ON THE ICONOGRAPHICAL ORIGIN OF
LCAM-SRING, THE GOD OF WAR

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In the series of the Defenders of the Faith, in Sanskrit Dharmapala (auspicious), in Tibetan Chos-sk’yong ( ), who execute the will of the tutelaries, one of them has a special figure for Tibetan theology: Lcam-sring ( ), the God of War. The representation of these Defenders is of the fiercest kind, drag-po ( ) or drag-ge’ed ( ), and there was the problem of the origin of such iconographical conceptions. Some authors think that they are metamorphoses of the Hindu Kali Dour (skt bhair); others speak of a Chinese influence or a Tibetan origin, such representations coming possibly from ancient native gods or goddesses of the Ro ( ) culture, for instance, The Red Tiger devil, I shall study here the iconography of the God of War; as in my particular collection of Thankas I have some representations of this dharma-pala, they helped me in my work.

The usual representation which is in some of my Tibetan thankas is the following one:

He is red coloured and treads a horse with his right foot, and, with his left one, a naked man. With his right hand he brandishes a sparkling sword and between his lips he mothes a human heart. In his left hand he carries a box and a spear with a red flag green cornered. He has a frontal eye. His armour is covered by a floating vestment with sleeves. At his left, accompanying him, is Srog-bdag ( ) covered by an armour, sitting on a dark-grey wolf, in his right hand he carries a sword, and in his left one, a noose. At his right side appears Rig-bu-mo ( ), sitting on a light grey lion, with a knife in his right hand, and a’b’ur-te ( ) in the left one. He is surrounded by red devils, the "knife holders" (ger-thogs ) who cut the corpses which cover the battlefield, and who raven hearts, etc. They all carry a sword in their right hand.

It is a terrible Dnam-mchog-pala. His head has the colours aspect (K’t’a-bo ) of all those divinities and, just like his hands, it is red coloured. On his three-eyed forehead a skulls' wreath is placed, From his back hangs a chain of severed heads. In another image ( ), he is covered by a golden armour, and with his right foot he treads a horse and with the left one a naked man. With his right hand he brandishes
a sword, its pommel "pur-hu" shaped, and between his lips he
mouths a human heart. His left arm carries a bow and a spear. He
has a frontal eye, and on his head he bears a crown formed by five
skulls. Hanging from his waist we can see the great garland of human
heads symbol of these terrible divinities. He is surrounded by two
emotions of himself. In the upper part there are three fans; in the
middle, Chau-Kha pa ( ), sitting on a lotus in the attitude of medita-
tion; his hands resting on his chest and holding the stems of two
lotuses crowned, the right one by the sword, and the left one by the book
He is accompanied by two of his disciples: Mekh grub ( ) at the
right side, and Rgyal-bshis ( ) at the left one.

On another taka, this god is distinct from his usual iconography;
he is there on foot on a lotus, and no one is around him. With
his right hand he brandishes a sword, he is devouring a human heart
and carries a spear. The sun and the moon appear above. The paint-
ing is black, bright and yellow, red and white strokes. The divinity
is surrounded by fiery clouds. Below, a fantastic background covered
by bones.

It is well known that the Dha-mempalas have always a terrific
appearance, bordered by flames, with sword, spear and whip. They
are always of the fiercest fiendish kind. The Lha-no ( ) or pa-l-bhum-
la-mo ( ), "the queen of the warning weapon", is one of them;
she is surrounded by flames, riding on a white-faced horse, upon a
saddle made out of the skin of her own son; she is clad in human
skins and is eating a human body and drinking blood from a skull;
often she has serpents around her. As it is known she is worshi-
ped for seven days at the end of the twelfth month, and the offerings
are placed in a bowl made out of a human skull. The identification
Lha-no with the Sin Devi, (6 if 6) or the Eilli ( 6a ) of the Hindu my-
thology is evident; in the case of Lha-no there is also a big influence
of the prototype of the goddess Durga. (6 if 6)

According to Grunwedel and Pozdniew, Lhams-trin belongs
to the group of the arag-gzed, the "Terrible Eight" which are really the
following nine gods: Rung-rjes ( ), Lhams-trin ( ), Jig-med-khyen
( ) Gru-ran-po ( ), Mgon-nyer-po ( ), Bsam-tsen ( ), Rnam-tser ( ).
Grunwedel has doubt about the origin of Lhams-trin, he is thinking of Kordiska (6a 6a) or Skanda
(6a 6a) the God of War of Hinduism, son of Siva (6a 6a) and Parvati

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according to most of the Puranic texts. He notes the outstanding part played by the God of ‘War in the ‘Tsam’ ( ) dance. But I do not see in the Hindu iconography of Skanda anything which recalls the Tibetan God of War.

For my part, I think that almost every one of these terrible gods and goddesses, defenders of Buddhism, are coming from the same representations in Hinduism around the great Devi ( goddess) in her destructive or transforming aspect: Camunda, ( ) for instance, is an emanation of Durga ( goddess) and the Mahakandibha, ( goddess of the skull) gives the description of the black goddess with a sword, a whip, a noose, a collar of skulls and with her eyes full of blood and fury. The Devi takes the forms of the Yogini ( yogini) the witches and wretches who accompany Durga and of the Dakini ( dakhini), the demons, exiles of human flesh and companions of Kali ( goddess): we have, in the hindu demonology, the Grahi, witches who come into the body of new born and kill them, the Bhairavi ( goddess), who assist Siva ( ), and Durga, the Sakini ( goddess) who help the black goddess. All these forms are the female side of the gods of awe and terror, like Rudra ( , Bhairava ( , Bhutesvara ( , the “chief-of-the-phantoms”, with the serpents on his head and the color of skulls. All around these aspects of Siva-Rudra ( ) there is a very rich iconography which has had certain consequences on Tibetan mythology. All the gods of the Drag po kind have their Hindu counterpart: Rta-mgin la Hayagivu ( , Ye’rin-dge g’yi la Yamar ( , the Mitaksh’-gro-ma are the dakhini, the demonic tutelaries. Surely, all these black Tibetan gods are coming from local and primitive deities but the theological conception and definition issue from Hinduism. The tantric rites from Bengal brought these deities and they were assimilated with local genius, many of them from the Don cult.

I think that our God of War, Lasm-pring, belongs to that same class; all his characteristics are coming from the fiercest kind of Siva as Rudra ( and Kali ( ); the frontal eye, the sword, the noose, the serpents, the skulls, the eyes full or rage. He is a destroyer, and, in this aspect, a Tibetan masculine copy of Kali, the transformer of the World. the “Black” who is symbol of the destruction of the Creation: her black colour represents the darkness of the Vaid of the Universe, as Kali is said “to be clad with Space”. She is the Great Mother who unceasingly creates forms but life continues only by Death and Renewal. Kali is the goddess of the Infinite Power who creates, transforms and dissolves the manifestation of the Universe. This
aspect of transformation is represented by terrific instruments she carries, as the skulls, the blood, the serpents and the human corpses which surround her. Lcam-terug is also a destructive form of god; for this reason, he bears all the iconographical symbolism of the Great Goddess, and his appearance is very close to some representations of the Hindu Black Goddess.