).<sup>16</sup> Having *relpa* hair is the primary criterion for being recognized as a "real" tantrist in Repkong discourse (a point to which we shall return shortly). However I should hastily add that, strictly speaking, the above description of *relpa* fits close to nobody. The dreadlocks worn by a number of (primarily elderly or middle-aged) tantrists have been actively produced by a precise technical manipulation of the hair (discussed below)—they are in no way the ideologically postulated "uncontrived" or "unfabricated" (*machöpa* [ma bcos pa]) results of a prolonged absence of attention to one's hair.<sup>17</sup>

The disjunction between the primary sense of *relpa* and its uses in common discourse is, however, more profound. Most Repkong tantrists (especially among the younger generation) have long hair but no dreadlocks, and the term *relpa* is very often used in a broader sense to refer simply to long hair: for instance the common formulation *relpa shak* [bzhang, lit. "leave"] is generally understood to mean to let one's hair grow long.

The key term *relpa*, or in Amdo *rawa*, thus has a strict sense (hair in the form of dreadlocks—the *relpa par excellence*, if one will) and a very

---

<sup>15</sup> Another list of Tibetan terms appears on a website maintained by a group of Western tantric practitioners and followers of the *ngakpa* tradition: [http://arocyclopaedia.org/shared/text/n/ngakpas\\_th\\_01\\_01\\_eng.php](http://arocyclopaedia.org/shared/text/n/ngakpas_th_01_01_eng.php). The list was compiled by Ngak'chang Rinpoche and Khandro Déchen, the founders of this group (Métsal Wangmo, personal communication, Sept. 2016).

<sup>16</sup> The term also refers to a "mane", for instance that of a lion.

<sup>17</sup> Dreadlocks are also occasionally the object of some form of care and styling; however, as Bogin points out (2008: 101), they are never cut or combed, and in that sense there is an (at least symbolic) association with the notion of unfabricatedness.

commonly used much broader sense (long hair—understood, in the case of a tantrist). The context is not always explicit enough to distinguish clearly between the two, and two other Amdo terms, the noun *gyälä*, literally “twisted locks”, and the related verb *gyi*, “to twist”, are sometimes used.<sup>18</sup> Dreadlocks are generally made by twisting two strands of hair into one thin, cord-like “twisted lock” (just a few millimeters in diameter), which then becomes matted over time. One says *gyälä gyi* or *rawa gyi*, “to twist dreadlocks”. (For an example of recent dreadlocks, with the cord-like structure still clearly visible, see fig. 14 below.)

Other terms for hairstyles are far less commonly used by tantrists. Tantrists who do not have dreadlocks generally keep their hair braided (in a single braid, as mentioned above) or in a ponytail. A short ponytail is left hanging at the back, but if the hair is long enough, whether braided or not, it is most often tied, wound and fastened around the head using a long, thin band of (red, orange, or in rare cases black) fabric called in Amdo *ramtel* [ral mthud, lit. “(that which) joins the hairs (or locks)”].<sup>19</sup> The same device is also used to attach dreadlocks in a coil around the head.



Fig. 3: Tantrists’ hair, fastened around the head with the *ramtel* band (Repkong, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> Local informants were generally not able to provide a spelling for the term *gyälä*, which may have no equivalent in written Tibetan. One suggestion was [’gyi li], which I have not, however, been able to locate either in dictionaries or in other written sources. The term (as well as the Amdo verb *gyi*) may be cognate to the verbal forms *dril* [sgril] or *dril* [’gril], “to twist, to wrap”.

<sup>19</sup> Nyida Heruka gives the term *reltak* [ral thag], literally “*relpa* cord” (He ru ka, 2003: 88).

Terms exist to describe these hairstyles—for instance, braiding one’s hair is called *tra lé* [skra sle] (Amdo: *kya la*) or *go lé* [mgo sle] (Amdo: *go la*), “braiding the hair (or head)”—but they are only rarely used, and distinguishing between the braid and ponytail styles is not an issue. What is much more of an issue is the tendency among some tantrists to wear a (in many tantrists’ minds, quite explicitly) Chinese-style braid or queue, gathering the hair from a disc-shaped area at the crown of the head, the rest of the hair being kept short or even shaven. As we have seen, this hairstyle was quite prevalent among Repkong men in the 1950s; today, some tantrists argue that the fact that a tantrist chooses this hairstyle is the result of some confusion between the tantrist’s *relpa* (which absolutely must comprise all the hair, they insist) and the Chinese queue<sup>20</sup>—but also, ideologically, in the tense current political context, a misguided choice.



Fig. 4: Opposed styles: dreadlocks and the Chinese-inspired queue (Repkong, 2012).

Finally, one much more rarely sees tantrists letting their hair flow down freely over their shoulders, in which case it is called colloquially *\*somo*. This latter style is suggestive of the “uncontrived” (*machöpa*) state—but only suggestive, of course: the hair is actually combed and washed.

The topknot (*zurpü* [zur phud] or *torchok* [thor cog]) is associated in literary sources and iconography with tantrists (but also with the higher

<sup>20</sup> Nyida Heruka also expresses a critical opinion on this matter (He ru ka, 2003: 90).

ranks of the Central Tibetan nobility—see Cassinelli and Ekvall, 1969: 122), and the association with tantrists is also true to some extent in Repkong. Thus, one of the founding figures of the Repkong Nyingma tantrists’ tradition, Palchen Namkha Jikmé [dPal chen nam mkha’ ’jigs med] (1757-1821),<sup>21</sup> is represented with a topknot—and freely falling hair (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Palchen Namkha Jikme, a founding figure for Repkong Nyingma tantrists (Khyunggön temple, Repkong, 2011).

Finally the term *changlo* [lcang lo], which seems to refer to braided or matted hair, is only rarely heard. It is used mainly as part of the classic, rather literary formulation characterizing the tantrist (a version of which has already been mentioned above), *gö-kar changlo-chen* [gos dkar lcang lo can], “those with long hair and white clothes”.<sup>22</sup>

With *relpa/rawa* (and to a much lesser extent *gyälə*), the most common term used when referring to tantrists’ hair is in fact the designation of a substitute: *chörel* [bcos ral] (in Amdo *chira*) is literally a “fabricated *relpa*”—a wig imitating the tantrist’s long dreadlocks. The use of such a wig is a response to the widely claimed necessity of having long hair (a *relpa*) in cases in which personal histories (most often, the forced cutting of their hair during the Maoist period) or insufficient vigor of hair growth have not made

<sup>21</sup> On this important local figure, see Dhondup, 2013: 118-120.

<sup>22</sup> Nyida Heruka defines the term *changlo* as “dreadlocks coiled on the crown of the head and attached with the *relpa* cord (*reltak*)” (He ru ka, 2003: 88): this is far more specific than what most sources (dictionaries and other) offer.

it possible to grow the requisite long hair.

In an ideological context in which “uncontrived” hair is so highly valued, there is of course in the use of a “fabricated *relpa*” a delicious irony, which is not totally lost on local tantrists, who occasionally tease those wearing a wig, complimenting them tongue-in-cheek for instance on their “impressive” (Amdo: *tsaya*) hair. We will come back to this intriguing part of the local hair culture later.

Another object that needs to be mentioned here is a black cloth which is sometimes wrapped around the hair in order to protect it from dust. In Amdo it is called *ratəm* [ral thum], literally “hair wrapping”.<sup>23</sup> This is often used, but neither exclusively nor constantly, by tantrists with dreadlocks; tantrists using a wig may also use one for instance.

How widespread is the tradition of wearing dreadlocks among Tibetan tantrists? Precise data is lacking; but keeping one’s hair long and combed, either braided or simply tied as a ponytail, is perhaps the most standard style throughout Tibetan tantrist milieus. Beyond Repkong (and to some extent the neighboring counties), Dolpo [Dol po] in northwest Nepal is so far the only other Tibetan area in which a strong tradition of dreadlocks has been documented (Jest, 1975: 305-306).

### *Capillary biographies*

Thus the Repkong tantrists’ strong emphasis on the *relpa* category (strictly speaking, hair in the form of dreadlocks, but more generally just long hair, in common usage) obscures the substantial diversity of hairstyles. As we have started to see, this diversity is informed partly by the age factor. Thus, in the following photograph of a group of tantrists from one particular village (Fig. 6), we see tantrists ranging in age from roughly 20 (the youngest and most junior recruit, with much shorter hair) to 70 (with dreadlocks more common among the middle-aged or elderly, sitting in the second row). Taking our inspiration from discussions of the socially determined character of human hair (Turner, 1980; Bromberger, 2010) and the “cultural biography of things” (Kopytoff, 1986), let us examine more precisely the biographical trajectories of the tantrists’ hair.

---

<sup>23</sup> In his study of Bönpo tantrists (of Repkong in particular), Tsering Thar gives the term *relshup* [ral shubs] (Thar, 2008: 545), “hair covering”.



Fig. 6: A diversity of hairstyles informed by age (Repkong, 2012).<sup>24</sup>

### *Childhood*

The socialization into tantrist culture of young (potential) future tantrists often begins at a very early age, as most of them have a tantrist in their immediate family environment—typically their father or grandfather. Following in their (grand)father’s footsteps is culturally understood to be one of the main options for them. The only son of one very committed tantrist from a reputed Repkong village community of tantrists actually succeeded very well at school and went on to study economics at university; however, he told me that in his childhood he used to go to the village temple to play, wearing a wig. These details, although minor, are revealing: the defining character of the tantrist’s hair is clear even to small boys.

### *Becoming a tantrist*

As opposed to entering the monastic orders, becoming a tantrist is rarely marked by a formal ritual procedure and a clear change of socioreligious status. One starts by learning to read and by memorizing basic texts with

<sup>24</sup> On the striking presence of “white [and red] shawls” (*zenkar* [gzan dkar]) in this picture, see below.

one's father, grandfather or a knowledgeable tantrist from the same village. At one point (nowadays often around the beginning of adulthood), one starts to take part in the *tsechu* [tshes bcu] (lit. “[ritual of] the tenth day”), the monthly ritual gatherings held in each tantrist village community on the tenth day of the lunar month. These are devoted to the cult of Orgyen Rinpoché [O rgyan rin po che], the “Precious one from Uddiyana”—one of the Tibetan names for Padmasambhava, an Indian master considered in Tibetan historiography as the main introducer of tantric teachings into Tibet, and who was subsequently given a central position in the pantheon of the Nyingma order. In many tantrist communities, starting to participate in the *tsechu* marks the beginning of one's commitment to the path of the tantrist.<sup>25</sup> In the Gurong [dGu rong] community to the north of Repkong, the procedure is a little more formal: the young candidate asks the local master for his permission, and some red thread is attached to his hair as a marker of his new status.

At this point the young man is not expected to already have long hair, but it is considered appropriate that he start letting his hair grow.

### *Letting one's hair grow long*

Typically, young tantrists start with a short ponytail at the back of their head, which gradually gets longer. As one middle-aged, somewhat more religiously sophisticated tantrist put it to me, he became a tantrist “externally” when he started to keep his hair long—understood, becoming a tantrist “internally” (and thus at a higher level, and therefore more fully) implied other criteria: a code of conduct, tantric commitments (Skt. *samaya*), practices, etc.

Entering the path of the tantrist and getting married often follow each other in more or less close succession, and this period is one of heightened economic responsibilities for a young man. Some young adult tantrists are able to find jobs outside the village, such as taxi-drivers, in which long hair might sometimes seem odd, and they therefore keep their hair relatively short for a number of years. They might have a relatively modest level of religious activity during these first years, trying nonetheless to participate as often as possible in the monthly *tsechu* rituals. Their seniors or their *lama*

---

<sup>25</sup> The tenth day cult of Padmasambhava is a key element of Nyingma tantrists' ritual culture, but it is common also in other, for instance village, lay contexts (Dollfus, 1989: 60-61, 163-165; Sihlé, unpubl.). It typically focuses on prayers to Padmasambhava and a “ritual of the multitudes” (*tsok* [tshogs], Skt. *ganacakra*), in which consecrated food offerings are distributed among the attendance or local community; in some contexts it is also associated with beer drinking.



[bla ma] might put some pressure on them to conform to a more suitable hairstyle, and ultimately they will need to make a choice and more fully embrace their tantrist identity and embodied mode of being. Switching back and forth between their religious moral communities and their partially secularized world of capitalist economic opportunity thus entails navigating conflicting demands. We should not assume, however, that this kind of situation must be entirely new; as we have seen with the case of the widespread Chinese-style queue, Repkong tantrists already lived prior to the 1950s in a world partially exposed to Chinese powers, norms and influences.<sup>26</sup>

A key formative phase in a tantrist's career is the performance of a *ngöndro* [sngon 'gro], a series of preliminary practices (one hundred thousand prostrations, an equal number of recitations of the mantra of the *buddha* Vajrasattva—key purification practices—etc.) that prepare one for tantric activity. A *ngöndro* also constitutes a prerequisite for obtaining certain tantric initiations—as well as the “hair consecration”, *relwang* [ral dbang], generally associated, as we will see presently, with the formation of dreadlocks. There is no fixed moment in life at which these preliminary practices have to be carried out, and some serious practitioners carry out several series over the course of their religious careers (ideally in retreat, but often stretched out over longer periods of time because tantrists cannot neglect their household responsibilities). In principle, however, performing a (first) *ngöndro* is a key initial phase and is sometimes presented as a practice that one should engage in at the same time as one begins to keep one's hair long. The beginnings of a tantrist's long hair may also receive ritual attention: according to an acquaintance from Gyawo Gang [rGyal po sngang] village, a decade or two earlier, when a young tantrist embarked on his preliminary practices, his hair was braided by a woman married into a family with an uninterrupted line of tantrists, the woman having both husband and children—an auspicious image of continuity and completeness, befitting this important departure into ritual practice.

### *Starting to grow dreadlocks*

The following two key steps—starting to grow dreadlocks and receiving a “dreadlocks consecration” (*relwang*)—are often interrelated and happen at the same time, but this is not necessarily the case, as we will see in the range of examples below. Some tantrists may go through none or only one of these

---

<sup>26</sup> Politically, in the decades preceding the Communist takeover in 1949, Repkong and most of eastern Qinghai were under the (in some ways efficient and state-like, but at times brutal) control of the Muslim Ma rulers (Weiner, 2012: 106-131).

steps, and even if they undergo both, they neither occur systematically at the same time, nor always come in the same order. What I have *not* encountered in my conversations with contemporary Repkong tantrists (but may, in recent generations, have happened in exceptional cases?) was the ideal pattern of developing dreadlocks as a result of prolonged retreats of religious practice—see the case of Zhapkar, mentioned above, or that of the Central Tibetan master Yolmowa Tendzin Norbu [Yol mo ba bsTan 'dzin nor bu] (1598-1644), who depicted this process in his illustrated autobiography:



Fig. 7: Yolmowa Tendzin Norbu in extended tantric retreat.  
(Source: Bogin, 2013: 129, with permission by author.)



Fig. 8: Yolmowa Tendzin Norbu with dreadlocks, after his retreat.  
(Source: Bogin, 2013: 131, with permission by author.)

Thus Dorjé Gyal [rDo rje rgyal]<sup>27</sup> (1920-2010), a tantrist whom I met several times in 2003-04, recalled that, when he was 24,<sup>28</sup> the previous Alak Khyunggön [Khyung dgon] summoned him and told him to undo his hair.

<sup>27</sup> All personal names given here, aside from those of masters, are pseudonyms.

<sup>28</sup> This is in the Tibetan count, and corresponds roughly to 23 in the Western count.

The *lama* then proceeded to make a “twisted lock” (*gyälə*) with one strand of his hair, following which the rest of his hair was transformed into twisted locks by other tantrists. (The *lama* always only begins the process, with just one or a few locks.) The young man’s father was reportedly not happy about this early start to his son’s dreadlocks, but insisted that, in that case, his son needed to perform the preliminary tantric practices (*ngöndro*) in the very same year, which the young man did. Two years later, the young tantrist then had the opportunity of receiving a “dreadlocks consecration”, from the eminent Nyingma master Dilgo Khyentsé [Dil mgo mkhyen brtse] Rinpoché, who was traveling through that part of Amdo.

A similar temporal sequence is seen in the case of a middle-aged tantrist from another village, currently in his forties, who told me in 2011 that he was planning to have twisted locks made some time in the near future, after which he hoped to obtain a dreadlocks consecration. However, in contrast to this statement, the most common motive in the narratives that I have heard (as in the previous case) is that the decision to initiate the process of growing dreadlocks is taken by someone else, such as one’s master or teacher. Thus, in 2013, on the occasion of a large ritual gathering, the current Alak Khyunggön (born in 1986) summoned eight *ngakpa* to him and, for each one, made three twisted locks, following which the rest of the hair was transformed into twisted locks by various acquaintances of each of the tantrists. (These helpers need not be tantrists themselves: for instance, they can be pastoralist herders, *drokpa* [’brog pa], who are reputedly expert at making ropes.) The young Alak Khyunggön apparently did not give the eight *ngakpa* a “dreadlocks consecration”<sup>29</sup> but only recited, while making the twisted locks, a text by which each one was being entrusted (*te* [gtad]) to the most important Nyingma triad of fearsome protectors, “Ma Za Dam, the three” [Ma gZa’ Dam gsum].<sup>30</sup>

My interlocutors noted that the event constituted a *tendrel* [rten ’brel]—an event organized in an auspicious manner, in order for it to lead to positive future developments—the eight tantrists being symbolical of the “Eight Rikdzin” [Rig ’dzin, Skt. Vidyādhara, lit. Awareness-holders], eight great tantric practitioners entrusted with the initial transmission of the important

<sup>29</sup> Local understandings diverge on this point. Some tantrists heard that Alak Khyunggön had conferred a *relwang* but, according to one of the main tantrists among the group of eight, this in fact was not the case.

<sup>30</sup> One also hears “Ma Za Dor, the three” [Ma gZa’ rDor gsum]. Both formulations refer to Mamo Ekajaṭī [Ma mo E ka dza ti], also known as Ngaksungma [sNgags srung ma], Zachen Rāhula [gZa’ chen Ra hu la] and Damchen Dorjé Lekpa [Dam can rdo rje legs pa] (see for instance Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956: 94; Vessantara, 2008: 125-128). My Bönpo *ngakpa* interlocutors, however, did not associate the hair consecration in their tradition with particular named deities—perhaps simply out of a lack of understanding of the technicalities of the act?

Kagyé [bKa' brgyad, “Eight Transmissions”] set of teachings.<sup>31</sup> (Interestingly, this event echoed an earlier, similar one: in the early 1990s, Lama Tsering [Bla ma tshe ring], a senior, highly learned tantrist from Linggya [Gling rgya] village, of a stature close to that of a master, gathered eight tantrists on the occasion of a large Kagye collective ritual, and conferred on them a dreadlocks consecration, making for each one their first twisted locks. The symbolic association with the Eight Rikdzin was clearly present at that moment too.)

Nowadays at least, Repkong tantrists start to wear dreadlocks typically only when they are middle-aged. The most junior case that I heard of was a tantrist whom I interviewed in 2011, and for whom the first “twisted locks” were made in the late 1940s, when he was 14 in the Tibetan count; at the same time he received a “dreadlocks consecration”. His religious training actually only began in earnest that very same year. Why the local master, Alak Yeshé [Ye shes], decided to make the twisted locks and perform the consecration at such an early stage is unclear. It may be noted that Alak Yeshé is remembered for having conferred hair consecrations also to lay male villagers—a highly uncommon practice. However, it may also have been that the master took into account the fact that the boy belonged to a reputed “*ngakpa* house”, *ngak-khyim* [sngags khyim].<sup>32</sup> Alak Yeshé also announced to the boy that he would become a “fine tantrist”.

As we have seen, although tantrists’ dreadlocks are sometimes talked about with reference to the ideal of “uncontrived hair”, they are actually all but uncontrived. The initial twisted locks are produced using a technique very similar to two-ply-cord-making; additionally, some tantrists make their locks thicker and longer by adding yak’s hair, as Thar (2008: 545) has already pointed out in the case of Bönpo tantrists in Repkong.<sup>33</sup> Tantrists sometimes speculate among themselves about this very question. In 2011, during a break in a major collective ritual, outside the temple, a group of young tantrists approached Shawo Gyal [Sha bo rgyal], the chant master, *umdzé* [dbu mdzad], a tall, large, imposing figure with a powerful voice, and asked about his hair: was his particularly impressive mass of thin, cord-like

---

<sup>31</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche, 2012: 482-483. These eight “Awareness-holders” are Indian masters. The same designation can, however, also refer to a secondary later set of eight Tibetan great tantric practitioners (disciples of Padmasambhava) entrusted with the further transmission of the Kagye teachings. See: [http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Eight\\_vidyadharas\\_of\\_Tibet](http://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=Eight_vidyadharas_of_Tibet) (accessed 10 May 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Whereas in many other Tibetan areas the emphasis is on a *ngakpa*’s “bone-lineage” (*dunggyü* [gdung rgyud] or sometimes *rügyü* [rus rgyud]), in the sense of a family lineage in the paternal line, in Repkong the emphasis is much more on the house. On the house as a key unit of Tibetan social organization, see Fjeld, 2008: 250; Sihlé, 2013a: 85 n. 15.

<sup>33</sup> See also Jest (1975: 306) for the Dolpo case.

locks only made up of his own hair? He insisted that it was. They expressed mild amazement, and one of them briefly fingered a lock or two, still hesitating whether to fully believe him. In 2015, I asked him the same question. In the meanwhile, the locks had partly lost their finely woven cord-like aspect and become more matted and indistinct. He explained to me that when he first fashioned the “twisted locks”, he added some of his own fallen hairs, which he had collected over time when combing his hair; but he firmly insisted that he had not added anything like yak’s hair. Most of these added hairs had probably fallen out again later on, he assumed. Basically, he really simply had a lot of hair.

His account of the way in which his first “twisted locks” were made came, however, with an unexpected twist—something more personal that he had never mentioned in our previous discussions on that topic (since 2011 Shawo Gyal has gradually become one of my main interlocutors, a frequent host and a friend). A senior tantrist in his village, whom he and many others considered as their master, had told him repeatedly that he was going to make him some “twisted locks” but had always put it off, until one day (in Shawo Gyal’s mid-thirties), when he visited his master in his practice and retreat cell, *tsamkhang* [mtshams khang], and found him rearranging his own dreadlocks. Shawo Gyal requested that his master make him some “twisted locks”, and the old tantrist, having checked and noted that the day’s astrological qualities were excellent, accepted. They prepared the ritual materials for a “dreadlocks consecration” that the master then conferred on his disciple, while making eighteen “twisted locks” for him. (The other twisted locks would be made later by his maternal uncle, a layman and an expert at making ropes.) Then suddenly the old tantrist pulled a dreadlock out of his own hair, and attached it among Shawo Gyal’s locks. He pointed out that this was a *tendrel* (an auspicious act carrying with it the potential for positive future developments): he was 80, and he told his disciple that he would be long-lived too. His hair was white, and easy to pull out. To the best of Shawo Gyal’s knowledge, this was a rare, possibly unique gesture: with one possible exception, he had never heard anyone mention receiving a lock of one’s master’s own hair. His relationship with the old tantrist was a particularly close and affectionate one; in his village, he was the only one of his generation to maintain a high level of participation in the regional-level great ritual practice gatherings, as his master advocated. Shawo Gyal kept the white lock in his own hair for three years, but then it started falling out; in the end, with the risk of people inadvertently stepping on it (which would have been inauspicious and polluting), he decided to store his master’s dreadlock in his altar room. “It is my most precious possession”, he told me.

In the Tibetan context, this is in all likelihood a highly uncommon, if not unique, case of religious transmission being rendered more auspicious

through the master's gift of a body part (a part, one should add, with powerful, divine associations, as we shall see below).<sup>34</sup> Although a rarity owing to the particular form of bodily gift it exhibits, this case is, however, also to be understood in a cultural context characterized by a whole economy of religiously charged body parts or substances (e.g. relics), and ritual procedures involving physical contact with dead or living embodiments of religious virtuosity, either directly or through substances (leftover food, clothes, religious or other objects, and even excreta) having been in contact with these sources of blessings and religious power.<sup>35</sup>

### *Receiving a "dreadlocks consecration"*

In the temporal sequence most commonly described by my Repkong interlocutors, the creation of the first "twisted locks" is immediately followed by a "dreadlocks consecration", *relwang*. However, in some cases a *relwang* can be performed for a tantrist with no dreadlocks or even with no first "twisted locks", and it might thus be regarded more simply, in these cases, as a "hair consecration"—which happens to be the literal translation of an equivalent term, quite common in literary sources: *trawang* [skra dbang].<sup>36</sup>

Technically speaking, just what is a "dreadlocks (or hair) consecration"?<sup>37</sup> My Repkong interlocutors were sometimes rather at a loss when asked to define what a *relwang* "did". A Bönpo tantrist told me that the *relwang* came "after all the [other] *wang*"—a formulation that pointed to the fact that a *relwang* is typically obtained at an advanced stage of one's

<sup>34</sup> The closest that comes to mind is perhaps (albeit with a very different, sacramental logic) the disciple's partaking of a drop of the master's semen in some rare tantric initiation contexts in the Indo-Tibetan tradition (Davidson, 2002: 197)—a theme that has so far never been mentioned to me in my ethnographic experience in Tibetan contexts.

<sup>35</sup> See for instance Huber's discussion of the place of materiality, substance and the body in Tibetan pilgrimage practices (1994: 84-93). On Buddhist relic cults, see Trainor (1997), Germano and Trainor (2004), and specifically for the Tibetan case Guidoni (2006).

<sup>36</sup> The term *relwang* is also found in textual sources: Ehrhard (2008: 106) mentions one title based on this term.

<sup>37</sup> In matters of terminology, here I primarily follow Snellgrove (1959: 131-133; 1987: 165 n. 86, 213) and *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* edited by Buswell and Lopez (2013: 97-98, 115-116): the *initiation* into a given tantric practice (often simply called *wang* [dbang]) generally involves a series of *consecrations* (*wang* or *wangkur* [dbang bskur], Skt. *abhiṣeka*), the number and sequence of which vary according to the class of tantra; and these consecrations also involve *empowerments* (*jinlap* [byin rlabs] or *jin-gyi lappa* [byin gyis brlabs pa], Skt. *adhiṣṭhāna*—terms that outside the initiation context are often glossed as "blessings"). On the term "consecration", see also Kvaerne, [1975] 2005: 164-165. For a summary of the structure of an initiation rite, see for instance Tribe, 2000: 231-233.

career as a tantrist, but that left unclear whether or not a *relwang* was conceived to be of a similar nature as the initiations received at earlier stages. Other tantrists however clearly distinguished between the two, in the sense that a *relwang* is not a procedure that authorizes and empowers the recipient to engage in a set of ritual practices associated with a given central deity, as initiations do. Judging from the comments of more erudite interlocutors, a *relwang* seems to consecrate the tantrist's hair and to establish it as the residence of tantric deities (on this theme, see the last section below). Finally, is it structurally similar in nature to a full tantric *initiation*, or more similar to one of the various forms of *consecrations* that constitute an initiation? My data is not fully conclusive here. In a number of occurrences that were mentioned to me, a *relwang* was actually conferred on the occasion (and as an optional extension) of a Vajrasattva initiation, which comprises a number of consecrations associated with the various attributes of Vajrasattva, including the deity's consort, and the deity's *own hair*<sup>38</sup>—this last consecration being the basis for the *relwang*.<sup>39</sup> However, one short *trawang* text, written by the great Nyingma master Dūjom Lingpa [bDud 'joms gling pa] (1835-1904) and associated in its colophon with one of the masters of Khyunggön temple, in Repkong, in guise of the instigator,<sup>40</sup> appears to include four consecrations that constitute a classic sequence for initiations of the “higher” classes of tantras (Tribe, 2000: 233).<sup>41</sup> The *relwang* may thus sometimes reflect the structure of a tantric initiation, but considering the dominant direction of my data, “dreadlocks (or hair) *consecration*” seems a more accurate translation for *relwang* (or *trawang*).

If we now close this technical parenthesis, the case of Shawo Gyal, introduced above, clearly illustrates the fact that a *relwang* is not always linked to the creation of “twisted locks”, and can be conferred years before the tantrist may eventually transition towards dreadlocks. The “dreadlocks consecration” that Shawo Gyal received from his old master was actually his third *relwang*. (Receiving several such consecrations is not exceptional.) He obtained the first one in his early twenties (i.e. in the mid-1980s), from Alak Sherap [Shes rab], a local master particularly active in the northern part of Repkong, who on that same day bestowed a Vajrasattva initiation. He

---

<sup>38</sup> In the iconography, Vajrasattva is represented with long hair, with one part attached to the top of the head and the rest flowing down freely over his shoulders.

<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Boord (1993: 152) mentions a consecration of all the hairs of the adept's body (within a standard sequence of nine or ten consecrations included in an empowerment context).

<sup>40</sup> This text was kindly brought to my attention by my former assistant in the field, Kunchog Tseten, as well as my colleague Hungchen, who has just edited and published a version of this text on the precious Ngakmang.net website: <http://www.ngakmang.net/chok/760.html> (accessed 21 Sept. 2016).

<sup>41</sup> A similar fourfold structure is mentioned for Bönpo *relwang* by Thar (2008: 545).

remembers that he did not understand the master's words as the latter was conferring the *relwang*. Some years later, he received a second hair consecration from Alak Pema Tumbo [Padma gtum po] (1933-2009), a famous master from Golok [mGo log],<sup>42</sup> with long-standing links with the Nyingma tantrists of Repkong, who had come to Repkong to give a long series of tantric initiations over a period of twenty days—an occasion on which hundreds, perhaps a thousand tantrists assembled. Alak Tumbo instructed him and the other recipients of the hair consecration that they could continue to wash and comb their hair—clearly, this was not specifically a *dreadlocks* consecration for the Golok master.

In several of our discussions, Shawo Gyal recalled that he was initially “afraid” of receiving a *relwang*, and in particular of eventually being prompted to start wearing dreadlocks. This would have been very unpractical, he explained; as a young adult, he needed to be able to engage in a number of activities, and the dreadlocks would have hindered him. He could picture himself starting to wear dreadlocks in his thirties, perhaps, but not immediately. (Actually, some of his young codisciples quickly left the master's room, in fright, when the master prepared to confer the *relwang*.) However, Alak Sherap reassured him that he could keep his hair as it was after the hair consecration. Shawo Gyal suggested that the diversity of situations associated with *relwang* might be understood to reflect a hierarchy of different levels or qualities of *relwang*; from that perspective, the consecration that he received as a young man from Alak Sherap, without any real understanding of what it implied, was probably, he thought, a lower-level consecration; perhaps something with a pedagogical value, to make him become more conscious of the fact that, as a tantrist, his long hair was not the same as that of an “old [lay]man”, *gepo* [rgad po]. In comparison, the consecration bestowed by Alak Tumbo was of a superior kind (*\*tsaya*). He did not understand everything, but the master entrusted (*te*) him to the fierce protector Za, the text leaning towards the powerful, violent, *drakpo* [drag po] mode of the ritual spectrum—a somewhat intimidating moment. Then, during the consecration, a rainbow appeared in front of the temple—that *relwang* was definitely special.

Among Repkong Bönpos (but not among Buddhists), when a master performs a dreadlocks consecration, a piece of fabric (with a sacred syllable written on the inside), called *wangtak* [dbang rtags], the “sign of the consecration”, is attached at the base of one of the twisted locks. An elderly Bönpo tantrist showed me in his dreadlocks the old *wangtak* that was still attached to the original lock—a twisted lock that had by then become an

---

<sup>42</sup> Outside of Repkong, he is also well known under the name Orgyen Kusum Lingpa [O rgyan sku gsum gling pa]. See Terrone, 2010: 146-152.



impressive dreadlock and, as the position of the tissue indicated, more than one meter longer.



Fig. 9: Attached to the dreadlock, the *bönpo* “sign of the consecration” (*wangtak*) (Repkong, 2003).

Once a tantrist has received a *relwang* (hair or dreadlocks consecration), a number of constraints shape his capillary life. My Repkong interlocutors mention a large set of rules and tantric commitments (*damtsik* [dam tshig], Skt. *samaya*), related to the fact that, as we will see, this procedure establishes a relationship between the hair, the practitioner and tantric protector deities. There are variations, however, for instance according to the masters who enunciated the rules. Thus Shawo Gyal recalled that, when Alak Tumbo conferred a hair consecration, he mentioned that letting one’s hair fall freely down one’s back was permissible (a hairstyle that is only rarely seen among Repkong tantrists); however, a decade later, he heard Alak Maksar [Mag sar], a local Nyingma master, explicitly forbid that very same style, stipulating that the hair needed to be kept wound around the head. Similarly, a rather erudite tantrist mentioned that, according to some masters, one should not wash one’s hair once one has received a *relwang*, but that he had never come across any textual justification for that. The rules perceived to be linked to the hair consecration can be quite extensive. Thus, in the formulation of another relatively learned tantrist, because with a *relwang* many divine assemblies (*lha-tsok* [lha tshogs]) dissolve (*tim* [bstim]) into the hair, it is then forbidden to engage in any unvirtuous acts,

whether of body, speech or mind; the hair becomes virtually a sign of one's commitment to such an ethical regimen.

One of the most frequently mentioned rules is that tantrists should not cut their hair. This is generally understood to become an absolute proscription once a *relwang* has been received. One also encounters a similar strong sense of prohibition among practitioners who have let their hair grow long during a prolonged tantric retreat.<sup>43</sup> The integrity of the hair needs to be protected in all possible ways: from being touched by inappropriate people or their clothes, from someone stepping over it, etc. Prior to the 1950s, if a young tantrist was involved in a fight and his opponent inadvertently pulled out even just one of his hairs, elders representing the Repkong Ngakmang [sNgags mang] (the “Collectivity of tantrists of Repkong”) would go to the culprit's house; the perpetrator of the offense would have to present substantial apologies, and a heavy fine would be exacted. The Repkong Ngakmang was famous and feared; such an affair would not be treated lightly. However, even the main prohibition regarding the cutting of one's hair apparently came with some exceptions. Thus Dorje Gyal (1920-2010), already introduced above, recounted how, his dreadlocks being very large and heavy, he asked Lama Tsering whether it would be permissible to cut them. The learned and prominent tantrist answered that the protector deities would not tolerate it, and that the external signs of the tantrist have to be maintained; however, he agreed to a compromise solution, namely trimming the bulky coil of dreadlocks. For several of my other interlocutors, this option was entirely unacceptable, though a tantrist from neighboring Labrang did mention independently the same possible solution.

### *Aging, death and beyond*

Dreadlocks constitute the culmination of the ideal capillary trajectory for Repkong tantrists—a culmination attained, if at all, generally more in the latter half of a tantrist's career. As we have seen, there are strict rules against cutting one's hair, and some tantrists' dreadlocks grow to be more than two meters in length. However, hair growth does not necessarily amount to a simply cumulative process: in time, hair loss and the weakening of hair growth can also take their toll. Some elderly tantrists end up with a common male baldness pattern, with less hair on the top of the scalp, or with a receding hairline; however, their dreadlocks remain attached on the sides and back of the head, which does not prevent them from being wound

---

<sup>43</sup> This includes also a few monastic contexts, such as the (fully ordained) *tokden* [rtogs ldan] yogic practitioners of the Drukpa-Kagyü tradition who practice at the Tsari sacred mountain (Huber, 1999: 86).

around the head in the usual manner. Other elderly tantrists have had more difficulty with later hair growth, in particular in conjunction with the forced cutting of their long hair during the Maoist period—we will return to this presently.

The theme of death was only brought up spontaneously by some rare interlocutors in my explorations of the Repkong tantrists' capillary biographies. Within this limited material, a recurrent theme was the notion that some virtuoso adepts (particularly of “Great Perfection” or Dzokchen [rDzogs chen] practices) die in a so-called “rainbow body”, *jalü* [‘ja’ lus]—basically, their physical body dissolves at death into a form of light, leaving only the nails and hair.<sup>44</sup> This display of extreme virtuosity is an apt symbol of the adept's perfect liberation, and the hair that has been left behind attains the status of precious relics.

With regard to more “ordinary” deaths among tantrists, one of my interlocutors (from Zhompong Shi [Zho ’ong dpyis], a village with a large tantrist community in the northeast of Repkong county) mentioned that if a deceased tantrist had received a hair consecration, then his hair needed to be cremated separately, not with the rest of the body. (This informant had a penchant for theoretical considerations, but in the present case he stated that he remembered such a procedure being carried out for elderly tantrists from his village.) For the burning of the hair he used the term *jinsek* [sbyin sreg], “burnt offering” (Skt. *homa*). How prevalent this practice exactly is (or perhaps was) still needs to be ascertained; similar practices have been described for the Drigung [‘Bri gung] monastery in Central Tibet (see the introduction by Schneider in this volume).

### *Codes and convenience: tying and untying the hair*

In the present section, let us turn our attention to a simultaneously material and symbolic feature of hair. When it gets long, the question arises, at the junction of cultural code and practical convenience: what should one do with it? As we have seen, hair lends itself to being shaped or styled in a variety of ways, ranging from letting it hang loosely, to gathering it in a ponytail (possibly alternating between the two), to disciplining it into a braid, or eventually setting off the virtually irreversible process of transformation from finely twisted cord-like locks into dreadlocks. Whatever the case, with the help of a simple device, the long, thin band of fabric called *ramtel* (lit. “[that which] joins the hairs [or locks]”), it is possible to either wind and fasten all the hair around the head or to untie it and let it hang loose. In a

---

<sup>44</sup> On this form of death, see Guidoni, 2006: 180-186.

nutshell, to tie or not to tie: this simple alternative has received some substantial cultural elaboration among tantrists, which we will now examine.

A first observation is that the longer the hair—in particular if it exceeds two or three feet in length—the more likely it is to be kept attached around the head for most of the time, for rather obvious practical reasons. However, when considering the winding of the hair around the head, a first, eminently cultural alternative is the following: should it be wound clockwise or counterclockwise, or, as Tibetans would phrase it, towards the right or the left? As any traveler (or, among its armchair variety, any reader) possessing some minimal familiarity with Tibetan ways immediately senses, this question is far from religiously irrelevant, given the prominence of clockwise vs. counterclockwise circumambulation of religious sites as a public marker of Buddhist vs. Bönpo religious affiliations. When asked, many Repkong tantrists state that Buddhist tantrists wind their hair clockwise around their heads, and Bönpo tantrists counterclockwise. This response accords with the deep-seated cultural model just mentioned, but interestingly it fails to account for the empirical reality: as far as I know (and as many other local tantrists confirm), almost all Repkong tantrists wind their hair counterclockwise around their heads, be they Bönpo or Buddhist. The main counter-example that I was told of is the (Buddhist) Hor Tertön Chögar [Hor gter ston chos sgar] community, located just south of Repkong county (but within the somewhat larger area referred to historically as Repkong<sup>45</sup>), in the north of the neighboring Tsekhok county: there, the tantrists are said to wind their hair clockwise around their heads.

Whether as a spontaneous or elicited comment, Repkong tantrists often address the question of the way in which the hair is attached around the head by first quoting a standard literary formulation, which is well known among them and actually applies more specifically to the case of dreadlocks: “twisting [the dreadlocks] towards the left, wind [the whole lot around the head] towards the right” (*yön-du chü-ne ye-su tri* [g.yon du gcus nas g.yas su dkri]). Textual authority notwithstanding, as we have seen, the common Repkong practice is, however, to wind the hair around the head towards the left, as we can observe in the following sequence kindly demonstrated by one of my tantrist friends.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> On various understandings of the “Twelve (Inner) Divisions” (Shokha Chunyi [Shog kha bcu gnyis] or Nangshok Chunyi [Nang shog bcu gnyis]) and “Eighteen Outer Divisions” (Chishok Chopgyé [Phyi shog bco bryad]) of Repkong, see for instance Reb gong pa mKhar rtse rgyal, 2009: 43 ff.

<sup>46</sup> As Françoise Robin (personal communication) also notes, Tibetans are mostly right-handed, and it is easier for right-handers to twist the locks counterclockwise (towards the left).



Fig. 10: Twist all the dreadlocks towards the “left” (counterclockwise) (Repkong, 2013).



Fig. 11: Then wind the whole set around the head, again towards the “left” (counterclockwise) (Repkong, 2013).



Fig. 12: Finally, fasten everything with the long “[band which] joins the locks” (Amdo: *ramtel*) (Repkong, 2013).



Fig. 13: Done (Repkong, 2013).

The “default” position, we may say (at least in the case of very long hair),

is thus to keep it wound around the head. In a number of circumstances, however, one is expected to unfasten one's long hair, primarily as a sign of respect: this may be when one handles the offerings of a ritual, or receives the "realizations", *ngödrup* [dngos grub], of a tantric ritual (see fig. 14), or prostrates, or when meeting or welcoming a master, and so forth.



Fig. 14: Receiving the "realizations" (*ngödrup*) of the ritual. Note the still clear cord-like appearance of the recent dreadlocks (Repkong, 2013).

When prostrating or handling offerings, one may insert the end of one's long hair into one's belt, in order to keep the hair in place and be able to move freely. When welcoming a master, the hair is commonly placed in front of oneself (see fig. 15).<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Note the variability of cultural codes: here it would be disrespectful not to untie the hair, but in Indic legal codes "[u]ntying the hair before a king (...) is regarded (...) as an insult subject to punishment" (Olivelle, 1998: 16).



Fig. 15: Welcoming a master on his arrival at a ritual gathering (Repkong, 2013).

Respect was the primary concern voiced by my interlocutors, but in the case of welcoming a master, there is also clearly, other than the question of positioning the hair, an overall concern for a pleasing aesthetics of auspiciousness and tantric imagery (see fig. 16).





Fig. 16: Welcoming a master: tantric aesthetics (Repkong, 2013).

However, living with dreadlocks is not entirely reducible to these codes. Their bulkiness can prove to be a constraint in certain ritual or mundane, everyday contexts. I once witnessed two ritual assistants struggling to fit a five-lobed crown (*rik-nga* [rigs lnga])—itself with its own symbolic representation of long hair attached at the crown of the head—onto the head of a senior tantrist already well-endowed with dreadlocks, who was officiating as the vajra-master for a burnt offerings ritual (*jinsek*, Skt. *homa*). Dreadlocks are commonly unwound and left to hang down on these occasions, but the officiant's head may still be slightly too bulky and unwieldy for the crown to fit easily (see fig. 17—or fig. 3 for the same officiant without crown).



Fig. 17: Wearing the five-lobed crown with dreadlocks (Repkong, 2011).

On a more quotidian plane, how does one sleep with such a mass of dreadlocks? One of my acquaintances told me, chuckling, that at night he untied his hair and put it on a second pillow next to the one for his head. He added, shaking his head in mild amazement, that his uncle, however, apparently slept without untying his (equally impressive) dreadlocks.

The practical constraints of large dreadlocks nevertheless also come with some minor advantages. One of my interlocutors mentioned something that the great Zhapkar points out in one of his songs: the hair that is wound around the head can be pulled down to protect the ears from the winter cold.

Others told me that, prior to 1958, long-distance travel was fraught with dangers, in particular due to the numerous bandits; if however one traveled with a companion whose bulky coil of dreadlocks (and possibly a red item of clothing) could be seen from afar, then one could be confident that the risk of being attacked was greatly reduced: the Repkong tantrists' ritual powers were highly feared.

*Long hair: an overdetermined religious identity marker*

Let us now come to what is, in effect, one of the key analytical features of the tantrists' long hair: its complicated position at the interface between the biological and the social—the latter itself a complicated bundle of socio-religious, socio-economic and socio-political dimensions. Thus, on the one hand, it is a part of the body—one that allows for considerable latitude in its shaping, but which, for instance in its growth, is subjected to biological rhythms and determinations. On the other hand, it is subjected, as we have started to note, to multiple social determinations: in effect, as we will see, it is an overdetermined key element of a tantrist's religious identity.

Although there is, as we have noted, a clear structural opposition between the tantrist's long hair and the monk's shaven head, the Repkong tantrists often point to a functional equivalence between their long hair (*relpa*) and the monk's monastic robes (*chögö* [chos gos]): these two truly constitute their external hallmark features or, as some of my interlocutors put it, their *chaluk* [cha lugs] (traditional attire, accoutrement, appearance). This asymmetry (hairstyle vs. clothing) must be seen in the context of the absence of a widely shared type of distinctive religious garment among tantrists. As we have noted, literary formulations describe tantrists as “those with long hair and white clothes”. In actual practice we occasionally find tantrists wearing a white skirt—the non-celibate hierarchs of the Sakya [Sa skya] order spring to mind here; among the Repkong tantrists however a white skirt is only very rarely seen. Somewhat more often (but, until recently, primarily among virtuoso practitioners), one sees tantrists wearing the “white [and red] shawl”, *zenkar* [gzan dkar].<sup>48</sup> Over the last decade or two, Nyingma masters have been increasingly advocating that “white shawls” be worn systematically by tantrists in ritual contexts, in accordance with formulations like the one mentioned above, and actual usage patterns in Repkong and other areas are changing markedly.<sup>49</sup> This will most probably

<sup>48</sup> Nyida Heruka's discussion of the tantrist's garments mentions primarily the “white shawl” (He ru ka, 2003: 85, 87), as well as items of clothing of other colors.

<sup>49</sup> A photograph like the one in Fig. 6, which dates from 2012, could not therefore have been taken in Repkong a decade earlier.

have implications in terms of how understandings of the tantrists' religious identity markers evolve, but for the time being the “white shawl” has only very partially been appropriated and the *relpa* or long hair retains pride of place in such matters.

When asked about the significance of their long hair, tantrists very often answer with statements about how the *relpa* constitutes a key religious identity marker and how keeping one's hair long is an obligation for them or, along similar lines, how that hairstyle marks them as followers or successors (*jenjuk* [rjes 'jug]) within an historical lineage that goes back to prestigious figures of the beginnings of the *ngakpa* tradition (on these associations, see more below). Keeping one's hair long is also mentioned spontaneously (and almost systematically) in discussions about what constitutes or defines a tantrist, or a “real tantrist”, *ngakpa ngoma* [ngo ma]. Other criteria are sometimes included, as in the following definition offered by Alak Böngya, the Bönpo master: “those with [tantric] vows, with texts, with long hair on their heads”.<sup>50</sup>

Such discussions are sometimes triggered by very practical concerns. To give but one example: in 2004 a master residing at Achung Namdzong [A chung gnam rdzong], a historically important Buddhist site in Chentsa [gCan tsha] county to the north of Repkong, organized an exceptional, very large ritual gathering, in which more than 3,000 tantrists (primarily from Repkong and neighboring areas) participated. The temple and its courtyard were barely sufficient for this massive turnout. The participants had to register on arrival in a small tent set up for the purpose and were given badges which enabled the organizing staff to strictly control access to the temple grounds during the week-long ritual. As the main disciplinarian of the ritual explained, registration was open only for “tantrists with long hair (*relpa*)”. This capillary requirement obviously meant that the participants were expected to conform to an important norm and identity marker of *ngakpa* culture (even if, as we have seen, not all tantrists actually have long hair); it also constituted in practical terms a workable criterion by which registrants could be identified as valid participants—even if this meant that some tantrists, who had short hair, simply arrived wearing a *chörel* wig in the style of a tantrist's dreadlocks.

Of course, there is in this criterion no proof of proper religious identity, only a reasonable indication, and the system is therefore not foolproof (but then the same could be said of short hair and red robes in a monastic context). A young Repkong layman whom I met seven years later told me that, coming from a “*ngakpa* house” (*ngak-khyim*) and his father not being

---

<sup>50</sup> Amdo: *dompa yöno, xwecha yöno, go-na rawa yöno* [Tib.: *sdom pa yod pa/ dpe cha yod pa/ mgo la ral pa yod pa/*].

able to go himself, he decided to go to the Achung Namdzong ritual gathering as a representative of his family, so to speak, even though he himself had only minimal religious training—knowledge of the common Nyingma prayers (*khandön* [kha 'don]), but not much more. He put on a *chörel* wig, was able to register, and simply took part in the recitation whenever he could. Given the extraordinary blessings that were to be expected from such an exceptional ritual gathering, he was probably not the only one that week for whom a borrowed wig of dreadlocks opened the doors to the Achung Namdzong temple.

The *chörel* wig is very often, however, the only way for a number of trained tantrists, in collective ritual contexts, to conform to the normative long-hairedness that is associated with their *ngakpa* religious identity. This was particularly the case when religious practice started anew after the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

As part of the Cultural Revolution's agenda of eradicating the old ways—as one major campaign was called, “smash the four olds” (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits)—Tibetan men had to cut their long hair (Wu Qi, 2013: 46). This also applied, of course, to tantrists. An elderly tantrist from Labrang (born in the early 1930s), who was imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution, told me that in prison the Han Chinese and Hui Muslims were afraid to cut his *relpa* (dreadlocks probably); he had to cut his hair himself with the help of a fellow prisoner from Repkong. In order to atone for the sin (*dikpa* [sdig pa]) they were incurring, they recited the hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva (a key tantric purification practice) as they cut the hair. Altogether, the old tantrist had to cut his hair three times in the Maoist period, starting in 1958. He was allowed to keep the hair he had to cut in prison, but many other tantrists' hair ended up being thrown into the Yellow River (Tib. Machu [rMa chu])—“the Machu was black at that time”, in the evocative words of a Repkong tantrist.

Overt religious activities started again very tentatively in the early 1980s, first at the household level, with for instance funerary rituals and monthly ritual gatherings of tantrists for the worship of Padmasambhava on the tenth day of the lunar month (*tsechu*). Collective public religious practice started on the occasion of a visit to Repkong of the Panchen Lama [Paṅ chen bla ma], who traveled to Tibetan areas to tell his compatriots that they should resume their religious activities. At the time of the great master's visit the Nyingma tantrists carried out a large Zhitro [Zhi khro, “Peaceful (and) wrathful (deities)”) ritual—their most widely known major ritual—and word was sent out slightly in advance that they needed to have long hair (*relpa*)—understood: a *chörel* wig if their hair was still rather short, which was the case for most of them. Recourse to the *chörel* substitute thus took on a massive, almost generalized character in the early 1980s (before decreasing

again, once the tantrists had grown long hair). Many tantrists prepared such a wig specifically in order to take part in the above-mentioned Zhitro ritual.

Beyond these very special political, historical circumstances, tantrists also have recourse to wigs for simpler, personal reasons, namely insufficient hair growth. In some cases a tantrist might obtain a wig from another tantrist whose hair is sufficiently long for him to dispense with his own *chörel*, or in rare cases from an acquaintance who has abandoned his religious career as a tantrist. Most of my interlocutors, however, had made their own. For this, one uses the soft hairs from the lower flanks of the yak, or the hair from young yaks' tails. The hair is steamed to further soften it, and then twisted in the form of the “twisted locks” (*gyälə*) which, as we have seen, are the first step towards acquiring dreadlocks. These fake locks are then attached to a circular headband, roughly over half its circumference. They are positioned on the forehead and sides of the head, and drawn over the head towards the back, where they are gathered together by a cord; the extremities of the long locks are held together by a *ramtel* band of fabric (just like normal hair). The resulting wig (see fig. 18) may measure one meter to more than 1,5 meters in length; when it is wound around the head, it gives the distinctive appearance of the bulky coil of dreadlocks highly appreciated by the Repkong tantrists.



Fig. 18: A wig to satisfy the long hair requirement: the *chörel* (Amdo *chira*) (Repkong, 2013).

The headband which keeps the wig in place needs to be rather tight and tantrists admit that the wig is only moderately comfortable. At ritual

gatherings that are not presided over by a master, short-haired tantrists sometimes arrive without a wig, but may be rebuked by the disciplinarians (*gekö* [dge bskos]); at rituals that are held in the presence of a master, most short-haired tantrists would not dare to turn up without a wig. As we have noted, however, wearing a *chörel* wig may generate mild teasing from one's peers. A Bönpo tantrist told me recently that tantrists with little hair nowadays prefer to simply keep the hair they have long and dispense with the (perhaps increasingly) awkward wig. A number of wigs have been confined to places like cupboards in which tantrists keep their books and ritual texts. The *chörel* wigs remain utilitarian objects, devoid of associations of divine embodiment that we find in the case of tantrists' real hair.

Thus long hair as a bodily marker of religious identity can be replaced by an artefact. This substitute is conventionally valid in the absence of a better identification criterion and constitutes an answer to quandaries induced by the overdetermined character of hair, at the interface of religious norms and sociopolitical or biological determinations. It is, however, only a partially satisfactory answer, not only because it may be misappropriated, as we have seen, but because of its complete fabricatedness, as its name implies, a fabricatedness which situates it at the opposite extreme from the ideal uncontrived (*machöpa*) quality of the tantrist's hair. The artefact as substitute for one's own bodily hair also lacks one religiously important quality: it does not share the hair's potential for becoming a support for embodied divine presence (a point towards which we shall turn presently).

Finally, is it perhaps not somewhat reductive to speak of a "centrality of appearances" at play in the tantrist's dreadlocks (Bogin, 2014)? Or, in an earlier formulation:

the seventeenth-century Tibetan Buddhist lama (...) Yolmo Tendzin Norbu (1598–1644) (...) was a monk until his mid-twenties, when he decided to become a *ngakpa*. Interestingly, his writings about *ngakpas* focus on (...) the mass of dreadlocks bound above the *ngakpa*'s head. This focus on *external appearances* challenges assumptions that locate questions of religious identity in some immaterial interior. The importance of the *superficial* is repeated throughout Tendzin Norbu's autobiography (...) (Bogin, 2008: 86; emphases added).

What we have seen regarding the *chörel* wig may seem to point in the direction of a "focus on external appearances", but, as I have just argued, it is an incomplete substitute, and there is more to real hair. The tantrist's long

hair (*relpa*)—whether his own or a wig—is a key religious identity marker.<sup>51</sup> Referring to it as “superficial”, as opposed to assumedly more common “immaterial interior” features, perhaps fails to recognize the recurrence, across religious traditions, of “external” or, more precisely, visually distinctive markers of religious identity, starting with the monk’s robe and shaved hair—in Buddhism but also in Catholicism for instance. These material, visually distinctive elements are in a sense greater than themselves, in that they are part of, and make implicit reference to, complex webs of meanings and symbolic orders. Beyond being situated on a “superficial” vs. “interior” axis, these are markers that convey key messages in fields of social conventions. They also sometimes need to be examined (as we will now do for the tantrist’s long hair) in the light of their complex ontologies and as endowed with power that may be mobilized in efficacious procedures that aim, depending on the case, at blessing or healing (as with monks’ robes), or for instance forcefully compelling or even destroying. We are dealing here with something much richer and much more complex than “external appearances” and “superficiality”.

*Multivocal symbol and hybrid ontology: embodied divinity, power and more*

Considering the diversity of ways in which hair can be shaped (even just within tantric contexts), it comes as no surprise to find within local ideas and locally relevant tantric literary sources a rich range of symbolic constructions that focus on the tantrist’s hair. Beyond analyzing this interrelated web of meanings, ontological notions and ideas of associated power, my aim here is to point to crucial dimensions in tantrists’ hair that seem to remain unrecognized in Bromberger’s trichological grid of analysis.

As we have seen, a primary layer of meaning associated with the tantrist’s long hair is the notion that it reflects an *unfabricated, natural state*. Along with the (at least in this ideal vision) white clothes and the mind dwelling in the natural state, it is part of the tantric commitment to the “three uncontrived” (*machöpa sum*) (He ru ka, 2003: 84).<sup>52</sup> This layer can be described as primary in the sense that the historical emergence of *relpa* capillary styles (marked by an absence of cutting the hair and in some cases of combing and washing) is probably to be found in Indic and then Tibetan

---

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, one may perhaps argue that long hair constituted a key identity and status marker for the pre-1950 Tibetan aristocracy, with forceful resistance to outside pressures regarding cutting the hair, and cases of use of wigs (see the introduction by Schneider in this volume).

<sup>52</sup> In his discussion of the Bönpo context, Thar mentions a fourth “natural condition” (*machöpa*): the use of a skull cup as a “natural” container (Thar, 2008: 545).

milieus of ascetics and meditators professing ideals of virtuoso, prolonged intensive religious practice and an absence of attention to “external”, worldly activities like hair care.

These origins are reflected in some of my interlocutors’ discourses on the symbolism of the tantrist’s hair, discourses which do not emphasize the underlying concepts but a notion of faithfulness to a tradition dating back to the originators of the Tibetan *ngakpa* path. These are, for instance, the “Great Master”, Loppön Chenpo [Slob dpon chen po] (a name of Padmasambhava), or Nupchen Sanggyé Yeshé [gNubs chen Sangs rgyas ye shes] or yet Nanam Dorjé Düjom [sNa nam rDo rje bdud ’joms], identified by Tibetan historians as two of Padmasambhava’s main Tibetan disciples.<sup>53</sup> These illustrious figures were presented by my interlocutors as having acquired their long hair as a result of prolonged retreats dedicated to tantric practice. In a Buddhist religious environment marked by a strong ideology of faithful adherence to the tradition as it is passed down since its perfect origins, these figures are seen as archetypes of the *ngakpa* and as models to be imitated. (Similarly, we have also seen, above, symbolic associations between a hair consecration or the fashioning of twisted locks and the Eight Rikdzin or Awareness-holders, eight great adepts entrusted with the initial transmission of the important Kagye tantric practices.)

Beyond this primary layer of meanings, another key cluster of ideas focuses on the relationship between the hair and *tantric divine agents*. The most commonly shared notions are that individual strands or locks of hair are places where particular kinds of deities reside (*shukné* [bzhus gnas], “place(s) of residence”, in some textual formulations). Tantrists having received more modest training may not be familiar, however, with these ideas and many might perhaps hesitate to claim the presence of deities in *their* hair. One also hears, less frequently, formulations suggesting perhaps a stronger degree of bodily fusion with the divine: deities are sometimes said to have been absorbed or to have dissolved (*tim*) into the hair. In this context of hybrid ontological status of the tantrist’s hair, one can understand all the better the insistence on the prohibition of cutting hair. Finally, one also comes across occurrences (or accounts) in which the hair is physically used in the manner of an instrument (it is typically untied, and sometimes hurled over the head,<sup>54</sup> or used to beat the ground) to act upon divine or other invisible beings (not necessarily residing in the hair): this can be to summon, to coerce or even, in the case of harmful forces, to destroy them.

Returning to the most common theme, with deities residing in the

<sup>53</sup> See these figures’ biographies on The Treasury of Lives website (Gardner, 2009; Mandelbaum, 2007) as well as, regarding Nupchen, Dudjom (2012: 607-614).

<sup>54</sup> For an example from Baragaon, a Tibetan society in the Nepalese Himalayas, see Sihlé, 2013a: 224 n. 17.



tantrist's hair, one finds a further diversity of views regarding the identity and the placement of these deities. Perhaps the most widespread idea is that the individual hairs are the abode of *khandroma* [mkha' 'gro ma] (Skt. *dākinī*: female deities that assist tantric practitioners).<sup>55</sup> According to a slightly more elaborate scheme, as was quoted to me by a rather learned Repkong tantrist,

the 21,000 hairs (*tralo* [skra lo])  
are the place of residence of 21,000 *dākinī*;  
the 58 braids (or, here, dreadlocks?) (*lenbu* [lan bu])  
are the place of residence of the 58 *heruka* (Tib. *traktung* [khrag 'thung,  
"blood drinkers"], *buddhas* in a wrathful manifestation).<sup>56</sup>

skra lo nyi khri chig stong de /  
mkha' 'gro nyi khri chig stong gi bzhugs gnas yin /  
lan bu lnga bcu rtsa brgyad de /  
khrag 'thung lnga bcu rtsa brgyad kyi bzhugs gnas yin //

The same scheme, but with 58 *heruka* and ten million one hundred thousand *dākinī*, is found in a spiritual song about the religious symbols that characterize the *ngakpa*, composed by the first Alak Maksar, known as Maksar Pandita (the "Erudite from Maksar") [Mag sar paṇḍi ta], an early-nineteenth-century Nyingma master from Repkong.<sup>57</sup> An echo of these ideas is also to be found for instance in an anecdote mentioned by Thar: a great Bönpo tantric adept wishing to take monastic vows went to see a master, who refused to cut his hair however, recognizing that there was a couple of wrathful deities on each "braid" (Thar, 2008: 546).<sup>58</sup>

A related, somewhat common notion is that the tantrist's hair is

<sup>55</sup> A closely related notion is that the myriad hairs on the practitioner's entire body are each the residence of a *khandroma* deity. On the term *khandro(ma)*, which also refers to virtuoso female practitioners, see also Schneider's paper in this issue.

<sup>56</sup> More precisely, this number is to be understood as referring to the *buddhas* of the five families in their wrathful manifestations (*heruka*), along with their entourage; see: [http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/khrag\\_'thung\\_lnga\\_brgyad](http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/khrag_'thung_lnga_brgyad) (accessed 19 Aug. 2016). On the Heruka figure, see Gray, 2007: 35-54.

<sup>57</sup> Maksar Pandita's personal name was Künzang Topden Wangpo [Kun bzang stobs ldan dbang po] (1781-1828). This song is entitled "Removing the Darkness of Doubt: The Suddenly Arising Song Which Deciphers the Symbols of the Yogi's Three Secrets" (Thol byung glu gzhas rnal 'byor gsang gsum brda grol the tshom mun sel zhes bya ba). An English translation has been published by Lama Tharchin Rinpoche and the Vajrayana Foundation, a version of which can be found at: [http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness\\_of\\_doubt.shtml](http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness_of_doubt.shtml) (accessed 19 Aug. 2016). (Thanks to Nuno Gonçalves for this link.)

<sup>58</sup> We find a similar theme in a number of accounts; see for instance Bogin (2008: 104-105) or Schneider's paper in this issue.

associated with the divine assembly, *lha-tso*k (technically, the *maṇḍala*), of one hundred peaceful and wrathful (*shi-tro*) deities (42 of the former, 58 of the latter) that figures prominently in ritual literature on the intermediate stage between death and rebirth. In connection with this, one tantrist mentioned having heard that one should therefore make one hundred dreadlocks (in actual Repkong practice, the number is generally much smaller).

A further, more elaborate variant among these divine trichological topologies was provided to me by a learned tantrist: in the “hair consecration” procedure, hair at the front is associated with the peaceful (*zhiwa* [zhi ba]) deities, hair at the back with the wrathful (*trowo* [khro bo]) ones; hair on the right is associated with the “male class” (*po-gyü* [pho rgyud]) protector deities, hair on the left with the “female class” (*mo-gyü* [mo rgyud]) protectors—distribution principles that echo the ordering of such deities in a *maṇḍala*.

There is, of course, greater coherence with the logics of tantric practice in the various intimate associations between the tantrist’s hair and tantric deities. A number of tantric meditations involve visualizing the deity dissolving into oneself, or placed within oneself or on one’s head. As Maksar Pandita’s song puts it, for instance: “The deity’s palace is established in my body”.

Though the notions of embodied divinities (including powerful protector deities) described above are relatively widespread, explicit associations with actual practices of power are much more sporadic in the (oral and written) data that I have gathered. One rather colorful mention is to be found in one of the earliest sources in Western languages that mentions the Repkong tantrists: a roughly two-page-long passage in the autobiographical account of a Tibetan published by Combe (1926: 151-153).<sup>59</sup> We read there that these tantrists (for Combe, “monks”, albeit ones whose long hair and married status were strangely unorthodox) “are known as Agba [= *ngakpa*], and have a great name as sorcerers and exorcisers of devils” (*ibid.*: 151). They engaged in prolonged tantric retreats, sometimes for up to 7 or 9 years [figures that today would be absolutely exceptional], at the end of which a sign of achievement could be a vision of “the Za, one of the most powerful and most dreaded chöjong [= *dharma* protectors (chos skyong)] in Tibet” (*ibid.*).

---

<sup>59</sup> The account mistakenly locates these tantrists in Golok, which lies much further to the southwest, but there is no doubt that it concerns the Repkong tantrists, given the name “Regong” (Repkong is often pronounced “Rekong”) and the number of Nyingma tantrists, 1900: this figure is part of a classic designation of the “Collectivity of tantrists of Repkong” (Repkong Ngakmang), namely “the 1900 ritual dagger holders” (see for instance Dhondup, 2011: 47).

When he has seen the Za and at last leaves the cell, assured of the Za's support, the Agba is a person of great and peculiar power. If anyone strikes or otherwise insults him, he pulls down his long hair, shakes it three times, when fire comes out of it, and he calls on Za to punish the offender. Shortly afterwards the latter dies, or at least falls very sick (*ibid.*: 152).

Maksar Pandita's song also associates the tantrist's long, empowered hair with violent ritual action:

If you make a top knot (*sic*, for topknot) it is the exquisite ornament of the yogi.<sup>60</sup>

If [the hair] falls loose it is the splendid style of the yogi.

If wrapped around the forehead it is a method to protect against sun and cold.

If it is whipped on the ground it will abolish enemies and obstructers.<sup>61</sup>

The awesome power of tantrists' dreadlocks also appears as the key theme in a variant that I heard in Repkong of the well-known Tibetan story of how one of the originators of the *ngakpa* tradition, Nup Sanggyé Yeshé, succeeded in protecting the Buddhist *dharma*. In the ninth century, at a time during which (according to Tibetan historiography) institutionalized monastic Buddhism was being eradicated, he made snakes appear in place of his dreadlocks in front of the "evil king" Langdarma [Glang dar ma] and impressed him so powerfully that the king promised not to harm tantrists.<sup>62</sup>

Many of my Repkong tantrist interlocutors, however, hesitated or refused to see any direct link between a *ngakpa*'s long hair and the wielding of ritual power. As one of them put it (in a doctrinally very consistent way): ritual power, *nüpa* [nus pa], is not located in the hair; it derives from spiritual accomplishments, *tokpa* [rtogs pa], which is something more internal. The account I heard which came the closest to positing a link between hair and power was the story of a former tantrist who used to mix precious Mani [Ma ni] pills with his dreadlocks—a rather idiosyncratic procedure. These pills had been empowered in a large ritual gathering focusing on the great deity Avalokiteśvara, and on the recitation of his six-syllable mantra, the Mani. The tantrist's reasoning was based on the principle that the ritual text

<sup>60</sup> Although tantric ritual activity is by far not always of a yogic nature, the Tibetan term equivalent to yogi, namely *neljor(pa)* [rnal 'byor pa], has often been used as a valorized literary designation for a *ngakpa* (see also Sihlé, 2013a: 123).

<sup>61</sup> [http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness\\_of\\_doubt.shtml](http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness_of_doubt.shtml). Links between the tantrists' hair and ritual power are also mentioned for instance by Terrone (2010: 236-237).

<sup>62</sup> In passing, note that this story echoes the association between awe-inspiring dreadlocks and snakes, discussed most notably by Obeyesekere (1981: *passim*). For a more standard version of this Tibetan story, see Dudjom, 2012: 612.

mentions that each pill *is* Avalokiteśvara. The narrator of the story, an elderly and somewhat knowledgeable tantrist, commented that he could well imagine that some power must come out of such a procedure.

If a number of my tantrist interlocutors preferred to emphasize other, doctrinally valid sources of ritual power, it may well be that popular perceptions echo more closely the lore expressed in Maksar Pandita's song or in Combe's account. We also find something suggestively similar in the context of Hindu ascetics (even if, here, the initial religious initiation involves shaving the hair):

Many *daśnāmī* renouncers [a set of Śaiva sectarian orders] (...) let their hair become matted into *jaṭā*, or dreadlocks, from the time they are initiated and their heads shaved. The length and thickness of their *jaṭā* serves to show how long they have lived the renouncer life and how religiously powerful they have become. Renouncers with extremely long or extremely thick *jaṭā* are generally considered to be extremely powerful (Hausner, 2007: 47).

Finally, a third important component of symbolism in matters of the tantrist's long hair, after the primary theme of uncontrivedness, and the key complex of notions centered on embodied divine presence and ritual power, concerns the *relationship with the master*.<sup>63</sup> According to Nyida Heruka, here we find the "central meaning" of the coils of long hair gathered on the top of the practitioner's head (He ru ka, 2003: 89). However, this strand of associations receives comparatively much more concise treatment by the author and was similarly much less present in my interlocutors' discourse.

One of the links between the master and one's hair is specific to practitioners who have received a hair consecration: in those cases, the blessing or empowerment (*jinlap*) of the master is perceived to have physically entered one's hair. The more general link stated by Nyida Heruka is that, as such, the long hair gathered on the top of one's head signifies the inseparability from one's *lama* (*ibid.*).<sup>64</sup> This seemingly abstract correspondence echoes a rather widespread notion, which one tantrist from Labrang expressed by quoting a textual formulation:

At the moment of winding the long hair around the crown of the head,  
do not forget your refuge *lama*, and pray to him!

---

<sup>63</sup> Erudite discussions of the *ngakpa*'s hair (such as Nyida Heruka's essay) suggest still further layers of symbolism, but I shall limit myself here to the themes that emerged from the discourse of my Repkong interlocutors as important.

<sup>64</sup> The term used here for the *lama*, *rikdak* [rigs bdag], literally "lord of the [*buddha*] family", is actually somewhat polysemic, but the following sentences clearly refer to the figure of the master.

mgo ral pa spyi bor dkri ba'i dus /  
skyabs bla ma ma brjed gsol ba thobs /

The hair a tantrist carries on his head can thus be seen as evocative of his respect for his master, or yet, as Nyida Heruka further elaborates, of the common *guruyoga* meditative practice in which one visualizes the master placed on the top of one's head (*ibid.*)—an idea that we also find expressed in Maksar Pandita's song.

### *Conclusion*

At the close of our examination, the question arises: to what extent do these Tibetan capillary modalities reflect more general well-known patterns in matters of hair culture, or perhaps teach us something new, allowing us a glimpse into features that have so far not received much attention?

The long hair of tantrists, whether in dreadlocks or in other less spectacular forms, has visibly been the object of much creative elaboration, due to a convergence of factors ranging from its inherently pliable, workable nature to the tropical-growth-like abundance characterizing the tantric ritual culture (pantheon, ritual traditions and so forth)—but also the general human inventiveness in the generation of meanings and symbolism. We have observed throughout this discussion how alternative meanings coexist, some of them widely shared and others much less—not to mention common situations of ignorance: as one elderly interlocutor put it, when as a young man he received a dreadlocks consecration, there was no way of knowing what the master had in mind at that moment. This complex landscape of ideas (and areas of obscurity, of incomplete understandings) is informed by a sociology of knowledge, with substantial differences in degrees of learning, but also by the strong diversity and relative lack of homogeneity of the tantric field.

In the context of Indic ascetic traditions (with which Buddhist tantric traditions have historical links), according to Olivelle (1998: 28):

As with most condensed and central symbols of a society, indigenous exegesis of hair is neither extensive nor frequent. The ascetic literature, for example, never tells us why an ascetic must shave his head (...) [although] native exegesis (...) generally waxes eloquent in most other areas of ritual practice (...).

Actually, Tibetan tantric traditions have a lot in common more specifically with Śaiva ascetic milieus, in which, as we have seen, following initiation the common practice is to grow long, matted hair. Irrespective of

this, we may note that the Tibetan situation only partially echoes Olivelle's assessment: if it is true that the exegesis of *ngakpa* hair is not a common, frequent social practice, it is not absent in religious literature<sup>65</sup>—a rather heterogenous multiplicity of exegeses was more what one of my Repkong interlocutors had found in his exploration of the written sources, as we saw in the introduction.

If we now look at the actual (indigenous and academic) modes of interpretation of the hair, and their key themes, it is first worth noting what has been one of the most influential approaches in academic writings: the association (often but not exclusively along psychoanalytic lines) between hairstyles and sexuality (Berg, 1951; Leach, 1958; Obeyesekere, 1981; Olivelle, 1989). Thus, according to Leach (1958: 154), at least at a normative level,

an astonishingly high proportion of the ethnographic evidence fits the following pattern in a quite obvious way. In ritual situations:  
long hair = unrestrained sexuality; short hair or partially shaved head or tightly bound hair = restricted sexuality; close shaven head = celibacy.

It is clear that the last part of this pattern finds echoes in Tibetan Buddhist monastic contexts,<sup>66</sup> and to some extent in lay contexts as well. Things are however much more problematic with regard to tantrists. The roots of their tradition, in the sense of the early period in which Indic tantric traditions developed, were marked, at least for certain adepts (for instance in ritual gatherings/feasts called Skt. *ganacakra*), by ritual modes of sexuality with a socially transgressive character—transgressing caste boundaries for instance (Davidson, 2002: 318-320). These practices were later largely “domesticated” or “sanitized” (*ibid.*: 318). Some strong sexual symbolism remains in the Tibetan tantric tradition, and a tiny elite of advanced virtuoso adepts are still said to engage in ritual practices involving intercourse with an actual partner, but basically the sexuality of the Repkong tantrists is very much that of ordinary laypeople—with some of them actually stressing in our discussions that they take their vows of avoiding sexual misconduct very seriously. Leach's own attempt at explaining the case of ascetics with matted hair is not fully coherent, as pointed out by Hallpike (1969: 260). Finally, it is clear that the empirical data produced in the present discussion simply does not warrant an interpretation in terms of sexuality.

<sup>65</sup> Sources such as the autobiographies of Zhapkar (Ricard, 1994) and Yolmowa Tendzin Norbu—as well as a short treatise by the latter (Bogin, 2008, 2013)—or a spiritual song by Maksar Pandita have already been mentioned. See also for instance some brief elements in a treatise by a certain bKra shis rgya mtsho (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> C.?), reprinted in Bu byung dbang 'dus (ed.) (1996: 67).

<sup>66</sup> For more about the symbolism involved here, see Lang, 1995: 35 ff.

To simplify things somewhat, the other single most common and prominent analytical approach to hair in the social sciences has been very sociological in its thrust (see in particular Hallpike 1969 and Bromberger's writings). Bromberger in particular has developed a four-pronged analytical scheme for looking at hair based on the dimensions of (i) gender, (ii) identities, (iii) norms and marginality, and only finally a less sociological dimension: (iv) aesthetics (see for instance Bromberger in this special issue). In his discussion of the third dimension, looking at the case of various Hindu, Buddhist or Christian religious specialists, Bromberger highlights the duality between rule-bound renunciation on the one hand and religious wandering and transgression on the other, associated respectively with shaved hair and long, unkempt hair (see Bromberger in this special issue, or a more detailed formulation in Bromberger, 2010: 161-182). More specifically, the elements brought by Bogin in his discussion of Yolmowa Tendzin Norbu's "dreadlocks treatise" (2008) are read by Bromberger somewhat incautiously in terms of the tantrist's (assumed) "neglect" of his appearance, appetite for sex and alcohol, and socially transgressive orientation (2010: 167).

Parts of Bromberger's general analytical grid are relevant for our purposes. As we have seen, the tantrists' hairstyles function quite clearly as a marker of group identity as well as distinctiveness—consider the key defining and authenticating requirement that the tantrist's long hair represents in Repkong discourses, as well as the structural opposition to the monk's shaven head. This clearly echoes Bromberger's second axis of analysis. However, if we consider Bromberger's more specific comments on the Tibetan case, the elements of "transgression" found in the tantrists' religious profiles and practices are moderate at best. They are generally householders, not itinerant specialists. In some local traditions they drink alcohol quite liberally in ritual contexts (Sihlé, 2013a: 55, 236, 237, 245); the Repkong tantrists, however, do not. Finally they are the prototypical specialists of rituals involving violence, such as powerful exorcisms aimed at slaying demons (if not sorcery, at least in popular imagination)—a ritual orientation that is often perceived as ethically transgressive (or at the least very delicate).<sup>67</sup>

Thus if moderate elements of transgressiveness are no doubt to be found in the tantrists' religious profile, they simply have not warranted any significant discussion in the present article's analysis of the Repkong tantrists' hair. The rejection of social conventions in favor of a "natural state" (a cognate theme more briefly mentioned by Bromberger) is assuredly

---

<sup>67</sup> For a book-length exploration of these issues, see Sihlé, 2013a: introduction, chapters 4-5, and *passim*.

a more accurate and relevant description of one of the key ideological themes underlying the tantrists' dreadlocks and other forms of long hair. In the end, focusing on transgression (or the rejection of social conventions) leaves out a rich field of other absolutely key associations: in particular, the twin themes of embodied/resident divinity and ritual power. It is known that in a number of societies "spirits or divinities [are believed to] reside in the head and hair" (Olivelle, 1998: 31, citing Frazer, 1913: II, 252-253; see also Bogin, 2008: 88, with reference to Sikes, 1912: 474). The case of the Repkong tantrists thus suggests that, in an analysis of hair logics along the lines of Bromberger's four-pronged, primarily sociological scheme, some larger issues with regard to cultural understandings are at least omitted or devalued as comparative analytical directions: how is the *nature* of hair perceived? What is the relationship between the hair and the *person*, and sometimes with the *beings* that can inhabit the hair or manifest in it? One is reminded here for instance of Hertz's celebrated analysis of widespread patterns in matters of the duality between the right and left hand ([1909] 1973): would cultural, cosmological understandings of hair, at the dual interface of the biological and the sociocultural on the one hand, and of the person and the outside world and its beings on the other, not warrant similar attention? If long hair as an essential marker of socio-religious identity is the most striking feature in Repkong tantrists' discourses on their hair, this is only one strand of a much more complex web of practices and meanings.

### Bibliography

Berg, Charles

1951 *The Unconscious Significance of Hair* (London, Allen & Unwin).

Bogin, Benjamin

2008 The Dreadlocks Treatise: On Tantric Hairstyles in Tibetan Buddhism, *History of Religions*, 48 (2): 85-109.

2013 *The Illuminated Life of the Great Yolmowa* (Chicago, Serindia Publications).

2014 "Wearing the Hair of Demons, Ḍākīnis, and Buddhas", presentation at the workshop "Trichologie tibétaine : Les cheveux et leur traitement dans l'aire tibétaine", organised by the Société française d'études du monde tibétain at INALCO, Paris, 28 March 2014.

Boord, Martin J.



1993 *The Cult of the Deity Vajrakila: According to the Texts of the Northern Treasures Tradition of Tibet (Byang-gter Phur-ba)* (Tring, Institute of Buddhist Studies).

Bromberger, Christian

2008 Hair: From the West to the Middle East through the Mediterranean (The 2007 AFS Mediterranean Studies Section Address), *Journal of American Folklore*, 121 (482): 379-399.

2010 *Trichologiques : Une anthropologie des cheveux et des poils* (Montrouge, Bayard).

Bu byung dbang 'dus (ed.)

1996 *gSang rnying rgyan dang rol mo'i bstan bcos* ([Lhasa], Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang).

Buswell, Robert E., Jr. & Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (eds)

2013 *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

Cantwell, Cathy & Robert Mayer

2002 Note on Transliteration: "Not Wylie" Conventions", *The Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu Edition of the rNying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, on line: <https://web.archive.org/web/20091022081751/http://ngb.csac.anthropology.ac.uk/csac/NGB/Doc/NoteTransliteration.xml>, accessed 4 Feb. 2016.

Combe, G. A.

1926 *A Tibetan on Tibet: Being the Travels and Observations of Mr. Paul Sherap (Dorje Zödba) of Tachienlu; With An Introductory Chapter on Buddhism and a Concluding Chapter on the Devil Dance* (London, T. Fisher Unwin).

Davidson, Ronald M.

2002 *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York, Columbia University Press).

Dhondup, T. Yangdon

2011 Reb kong: Religion, History and Identity of a Sino-Tibetan borderland town, *Revue d'études tibétaines* (20): 33-59.

2013 Rules and Regulations of the Reb kong Tantric Community, in Yangdon Dhondup, Ulrich Pagel and Geoffrey Samuel (eds), *Monastic and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet* (Leiden; Boston, Brill): 117-140.

Dollfus, Pascale

1989 *Lieu de neige et de genévriers : Organisation sociale et religieuse des communautés bouddhistes du Ladakh* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique).

bDud 'joms gling pa

[1872] 2016 “rNal 'byor ral ba'i cod pan la dbang bskur zab mo” [The profound consecration of the yogi's long hair topknot], in *Chos nyid nam mkha'i klong mdzod* [The Vast Space Treasury of the Nature of Reality]. Reprinted 2016, on line: <http://www.ngakmang.net/chok/760.html>, accessed 21 Sept. 2016.

Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdrel Yeshe Dorje

2012 *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: Its Fundamentals and History*. Translated and edited by Gyurme Dorje and Matthew Kapstein (Somerville, Wisdom Publications).

Ehrhard, Franz-Karl

2008 *A Rosary of Rubies: The Chronicle of the Gur-rigs mDo-chen Tradition from South-Western Tibet* (Munich, Indus Verlag).

Fjeld, Heidi

2008 When Brothers Separate: Conflict and Mediation within Polyandrous Houses in Central Tibet, in Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz (eds), *Tibetan Modernities: Notes From the Field on Cultural and Social Change* (Leiden, Brill): 241-261.

Frazer, James G.

1913 *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, part 2. 3rd ed. (London, Macmillan).

Gardner, Alexander

2009 Nubchen Sanggye Yeshe, *The Treasury of Lives*, on line: [http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Nubchen-Sanggye-Yeshe/TBRC\\_P2885](http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Nubchen-Sanggye-Yeshe/TBRC_P2885), accessed 5 Sept. 2016.

Germano, David and Nicolas Tournadre

2003 THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan, *The Tibetan & Himalayan Library*, on line: <http://www.thlib.org/reference/transliteration/#!essay=/thl/phonetics/>, accessed 4 Feb. 2016.

Germano, David and Kevin Trainor (eds)

2004 *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia* (Albany, State University of New York Press).

Gray, David B.

2007 *The Cakrasamvara Tantra: The Discourse of Śrī Heruka (Śrīherukābhīdhāna). A Study and Annotated Translation* (New York, American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University).

Guidoni, Rachel

2006 *Les reliques dans le monde tibétain*, doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris-X-Nanterre.

Hallpike, C. R.

1969 Social hair, *Man, N.S.*, 4 (2): 256-264.

Hausner, Sondra L.

2007 *Wandering with Sadhus: Ascetics in the Hindu Himalayas* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press).

Hertz, Robert

[1909] 1986 The Pre-eminence of the Right Hand: A Study in Religious Polarity, in Rodney Needham (ed.), *Right & Left: Essays on Dual Symbolic Classification* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press): 3-31. [Translation by Rodney and Claudia Needham of: 1909 La prééminence de la main droite : Étude sur la polarité religieuse, *Revue philosophique* (68): 553-580.]

He ru ka, Nyi zla

2003 sNgags pa'i shes rig la dpyad pa'i gnam, *sNgags mang zhib 'jug: sngags pa'i shes rig dus deb* (6): 82-99.

Huber, Toni

1994 Putting the gnas back into gnas-skor: Rethinking Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage practice, *The Tibet Journal* 19 (2): 23-60.

1999 *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (New York, Oxford University Press).

Jest, Corneille

1975 *Dolpo : Communautés de langue tibétaine du Népal* (Paris, Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique).

Karmay, Samten Gyaltzen

1998 *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet* (Kathmandu, Mandala Book Point).

Kopytoff, Igor

1986 The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press): 64-91.

Kvaerne, Per

[1975] 2005 On the concept of sahaja in Indian Buddhist Tantric literature, in Paul Williams (ed.), *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies. Vol. 4: Tantric Buddhism (including China and Japan); Buddhism in Nepal and Tibet* (London; New York, Routledge): 162-208. [Reprint from 1975 *Temenos* (11): 88-135.]

Lang, Karen

1995 Shaven heads and loose hair: Buddhist attitudes toward hair and sexuality, in Howard Eilberg-Schwartz and Wendy Doniger (eds), *Off with Her Head! The Denial of Women's Identity in Myth, Religion, and Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press): 32-52.

Leach, Edmund R.

1958 Magical Hair, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 88 (2): 147-164.

Maksar Pandita Künzang Topden Wangpo [Mag sar pañdi ta Kun bzang stobs ldan dbang po] (1781-1828), transl. Tulku Thubten and Ron Garry [n.d.] 2007 "Removing the Darkness of Doubt: The Suddenly Arising Song Which Deciphers the Symbols of the Yogi's Three Secrets" (translated from the Tibetan *Thol byung glu gzhas rnal 'byor gsang gsum brda grol the tshom mun sel zhes bya ba*), on line: [http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness\\_of\\_doubt.shtml](http://www.nyingma.com/artman/publish/darkness_of_doubt.shtml), accessed 5 Sept. 2016.

Mandelbaum, Arthur

2007 Nanam Dorje Dudjom, *The Treasury of Lives*, on line: <http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Nanam-Dorje-Dudjom/303>, accessed 5 Sept. 2016.

Obeyesekere, Gananath

1981 *Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).

Olivelle, Patrick

1998 Hair and Society: Social Significance of Hair in South Asian Traditions, in Alf Hiltebeitel and Barbara D. Miller (eds), *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (Albany, State University of New York Press): 11-49.

Ramble, Charles

1984 *The Lamas of Lubra: Tibetan Bonpo Householder Priests in Western Nepal*, D.Phil. dissertation, University of Oxford.

Reb gong pa mKhar rtse rgyal

2009 *'Jig rten mchod bstod: mDo smad Reb gong gyi drug pa'i lha zla chen mo'i mchod pa dang 'brel ba'i dmangs srol rig gnas lo rgyus skor gyi zhib 'jug* (Beijing, Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang).

Ricard, Matthieu (transl.)

1994 *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogin* (New York, State University of New York Press).

Sihlé, Nicolas

2001 *Les tantristes tibétains (ngakpa), religieux dans le monde, religieux du rituel terrible : Étude de Ch'ongkor, communauté villageoise de tantristes du Baragaon (nord du Népal)*, doctoral dissertation, Université de Paris-X-Nanterre.

2013a *Rituels bouddhiques de pouvoir et de violence : La figure du tantriste tibétain* (Turnhout, Brepols) [Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études – Sciences religieuses, 152].

2013b Money, Butter and Religion: Remarks on Participation in the Large-Scale Collective Rituals of the Repkong Tantrists, in Yangdon Dhondup, Ulrich Pagel and Geoffrey Samuel (eds), *Monastic and Lay Traditions in North-Eastern Tibet* (Leiden; Boston, Brill): 165-185.

(unpubl.) “*Ts'echu* rituals in Baragaon: Social and religious changes in a Tibetan society of the Nepalese Himalaya”, 18 pp.

Sikes, E. E.

1912 Hair and Nails, in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark).

Snellgrove, David L.

1959 *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study* (London, Oxford University Press).

1987 *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors* (Boston, Shambala Publications).

Stein, Rolf A.

[1962] 1987 *La civilisation tibétaine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Paris, Le Sycomore / l'Asiathèque).

Terrone, Antonio

2010 *Bya rog prog zhu, The Raven Crest: The life and teachings of bDe chen 'od gsal rdo rje, treasure revealer of contemporary Tibet*, PhD dissertation, Faculty of Humanities, Leiden University.

Thar, Tsering

2008 Bonpo Tantrics in Kokonor Area, *Revue d'études tibétaines* (15): 533-552.

Trainor, Kevin

1997 *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravāda Tradition* (Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press) [Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions].

Tribe, Anthony

2000 Mantranaya / Vajrayāna: Tantric Buddhism in India, in Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London; New York, Routledge): 192-244.

Turner, Terence S.

1980 The Social Skin, in Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Lewin (eds), *Not work alone: A cross-cultural view of activities superfluous to survival* (London, Temple Smith): 112-140.

Wallis, Christopher

2016 The Tantric Age: A Comparison Of Shaiva And Buddhist Tantra, *Sutra Journal*, on line: <http://www.sutrajournal.com/the-tantric-age-a-comparison-of-shaiva-and-buddhist-tantra-by-christopher-wallis>, accessed 15 March 2016.

Weiner, Benno R.

2012 *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier: State Building, National Integration and Socialist Transformation, Zeku (Tsékhok) County, 1953-1958*, PhD dissertation, Columbia University.

Wu Qi

2013 *Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Continuum and Transition among Tibetans in Amdo*, PhD dissertation, University of Helsinki [Publications of the Institute for Asian and African Studies 14].

Zhabs dkar, Tshogs drug rang grol (1781-1851)

[n.d.] 1985 *sNyigs dus 'gro ba yongs kyi skyabs mgon zhabs dkar rdo rje 'chang chen po'i rnam par thar pa rgyas par bshad pa* [The Detailed Autobiography of the Great Vajra Holder Zhapkar, the Lord of Refuge of all Beings in the Age of Degeneration], 2 vols. (Xining, mTsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang).