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Delok ('das log), women on the fringes of Buddhism

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In Buddhism, *karma* and its complement, reincarnation, are fundamental beliefs. Although the ultimate goal of a Buddhist is to escape the cycle of reincarnations and enter *nirvana*, in the Tibetan culture, ordinary laymen know that this is an almost impossible aim for them to achieve, and their first priority is to try to avoid "bad reincarnations" and sufferings in the different hells. While Buddhist death rituals play an important role in alleviating these fears, their language and complexity often do not make the family reassured enough on the fate of their dead.

It is in this religious context that we can place the *delok* (Tib. '*das log*')¹ who were mostly women. They "died" and then travelled in the netherworld — hells, and less often paradises. They came back to earth to tell people what they had witnessed and bring messages from the dead to the living. Their experience became a narrative, either oral or written.

The *delok*'s² trip has a pattern different from other descents into hell, which are found in India, Tibet, China or Mongolia, and which involve great saints of Buddhism such as Maudgalayayana — the Buddha's disciple —, Padmasambhava and even the great culture hero Gesar. They are what we would be called "Saviors " because, in their cases, the person does not "die" but, through his magical power, goes to hell with a definite purpose: to save a person who is close to him. Although their influence on the *delok* is important, they cannot be considered the same.

¹ This article is partly based on my PhD dissertation published *Les revenants de l'au-delà dans le monde tibétain: sources littéraires et tradition vivante*, Editions du CNRS, Paris: (1989) reprint 2010. See also Pommaret, "Returning from hell", *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, D. Lopez (ed.), Princeton University Press, 1997, 499-510.

To find a scheme comparable to the *delok*, one has to turn to China, where examples of an ordinary person who dies, goes to hell and is sent back to earth, are documented as early as the Six Dynasties (222-589 A.D.).

As for the images used by the *delok* in their narratives, they reflect the influence of elements that came from classical Indian Buddhism and spread throughout Asia. The descriptions of the different hells, the Judgement of the Dead and the fact that each sin is associated with a specific hell are close to Indian models, although the Tibetans have transformed or adapted these elements to their own culture.

The *delok* can thus partly trace their roots to different influences: Indian and Chinese.

However, one must also take into account the indigeneous beliefs of Inner Asia, and especially the Turco-Mongols, where the trip to the realm of the dead was practised by shamans. The birth of the *delok* phenomenon is certainly due to a confluence of beliefs from different populations, including pre-Buddhist Tibetan beliefs.

Several textual elements clearly indicate that *delok* did exist in the past. Their biographies usually give details of their birthplace, their parents' names, their social background, but, very often, omit the year of their birth and/or the year of their *delok* experience. These narratives (called "biographies", *rnam thar*) are rather deceptive, as they really give very little insight into the lives of the *delok* but stress on their experiences in the netherworld.

However, the *delok*'s desire to practise religion from a young age is always emphasized.

Delok are also mentioned in the historical literature, albeit rarely, and this provides valuable historical clues. Added to the information from the biographies, they make it possible to say that *delok* were indeed historical persons and to make an attempt at dating both the first occurrence of the phenomenon and the earliest appearance of their biographies.

² For the reader's convenience, I will use in this article only the transcription of classical Tibetan words and not the complex transliteration. The transliteration will be used only in the notes.

Buddhist *delok* are attested in the literature as early as the 12th century, and 13th century when the biographies of two *Bon po* masters of the 12th century, Matön Sherab Senge and Yiltön Ponse Khyung Götsel, describe them as having a similar experience.³ This convergence makes it possible to date to the 12th century the appearance of the *delok* in Buddhist and *Bon po* literature.

Among the eleven *delok* which I studied from their biographies,⁴ it is impossible to accurately date their lives except for the first one, Nangsa Öbum, born in 1138, and the last one, Dzungchen Tagla Koncho Gyeltshen (1859-1942). For each of the others, only the century can be indicated. As for the biographies, they could very well have been written during the lifetime of the *delok*, or long after their death. In most cases, the date of publication is not mentioned and only four biographies out of eleven can be dated precisely. Except for the biography of Nangsa Öbum, the *delok* literary genre, where all the biographies follow the same pattern, really appears to bloom from the 16th century. Which factors are likely to have contributed to this florescence at that time ?

From the biographies, it is known that the *delok* came, in their great majority, from the *Nyingmapa* and *Kagyupa* milieux, which are allegedly less dogmatic than the *Gelukpa*. On one hand, these two religious schools nurtured between the 12th and 14th centuries intellectual and religious movements that were probably determinant in the formation of the *delok* literary genre. One of the dominant aspects of the *delok* stories is the place given to the cult of Avalokiteshvara, the *bodhisattva* who saves beings. The *delok* see themselves as his incarnations, and *Om mani padme hum (hri)*, the formula in six or seven syllables punctuate the narratives. It is associated to Avalokiteshvara and which has the power to save one from the realms of reincarnation. The erection of prayer-flags carrying the *mani*

³ A.M. Blondeau, *Annuaire de l'EPHE Vème section*, T.XCIII, Paris: 1984-1985, 107-114.

formula is one of the most popular ways of helping the dead to be liberated from bad reincarnations. The religious story-tellers (*manipa*) who recite this formula — whence their name — also play, in these texts, the role of saviours of the dead. Their popularity, as well as that of the *mani* formula, was spread in the 13th century, largely by Guru Chöwang, the great *Nyingmapa* "treasure-discoverer" (1212-1273). Interestingly enough, he was himself a "savior saint", as he went to hell to liberate his mother. *Delok* stories thus belong to the context of the soteriological cult of Avalokiteshvara.

However, the text which certainly had the most immediate influence on the *delok* accounts is "the Tibetan Book of the Dead", the *Bardo Thödröl*. This text is included in a large *Nyingma pa* collection, which has been only partly translated in the West, and which is called the *Karling zhitro*, "The peaceful and wrathful deities according to Karma Lingpa". Karma Lingpa was a "treasure discoverer" of the 14th century, and he is credited with the discovery of this text in the province of Dagpo in south-east Tibet.⁵ A comparison between the *Bardo Thödröl* and the *delok* texts reveals a strong analogy.

At the same period, the 15th and 16th centuries in Tibet witnessed a marginal movement that was in reaction against the religious structures of the time. This was the "Divine madmen" (*Nyön pa*) movement and at least one of the male *delok*, Jampa Delek, was a disciple of one of the most famous of these madmen, the "divine madman of Tsang".

A certain religious effervescence, if not favorable to individual initiatives, at least tolerant of them, must have existed at that time in Tibet. This situation might have been due partly to the absence of centralized political power, with *Karmapa* and *Gelukpa* religious schools fighting each other until the victory of the latter in the first half of the 17th century. It is

⁴ These are: sNang sa 'od 'bum, Khams pa A krung, Chos dbang rgyal mo, Gling sa chos skyid, Karma dbang 'dzin, Kun dga' rang grol, bKra shis rnam rgyal, Byang chub seng ge, Byams pa bde legs, Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom and rDzogs chen sTag bla dKon mchog rgyal mtshan

⁵ These texts deal not only with the intermediary state of passage between two incarnations, the *bar do*, but also the peaceful and wrathful deities and the whole liturgy of death rituals.

possible that the political atmosphere in a Tibet torn between different religious schools more hungry for political power than for spiritual achievement, led some individuals to marginalize themselves vis-à-vis the existing religious structures.

The *delok*, who existed much before the 16th century, must then have unconsciously taken advantage of this atmosphere and benefitted from this tolerant religious and literary influence. That might explain why their biographies flourished from the 16th century onwards.

Whereas the *Bardo Thödröl* is a ritual and gives theoretical explanations in a literary style that is difficult for the ordinary layman to understand, the *delok* texts are full of concrete examples and images, and their style is popular. Here is the *raison d'être* of these texts. Far from being an esoteric teaching, they are a religious teaching for the people. The two fundamental notions of Buddhism, *karma* and reincarnation, are developed in the Tibetan context in order to be easily understood by each and every person. It is known that, as early as the Dunhuang manuscripts (7th-9th centuries), there was a conscious tradition to adapt abstract notions in a didactic and simple way.⁶ The *delok* biographies continue in this tradition of "teaching for the people".

What better way to convey to uneducated people the abstract notion of karma than to use concrete examples taken from daily life where they can understand that an action brings about a retribution or a reward ? Strong images will strike a chord in people and remain imprinted on their memory. Sinful actions of daily life and their tangible links to punishment, virtuous deeds and their reward, as well as rituals that should be accomplished to earn merit, are carefully detailed in the *delok* accounts. Some sinful actions are those that everybody can commit when living a mundane life. Many deal with transgressing prohibitions common to many societies: crime, adultery, lying, robbery, breaking of

⁶ Y. Imaeda, *Histoire du Cycle de la Naissance et de la Mort*, Droz, Paris-Genève: 1979.

religious vows, mistreatment of another human being. However, others are related solely to the Buddhist culture, more particularly to the Tibetan culture, and are intimately linked to the lives of the people.

After travelling through the different hells and meeting people who gives him/her messages to take back to their relatives, the *delok* appears in front of the Lord of the Dead. After judging the *delok*, the Lord of the Dead gives him/her a message for the living. This message can be summarized by the two sentences that the Lord of the Dead deliver in the narrative of Karma Wangdzin: "Human beings who try to do virtuous deeds should be sent to the paradises. Those who have accumulated sins should be sent to the hells."⁷

This message usually constitutes a relatively large part of the narrative but its length varies according to the text. Two of the longest messages are found in the narratives of Sangye Chödrom and Kunga Rangdröl. The last part of the message always concerns the *delok*: "And the Lord of the Dead again added: 'Girl, when you go on pilgrimages to all the mountains, big and small, and when you visit the place where the *delok* Karma Wangdzin lived, all the people will come and ask you to tell them about what happens in the *bardo*. Amongst these people, to those who are predestinated, you must explain everything without hiding anything. You must exhort the people to practise religion. Your lama will tell you the same thing as me. You must go to the fortress of sPu na kha where the seat of the Bhutanese government is situated. Amongst the lords and the people, young and old alike, some will revere you and will have faith in you. Others will insult you and will give you evil looks. At that time, people will say various things about you. You must explain everything to them without hesitation. Great benefit for the people will result from your action.

⁷ *Karma dbang 'dzin rnam thar*, Thimphu, 220.

'As for the duration of your life and the difficulties you will meet, here they are: You will have a problem when you are thirty years old; but at that time, your death will be postponed and you will come back here only when you are fifty. You will not fear my attendants and we will meet again like a father and his child. Then you will be reborn on earth in a "hidden and blessed country". Your name will be Dechen Wangmo. When you finish converting the people of this country, you will be reborn in the country of Uddiyana⁸, the land of the *dakini*. Do not eat fish, pork or eggs anymore. You must grasp my speech perfectly! Now, as they are ready to burn your corpse, you must go back to earth immediately.'⁹

After having received the message of the Lord of the Dead, the *delok* returns to earth to narrate her experience, deliver the different messages and exhort people to practise religion. The return of the conscious principle to the corpse takes place very rapidly. The *delok* regains her consciousness, and the cloth which was covering her falls off. Not surprisingly, this terrifies the person who was looking after the corpse. The family is called and the people of the village assemble. Some believe and accept the *delok* experience, while some think she is a trickster or a demon. Finally, the *delok* is recognized as a holy person and relates her experience throughout the country.

The following is the relation of the return of Sangye Chödrom: "As I was thinking I had to go up, a green wind blew and carried me up. In an instant I arrived at my village, Zachu gang. A woman who was coming to fetch water passed by and we walked a while together. I did not recognize my corpse as it was like the corpse of a pig. As I was thinking I did not know what it was, I lost consciousness and it was as if darkness was falling. My body moved a little and a man who was there checked to see if there was any heat in my heart. My heart was warming up. The seven women who were looking after my corpse started

⁸ The country where Padmasambhava was born, identified with the region of Swat in present-day Pakistan.

⁹ *Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom rnam thar*, Thimphu, 182-189.

screaming: 'The girl is back!' And they started crying and moaning. My mother then arrived. One by one, she took off the clothes that were wrapped around my body and she shouted: 'Daughter, are you back?' She took my hand and started crying and moaning too. At dawn on the seventh day of the seventh month, all the villagers assembled and they said: 'The girl is back from the country of the Dead.' They came to see me and everybody was talking at the same time. My parents and my family gave me all kinds of food and drinks. But, as my body and my mind had been separated for seven days, my throat had dried up and I could not even drink water. The pious people who were there asked me where I had gone during these seven days. Many women, full of faith, looked at me and cried. Some people were jealous and became angry. People who had a good karma prostrated themselves in front of me and were going around me. As for the sinners, they did not believe anything of what I was saying, and these demons said that I was not telling the truth. But all the people assembled around me begged me to relate to them what happens in the *bardo*."¹⁰

My research in Nepal and Bhutan in 1980-1984 led to the discovery that a few *delok* still existed today in peripheral regions, far from centralized powers and they seemed to be only women while men - albeit rare- do appear in the historical tradition, as seen earlier.

This research also showed that the *delok* did not travel to the netherworld only once, as the biographies let us suppose, but at regular intervals during "séances" which occurred on auspicious days of the month. In fact, these *delok* were akin to shamans, but shamans who had been Buddhicized in such a way and for such a long time, that they had lost the memory

¹⁰ *Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom rnam thar*, Thimphu, 190-192.

of their shamanistic origin.¹¹ They were "dozing shamans" to quote the great anthropologist Philippe Sagant from an article about the Limbu shamans of Nepal.¹²

After an initial crisis or sudden illness which caused their first "death" and travel to the netherworld, the *delok* "died" for several hours on auspicious days of the Buddhist calendar. These days were known by the people who came and asked her news from their deceased relatives and which merit-making actions they should perform for the deceased in order to speed their release from hells. The *delok* then covered herself with a cloth and without a transe, or any special paraphernalia, fell into a deep slumber which they called "death". After several hours of total stillness, she came back to her senses and her return was signalled first by shrieks and loud sighs, then by a long song. The *delok* described the sufferings of the relatives and delivered the message to perform certain rituals, erect prayers flags, say the *mani* formula, build a stupa and any other pious deed which would then be transferred to the deceased person. The *delok* was the person who can deal with a world which ordinary beings could not reach. Because the *delok* blurred the border between the worlds of the dead and the living, she was seen as a potential threat and was not permitted to be present during funeral rites or births, also for fear of polluting herself (*drip*).

But the function of the *delok* went beyond being a messenger between the living and the dead. As a woman, she was seen as being close to ordinary people's worries and she could also advise the living on problems affecting them personally or their community. She exhorted them to behave in the right and appropriate way and thus, she became a restorer of the social order.

"Death management" and restoring the social order coupled with travelling to the netherworld are usually associated with the shaman's role. It must however be stressed that

¹¹ Pommaret (1989) 2010.

¹² P. Sagant, "Le Chamane assoupi", in *Asie du Sud, traditions et changements*, Paris: 1979, 244-247; reprinted in *The Dozing Shaman. The Limbu of Eastern Nepal*, New-Delhi: OUP, 1996.

the modern *delok* was not aware of this shamanistic underlayer and that they were totally set in her Buddhist beliefs. And this was reinforced by the fact that the biographies of the *delok* of the past which they often knew through oral transmission, totally obliterated any shamanistic aspect. In these biographies the discourse was controlled by the Buddhist religious ideology.

Women on the fringes of Buddhism, the *delok* did not threaten the established religious order or interfere with the monks' functions in soteriological rituals. Still they responded and soothed in a simple way the people's anxiety about their dead relatives.

Buddhist and shamans, this fundamental ambiguity of the *delok* - which they were not even aware of-, was probably one of the factors which allowed them to survive. Women, they were allowed to play a role in a male oriented religious context because they never contested the monastic hierarchy. They were on the side of the religious establishment, were not potentially dangerous for the monks' supremacy in soteriological rituals and dealt with the dead in an "unorthodox" way.

While the *delok* survived for centuries as a living tradition¹³, in the last 20 years in remote areas of the Himalayas, modernisation, education as well as a certain homogenisation of Buddhism seem to have made these intriguing figures a tradition of the past.

¹³ Cf. the biography of a 20th century *delok* Dawa Drolma, *Delog: Journey to realms beyond death*, Junction city: Padma publishing, 1995.