PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON SOME TIBETAN
“SPIRIT MEDIUMS” IN NEPAL

Per – Arne Berglie
Tyreso, Sweden

Some of the most interesting recent studies on Buddhism concern the relationship between the “normative” Buddhism of the texts and the “practical” Buddhism among the people. M. E. Spiro sees Buddhism as comprising three separate but interlocking systems. He calls the three systems nibbanaic, kammatic and apotropaic Buddhism. The first two are soteriological systems, the first normative, the other nonnormative. The third system, apotropaic Buddhism, is a nonsoteriological system mainly concerned with protection from danger. I think that the activities of the Tibetan spirit-medium (dpa’ bo) may be seen as examples of apotropaic Buddhism. By this I do not mean to indicate that their practices are “magical” as opposed to the “religious” practices of the lamas or of pious layman. I simply want to stress the central theme in their work: the curing of the sick and the counteraction of harmful forces.

In this paper I intend to make a preliminary summary of material collected in Nepal during 1970 and 1971. It concerns four dpa’ bo living in a settlement for Tibetan refugees. The word dpa’ bo (literally “hero”; pronounced “pa-wo”) has been interpreted to mean “medium” or “sorcerer.” I do not, however, use these terms here, as they have unwanted connotations. The word dpa’ bo might better be interpreted as “spirit-medium,” taking the word in the meaning outlined by R. Firth. Firth distinguishes spirit possession, spirit mediumship, and shamanism. In spirit mediumship he stresses the communicative aspect of the possession to distinguish it from spirit possession. In the latter, the behaviour of the possessed is primarily regarded as the bodily expression of spirit manifestation. The line between spirit mediumship and shamanism is not so clearly drawn by Firth. In this connection it may be as well to

1. I would like to thank Mr. Ulf Drobin for many valuable comments and criticisms. I must also thank Mr. Donald Burton for revising my English.
say a few words about “Tibetan shamanism.” Several authors have discussed this problem. The opinions of these scholars differ, but they all point out various phenomena as examples of shamanism or of shamanistic traits in Tibetan religion. Central to their discussions are “spirit-mediums” of various types. A different view is held by M. Eliade and others, who do not consider possession as typical of shamanism in the strict sense of the concept. Eliade writes that “the specific element of shamanism is not the embodiment of ‘spirits’ by the shaman, but the ecstasy induced by his ascent to the sky or descent to the underworld.” This view of shamanism, however, seems too narrow, as possession occurs together with “soul-flight” also among North Asiatic shamans. A. Hultkrantz has proposed an extension of the meaning of the term shaman. He writes that a shaman is “a practitioner who, with the help of spirits, cures the sick or reveals hidden things etc. while being in an ecstasy.” Using such a wide definition one might speak of “Tibetan shamanism” in connection with the dpa’ bo. Many phenomenological parallels could easily be shown between North Asiatic shamanism and ritual possession among the Tibetans. Without concealing the phenomenological resemblances and the possible historical connections it is nevertheless evident that the use of the term “Tibetan shamanism” is a question of the breadth of the definition given to the concept shamanism.

The dpa’ bo were perhaps the most active religious functionaries in the settlement. Even more than the local lama they came into contact with the intimate and personal problems of the villagers. Their séances were popular and spectacular events where people gathered and met the gods face to face. On these occasions the reality of the supernatural world was convincingly shown to the spectators. I think it safe to say that the dpa’ bo acted in the centre of the religious life of the village.

Very little information on Tibetan “spirit-mediums” of the dpa’ bo type is to be gained from a study of the literature on Tibetan religion. More is known about the Lepcha dpa’ bo, who however seem to be dissimilar to the Tibetan variety. Most material on Tibetan ‘spirit-mediums’ concerns the high-ranking “oracles” possessed by gods with high statuses in the pantheon hierarchy. As will be evident, the dpa’ bo differ from these “oracles.” It is obvious that the different phenomena of ritual possession in Tibetan culture are manifold, historically as well as functionally.

During my fieldwork in India and Nepal I was in contact with eleven "spirit-mediums" and was able to attend séances with six of them. In my thesis I shall give a full treatment of my material. In this paper I intend to concentrate on four dpa' bo. The settlement or village in which they lived was inhabited by about 400 people. There was a handicraft centre where many earned their living. Others worked as porters or earned a livelihood from the occasional jobs available. In the village there was a small monastery, to which belonged a lama, a few monks and about ten child novices. This was a bka' rgyud pa monastery, rather poor and the building not yet completed. Most of the boys spent the nights in the homes of their parents. In the village there also lived a sngags pa (tantric yogin). He was an old man, called upon mainly to exorcise demons from houses when somebody in the household had fallen ill. The activities of the dpa' bo, the lama, and the sngags pa partly overlapped as they were asked to help in the same kinds of situations: someone was ill, someone was struck by misfortune, etc. I do not think, however, that it would be correct to regard them as competitors. As they used different methods for healing the sick or bringing good luck, they are rather regarded as complementary to each other. Furthermore, they were specialists in different kinds of maladies.

All the four dpa' bo were laymen. When not officiating at séances they lived quite ordinary lives.

1. Wangchuk (dBang phyug).

He was the oldest of the four, about forty years of age; he was married and had one son. The family was mainly supported by the wife's work at the handicraft centre. Wangchuk himself was a rather weak man and suffered from T. B. Nevertheless he worked as a porter whenever the opportunity was offered. He was born in eastern Tibet, but had spent a long time as a pilgrim in the western parts of the country.

2. Sechur (Sri gcod).

He was about thirty-two years old, married and had one child living with him. He was born in the north-eastern part of Tibet. He, too, worked as a porter.

3. Nyima (Nyi ma).

He was twenty-six years old and not married. He lived with his father, his younger sister and two younger brothers. He was occupied at the handicraft centre as a carpet weaver. He had been a dpa' bo for a rather short time, was not yet fully established, and consequently not often asked to perform. He was born in northern Tibet.

4. Rigdzen (Rig 'dzin).

He was a boy, chosen to be a dpa' bo. He was born near Lake Nam Tso in the middle of the fifties. His father was dead and he was living with his mother. He was just passing through the period of testing (as described below, p. 90-92) during my stay in the village.
I collected my information mainly in two ways. Firstly, in interviews and conversations with the dpa’bo, with the help of an interpreter. Secondly and perhaps more rewardingly, by making tape recordings of complete séances and afterwards listening to the tapes together with the dpa’bo whose seance had been recorded. On these occasions everything heard from the tapes (much was impossible to hear owing to the noise from the drum and the gshang) was written down in Tibetan by interpreter, who most of the time was Rigdzen. The dpa’bo then commented on the text and gave explanations of difficult passages whenever he could. I recorded altogether eight séances, six of which I was able to discuss with the dpa’bo concerned. Sometimes there were obvious contradictions between what the dpa’bo said when possessed and what he had said in his normal state. According to my informants there was no doubt about what was to be most trusted: during the séance it was the god who spoke, not the dpa’bo. During the séances the possessed dpa’bo were able to give much more information concerning the gods, various ritual practices, etc than in their normal state.

THE RECRUITING OF THE dpa’bo.

The father of Wangchuk was a dpa’bo, but according to his son not a good one. His mother’s father was a dpa’bo, too, and it was to him that Wangchuk owed most of his knowledge. Wangchuk was preceded by eight dpa’bo in his family line, one in each generation. He himself was the ninth and he was convinced that his son would be the tenth.

Sechur’s father was a dpa’bo.

Nyima’s father’s brother was a dpa’bo, as was also his mother’s brother who was living in exile in India.

Rigdzen’s father was a dpa’bo and so was his mother’s father. His mother’s brother, now living in Dolpo in Nepal, was also a dpa’bo. Rigdzen would eventually become the fifteenth dpa’bo is his family line.

Thus it is quite clear that the hereditary transmission of the office was very important—a long line of dpa’bo in the family was taken as a guarantee of the trustworthiness of performing dpa’bo. It was, however, not enough to have a dpa’bo heritage. If a person was to become a dpa’bo this had to be confirmed by election or a call from the gods.

Wangchuk was about ten years old when the gods revealed themselves to him for the first time. He was herding sheep when he suddenly saw wonderful divine beings. He felt an irresistible desire to follow them, and this he did without knowing where he went. Later he woke from his trance in an unknown place. The experience was repeated and continued for about three years. When he was thirteen he consulted
a lama. The latter understood the situation and made him pass some tests. After this he was able to start practising as a dpa’bo.

When Sechur was fifteen years old his head became “empty.” He wandered about not knowing what he did. Then he saw remarkable things no one else saw: gods, demons, strange animals, etc. He did not understand what was happening to him and went on several pilgrimages. But nothing helped. Finally, he went to another dpa’bo, who identified the beings who had revealed themselves to him. After this he could set up as a dpa’bo.

Before becoming a dpa’bo Nyima was a sgrung pa, a bard, who can usually recite the epic of Gesar. When Nyima was about thirteen he had some strange experiences. He was visited while asleep by a man who sang the whole Gesar epic to him. It was just like a dream, but yet not a dream. The man was all dressed in white and his head was of silver and gold. This being visited him every night for two years. So when Nyima was fifteen years old he could sing the whole epic by heart. Then about one year later the call came to become a dpa’bo. He saw gods riding on horses and when they urged him to accompany them he complied. He was just like a “madman” (Tib. snyon pa). But it was not until many years later that he could pass the necessary tests and receive a blessing from a lama. After which he could set up as a dpa’bo. Usually he performed only when asked by close friends or when his own family needed help.

For Rigdzen the period of call from the gods was not yet over when I was staying in the village. This had been going on for quite some time, and it was rather disturbing for himself and those about him. He was often irritated and angry for no reason. He walked in his sleep, did not eat for days, and so forth. He saw the gods, blue and red figures. He followed them and when he returned to his senses found himself in unexpected places far from his home. During my stay Rigdzen was being tested by Wangchuk and I will give an account of this below.

As demonstrated here the phenomenon of divine election is rather homogeneous. This part of a dpa’bo career was often quite embarrassing to him. His difficulties came to an end after the tests, i.e. after the identification of the supernatural beings involved. The dpa’bo, however, retained his ability to see gods and demons outside the context of the séances. Wangchuk stressed that the age of thirteen years was the age at which all good dpa’bo received their election. Interesting parallels to the importance attached to the age of thirteen are to be found in the legends of the old Tibetan kings, as

---

13. The literature on the epic and the bard is copious, but Stein 1959 is the only exhaustive study.

well as in the legend of the founder of *Bon* as it is given in the *Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long*.\(^{15}\)

**TESTS**

After receiving the call from the gods the *dpa’ bo*-to-be must be tested. This is necessary to establish the exact identity of the gods (or demons) the candidate sees or is visited by. The test, which can be arranged in many different ways, must be conducted by someone who is himself able to see the supernatural beings, i.e. by a lama, a *sngags pa* or by another *dpa’ bo*.

Wangchuk was tested by a lama in a procedure more or less identical with one he himself used when testing Rigdzen.

Sechur refused to tell me anything about the tests he had passed.

Nyima had been tested both by both Sechur and Wangchuk. During my stay he performed once when they were both present in order to control his descriptions of the gods.

As I was in a position to attend one of the séances in which Rigdzen was tested, I intend to give a full account of what took place. The séance was held on the evening of the fifteenth day in the second Tibetan month (as calculated by Wangchuk). No particular preparations had been made, but Rigdzen had carefully avoided meat and *chang* (beer) that day. This he did in order, as he said, not to evoke the wrath of the gods. The first part of the séance proceeded as usual: the altar was arranged by Wangchuk, after which he sang the invocations to the gods, inviting them to come to the place. After the invocations, during the customary short pause, Wangchuk tied a white ribbon around the fourth finger of Rigdzen’s left hand and a red one around the fourth finger of the right. Rigdzen himself tied a piece of white cloth around his head, being careful to form it into a beak-like top in front.

In order to make it easier to understand the following procedure mention must here be made of the way in which the possession is thought to take place. The possessing god is thought to enter the body through certain “channels” (Tib. *rtsa*). One of these “channels” has its opening in the fourth finger of the left hand, another in the fourth finger of the right. Through the first, the “channel” in the left hand, the possessing god enters if he is a *lha* (*lha* is a class of gods), and through the “channel” in the right hand, if he is a *btsan* or *klu* (again classes of gods to be explained below, p. 104). When the fingers are tied the possession cannot take place, and only the “light” (Tib. *‘od gzer*) of the gods can enter. One can then see the gods clearly if the “channels” are clean.

\(^{15}\) *Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long* fol. 410.
After the brief interval Wangchuk sang a short song, put his head-dress (Tib. rigs lnga) and let himself be possessed by the god who was to carry out the task of the evening. In this case it was Thang lha'i thang sras mchor bo. Wangchuk was now drumming very fast and Rigidzen, who was sitting cross-legged close to me on a bench on Wangchuk's right, started to tremble and then to shake. As the intensity of the drumming increased Rigidzen's shaking became more and more vehement. The possessing god then asked, through the mouth of Wangchuk, why he had been called and he was told the reason. Wange-huk now took a handful of rice, blew in it, and threw it at Rigidzen, who was shanking, snorting and hissing violently. Wangchuk knelt, took the bundle of feathers from the altar (see below) and waved it to and fro in front of Rigidzen's face. Then there was a period of violent drumming, during which Rigidzen jumped and swayed on his seat.

Wangchuk then asked Rigidzen to tell what he saw in the phyi gling (one of the mirrors on the alter, the one in which the lha stay during the seance). Rigidzen now sang, as it seemed with the utmost difficulty, snorting and grunting between the words. He was barely able to press the words out of his mouth. In spite of repeated urgings from Wangchuk, Rigidzen was soon unable to articulate any more; he could only groan. Wangchuk then leaned forward and untied Rigidzen's left-hand finger. He then sat down again and began to describe the lha in the phyi gling. After this he once more resumed his violent drumming and Rigidzen again started to shake. Rigidzen now had to tell what he saw in the bar gling (the mirror in which the members of the bstan class stay during the seance). He tried hard but without much success. Wangchuk now took off the red ribbon on Rigidzen's right hand. Rigidzen seemed completely unaware of what was happening around him. Then, for the third time, Wangchuk resumed his drumming and Rigidzen immediately started to shake and jump. Wangchuk took the white and the red ribbons from the altar where he had put them, blew on them, and then tied them again on the fourth finger of each of Rigidzen's hands. Rigidzen was now sitting with his head hanging down and leaning to one side. He was completely motionless. Wangchuk sang for a long time, then threw rice at Rigidzen, who slowly came to. He looked around him, took off his head-cloth, stood up and stepped outside on unsteady legs as Wangchuk began the final part of the seance. After the seance Rigidzen told me that when Wangchuk was drumming the pain in his arms and shoulders was almost unendurable and made it very difficult to sing. During the seance his "consciousness" (Tib rnam shes) had been in his body all the time. That was why he could remember, though dimly, what had happened. The outcome of the test this time was that Rigidzen was to wait some time and then try again.

The test, as has already been mentioned, aims at establishing the identity and nature of the beings the dpa' bo candidate sees. But even if the candidate passes the tests and receives blessings from a lama he is not completely safe from evil-minded
demons, who never tire of trying to sneak into his altar-mirrors or even into his body in order to disturb the séance. According to my informants there are three classes of dpa’bo: the good, the mediocre and the bad. It is of course important to know to which of these classes a dpa’po belongs. When living in Tibet the young dpa’bo had to go on pilgrimage to the mountain of Targo. 16 On this pilgrimage he was to find out to what class he actually belonged. Targo, together with Lake Dangra, 17 plays a very important role for the dpa’bo. Targo is the seat of a group of btsan, members of which often possess the dpa’bo. In this mountain there is a cave in which Padma ‘byung gnas (Padmasambhava) is said once to have meditated and it is to this particular cave that the dpa’bo must go. Inside the cave there are three stones: one for the dpa’bo to sit on, one for incense and one, somewhat higher, for the altar. In this cave the dpa’bo was to invoke the gods. A bad dpa’bo was bound to die during the performance. His blood would stream out through his nostrils. Afterwards his bodily remains could be found outside the cave and his head-dress and other belongings inside, a attached to a string. A mediocre dpa’bo, on the other hand, would survive and could leave the place without anything happening. A good dpa’bo, finally, would not only survive, but on leaving the cave would find treasures (Tib. gter) of some kinds: a drum, a gshang, medicine, etc.

But there exist also several methods with which practically anyone can test a dpa’bo. Here I will just mention one which was considered very funny by my informants. The demons who are most often suspected to take up their abode in the dpa’bo are the the’urang. 18 As these demons are very fond of food, they are said to leave the body of the dpa’bo immediately if a plate of food is placed nearby. If the dpa’bo is possessed by one of the the’urang he will suddenly and unexpectedly come to himself again.

TRAINING

The lama who tested Wangchuk also taught him how to test prospective dpa’bo in his turn. One important activity of the dpa’bo is the healing of illness by sucking the object or substance causing the illness out of the patient’s body. This Wangchuk learned how to do from his maternal grandfather. The grandfather made a small figure of “dough” (Tib. spags, i.e. rtsam pa, roast-flour, mixed with water or tea) in the semblance of a human being into which he put a piece of meat. Wangchuk then succeeded in sucking out the piece of meat when possessed.

17. On Dangra, see the references in note 16. (Mt. Targo and Lake Dangra are located in Western Tibet and were probably the locus of dpa’bo legends and activities primarily in reference to that region).
Sechur said that the only occasion on which he ever received any instruction was when he was told the names of the gods he had seen.

Nyima had been instructed by both Sechur and Wangchuk, but I could not obtain any details of their training.

Rigdzen had not yet received proper instructions.

During one of the seances with Nyima the possessing god said that there were four subjects a good dpa' bo ought to know: he must know about the "channels" (Tib. rtsa) in the body through which the possessing god enters and he must know how to describe the appearances of the gods. Both these subjects can be learned from a lama as well as from a dpa' bo. Further, he must know how to cure illness by sucking and he must know how to invoke the proper supernatural beings for this procedure (as will be described below p., 97-98, it is zoomorphic beings who possess the dpa' bo and make the sucking-out of illness possible). The last two subjects can only be learned from another dpa' bo.

It is considered very important for a young dpa' bo to choose a wise and honest dpa' bo as a teacher (Tib. dge rgyan). If the teacher is dishonest there is a possibility that he will steal gods from his pupil.

Theoretically the dpa' bo is independent of the lama's authority. Nevertheless, all the dpa' bo thought it necessary to have a lama's blessing for their work as a dpa' bo. It would be a most interesting task to investigate the relationship between the lamas and the dpa' bo in detail. One of my informants told me that his native district in Tibet was seldom visited by lamas, and on this account the local dpa' bo might sometimes, when possessed, act as a lama.

**THE PARAPHERNALIA OF THE dpa' bo.**

At the beginning of every seance the dpa' bo sets up a small altar. Wangchuk's way of going about this may be taken as an example. He built it in front of the house-altar; ideally the dpa' bo should have the altars on his right side when performing. Wangchuk started by forming a swastika (Tib. g. yung drung) of rice on the table or shelf that was to serve as a base for the altar. He then filled two bowls with spags and one with rice. The contents of these bowls were then given a cone-like form. The three bowls were put on the g. yung drung—the one with rice was placed to the left. In the spags-cone in the bowl in the middle he then put his big mirror, and behind this he planted a small stick usually three small pictures 19 fastened to it. These pictures depicted mGon po phyag drug (the six-armed Mahakala), Guru drag po (a manifestation

---

19. The Tibetan word for such a picture was pronounced tsagle by my informants: according to A. Waymen it is written tsa ka li (Wayman 1973: 56 f.).
of Padmasambhava), and Sa skya gong ma. Then one stick with pictures of Urgyan rin po che (Padmasambhava) and Karmapa were put in the left bowl and one stick with a picture of dpal ldan lha mo in the right. In front of these bowls he then placed three smaller ones containing tea (to the right), milk (in the middle), and water (to the left). Some smaller ritual items were then placed around the smaller bowls: a bundle of white feathers, two white shells and one spoon. Finally, a white scarf (Tib. kha btags) was stretched over the picture-sticks and an oil-lamp and some incense-sticks were lit just before the chanting of the invocations. The mirror (or mirrors) that the dpa’bo places on the altar is considered the most important part of his paraphernalia. During the seance the gods are present through their reflections in the mirror. The dpa’bo say that the gods stay in the mirror, and they are able to describe exactly the way the gods place themselves when they have arrived after the invocations. They stand in two lines converging backwards, with the leader of the class in the front of the line to the right. Interestingly enough, the mirror is always called gling, “world.” The mirror is so important because if it is not placed on the altar, the gods will not have a place to stay and will consequently not come. Although one mirror is enough, the dpa’bo ought to have three: one for each class of deity. The three mirrors are called phyi gling, bar gling, and nang gling. If the dpa’bo, as is most often the case, has only one mirror, it thought to be divided into three different concentric circles. As mentioned above, the lha stay in the phyi gling, the btsan in the bar gling and the klu in the nang gling. Instead of a mirror a dpa’bo might use, I was told, a knife for the same purpose. This he can do, for instance, when travelling and thus not able to take his whole equipment with him.

Wangchuk, Sechur and Nyima used the same kind of drum, the damaru, shaped like an hour-glass. It was made of wood, preferably sandal-wood. The drum is held in the right hand. In his left hand the dpa’bo held a gshang, a flat bell. Instead of the damaru he could have the big drum (Tib. rnga chen), which is beaten with a curved drumstick. In Tibet Wangchuk had always used the big drum. The drum is important because its sound is thought to reach the deities and make them come more willingly. In the séances it is sometimes said that “at first sound from the drum, the lha will come like slowly falling snow; at the second sound from the drum, the btsan will come like a hail-storm; at the third sound from the drum, the klu will come like

20. The head of the Sa skya Pa according to my informants. They were not able to give. Further information

21. For a description of this type of drum, see, for instance, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 399.

22. For a picture of a gshang, see Karmay 1972, fig: VII.
whirling snow-flakes.”

Wangchuk also used another musical instrument, a horn which (Tib. *rkang gling*) he blew three times during the invocations to greet the three classes of deities arriving.

Important in healing séances was the small figurine in the semblance of a human being (Tib. *mi lpa gs yang gzhi*) used by Wangchuk. It was made of leather with black stones as eyes and bird-claws attached to its hands and feet. How it was used will be described below.

The bundle of feathers has already been mentioned. It was always placed on the altar, but not very often used. It was only put to its real use in séances arranged in specific situations for the expulsion of demons. Such a séance was arranged at the request of families who had lost a child. Its central part consisted of the cutting off of a string made from nine threads. For the cutting the feather-bundle was used, the feathers of which were supposed to come from the *thang dkar* birds. The cutting of the string was thought to prevent further misfortunes befalling the family.

Another important part of the *dpa' bo* paraphernalia was the head-dress (Tib. *rigs lnga*). This was donned just a few moments before the possession took place, and this was the sign that the god was now acting through the *dpa' bo*. The *rigs lnga* is a five-lobed crown which is fastened to the head with strings. On the lobes are painted pictures, said to represent five *mkha' 'gro ma* (dakini), but in fact depicting the five buddhas known schematically to many scholars as “dhyani-buddhas.” In front of the outermost lobe at each side there are two “wings” attached to the strings. These “wings” are fan-shaped and painted in the colours of the rainbow. Each is decorated with two eyes, the eyes of the *khyung*-bird according to my informants. In front of these wings the so-called *snyan dar* hangs down at each side. The *snyan dar* consists of two big bundles of multi-coloured ribbons fastened together with a short string. The string is stretched over the *rigs lnga* and the bundles are consequently hanging down or each side in front of the *dpa'bo*’s shoulders. The *rigs lnga* could not be put on until the *dpa' bo* had wrapped a piece of red cloth around his had.

At the end of every séance, during the “*rigs lnga* game”, the *dpa' bo* makes a show of swinging and jerking his head in all possible ways to show that the headgear will

23. In Tibetan: (the words with uncertain orthography are preceded by *) “*dar skad dang Po giang la sa/lha dmag la kha 'bab' dra yod/dar skad de gnyis gtang la sa/ btsan dmag la ser *khang 'dril ba ltar/dar skad la gsum va stang sa la/jktu dmag la bu yug tshub 'dra yod’*. (*dar* was the colloquial pronunciation of *damaru*, drum). (See also figs. 1,3,4,5 and 6).

24. From the description my informants gave of the *thang dkar* birds, they seem to seem to be eagles (cf. Stein 1956: 392) rather than vultures (of Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 488).
not fall off until he wants it to it is thought of as guarded and kept on his head by one or two mkha’gro ma. Finally, is it held that during and right after the sáéance the rigs lnga brings luck. During the “rigs lnga game,” for instance, it might happen that people will go to the dpa’bo and try to put their heads under the flapping “wings” of his headgear; or that after the séance and before the dpa’bo had put the rigs lnga away, people will ask him to touch their heads with it and say a few words intended to bring luck.

Importance was also attached to the falling-off of the rigs lnga. If it came off very slowly and stayed on the on the back of the dpa’bo with the “wings” over his shoulders this was considered to be very lucky (Fig. 1) But if it came off fast and fell to the ground it was considered a very bad sign for the dpa’bo or, according to the direction in which fell off and other circumstances, for the people who had asked for the séance.

ACTIVITIES

During the séance it is not the dpa’bo who acts, but the god by which he is possessed. This is the only source of the dpa’bo authority and the only reason why people come to him for help. Apart from the séance he has no religious authority whatsoever. Theoretically he has no responsibility for what happens during the possession, and he claims that he does not remember anything afterwards. In practice, however the dpa’bo is of course responsible for the correctness of his invocation of the gods, and he is also supposed to see that no demons sneak into his mirror or into his body. So, after all, no distinct line is drawn in this respect between the unpossessed and the possessed doa’bo.

The dpa’bo have a foundation myth. According to my informants, it was Guru rin po che who invited the first dpa’bo to come to Tibet from neighboring regions so that they could cure the illnesses afflicting the Tibetans at that time. He invited four dpa’bo to come, one from each of the four cardinal points, hence they called Phyogs (of Zur) bzhi dpa’ rab bzhi bo. Everything the present-day dpa-bo can do when possessed can be done because of the archetypical acts of these four primeval dpa’bo. and they were often referred to at the séances.

The narrative about the four mythic dpa’bo stresses the main activity of the Tibetan “spirit–mediums” today, the curing of illness. The dpa’bo can cure in many ways, but the method most often used was to suck out from the body of the patient the object or substance causing the illness. Nevertheless not all illnesses can be cured in this way: in one of Wangchuk’s séances the possessing god said that only gza’, lhog pa, and khyi symon could be cured in this way. Neither Wangchuk nor any other informant was after the seance able to give any further information on gza’ except that it was an illness. According to Jaschke’s dictionary the word is used for
epilepsy. Concerning lhog, the information was more specific: there are three kinds of lhog; me sa, and chu lhog (i.e. fire, earth, and water lhog) caused by different kinds of worms. These worms make crater-like sores in the skin of the afflicted person. Khyi smyon, literally means “mad dog,” but here it is used for the “poisoning” resulting from the bite of a dog suffering from rabies. The “poison” is in the first stage of this illness thought to be evenly distributed in the whole body. After some days it will gather in one of the bitten person’s shoulders and take the shape of a small dog. If the “poison” is not sucked out in time, it will kill the victim. As it often happened that people were bitten by dogs who had or were thought to have rabies, the dpa’bo were frequently asked to cure the condition. As an example I will take one of Wangchuk’s séances, which was arranged to cure an elderly couple.

The invocations were sung as usual (see below p. 100), the possession duly took place, after which Wangchuk answered some questions posed by a participant and then began the healing. One of the bitten persons, the old man, sat down on the floor in front of Wangchuk, who was sitting cross-legged on a bench. Wangchuk hit the man over the head with the mi lphags g. yang gzhi three times. This he did, as was explained to me in order to chase away demons and evil spirits.

The possessing deity then decided which of the possible remedial animals was to come. It was a wild dog this time: Thang lha’i khyi rgod rag pa. The old man undressed to the waist, turned his back on Wangchuk and placed a small piece of red cloth on his left shoulder. Wangchuk now jerked the drum violently and soon started to bark and to howl, to sniff in the air like a dog and to bare his teeth threateningly. He then put the one side of his drum against the piece of red cloth on the man’s shoulder and sucked noisily at the other side of the drum. This was repeated three times. He then made movements with the drum over the man’s back as if to gather the “poisonous” substance into one place. He sucked three times more and spat into a small bowl of water. Everyone present now leaned or stepped forward to see better. To me it seemed as if small grey and green particles were rapidly dissolving in the water. There was then some discussion among the onlookers about the result. The old man moved aside and the other bitten person, the old woman, took his place. Wangchuk again started the violent drumming and a minute later assumed the look of a fierce wild dog, howling and showing his teeth. The same procedure was repeated, but now he sucked only three times. In the meantime the bowl had been refilled with fresh water and when he spat out this time, I again saw grey and green

smoke in the water just as if coloured particles were dissolving. The bowl was again closely inspected by all present. The same possessing god as at the beginning replaced the dog and gave a detailed explanation of the procedure and its result.

The cured couple thanked the god very respectfully and humbly and left. Although this healing séance was rather typical, different methods may be employed. It sometimes happened that the possessing animal did not suck out the illness but instead tore it out with its claws. Over the area of the patient's body where the illness was thought to be located a piece of red cloth was placed, as usual. The animal having entered the dpa' bo, then, with frightening speed and ferocity, grabbed the cloth and stuffed it into his mouth. He chewed the cloth for a short while, took it out and then spat out what he had taken from the patient's body. After the ceremony, the patient's body was examined for claw-marks.

From the four dpa' bo together information about twenty remedial animals could be obtained: wild dogs, wolves, bears, wild yaks, birds, etc. Furthermore three members of the highest class of the gods, the lha, appeared at healing séances. Those were the sman pas, the "physicians," who controlled the healing process. Also other deities who guarded the patient's body during the healing were present.

Besides healing, the dpa' bo could do many other things. Of these, only a few will be mentioned here. Often the dpa' bo was asked to predict the future: the outcome of an illness, the prospects of a projected journey, etc. The possessing god could sometimes answer questions directly, and in such cases he let a group of lha called the mngon shes check the correctness of his answers. Usually, however, the possessed dpa' bo used a kind of drum divination called rtsis.27 The rtsis procedure was checked by the rtsis pa, three members of the lha-class, and carried out as follows. After the usual invocations the deity entered the dpa' bo and was told about the problem which he was asked to solve. The dpa' bo then put his double-drum on the altar or on a table in front of him and placed a few grains of rice on the drumskin. He started to sing with the gshang tinkling loudly in his left hand but did not touch the drum. The song explained what was going to happen: if the rice moved towards the altar it was considered a positive answer, if, however, it moved in the opposite direction, the situation was serious and adequate measures were to be taken. Alternatively it was held that if the rice started to rotate clockwise the predictions were good, and if counter clockwise they were bad. The movements of the grains were very apparent, something which many have been effected by sound-vibrations. Everyone watched carefully and then told the god what they saw, whereupon the god explained the meaning.

27. rTsis usually means something like "astrology" or "astrological calculation". While mo is the usual word for divination. Compare Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956: 455.
Sechur performed the rtsis differently: he dropped the rice from his left hand onto the drumskin (he held the drum in his right hand) and from the pattern formed by the grains he read the future (Fig. 2).

Some words must also be said of the bla ’khug, the “calling of the bla, the soul.” This ceremony, according to my informants, might be performed in a way differing from those described by earlier authors. 28 One diagnosis of illness is that the bla, the “soul”, has left the body. This may be due to the fact that the patient has been frightened by a wild animal or that a demon has stolen the bla. Loss of the bla makes a person weak and apathetic to recover. The patient has to get his “soul” back. This ceremony is called bla ’khug, “soul-calling”, and may be performed by a dpa’ bo or a lama. During my stay in the village I met one case of “soul-loss” in a young girl who was the sister of Nyima. She had no appetite, did not talk and most of the time was found lying on the ground in her family’s house. The healing ceremony arranged for her took the following form. When possessed, the dpa’ bo took three objects, one small turquoise, one coral bead and one small shell which he put in a ball of spags. The ball was then thrown away with a sling. A bowl was now filled with water mixed with milk, and a scarf (Tib. kha btags) was stretched over the bowl as a cover. The girl suffering from “soul—loss” had to put her hands into the bowl in order to find the thrown-away objects. I was told that if she could find all of them, her bla would return, but if she could only find one or two of them, the dpa’ bo would be possessed by a very wrathful deity who would help to locate the missing object or objects. During the séance the three objects were obviously thought to be identical with her bla. The séance was successful, I was told, and after a few days the girl seemed to have recovered completely.

TRANCE

In this section I will give a more detailed description and analysis of a dpa’ bo performance and also will try to give an idea experiences of the dpa’ bo during the séance.

In order to make the possession possible, the dpa’ bo must send away his “consciousness” (Tib. rnam shes). The sending away of the rnam shes must take place precisely at the moment before the possession, as the time in between is considered to be very dangerous for the dpa’ bo. Many demons will try to take the opportunity of entering the “empty” body. The rnam shes is sent to a deity residing on the altar. Wangchuk had Pad ma ’byung gnas (i.e. Padmasambhava) as the guardian of his rnam shes, while Nyima had Mkha’ ‘gro Ye shes mtsho rgyal as the guardian of his. Under no circumstances may the rnam shes remain in the body during the possession. In this

---

case the dpa’ bo becomes “half god, half man”, as it is called, and what he says and does during the séance is not to be trusted. The rnam shes leaves the body through one of the “channels” (Tib. rtsa) in the body, viz. the one called dbu ma, which, according to my informants, leads from the top of the skull to a point in the centre of the chest. At the same point enter two other rtsa, the rkyang ma, which begins in the fourth finger of the right hand, and the ro ma, which begins in the fourth finger of the left hand. As has been mentioned above, the possessing god enters the dpa’ bo through one of these rtsa. Different classes of the gods enter through different rtsa. To each of these rtsa belong special deities who during the séance keep the rtsa clean. They are called “cleaners of the rtsa-road” (Tib. rtsa lam sang mkha'). Other deities guard the openings into the rtsa and are called “rtsa-masters” (Tib. rtsa bdag) and they are inherited by one dpa’ bo from another. From other contexts well-known gods, as for instance Nyan chen Thang lha 29 the mountain-god, may have such a specialized function. Other deities are also present during the séance to guard specific parts of the dpa’ bo’s body. There may be different gods on different occasions for this purpose.

As a typical example of how a séance might be structured I will choose the above mentioned one concerning the old couple bitten by a mad dog.

This séance took place on the 16th of January 1971 in the home of Wangchuk (this was an exception, usually the séances were held in the home of the patient). I was alone with Wangchuk when he arranged his altar. He kept his paraphernalia behind the ordinary house-altar when he was not using it. At 5:45 p. m. he started and the arrangements took about him half an hour. Then he smoked a cigarette and after that read a few short prayers (among them the “refuge formula”). Soon he started to sing the invocations to the accompaniment of the drum and the gshang. He mentioned a large number of deities by name, inviting them to come to the place. He then described in some detail important places to which pilgrimages were made in the area around Gangs rin po che (i. e. Kailāsh). This went on for about twenty minutes, and it was 6:45 p. m. by the time the invocations were finished and all the deities had reached the mirrors on the altar.

After a short break of about three minutes during which he wrapped a piece of red cloth around his head he picked up his headgear and held it in front of him at arm’s length. He recited the names of the mkha’ ‘gro ma believed to stay on the lobes of the rigs lnga and put it on his head, fastening it with two pairs of strings. When he then took up the song again, he jerked his drum faster and faster. His body started to sway to and fro and, as he sat there cross-legged, his whole body soon started to shake and jump. Suddenly he leapt onto the floor and began to dance to the accompaniment of a pulsating, very fast drum rhythm. He jumped up

on the bed-bench again and danced there with his face towards the altar. Then he sat down, now possessed, and the deity asked why he had been called (Figs. 3, 4). It was gNyan chen Thang lha dkar po who spoke. At 7:01 p.m. the god was told about his tasks for the evening. Before the séance I had got permission to put a few questions to the deity and these were now asked by the intermediary of the evening. 30 The answers followed immediately, without the need for the rtsis-procedure. The curing part started at 7:17 p.m. As has been described above, the wild dog Thang lha'i khyi rgod rag pa possessed the dpa'bo and sucked out the “poison” from the bitten couple. The healing process was finished by 7:40 p.m. Now Wangchuk started to sing about the primeval four dpa’bo and their deeds. Suddenly he angrily jumped out onto the floor. Some people had irritated the god by looking in through a hole in the wall. However, he soon calmed down and the time had now come for the deities to leave. He again sang the names of many gods and tea was offered to each of them. The lha left the place riding on thang dkar-birds and Wangchuk asked the gods to throw down feathers plucked from the birds as they flew away. A violent drumming commenced and Wangchuk was highly agitated, his body shaking and swaying. Rather soon, a rain of small white feathers fell down from somewhere under the dark ceiling. The onlookers now began a wild chase after the feathers, trying to catch them before they reached the floor. Such feathers were considered to bring luck. A few persons in the audience were skeptical, though not openly so. One of them said to me afterwards that Wangchuk certainly must have had the feathers hidden somewhere on the rigs lnga. If this was the case they were thrown up into the air through the violent shaking of the head that immediately preceded the rain of feathers. At 8:17 p.m. Wangchuk started the “rigs lnga game.” As the “game” went on, with Wangchuk vehemently swinging and shaking, the rigs lnga slowly slipped backwards. Finally, it fell off and remained around his neck with the wings resting on his shoulders. Wangchuk quickly put a piece of grey cloth over his face, snapped his fingers and sank backwards against the wall. It was now 8:30 p.m. After a few moments rest he uncovered his face and started to collect his things. During the “rigs lnga game” most of the audience left, only a few remaining. Wangchuk’s wife served cooked rice and he also had some. He looked weak and exhausted as he asked about what had happened during the séance.

All the séances I attended were held indoors in the evening, although Wangchuk said that he could perform at any time of the day and at any place. The length of the séances varied, and those I attended lasted from an hour and a half to more than four hours. The time for singing the invocations varied between 18 and 27 minutes (for Wangchuk between 19 and 22 minutes). The reason for the great variations in length between one séance and another was not so much the variety of the problems posed

30. This séance was one of the first I attended in the village. The questions, which were put in order to justify my presence, concerned personal matters.
at each séance, but rather the fact that the *dpa’bo* could make the concluding part, the “*rigs lnga* game,” longer or shorter.

When asked what they felt at the onset of the possession the *dpa’bo* found it very hard to describe exactly what they saw and felt. During the invocations, as mentioned above, the deities reach their respective mirrors (or part of a mirror) on the altar. The *dpa’bo* sees them arrive and place themselves according to class and rank. This ability to see the gods is not restricted to the *dpa’bo*; also lamas and *sngags pa* have it. When the actual possession is going to take place Wangchuk sees what he describes as something like a rotating wheel with all the colours of the rainbow. It is very beautiful and very bright. When the god enters the *rtsa* his body feels big and as if it were filled with gas. After that he does not remember anything.

Sechur said that he saw a fire glowing in many colours. The fire grows bigger and bigger and comes nearer and nearer until it enters his body and everything becomes black. He remembers no more of the séance until it ends. Then everything happens in the reverse order.

Nyima said that when singing the invocations he saw stars sparkling in the mirrors on the altar. Then the mirrors grow bigger and bigger and the people around him become smaller and smaller, while their eyes shine brightly and their voices become thinner and thinner.

After the séances the *dpa’bo* usually recovers a few minutes after the *rigs lnga* has fallen off. Wangchuk and Nyima said that they did not feel anything in particular afterwards, but Sechur said that his arms and shoulders ached because the powerful *rnam shes* of the possessing deity had penetrated his *rtsa*.

The change in the ritual status of the *dpa’bo* during the séance is marked by the putting on of the *rigs lnga*, but the actual possession seems to take place shortly afterwards, when the *dpa’bo* jumps onto the floor and dances. According to Wangchuk there are different kinds of dances: the dance of the lion, the dance of the elephant, of the *mkha’ gro ma*, etc. Wangchuk and Nyima dance for a very short while on the floor and then jump back onto the bed-bench where the deity usually introduced itself and asked why it had been called. Nyima would do something extraordinary at this stage, for instance throw glowing coal from the fire-place at the onlookers. Sechur usually danced a little longer on the floor with widely outstretched arms as if flying, chirping like a small bird. Then he used to kneel in front of the intermediary. Often the possessing god is very irritated and angry at the beginning of the séance and makes scornful comments on the ignorance of the onlookers who cannot solve their own problems but have to call on him for help. Usually he calls them by a stereotyped formula, “you bazaar-loafers, you meat-eaters and black-heads!” 31 When the

31. In Tibetan: *khrom pa sha zan mgo nag.*
deity has introduced himself the task must be set without delay. In most cases the clients have asked someone well in advance to act as an intermediary between them and the god. The intermediary must always be a man. The role of intermediary is not sought after, and sometimes there may be long discussions even during the invocations about who is going to fill it. The intermediary does not usually receive any payment, but he is invited to share the food that is served after the séance. He has various tasks to perform: to offer tea to the gods, to place a kha btags over the rigs lnga in order to greet the deity when the latter introduces himself, to talk humbly with the god, to make respectful and grateful exclamations when the deity is explaining something, to throw rice at the dpa' bo if the possessing god is too angry and violent, and most important, to interpret what the god has said if this is difficult to hear or to understand.

An important aspect of the séance is what might be called the theatrical aspect, the dpa' bo's dramatic presentation. In theory, as has already been stressed, the authenticity of the dpa' bo is proved by tests. In practice, however, the authenticity of the dpa' bo is proved by the success of his performances. To the core of behaviour typical of the séance other features were added, which were not strictly required. Thus Nyima played with fire, Wangchuk let feathers fall, etc. These doings were not essential parts of the ritual, but were nevertheless carried out to "make a good show." This was doubtless due to the dpa' bo's constant need to prove the reality of the possession and the power of his gods.

At the end of the séance the deities leave the place, one by one, in strict order. While they are leaving, the dpa 'po plays the "rigs lnga game" until, finally, the mkha' gro ma release the strings and the rigs lnga falls. At that very moment the rnam shes returns to the dpa' bo who becomes himself again.

The audience should also be mentioned. At every séance I witnessed there were more people present than really belonged to the house or to the immediate neighbourhood. In spite of the relative frequency of the séances (towards the end of the Tibetan year one séance every evening) there were always many onlookers. They usually dropped in during the invocations and left after the dpa' bo had accomplished his task. There was always a relaxed atmosphere in the room—sometimes too relaxed and noisy, which provoked angry remarks from the deity. It is probable that many in the audience experienced the séance as a kind of entertainment, as it was the only diversion offered the villagers after the day’s work.

PANTHEON

The pantheon of the dpa'bo is divided into three classes: the lha, the btsan and the klu. They are often called "the upper lha, the middle btsan and the lower
The groups are too well known to need any commentary here. Within the three classes further subdivisions are made. The lha class, which consists of eighty gods, is divided into several groups according to function and speciality. There are, for instance, the rtsis pa, the mgon she, the sman pa, the sgrup thob (i.e. siddhas), etc. The btsan class, on the other hand, is grouped according to different mountains to which the btsan belong. One important group among the btsan belongs to the Targo mountain, another belongs to the Thang lha mountains, etc. The btsan are 36 in number and have lots of servants and soldiers in their retinues. The klu finally, are a much larger group led by Klu chen gTsug na rin chen and divided into groups according to their association with different lakes.

The lha have the highest status among the dpa’ bo’s deities, but nevertheless the btsan are the most important. It is significant that the dpa’ bo, when possessed talks about himself in stereotyped phrases, such as the btsan po, the “mighty” or as the dmar po the “red one,” all designations indicating the btsan class. At all the séances I attended a btsan always possessed the dpa’ bo, never a lha or a klu, although I was told that this might happen.

The usual way in which a dpa’ bo acquires his deities is by inheritance, or he receives them as gifts from an older dpa’ bo.

A question which is unfortunately very difficult to answer is the extent to which the pantheon of the dpa’ bo is exclusive to them and the extent to which the deities exist in the folk religion. As Tibetan folk religion is not very well known, the answer must depend upon further research.

Finally, some remarks may be made on the social position and psychological make-up of the dpa’ bo. Economically, as well as socially, they gained very little from their spirit-mediumship. Psychologically, the dpa’ bo whom I met with outside the séances showed no deviations from what might be called normality. Nor did they, in their ordinary lives, demonstrate maladjustment and social dissatisfaction more than others in the village. There seem to be no grounds for regarding their spirit-mediumship as solely a compensation for their subordinate social position. I do not think it is possible to explain any traditional religious behaviour as a result of the need of maladjusted individuals for compensation. 33

The greater part of what is known about other forms of ritual possession in Tibet concerns the high-ranking “spirit-mediums” often called “oracles” (Tib. chos skyong, 32. Cf. Hoffmann 1950: 139.
chos rje, sku rten pa, etc). Although much has been written about the performances of the “state oracle” and others, very little is known about their training, how the possessing deity enters the body, what they experience, etc. The lack of relevant data makes comparisons with the material presented here difficult. One is practically limited to comparisons between trance performances from a more general point of view. The underlying scheme seems to be identical: invocation—possession—the god as is asked for help—the god leaves and the “spirit—medium” has some kind of collapse. A few observations may be made. The “oracle” does not sing the invocations himself, which the dpa’ bo always does. Furthermore, the initial phase of the possession is more violent and is connected with greater motor agitation among the “oracles” than among the doa’ bo. Moreover, the “oracle” seems to be in a much deeper trance than the dpa’ bo. This is of course hard to measure, but the different ways of behaving during the séances, the dpa’ bo with agility and motor control, the “oracle” under great physical strain and with the need for one or more assistants to keep him under control, indicate a difference in the depth of the trance.

CONCLUDING REMARKS.

M. Goldstein has written in an article that “the literature on Tibetan society suffers from chronic religious indigestion.” One may perhaps paraphrase this and say that the literature on Tibetan religion suffers from chronic “lamaistic” indigestion, but by this I simply mean that the study of Tibetan folk religion has been neglected. Until further research is carried out many interesting questions concerning the dpa’ bo must be left unanswered.

Buddhism may be defined in many ways: from historical and from theological viewpoints, but also from a functional point of view. In the latter case one must consider all the religious beliefs and practices in the area conventionally called Buddhist. From this point of view the beliefs and activities of the dpa, bo may be seen as examples of apotropaic Buddhism. That Tibetan religion comprises different systems of different origins and age is obvious, and further research might clarify their interaction.

* * *

REFERENCES CITED

Blondeau, A. M.

Chapman, F. S.
1938 Lhasa, the Holy City. London.

David—Neel, A.
1930 Arjopa. Leipzig.

Douglas, M.

Eliade, M.

Firth, R.

Goldstein, M.

Gombrich, R. F.

Gorer, G.

Govinda, A.

Grub mtha’ shel gyi me long.

Haarh, E.

Hanbury—Tracy, J.
1940 Black River of Tibet. 2nd ed. London.
Harrer, H.
1953 *Seven Years in Tibet*. New York.

Hedin, S.

Hoffmann, H.
1950 *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon Religion*. Wiebaden.

Hultkrantz, A.

Jaschke, H. A.

Karmay, S. G.

Lessing, F. D.

Lewis, I. M.

Morris, J.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, R. de
1956 *Oracles and Demons of Tibet*. ’s-Gravenhage.

Rock, J. F.

Roerich, G. N.
1931 *Trails to Inmost Asia*. New Haven

Schroder, D.
Schafer, D.

Siiger, H.

Spiro, M. E.

Stein, R. A.
1972 *Tibetan Civilization,* London.

Tambiah, S. J.

Tucci, G.

Unkrig, W. A.

Wayman, A.

* * *