

Materials on the Life of Yumo Mikyo Dorjé: Two Translations and a Discussion of Sources

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Sources: Yumo's Texts and Biographies

Yumo's known writings are comprised of four short texts collectively known as the *Cycle of the Four Radiant Lamps*.¹ Though these are not widely studied today, they were significant works in the early Tibetan Kālacakra tradition. Composed in the 11th century, they were still being taught in the 14th century by Dolpopa,² and were also mentioned in the *Blue Annals*,³ which was written in the 15th century. Tāranātha mentions that Yumo composed numerous treatises,⁴ so it is plausible that other works by Yumo await rediscovery.

Numerous short biographies tell us details about Yumo's life. Two of these biographies are translated here. The first, and earliest, is written by Gyelwa Yeshé (b. 1257), and is found in his collection of short biographies of Kālacakra adepts. The second is a very short sketch found in Tāranātha's collected works. The Tāranātha account does not add much to the Gyelwa Yeshé version, but it contains an important line crediting Yumo with teaching the distinctive Jonang position of other-emptiness.

Several other biographies of Yumo exist.⁵ The most important of these is found in a 14th century Kālacakra history of unknown authorship, now in the Musée Guimet in Paris.⁶ This

¹ *gsal sgron skor bzhi*. For a translation and analysis of one of these four, *The Lamp Illuminating Emptiness*, see my *Naked Seeing: The Great Perfection, the Wheel of Time, and Visionary Buddhism in 11th Century Tibet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² See Stearns' note in *The Buddha from Dolpo: A Study of the Life and Thought of the Tibetan Master Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltsan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 200n11.

³ See Roerich, George and Gendün Chöpel (trans.), *The Blue Annals* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996, reprint), 640.

⁴ *bstan bcos kyang mang du mdzad*. See the translation below.

⁵ Aside from the biographies mentioned here, mentions of Yumo can also be found in *The Blue Annals*, the foundational history completed in 1476 by Gölo Zhönnupel. See Roerich and Gendün Chöpel's translation, 179, 186, 636, 640, 755, and 765ff.

Yumo also appears in Lodrö Donyod Rinpoche's *dus 'khor chos 'byung rgyan indra nI la'i phra tshom* (Darjeeling: Bokar Ngedon Chokhor Ling, 2005), 441; and in Ngawang Lodrö Drakpa's *jo nang chos 'byung zla ba'i sgron me* (Krung-go'i-bod-kyi-shes-rig-dpe-skrun-khang, 1990), 18. Additional sources are mentioned in D.S. Ruegg, "The Jo Nan Pas: A School of Buddhist Ontologists According to the Grub Mtha' Sel Gyi Me Lon," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 83, no. 1 (1963): 80n20.

biography closely mirrors the version by Gyelwa Yeshé, but is more elaborate and helps with many of the details. Also of interest is an account by Khedrup Jé (b. 1385), which appears in his monumental commentary on *Stainless Light*. This is the most detailed biography of Yumo; closely related to (and possibly based on) the above manuscript, it adds some interesting details related to Yumo's later life.

Translations: Two Biographies of Yumo Mikyo Dorjé

(1) "The Biography of Yumo the Great Siddha," by Gyelwa Yeshé

*I bow to the feet of Yumo the great siddha,
Who thoroughly trained in all objects of knowledge and became a scholar,
Who possessed the esoteric instructions on the root tantras, and made effort at
accomplishment,
Who attained all siddhis, and acted without limit for the benefit of others.*

Now, to tell of Yumo the *mahāsiddha*, who was guided by the great Drogön Namla-tsek. His birthplace was at the foot of Kailash, the white snow mountain.⁷ His region was Ladö, and his family line was Ngam. He was born as the son of a father named Trompa and a beautiful mother; they had four sons.⁸ In the land of Ladö Lhotser, there lived a master named Zhön-tsun. They asked him to be their preceptor, and in the tiger-year all six of the householders became ordained. Each of these householders remained ordained for life.

When he was young, he listened to the doctrine from Sétön Drachen-dzin of Dönmo-ri, and from Bentön Töpa-ga; those two gave him the name Yumo. Then, he listened to teachings on *madhyamaka* and *pramāṇa* with Pégé Tong.

At that time, it was said that among the Tibetan *vinaya*-holders, there was none greater than Lama Sok Chenpo, and everyone gathered around him. He [i.e. Yumo] also went there, listened to the *vinaya*, and trained. Lama Sokpo Chenpo recited *The Root Vinaya Sūtra*,⁹ and explained it to his circle of students. Sok Chenpowa was a student of Purangpa, and so [like his teacher] was also learned in the field of conduct. Thus [Yumo] trained there.

⁶ Cyrus Stearns mentions this manuscript in *Buddha from Dolpo*, 199n10, and dates it to 1360. Stearns and Dan Martin have both suggested that the text is written by a disciple of Dolpopa. Many thanks to Dan Martin for providing a typed version of this rare text.

⁷ I suggest 1038 as a plausible birthdate; see my *Naked Seeing*, 353n25.

⁸ CB notes that Yumo was the youngest. KJ mentions that the family was nomadic.

⁹ Guṇaprabha's *Vinayasūtra* (D4146).

Later, when [Yumo] became interested in secret mantra, he learned Hevajra and the lesser tantras.¹⁰ At that time, one of his friends said, “In the winter of this year, what religious activities will you do?”

“I will stay in retreat, and copy texts on secret mantra.”

His friend said, “In the archive, there is [a manuscript of] *The Vajragarbha Commentary [to the Hevajra Tantra]*....”

In this way, a previous karmic connection awoke [in Yumo], and he said, “Just through hearing [the name of this text] I feel an amazing joy! Can I get this book?”

“Come get it,” [his friend said], and thus [Yumo] acquired it.

Then, reading while copying it in retreat, he was filled with dedication and prayed, “If I could only meet someone who understands this, what joy that would be!”

His friend said, “Paṇḍit Somanātha understands it.”

“Is he a real person?”

“Of course he is real!”

“Where does he live?”

“He is staying in Ü.”

Thus [Yumo] traveled to Ü,¹¹ and went before Khampa Tiuwa, a scholar in the field of conduct. [Yumo] copied the book *Compendium of Trainings*,¹² and practiced it, coming to completely understand it. At that time, a *paṇḍit* was staying in Karchung Gyai-dé, and there was talk that this was the Kaśmiri Dawa Gönpö.¹³ Because of what he had heard earlier, [Yumo] asked [Khampa Tiuwa]¹⁴, “Does he know the *Vajragarbha [Commentary]*?”

“Not only that, he also knows the great tantric system of Kālacakra.”

“If I ask for it, will he grant it?”

“Usually he is stingy with the doctrine. But now he is going to Nepal and needs a porter. If you are able to go, then he will give it.”

¹⁰ CB and KJ are more clear that this is still during his time with Sok Chenpo.

¹¹ In CB and KJ, instead of debating if Somanātha is a “real person” (*mi dngos*), they discuss if he is a “person from the old times” (*sngon dus kyi mi*). They are unable to resolve this, and Yumo goes to Ü (*dbus*), to study with Khampa Tiuwa, rather than in pursuit of the Kaśmiri Paṇḍit. This could fit with the present history as well, though Gyalwa Yéshé appears to indicate that Yumo went to Central Tibet because he heard Somanātha was there.

¹² Reading *bslab btus* for *bslab dus*. This refers to Śāntideva’s *bslab pa kun las btus pa* (*Śikṣāsamuccaya*), D3968. The reference to the field of “conduct” (*spyod phyogs*) also suggests Śāntideva’s famous *byang chub spyod pa la ’jug pa* (D3898).

¹³ I.e. Somanātha.

¹⁴ KJ specifies that he asked his master (*slob dpon*).

Sumpa Dorjé Zhönnu made the request for him, when he and the *lama*¹⁵ were editing the *Root Hevajra Mantra*¹⁶ and the *Hundred Syllables of the Tathāgatas*.¹⁷ When he made the request,¹⁸ [Somanātha] pointed at some golden lamps and numerous cases of musk,¹⁹ saying, “Carry these to Nepal! If you accomplish this, next year I will return to Tibet and at that time I will give you the doctrine.” [Yumo] then said that he would go.

He went to get some books that he had left in the care of Gompa Tsüldrak, who said, “Now where are you going, to Tsang?” When [Yumo] explained what had just happened, [Gompa Tsüldrak replied,] “You will not get the doctrine from the *paṇḍit*. Through this [trip], you would just be performing penance—you won’t get any doctrine.” Saying this, he told him many [similar] stories.²⁰ “But there is someone who has obtained all of the *lama*’s doctrines without exception. This is my great *lama*, who is dwelling at Norzang.”²¹ Thus [Yumo] was moved to listen to [teachings from] him there.

Using their influence, Tönpa Gyelwa-ö, Gompa Wangsö, and Gompa Tsüldrak assisted him in making the request. In support of the request, they brought a few measures of gold, a nice conch-shell, and a fine skull-cup that possessed all the proper attributes. Offering these, they made the request. [The *lama*] said, “Through these you have become close to me, making an auspicious connection. The *vinaya*-holder Sok Chenpo teaches the doctrine to all the venerable ones who do not yet know how to eat a meal [properly], and who do not yet know how to wear the clothes [of a monk]. He has acted like your father. Because you are held in his heart, you have one good quality. Come!”

¹⁵ GY is not completely clear about who is doing the editing, only stating “the two: he and the lama” (*bla ma dang khong gnyis*). This would seem to mean Sumpa Dorjé Zhönnu (“he”) and Somanātha (“the lama”). However, CB and KJ both specify that Somanātha and Lama Namla-tsek were the ones engaged in the editing; in this light, it could be read as “he [Somanātha] and the lama [Drogön Namla-tsek].”

¹⁶ *dgyes rdor rtsa sngags*.

¹⁷ *de bzhin gshegs pa'i yi ge brgya pa*.

¹⁸ KJ (p. 178.3) notes that on meeting Yumo, Somanātha drank from a full cup of barley beer, and offered the remainder to Yumo. Yumo refused to drink, a choice that some in attendance considered to be disrespectful.

¹⁹ Reading *gla rtsi* for *bla rtsi*.

²⁰ This was apparently not the first time that Somanātha was on the lookout for porters. See Roerich and Gendün Chöpel (trans.), *The Blue Annals*, 757, where Somanātha tries to get Drogön Namla-tsek to carry some possessions to Sikkim.

²¹ *nor bzangs*. CB and KJ both give the epithet “The One from Norzang,” spelling it, respectively, *snor bzangs pa* and *snor bzang pa*. The name of this lama is not specified here, but it must be Drogön Namla-tsek, Yumo’s main spiritual guide, who is mentioned above in the introductory verses, and whom the *Blue Annals* cites as Yumo’s principal Kālacakra teacher.

This great physician²² had reached the age of seventy-two. It is said that he stayed four [more] years, while [Yumo] listened to and trained in all of his teachings without exception. Thus he came to understand works like the esoteric oral instructions on the *Litany of Names of Mañjuśrī*,²³ the *Clear Lamp*,²⁴ and so forth.

Through his decision to entrust the *dharma* [to Yumo, the *lama*] became ill. But at this time, he supplicated the *ḍākinīs*, praying “Until I have finished giving the doctrine to this Teacher from Tsang, do not kill me!”²⁵ He then gave all of his advice, delivering it in oral explanations, giving it without having to be asked. Once he had completed the others, [Yumo] requested the twelfth initiation.²⁶ [The *lama*] thus performed the vast ritual, giving the *vajra*-master lord empowerment, using ten secret-mantra *yoginī* action-seals.

After giving him oral instructions on the eleven points of the *Vajra Words*,²⁷ he said, “This unravels the difficult points of all the classes of tantra in the entire secret mantra [vehicle]. It is transmitted from the heart of one *lama* to the next. So in entrusting this doctrine to another, do not explain it to more than one fortunate student.” Putting a *torma* in [Yumo’s] hand, he made the secrecy-seal of the *ḍākinīs*, saying, “In general, this is something that should not be explained to those who have not completely obtained the tantra,²⁸ and who have not received the *vajra*-holder lord empowerment.” It is said that, because he was not liberated by mere examples, he received it three times thereafter, having to return to the master and settle the teaching in order to grasp the words and understand the meaning.

Thus, this holy being, guided by the holy *lamas*, was trained by four spiritual friends,²⁹ and became renowned as a great *vinaya* holder. His superior insight blazed up, resulting in a vast

²² *lha rje*, referring to Drogön Namla-tsek.

²³ *'jam dpal ye shes sems dpa'i don dam pa'i mtshan yang dag par brjod pa* (D0362).

²⁴ *sgron gsal*; a Guhyasamāja commentary by the tantric Candrakīrti (D1801).

²⁵ The suggestion here is that Yumo’s teacher, seeing Yumo’s good qualities, deliberately breaks an order of secrecy, and accepts the punishment from the protectors of the tantric teachings he is giving. “Teacher from Tsang” (*gtsang ston*) here refers to Yumo.

²⁶ This refers to the Kālacakra tradition, which usually is said to have eleven initiations. There is a particular method of counting where the “*vajra*-master lord” empowerment (*rdo rje slob dpon bdag po'i dbang*) is considered to be the twelfth.

²⁷ *gdam ngag rdo rje tshig gi gnas bcu gcig pa*. I am not clear on the identity of this text; some candidates might be: D1368, D1389, or D1401.

²⁸ *rgyud rdzogs par ma thob*, meaning those who haven’t obtained the initiation (*dbang*), reading transmission (*lung*), and guidance (*khrid*).

²⁹ This would seem to be the lama (Drogön Namla-tsek), and his three students (Tönpa Gyelwa-ö, Gompa Wangsö, and Gompa Tsüldrak).

understanding of the holy *dharma*. Possessing great compassion, he became known as one who had methods even for those who were not suitable vessels.³⁰

Between the ages of fifty and eighty, he spread the holy *dharma*³¹ and performed vast activities, then totally completed his intention.³²

It is said that he had bound Gönpö Lhachen Pelbar³³ to an oath, and all of his actions were [thus] enlightened ones, performed in accordance with [Yumo's] orders. There were many students of the *siddha*, like Lama Drak Karwa, and so forth.

(2) “The Mahāsiddha Yumo,” A Biographical Sketch by Tāranātha

His family line was Ngam. His birthplace was at the side of Mt. Kailash. His ordinary ordination name was Dépa Gyelpo. His secret name was Mikyo Dorjé. He stayed with many *lamas* in Ütsang. He became a student who *lama* Sok Düldzin Tsültrim held in his heart. Later when he became interested in secret mantra, he listened to many of the tantric doctrines. Hearing the name of the *Vajragarbha Commentary*, he felt an immeasurable joy. He stayed with *lama* Drotön for five years, and received the entirety of the initiations, tantras, and esoteric instructions that he possessed. The *lama* even gave him the lord initiation and the great-lord initiation just as they are described in the [Kālacakra] tantra's commentaries.

Later, he lived in the land of Uyük,³⁴ and authored many treatises. He began the tradition of the tenet system of tantric other-emptiness.³⁵ He attained unimpeded supernatural perception. There are records of him emanating as crows,³⁶ cuckoos, and so forth, emanating to various lands, and performing magical transformations. His renown as a *siddhi*, too, was extremely great, and spread across the land. His spiritual son was Dharmesvara Chökyi Wangchug.

³⁰ *snod ldan ma gtogs par thabs kyis 'dzin pa*, i.e. he didn't just teach tantra to the highest students, but also taught ordinary doctrines to those who weren't suited for esoteric instruction.

³¹ KJ and CB mention that Yumo's teaching was primarily in Uyük, which is in Tsang. GY's account of Yumo's activities is more modest in that it does not discuss magical powers. Several of the other Yumo biographies recount Yumo's ability to transform into a bird. KJ (p. 180.2) also mentions that when Yumo wished to have a spiritual heir, he performed a ceremony that transformed the power of a woman's ovum (*yum gyi rdul stobs su gyur*), leading to the birth of Machik Trülku Jobum, a renowned female Kālacakra adept.

³² This is a polite way of saying that he died.

³³ This seems to be the name of a *dharma* protector. See notes on a deity with this name in Réne Nebesky-Wojkowitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* (Kathmandu: Pilgrims, 1993), 53.

³⁴ *'u yug gi rgyal gnas*. KJ records the site as *nub ma'i mda' rgyal khab*.

³⁵ *sngags kyis gzhān stong grub mtha'i srol ka phye*.

³⁶ KJ mentions that he emanated himself as a crow to appear in front of the cave where one of his students was staying.

Abbreviations

GY = manuscript of Gyelwa Yeshé's *Biographies*.

CB = Manuscript history (*chos byung*) of unknown authorship.

KJ = Khedrup Jé's *Illuminating Reality*.

D = Dergé edition of the Kangyur and Tengyur. Note that the numbering is derived from the online catalog at the Tibetan and Himalayan library:

thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/kt/catalog.php#cat=d/k

Bibliography of Tibetan Sources

Gyelwa Yeshé. *Biographies of the Glorious Kālacakra Lamas in the Lineage of the Jonang Tradition* (*dpal ldan dus kyi 'khor lo jo nang pa'i lugs kyi bla ma bsgyud pa'i rnam thar*). My translation is based on a handwritten illustrated manuscript, said to be from Drepung Gomang Monastery; Yumo's biography begins on 12b. Gyelwa Yeshé's text has also been published in book format (Mi-rigs-dpe-skrun-khang, 2004) (TBRC, W27321).

Khedrup Jé. *Illuminating Reality: An Extensive Explanation of Stainless Light* (*dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i 'grel chen dri med 'od kyi rgya cher bshad pa de kho na nyid snang bar byed pa*). Published in *The Collected Works of the Lord mKhas-grub rJe dGe-legs-dpal-bzan-po*. New Delhi: Mongolian Lama Gurudeva, 1980, vol. kha, p. 176.5.

Tāranātha. *Important Points on the Origins of the Śrī Kālacakra Cycle* (*dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i chos bskor kyi byung khungs nyer mkho*). This is in Tāranātha's collected works, (TBRC, W22277) vol. 2. The passage on Yumo begins on 8b.2.

Unknown author. *Amazing Histories of the Realizations of [Masters Following] the Transcendent Victor Kālacakra* (*bcom ldan 'das dpal dus kyi 'khor lo'i chos 'byung ngo mtshar rtogs brjod*). An incomplete manuscript held in the Musée Guimet in Paris (no. 54588).

Yumo Mikyo Dorjé. *The Cycle of the Four Radiant Lamps* (*gsal sgron skor bzhi*). Gangtok, Sikkim: Sherab Gyaltzen and Lama Dawa, 1983. Note that in this published edition the author is mis-identified as A-wa-dhū-ti-pa-bsod-nams.

-----, *The Lamp Illuminating Emptiness. sTong nyid gsal sgron*. An independent manuscript of one of Yumo's above "four lamps." Included in *Jo nang dpe rnying phyogs bsgrigs*, TBRC W00KG0638.

Personal Names

Bentön Töpa-ga = ban ston thos pa dga'

Dawa Gönpö = zla ba mgon po

Dépa Gyelpo = dad pa rgyal po

Dharmeśwara Chökyi Wangchug = d+harme shwa ra chos kyi dbang phyug

Dönmo-ri = don mo ri
 Drak Karwa = brag dkar ba
 Drogön Namla-tsek = 'gro-mgon-gnam-la-rtsegs, a.k.a. sgro ston gnam la rtsegs
 Drogön = sgro ston, an alternative way of referring to Drogön Namla-tsek
 Gompa Tsüldrak = sgom pa tshul grags
 Gompa Wangsö = sgom pa dbang bsod
 Gönpö Lhachen Pelbar = mgon po lha chen dpal 'bar
 Gyelwa Yeshé = rgyal ba ye shes
 Khampa Tiuwa = 'kham pa lti'u ba
 Khedrup Jé = mkhas grub rje
 Machik Trülku Jobum = ma cig sprul sku jo 'bum
 Ngam = rngam, spelled rngan in GY
 Pégé Tong = spas ge mthong
 Purangpa = spu rangs pa
 Sétön Drachen-dzin = se ston sgra chen 'dzin
 Sok Chenpo = sog chen po
 Sok Düldzin Tsültrim = sog 'dul 'dzin tshul khrimts
 Sumpa Dorjé Zhönnu = sum pa rdo rje gzhon nu
 Tāranātha = tA ra nA tha
 Tönpa Gyelwa-ö = ston pa rgyal ba 'od
 Trompa = khrom pa
 Yumo Mikyo Dorjé = yu mo mi bskyod rdo rje
 Zhön-tsün = gzhon btsun

Place Names

Karchung Gyai-dé = dkar chung rgya'i sde
 Ladö = la stod
 Ladö Lhotser = la stod lho mtsher
 Norzang = nor bzangs
 Tsang = gtsang
 Ü = dbus
 Ütsang = dbus gtsang
 Uyük = 'u yug gi rgyal gnas