

Tibetan Oracles and Himalayan Shamans

Transcribed from a Lecture by Dr Fabian Sanders

I had the opportunity to do field research in the Tibetan areas of N.E. India, mainly in the Arunachal Pradesh area (roughly north of Assam and east of Bhutan). This region is very interesting for research because it is almost totally unspoilt, mainly due to political reasons. It was closed to tourists and also missionaries, who are the most devastating influence in these areas. The main visitors were the military who were defending the border with China; as you may know, China claims Arunachal Pradesh as part of its territory.

The area is inhabited by a tribe we can call the Monpa, lit. *'those who live in the lowlands'*. Its main centre is in Tawang (rta dbang), which is nestled between Tibet on the north and Bhutan on the west. The area is famous as the birthplace of the 6th Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, (tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho) and since the 6th Dalai Lama was born in Tawang, the Chinese claim this territory.

During our research we had the opportunity of meeting a local oracle and witness a trance performance by him and his attendants. So I became interested in this topic and was able to meet also the current *kuten* of the Nechung (gnas chung) oracle. The Nechung oracle is the main state oracle of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, and the Tibetan government when it was in Tibet. His name is Thupten Ngodup (thub bstan dngos grub) and he lives in Dharamsala, India.

Oracles: East and West

We might recall that in the classical Western world, specifically in Greece and Rome, oracles were considered normal. The most important of these was the Delphi oracle in Greece, and the Sybilles in Rome or in the Tuscan area. The Delphi oracle especially had characteristics which are very similar to those of the Tibetan oracles. This is why we can correctly use the term "oracles" to explain Tibetan oracles. In the West, oracles became silent and the tradition ended around the 4th century C.E. From a Tibetan point of view, we can say that the tradition of communication between the gods and humans was interrupted. Instead, Tibet was one of the few places where traditions continued virtually untouched and unspoilt right up to the 1950s and so Tibet was able to maintain the tradition of oracles to the present day. Originally there were hundreds of oracles in Tibet and the Himalayan highlands but over time the oracles became fewer and fewer while the shamans took over and became more widespread. We will talk about the difference between oracles and shamans, who are similar but also have certain peculiar differences.

Oracles in Tibet

What is then the tradition of oracles in Tibet? Its history certainly goes back into the very remote past, before the advent of Buddhism in the 7th century. Oracles were a definite and precise feature of the Bon tradition, the pre-Buddhist Tibetan tradition. This Bon tradition had a cosmology which divided the cosmos in three worlds. One is the upper world of the gods. Then there is the intermediate world of spirits, of subtle beings. And then there is the solid world they call the earth. So, there are these three worlds: one is that of the gods, one is the intermediate and one is the earth. Human beings in short participate in these three worlds with their body, their so-called speech - in Buddhist terms, but this is applicable to Bon as well - and their mind or spirit. Just as the external world has a realm of the mind, so it has a realm of energy, of spirits - or whatever - and a solid, physical realm, so internally human beings have the same. And these three are not closed. [Human] Beings are not closed and they are open to contact with the external. Just as we have contact with the physical world, for example with food, other people and so on, so the psychic level has contact with the outside. This gives the possibility of communication between the psychic level of the individual and the psychic level outside. So this kind of world was inherited by the Buddhist masters who brought Buddhist Dharma to Tibet, because they held the same world view. The world was in three parts: one solid, one psychic and one mental. So they could make use of the pre-existing tradition and use it for Buddhist purposes.

The Oracular Deity

The change happened when the famous tantric master Guru Padmasambhava came to Tibet and tamed the subtle world – the deities of the Bonpos - and bound them under oath to obey and defend the Buddhist teaching. He made these powers, which we can call deities, protectors of the Buddhist faith and of Buddhist practitioners. They became Cho sung (cho srung), protectors of the Dharma. According to Tibetan tradition, he tamed these beings through the powerful invocation of mantra, powerful spells, which bound them to obey those who held the power of these spells. Guru Padmasambhava tamed these beings. He made them protectors of the Dharma and obliged or convinced them to help practitioners of Buddha Dharma by communicating, giving advice, foretelling the future and even healing people.

Why is this the case? I spent quite a long time trying to understand what is the nature of these deities. The explanation generally is that they are sentient beings. They are beings, just like people or animals and anyone else, but without a body. Yet they do have two other aspects. They have a mind or spirit and a voice. Not having a body though, they cannot communicate with those who communicate with them on a bodily level. So they are samsaric beings and, as such, they are not higher gods, as we would understand the great gods of India or Tibet, for example Palden Lhamo (dpal ldan lha mo) or Kali. They are gods more linked to the land, the mountains, lakes and to the geographical features. We could in a way say that mountains and lakes are their bodily aspect. So they are the subtle aspect: the speech and mind aspect of mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes, especially mountains and lakes.

The Oracular Context

So what is the relationship between Guru Padmasambhava and these deities? Or with the high Tibetan lamas, such as the relationship between the Dalai Lama and Nechung, the state oracle. It is a relationship of master with slave. The master is Guru Padmasambhava or the Dalai Lama. The slave is the deity. This is because the Dalai Lama is the one with the knowledge, whereas the deity is the one who receives the knowledge. But the status of the deities allows them to perceive and have knowledge of information and intelligence that can be useful for human beings, who don't have the same capacity. The gods are in a position in which they can see the world from above (let's say) and perceive time in a more expanded way. In a way this is similar to a dream. In Eastern cultures, you know that in dreams you can have a communication with the wider world, receive information and suggestions. So these gods sort of live in a permanent dream state and because they don't have a body, they have a wider perception and can be useful for people.

So how can we get information from these deities to our world in order to use it? The way is through a so-called *kuten* (sku rten). In Tibetan *ku* is an honorific term for body, the physical aspect, and *ten* means 'base' or 'support'. So, *kuten*, together, means physical support or physical base. What does this mean? First of all it denotes the complete passivity of the body. It is just a support. And then it denotes the fact that this body is sort of lent to the deity, in order to participate in the gross world which we perceive.

The *Kuten*: Discovery and Characteristics

What then are the characteristics of the *kuten*? The *kuten* is a person who has some problems, to be honest. He is someone whose psychic container gives an appearance of unity and being closed from the outside world. Most people also normally perceive themselves as closed from the world, from a psychic or mental point of view even though human beings comprise a psychic aspect. It's not a unity, not a whole. But the *kuten* are not sealed from the outside; they have an opening, a crack into psychic existence in which external entities can enter. So this is a handicap from a certain point of view and it is an anomaly, which can be understood as an illness as well. It can also be a cure but we will look at this later. In general these people, whether they are oracles or shamans have exactly the same characteristics. If they do have this open psychic aspect, then they can become either shamans or oracles, depending on different factors.

So how do they notice that they have this open psychic aspect? Generally between the ages of 10 and

20, they suddenly become very ill. They go through very severe illnesses, in which they have a number of bad dreams and are really in a state of prostration. People fear for their life but there is no medical diagnosis for their illness. They also have signs of craziness and madness. Sometimes they go into the wilderness where they stay for many days, even weeks. They don't really come out of the wilderness but slowly, slowly they are able to manage, somehow, this state of mind, and also their physical illness. Generally, in a Tibetan Buddhist context, their families take them to a lama and the lama can see the problem. Once the lama can exclude illnesses such as epilepsy or other mental problems, he might look into the possibility that the 'ill' person is showing the signs of becoming an oracle or shaman. In this case, he also has to look into the family history because generally this kind of ability is hereditary. So, it can be found in several generations in the same family. Either it can be transmitted from father to son or from mother to daughter. There are both male and female oracles and shamans as well. So if the father has passed away, and was an oracle or shaman himself, then the possibility is high that the son has been chosen for the same job. This is quite easy to understand.

In other cases such as the Nechung oracle, who is a monk of the Nechung Monastery, obviously he does not have offspring. So the *kuten* has to be looked for. There are these two different ways in which an oracle is discovered, once he has shown the signs of being an oracle. But there is also a third possibility for becoming an oracle. If necessary, a lama holding a particular office, can do this by inducing a trance in someone else; he is then able to transfer the deity into the body of the oracle. Once someone is identified as being able to host the deity as a guest in himself, in a Tibetan Buddhist context, a number of rituals are performed in order to open up the channels of the subtle body. This is in order to facilitate the arrival of the deity and to make this experience easier for the *kuten* because to have the deity using your body is a very great strain. In general, once the trance is over the *kuten* just fall unconscious and can stay like that for one or two days, even. So the lamas perform some rituals on the *kuten* and teach him some exercises, mostly breathing so that he can find it easier to train himself to be a *kuten*.

Gelek Choesang (dge legs chos bzang)

Specifically, I would like to tell you the story of the *kuten* we found in a village in the Arunachal Pradesh area. He used to perform for the local community mostly in order to diagnose illnesses for which no one had a clue and also to give advice on important decisions in ordinary people's lives. This *kuten's* name is Gelek Choesang and he is the son of the previous *kuten* of the same oracle. His father passed away when he was in his adolescence and after that he started to have very strange and wild dreams, frightening nightmares and became psychically very restless. Basically he fell ill. Knowing his father was the previous *kuten*, he sought advice at a local Nyingmapa monastery, a monastery of the old school, the Sarong Gompa (sa rong dgon pa), which lay 4 or 5 hours east of Taiwan. The Tulku (sprul sku) at this monastery recognised that Gelek Choesang was being possessed, not by the deity of the previous oracle (his father has been the oracle), but by his own father. The father had come to knock on his son's door and wake him up to the possibility of being the next *kuten* of the deity. The tulku then performed a number of rituals on the boy and instructed him on the techniques and practices he had to perform in order to ease his job. He also appointed one village lama who lived close to his home to be the ritualist in charge of performing the rites necessary to call the deity. This is very important as before the deity is called, the *kuten* is completely passive. The *kuten* just (sort of) offers his body to the deity. The important task is performed by the official, a Lama, who reads out a text while playing music with cymbals and drums. So this is more or less how the ritual takes place.

The Significance of the Text

To return to Guru Padmasambhava: when Padmasambhava tamed the subtle world of Tibet, literally step by step, covering the whole of Tibet, he formulated texts that were powerful to invoke these deities. Some of these were passed onto his students and others he hid as *terma* (gter ma) teachings. *Terma* teachings, as you know, are those teachings which are hidden for some time and later on, when the time is right, a *Terton* (gter ston) i.e a discoverer of *terma*, is supposed to find the teachings and revive their use ritually in the world. So the texts which are used to invoke the oracles are all mostly, according to

tradition, attributed to Guru Padmasambhava.

These texts have a number of functions and are really the key of the oracular performance and existence. They are structured, more or less, like general sadhana texts. Sadhana texts are those texts which practitioners follow and recite for their meditation. Generally they visualise what is written in the text. These invocation texts describe the deity, its iconography, dress and characteristics. They help the Lama go into a state in which he evokes the place where the deity resides, and then they invoke the presence of the deity. The same voice, rhythmically speaking, together with the cymbals *chimbis* and the drums, provokes a state of trance in the *kuten*. And then the third active aspect of the text is that the deity itself is called and is really compelled to come by the recitation of the text.

So on one hand, the Lama does the visualisation according to the text, the *kuten* goes into his trance and then the deity comes. According to Tibetans, the text is really the key for the presence of the deity to be real. Another important aspect is the rhythmic music that is usually played with the drum and the cymbals.

In the case of our *kuten*, there was only one single lama. In the case of the state oracle, for example, there are more than a dozen players and reciters. So the rhythmic sound sort of facilitates the trance of the *kuten*. In the field work we have done in Arunachal, we were able to take pictures of the text. The Lama allowed us to take pictures of the text. I have translated it and it will appear as subtitles in the short film I will show later. But unfortunately I had no time to translate it into English and it is in Italian. I hope it is not a big problem and I will try to translate parts of it if you like.

The Experience of the Kuten

So what is the experience of the *kuten*, the one who is the receptacle of the divine presence? I was able to interview the present *kuten* of the Nechung oracle in Dharamsala. There are four oracles, in major state performances, that go into trance together in big festivals in Dharamsala. There are two male and two female oracles. The Nechung and Gadhong (dga' gdong) oracles are the main male ones. And Dorje Yudronma (rdo rje g.yu sgron ma) and Tsering Chenga (tshe ring mched Inga) are the two female oracles. So I asked Thupten Ngodup, the present *kuten*, what is his experience during the trance ... during what is described as his trance by the people who look on. And he said that when the music starts and the text is recited, he is overwhelmed by what can be described as a kind of exhaustion. The object of the senses, that is forms, colours, sounds and so on start becoming more and more distant as if they were behind screens or in water. They become further and further from his perception. At a certain point he loses his consciousness and presence completely and falls in a state similar to deep sleep as if he is sleeping but with no dreams. And that's it. He doesn't have any other experience or any other personal contact with the deity that comes through him. After the deity leaves he collapses and then wakes up. The length of time waking up differs and the *kuten* can't remember anything. He has completely forgotten what happened and the time that's past is reduced to just a few minutes in his mind. The trance can be thirty minutes, although it can also take only ten minutes or twenty minutes. Sometimes if it's longer than half an hour, this is a long time but when he wakes up it's just as if a few minutes had passed in a way that is typical for sleeping or dreaming states. And when the deity leaves, the *kuten's* state is really of physical exhaustion and prostration. This is because the god/deity who is possessing him, is straining his body a great deal. It is said to be like that.

In fact, while in trance he displays an incredible power and energy. You must understand that his dress with all the iconographic features like the sword and so on, weigh at least sixty pounds or more. The particular hat he has now weighs about thirty pounds. In the past, it used to weigh around eighty pounds. So that is really heavy to carry on your head. And if you see how he moves about and dances, when he is not in trance he can hardly stand up. He needs two assistants to help him up. When he starts moving, the first manifestation of the presence of the deity is that he stands up very quickly and starts a dance of reverence towards the lamas who are present. So he prostrates himself deeply and dances very



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solemnly with great dignity. And then, after this offering of the dance, he makes other offerings to the lamas, like *torma* (gtor ma) and whatever is given to him. Then he starts to speak and answer questions. That is also very interesting because if you hear him, his voice sounds just like a hiss: a very long and rhythmic series of hissing sounds like this. Of course no words can be understood by someone who is not specifically trained to understand these sounds. For example in the case of the Nechung oracle, the Dalai Lama understands his language. In case of our oracle in Arunachal Pradesh, he was said to speak in a medieval Khampa dialect. Kham is the eastern part of Tibet. His language was understood by one lady who was his interpreter and translated his answers to questions. So this is the experience of the *kuten*, which is nothing. He just gives his body and is completely passive.

Shaman or Oracle?

Interestingly for our research in the Arunachal area, we were able to do this over a period of seven years, going three times to the same place. The second time we went there, which was after 3 years, we interviewed Gelek Choesang again, the *kuten* of this oracle. It was very interesting to witness his change of attitude towards being the *kuten*. The first time we met him, he was in his early or mid twenties and was not very experienced. He had not done many trances and was a little frightened of the potential of his office. It was rather overwhelming for him and he could not quite bear it. The second time he was much more sure of himself and self-confident. He didn't think for a long time about his answers as he had done before. He was just speaking straight. We asked him, "So how is your work, your job going?" If you can call it a job. And he said, "I want to stop. I don't want to be the *kuten* anymore". He then told us why he had decided not to be the *kuten* any longer.

After one session of trance, he was really exhausted and decided to stop. So he went to see the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala and asked the Dalai Lama for advice. His answer was "Yes. You can stop. Rituals can be performed in order to close this crack you have that allows the deity to enter, so that you don't get possessed anymore, neither by the deity nor by other spirits". But the Dalai Lama said, "But I strongly advise you that as this is an important service you do for the people of your area, you can train and get more sound advice, better than the advice you have had up to now. You can make things easier for yourself but please still go on performing your task". Then we asked again, "But what is the reason for you wanting to stop?". And he said, "I want to be a politician". Apparently the two things were not compatible. He wanted to enter politics in the local area to become something like the mayor of Dirang, the local town. On the other hand he owed his reputation, on which he would like to base his election as mayor, on being a *kuten*. I don't know if people would have voted for him if he was not a *kuten* anymore.

Anyway in the end he decided to carry on as the *kuten*. I don't know about the politics but he stopped politics when he decided to go on with his job. Anyway, he went to some *tulku*, a master living in the Kullu, Himachal Pradesh area, who helped him to get better control over his trance. As you might remember, I told you that his first possession was by that of his own father. He experienced visions of his father who generally presented himself to his son in three forms: one was as an animal, the second was as someone dressed like a monk, and the third was his father's real appearance as he remembered it. This was highly disturbing for him because he didn't know what happened or what to do. But his father gave him advice on how to deal with his energy.

Later, when he went to the lama in Kullu, the lama performed some rituals which closed down the possibility of him being possessed by spirits other than his oracular deity. These other spirits or *bhut* as they are called in India are the psychic remains of human beings, of dead people. But the *kuten* said, "This is also a drawback because my father helped me a lot". He gave us an example. Once he was riding on a motor bike in Siliguri in West Bengal, and all of a sudden he had a strong urge to get off the bike. He was sitting on the back seat and made the driver stop. He got off the bike and heard later that the driver had had a deadly accident. He ascribed that sudden urge to get off the bike to his father. The fact that he was possessed by his father also is a very interesting element because this is a sort of bridge between the oracular world and the shamanic world.

What distinguishes the oracle from the shaman? It is basically the nature of what possesses the person, the base or the medium as we are accustomed to call them in the west. So we have two possibilities. If it is a deity possessing the person, then it is an oracle, which has very specific and clear features defining it. If it is a spirit, such as the ghost of a dead person, or some kind of lesser spirits, then it is a shamanic trance. Another feature which distinguishes the two radically, is that the oracular seance takes place under the control of a ritualist, a lama who is in charge and controls the scene perfectly. The *kuten* is completely passive whereas the shaman actively makes everything happen. He induces his own trance and he has some experiences which he can recall during his trance even though he still needs an assistant. When he speaks, he needs someone to record and most of the time, also someone to translate what he says. I can show you a small clip:

Video Commentary: The Shaman

So this is a ritual performed by a shaman who called himself a Bonpo, that is belonging to the pre-Buddhist tradition in Tibet. The shamans from this particular area are sometimes referred to by the Nepali word *Jhañkri* or in the local language, as well as in Tibetan, as *Lhapa* (lha pa). *Lha* means a god and *pa* is a particle that personifies the word which precedes it. It means "one person having to do with what comes before". So *Lhapa* means basically, "a person having to do with gods". It can also be translated as "he who personifies the gods". This (in the clip) is a ritual in which no trance takes place; it is only a ritual performance, an auspicious performance done once a year in order to make friends with the subtle world, and with the spirits. You can see on the video that he plays the bell with the right hand and holds the ritual vajra with the left hand, which is exactly the opposite of the Buddhists. Filming was not very easy. In front of the shaman are burners for burnt offerings and some plates and bowls for offering food. And hung on the wall of the hut are a number of scarves or blankets into which the spirits are called. Basically, they perform the function of the *kuten* and act as a receptacle for the spirits. But in this case the spirits don't have to speak, they just have to receive offerings. So the shaman recites quite elaborate verses, while offering especially copious quantities of *chang* - which is the local barley beer and, of course, drinking a good share of it himself! This is what we call ritualistic shamanism. Some plants are also gathered for burning incense etc. You know that subtle beings often feed on smell. You can see that his bell is played very rhythmically and in many cases he uses the bell to get into a trance. In this case he doesn't need the other offerings, and he becomes the vehicle for the spirits. So this is one short film.

Video Commentary: The Oracle

Let us look at the other video. This is the altar room in the private house of Gelek Choesang himself. The first thing to be done is dressing him. As I said before, the dress of the oracle, the *kuten*, represents the iconography of the deity. In this case, the deity which possesses Gelek Choesang is called Karma Trinley (karma 'phrin las). Most probably this Karma Trinley is an emanation or a minor aspect of the god Gyalpo Pehar (rgyal po pe har), who is the deity having the same principle as that which possesses the Nechung *kuteng*. It's a sort of side emanation. Karma Trinley does not come alone. He has a number of attendants, generally one male and one female attendant. Alternatively they possess and show themselves in the body of Gelek Choesang. You can also clearly see this as it is marked by a change of his attitude, his voice, how he behaves and so on. The dress is generally quite complicated with several layers of brocades and it has a special mirror which is put on the heart area. There is also a silver sword and a big ring on the right thumb. The mirror is particularly important because it is said, for example, in the case of the Nechung oracle, that the mirror is the place where the deity enters because it is on the heart chakra, the heart centre which represents mind. According to Thupten Ngodup, the Nechung *kuten*, the deity takes the place of the mind of the *kuten* and the mind of the *kuten* resides temporarily in the mirror. Then there is the particular feature of the hat, which in the case of the Nechung oracle is a really heavy helmet. In the case of this *kuten*, it's just a silken cap with three frowning eyes embroidered on it, which also represents the iconography of Karma Trinley, who has three eyes in his forehead.

These are the preliminary invocations. You can see that the text in front of him has not been opened yet. First there are more general Buddhist practices and offerings being prepared such as Bhutanese

alcohol. The abode of Karma Trinley is generally a cremation ground and it is quite horrible as it is full of human remains in typically tantric style. The text describes the dwelling of Karma Trinley and then the oracle starts the formal invocation. You see that the *kuten* starts to get into a confused state; he has a lot of perspiration, his eyes go backwards and generally when the trance starts, he starts shaking visibly, especially his legs. So after the description of the abode, the text describes the deity: his iconography, his mount which is a horse, and his attendants. The attendants have the duty to notice a particular moment in which he stops breathing. Well before that happens, they have to place the hat on his head and then at a certain moment when he stops breathing, they tie it very tight under his chin. This is supposed to block the deity inside the body and prevent it from leaving. So the text now says, "*Tremendous Splendour, if we invite you with musical offerings, please come*". He seems to be crying now and it was later explained that the female attendant of Karma Trinley was unhappy because the worship of her in the valley was insufficient. She had felt neglected in the home rituals and so the *kuten* manifested in this way, crying. Now a third deity has his turn and he is also upset because some rules of purity that have to be observed before the ritual, i.e. abstinence from meat, fish, garlic, onion and ginger, were not observed properly. These should have been observed by the *kuten* and other participants. Since they were not observed properly, the deity was angry. This is a very typical phase in oracular trances, when the deity sort of draws the sword towards himself and sometimes it is said that the sword bends. In these valleys, you can often see a bent sword hanging from above the door at the entrance of monasteries and temples. Supposedly it is an apotropaic object which is produced in oracular rituals [ed.i.e. an object which is supposed to have the power to avert evil influences]

The deity or deities have gone now and the *kuten* is left exhausted. The monk now chants some concluding verses in order to accompany the deities back to their abode and thank them for their help.

Questions and Answers

Q: The lama who did the invocation at the beginning and then was beating the drum at the end, did he interpret ?

A: No.

Q: So the people asking questions were able to understand what the oracle was saying?

A: Generally you saw a woman with horsetail hair, who was the interpreter. In this case, the main reason people asked for the ritual to take place was to ask the *kuten* to make a diagnosis for a small child who could not speak and suffering some kind of disorder. They wanted to know the reason for this. Once the ritual was taking place, then many other people (including ourselves) asked additional questions. The therapeutic capacity of oracles is that they can diagnose exactly the causes for the illness, especially in the case of provocation or disharmony with some subtle beings or spirits and he can then send these spirits away. The oracle is more powerful so he is able to exorcise them. But the only job of the lama is to play and to chant, apart of course from doing his practice.

Q: Is the text part of a known lineage? How does the text fit in?

A: The text seems to be a *terma* in this case. It has the Ter-tseg (gter tshag), a punctuation sign which identifies *termas*) and so on. But the lineage of the oracles has been transmitted from father to son. The oracle or the *kuten* has the text, not the lama. The lama changes quite often, every two to three years, sometimes even earlier. The second time we went there we asked, "*Where is the lama?*" and they replied, "*Oh, he had some drinking problems*". So another one took his place and we went to see the new lama. But the text stays with the *kuten*.

Q: Are there many texts like this in the possession of the *kuten*?

A: No, he has the one text which he cannot even read as he cannot read Tibetan. It's just his door for the possession to take place. But the lama reads it and the *kuten* is passive in this respect.

Q: Do you know who discovered the terma or who wrote it?

A: No, I don't know and they also don't know. It's just handed down and every once in a while it is copied onto new sheets but that's it.

Q: What are the kinds of questions are asked? You mentioned a kind of medical diagnosis. What would be the questions that would be asked to the four oracles in Dharamsala? What's the range and breadth of it all? Or are some questions discouraged?

A: Yes, the kind of questions change depends on the milieu in which you are. For example, the state oracles of the government are asked questions as in the case of Nechung. The Dalai Lama says, in an interview a few years ago and also in his book 'Freedom in Exile', that questions for Nechung have to be serious. They have to be big questions such as, "*Should I go into exile in India or should I stay in Tibet?*". This kind of question as well as government matters, these are for the state oracles. For the lesser "village oracles", if you can call them that, any kind of question is ok, such as those relating to everyday life and worldly questions: e.g. how will the harvest be, whether couples will have children or not, what is the problem if they can't have children, illnesses and bad weather. In a way these sort of questions are very similar to those put to shamans. Somehow, from the point of view of the quality of questions, there is no real distinction between shamanic and oracular questions in this kind of milieu.

Q: I was just very frustrated by this concept of psychic opening. I was wondering how would that fit in another context.

A: Actually I'm not really sure about that, in the sense that I am not sure how the different points of view, whether from Western or Tibetan culture, or generally an oriental point of view, would interpret their respective phenomena. So I am not sure how a Tibetan Lama would interpret this kind of manifestation in a westerner. I am not certain also how doctors, and suchlike, would interpret this phenomenon in Tibetan society. For example, for a long time in the past, these kind of practices have been ascribed to certain kinds of schizophrenia, epilepsy, and so on. This has been largely denied by studies in more recent years. But it's really difficult to say whether the deity was here or not because you have no instrument by which to ascertain this. You can never meet a deity and say he was or he wasn't here. What I mean to say, and like to present, is how the people interpret these phenomena. By asking the people and the Lamas, we have tried to see what they think of their own phenomena. I am not sure what would happen here.

Conclusion

As I have tried to show, the oracle works in a extremely specific, precise context which defines it as an oracle. If the context is not that, he is not an oracle. So the oracle obeys very precise rules and it is very important that the deity is strictly controlled by the ritual procedures. The shaman is a completely different matter. First of all he does not have a Guru. We would say in Italian that he is a "*cane sciolto*", a stray dog, in a way. He is sort of his own teacher. And the shamans say they learn what they know - the verses they chant, how to play the instrument, how to get into the trance, from their so called guiding spirit which appears to them in dreams. In general during the trance they don't have any contact because they are somewhat sleepy. In dreams, they receive instructions as to how to carry out all the procedures and how to control themselves and so on.

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Transcribed by Emiliano Diego-Franceskides