

1 The Madman of gTsang

gTsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507) is an exceptional figure in bKa' brgyud cultural history, for both his literary works and his extraordinary life. His version of the life story and songs of Mi la ras pa is among the masterpieces of Tibetan literature, and influenced the popular view of the Tibetan yogin as the devoted hermit meditating in the isolation of wilderness retreats. This ideal, pictured so effectively in his famed works, was also embodied by gTsang smyon Heruka and his main disciples in their own life and deeds, and diffused through texts, artefacts, preaching, and living example. The master is also known as Sangs rgyas rgyal mtshan, the Victory Banner of Awakening, a name evocative to the deed of “establishing the victory banner of Accomplishment” in the sacred sites of La phyi, Ti se, Tsa ri, and the Six Fortresses (see p. 19, 49 ff.). Indeed, his life was spent practising and teaching in the holy sites associated with the memory of Mi la ras pa, without settling in one specific place. An adept of the highest tantric teachings, he took Hevajra as his meditation deity, and adopted the garb of the yogin smeared in ashes and adorned with bones, becoming Dur khrod nyul ba'i rNal 'byor pa Rus pa'i rgyan can, the “yogin adorned with bone ornaments wandering in charnel grounds” (see figs. 1a, 2b, 3a). Even though this is how he signed his works, he is better known as gTsang smyon, “the Madman of gTsang”: this epithet points to a deliberately unconventional religious behaviour, which in Tibet is styled as “mad/crazy.” This “saintly madness” may be contextualised both in terms of the master's religious background, and in light of the social and political environment in which he lived. In particular, it may be argued that this behaviour—and the epithet—carries and conveys significations which prove crucial to the self-representation of the master and therefore to the responses he obtains from his contemporaries, and it may be skilfully employed to manage an uneasy relationship with secular power and religious authorities. Indeed, gTsang smyon Heruka lived during the decline of the Phag mo gru rule, and the rise of the Rin spungs pa, a period of conflict for political power and religious paramountcy in central Tibet. He developed his own skills to make his way into these difficult but exciting times, and to leave his indelible mark upon them.

Fragmentation and Creativity

In the period from the middle of the 14th century to the middle of the 17th century the Tibetan cultural area was divided into regional principalities with a varying degree of power and shifting alliances.¹ The noble families which controlled a specific area experienced periods of greater autonomy and periods of subordination, during which they were attached to a stronger centre of government. They usually kept their strongholds, while their capacity to control wider areas varied. There were frequent conflicts, marriage alliances, and manoeuvres to seize the political power. Most of the influential families controlled the major monastic institutions as well, through the so-called “uncle-nephew” system of succession (*khu dbon rgyud*), even though also the reincarnation system (*sprul sku*) became a well established mode of transmission of religious authority.

This has been described as an “era of imperial revivalism,” during which the gaze was turned to the past, and in particular to the Tibetan empire (7th–9th centuries), seeking for models of self-understanding. It would result in the “most glorious hour” of the art of history writing, a growing interest in the retrieval of documents and stories relating to the empire, and the consequent surfacing of the lost treasures (*gter ma*) of the past.² Indeed, narratives about the past, its legacy, and the Buddhist “conversion” of Tibet were compiled into compositions with long-lasting effects on the self-understanding of the Tibetans, such as *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies* (*rGyal rabs gsal ba'i me long*), and an increasing attention was devoted to the genealogical description of religious traditions, as part of the Tibetan concern with history.³ This was accompanied by the construction of the discourse

¹ This period runs from the end of the Sa skya hegemony (that can be dated to 1368 to coincide with the conventional end of the Yuan dynasty) to the beginning of the dGa' ldan pho brang hegemony (1642). It is a time of fragmentation and civil wars, which sees the prevailing power shifting several times, from the Phag mo gru pa to the Rin spungs pa to the gTsang pa sde srid. Even though a definitive label for this period of Tibetan history has not been agreed upon, its beginning and end are marked by key events which determine major historical shifts, while its internal subdivisions may be differently understood. For this reason, it may be treated as a broad historical period in itself, with some common characteristics and trends which evolve over the centuries. However, this approach should not obliterate the existence of distinct local histories for this period, due to the fragmented and contested nature of political power. For a brief survey of different options for the periodisation of Tibetan history, see CUEVAS 2006. For a multidisciplinary historical approach to this period, see CAUMANNs AND SERNESI eds. 2017.

² For the definitions in quotation marks, see MARTIN 2001: 7. For a discussion of the meaning of *gter ma* as “a cult of relics combined with the romance of discovery” see *ibid.*: 16–29. TUCCI (1949: 23–4) saw the Phag mo gru rule enthusiastically as a period of “awakening of national consciousness,” aiming “to restore the ancient kings’ monarchic ideal” and “to revive national laws and customs,” and observed that: “This conscious rebirth of ancient traditions (...) was attended not only by a renewal of historical studies and a vast production of chronicles, but also by research for documents, real or presumed, which might revive, as a reminder, the age of the kings. (...) Thus literature, either by truly discovering and publishing forgotten documents, or by attributing to old masters texts compiled in this spirit, prepared and accompanied the new movement of Tibetan history.” For a discussion of the Phag mo gru period and treasures in the context of an analysis of “proto-nationalism,” see DREYFUS 1994: 209–10.

³ For the “imaginal persistence of the empire” and the *Maṇi bka' 'bum*, see KAPSTEIN 2000: 141–62. For the *Mirror Illuminating the Royal Genealogies*, see SØRENSEN 1994. These works are compositions of different

related to the Great Debate of bSam yas, and the gradual but inexorable definition of “Indian” as the marker of authentic doctrinal views and religious practices: Tibet was the Buddhist land which preserved and transmitted the Indian Buddhist heritage, which had to be retrieved, re-installed at the centre of the discourse, and protected from loss, flaws, deterioration.⁴ In fact, this process carried within itself the seeds for cultural blossoming, and engendered configurations of thought, ideological constructions, and forms of practice distinctively Tibetan, which reflected contemporary instances.⁵ These were framed in a discourse looking back, concerned with the issue of origins, and verbalised as a rediscovery or a retrieval, in narrative genres such as history and hagiography, but also in doxographical and exegetical writing.

These propitious circumstances led to an incredible flourishing of philosophy, literature and figurative arts, especially between the mid 14th century and the early 16th century. Some of the most influential Tibetan scholars, such as Tsong kha pa (1357–1419), Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1375/6–1451), or Go rams pa bSod nams seng ge (1429–1489)—to arbitrarily name a few—lived in this period, which saw the compilation of seminal works and the diffusion of monastic centres for the study of philosophy and doctrinal debate, with their specific curricula and textbooks. Tsong kha pa gathered many followers and supporters, who fostered the construction of new large monasteries in central Tibet for scholastic training, where the strict observance of the vows, the knowledge of the scriptures and of the ritual procedures, and the ability in debate were highly valued qualities. As is well known, this group of followers became rapidly distinguished as an autonomous religious school which was eventually called dGe lugs pa: it gained wealth and power,

genres, even if their contents may at times coincide. For history writing in Tibet, see e.g. TUCCI 1949: 139–70; VAN DER KUIJP 1996; VOSTRIKOV 1970; MARTIN 1997.

⁴ Among the vast literature on the Great Debate of bSam yas, see the classic study by DEMIÉVILLE 1952, and IMAEDA 1975; VAN DER KUIJP 1984; SEYFORTH RUEGG 1989; 1992. For the notions of Indian and Indic, see SEYFORTH RUEGG 1995: 141–47; 2004. The prominent place of India in Tibetan religious discourse has led to a misleading depiction of Tibetan Buddhism (and society at large) as basically static and conservative, which has influenced both the popular and the scholarly understanding of Tibetan civilisation. For a dynamic appreciation of the notion Indo-Tibetan, note the remark by SEYFORTH RUEGG (2004: 340–41, n. 39): “this descriptive term is not meant to convey the idea of a single monolithic—and monothetic—entity. Rather, over a large area of south and Central Asia and a period of more than a millennium, it refers to cultural and intellectual developments marked, polythetically, by continuities—and by what may be described as ‘family resemblances’—as well as by discontinuities.”

⁵ “Such processes, which were conservative and innovative at the same time, could take several forms: elaboration of pre-existing authoritative scriptures; fulfilment of ancient aims through new technologies; discovery of ‘hidden’ texts; introduction of ‘lost’ practices; revival of ‘abandoned’ areas or opening of places that had been previously ‘hidden’ etc. Examples are numerous and well-known, including: the rediscovery of *gter-ma* texts; the construction of bridges for the sake of all living beings; the reintroduction of dances (...); the discovery of Indian *pīṭhas* in the Tibetan landscape at places such as Tsari; the opening of ‘hidden valleys’ (*sbas yul*).” (DIEMBERGER 2009: 112–13). This article by Diemberger discusses in particular the activities of Chos kyi sgron ma[me] (1422–1455), a female disciple of Bo dong Phyogs las rnam rgyal and Thang stong rgyal po, depicted as participating “in a larger movement of rediscovery of a multilayered Buddhist past that aimed at reviving the imperial legacy and the ancient Indian Buddhist civilization” (*ibid.*: 111–12).

and it was soon able to construct more autonomous monasteries in central Tibet, rapidly assuming a prominent political position as well. Therefore, during the 15th century, it came in conflict with the Sa skya pa and the Karma bKa' brgyud pa, who were backed by the noble families who aspired to control central Tibet (dBus gTsang). The confrontation on philosophical tenets took place in public debates, treatises, and polemical texts. At the same time, from the political and institutional perspective, the schools were competing for the support of powerful and wealthy noblemen, to establish the prestige of their monastic establishments, and to expand their territorial domains and revenues. In particular, new monasteries (*dgon pa*), colleges (*chos grwa*), practice places (*sgrub grwa*, *sgrub gnas*), and hermitages (*ri khrod*, *dben pa*) were founded in great number, in a strategical chess game carried out by influential masters together with the families supporting them.

The 15th century also saw the flourishing of the arts, and it is agreed that at this time we witness the formation of specifically Tibetan styles of painting, as well as the construction of some imposing religious buildings such as the famed sKu 'bum stūpa at rGyal mkhar rtse. Metallurgy and engineering skills were developed, which allowed the casting of exquisite statues and decorative plaques for the richest religious institutions, but also enabled the construction of the so-called “iron-chain bridges” over the main rivers of the Tibetan plateau. Finally, a major technical innovation was the introduction of xylographic printing in central and western Tibet. The earliest known books printed on the plateau date from the beginning of the 15th century, and a century later xylography was a widespread means of book-production, whose potential benefits for the preservation and diffusion of textual culture were recognised and sought-after.

So this was indeed a time of cultural effervescence, during which religious reform, technical innovation and the arts were supported in spite of political unrest and frequent civil wars. For these reasons this period has been compared, somewhat provocatively, with the contemporary Italian Renaissance.⁶ Even though the intellectual contexts of the Italian and Tibetan 15th century are extremely different, some of the themes of the epoch may be identified in both cultures, of course evolving in distinct social, economic, religious and symbolic worlds. Among them, the paramount theme of fragmentation, with frequent clashes between different political entities, and sudden changes in the political landscape. In such a context the intellectual/artist is compelled to negotiate with power, both on the symbolical and the economic point of view. Representation (and self-representation in particular) is a vital necessity for the local political power as it is for the individual master, and

⁶ See e.g. DIEMBERGER 2007: 33: “There were some parallels between this fragmented but intellectually productive Tibet and Italy in the same period, with its political fragmentation into city-states and its extraordinary artistic and scientific productivity. Patronage of the arts and sciences became an important factor for competing polities, leading to the so-called “campanilismo” of the Italian Renaissance (...). In both cases, artists and scholars had to act strategically in accepting or refusing patronage, collaborating, and negotiating constantly shifting allegiances. However, they also enjoyed the relative freedom from a hegemonic power, which, as Peter Burke has pointed out, had an important effect on creativity.”

these instances are brought together through patronage. The ruler, nobleman or rich merchant can provide to the master (scholar or artist) both the means, and the appropriate stage, for his achievements, at the issue of a communication process aimed at recognising mutual gain from the relationship.⁷ This brings about singular products of successful strategies, each distinct in its formal qualities: the multiplication of workshops (*bottega*, *atelier*) is the ultimate and obvious consequence. To look back at the past while responding to contemporary issues, and exploring creative ways of representation and narration, is another common theme of the Renaissance.⁸ This entails that the experimentation with artistic forms, and the development of technological innovation, are carried out most often at a regional level, even though not in isolation. The introduction of the printing press is part of this process. While in Europe it is the mobile character, in Tibet it is xylographic woodblock printing which ensures the diffusion of texts and ideas quicker and on a bigger-scale.

Warfare

During the latter part of the 15th century, internal struggles within the ruling family Phag mo gru pa (the lHa gzigz Rlangs clan) weakened its capacity of holding a firm control over the territories of central Tibet (dBus gTsang).⁹ The noble families serving at court, who owned large estates (*gzhis k[h]a*), and held the military

⁷ Schaeffer quotes the following statement from the biography of Zhwa lu lo tsā ba Chos skyong bzang po (1441–1527) (*rJe btsun zhwa lu lo tsā ba'i rnam par thar pa brjed byang nor bu'i khri shing* by sKyang ston lo tsā ba Rin chen bkra shis): “Those who are renowned as scholars are only those reputed to be so at the king’s court,” commenting: “Here, in the words of the biography itself, is the start of a social definition of scholarship. Scholars are those whose labours are publicly recognised by leaders, for only with such recognition could one continue to practice one’s craft” (SCHAEFFER 2009: 71). This idea that “reputation makes a scholar” (*ibid.*) is particularly relevant to the present discussion. The idea put forward by Schaeffer that it is exactly so for the madman, may perhaps be nuanced: I will argue that the madman chooses a specific, distinct strategy to negotiate with political power, hence seeking public recognition and economic support. This different choice allows a higher degree of autonomy than enjoyed by the scholar at court.

⁸ “Per più versi, il bisogno di rappresentare e di rappresentarsi lega artisti e committenti. Ma non nella forma della coincidenza dei rispettivi intenti, bensì in modo dialettico; *per tangenze*, si potrebbe dire. All’interno di un processo generale di formazione di una ‘civiltà del calcolo’, si delineano molti modi di reciproca strumentalizzazione fra programmi e maniere artistiche. Si profila così una galassia di saperi tesi all’autonomia (...)” (TAFURI 1992: 21). There is a continuous dialogue between the universalistic aspiration and its locally and historically qualified expression. For the inspiring principles of Humanism (*umanesimo*), and its contradictions and paradoxes, see e.g. TAFURI 1992: 3–32; CHASTEL 1999.

⁹ For a detailed reconstruction of the political and military history of the Phag mo gru pa, see CZAJA 2013, on which the following brief summary is mainly based upon. An overview of the period in question is also found in TUCCI 1949, vol. 1: 27–31, 39–41. Main historical sources for the families and events presented here are the *New Red Annals* (*Deb ther dmar po gsar ma*) (TUCCI 1971), and the *Song of the Queen of Spring* (*dPyid kyi rgyal mo'i glu dbyangs*) (TUCCI 1949, vol. 2: 640–49; AHMAD 2008, with caution). A genealogical scheme of the house of the Phag mo gru pa is provided in VAN DER KUIJP 1981: Appendix; TUCCI 1949: Table VI; CZAJA 2013: 561–62, figs. 12–13; see also SERNESI 2010a: 128.

fortresses (*rdzong*) built in order to control and administrate the kingdom, profited of these internal fights to strengthen their autonomy, and sided with one or the other prospective ruler in order to pursue their own political goals.¹⁰ The two most powerful families in gTsang were the Shar ka family ruling rGyal rtse, and the *rdzong 'dzin pas* of Rin spungs fortress.¹¹ In dBus, in the sKyid shod region of lHa sa, the foremost clans were the sNel pa, with the main seat at sNe'u rdzong, their offshoot the dGa' ldan pa (who would have a prominent position in the 16th century), the Brag dkar ba, and the *rdzong 'dzin pas* of 'Ol kha stag rtse. These families were all allied, with the occasional deception, and intermarried. The sNel pa were also the main supporters of the dGe lugs order since its inception, together with the 'Ol kha pa.¹² In Yar lungs, three families had a similar relationship of allegiance and intermarriage among each other, with the occasional skirmish, namely the lHa Bug pa can (controlling the fortresses of bSam sde and Gri gu), the Yar rgyab pa (controlling Yar rgyab, and the Gong dkar fortress in lower sKyid shod), and the ruling family of Bya. They supported mainly the Sa skya, 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud, and Karma bKa' brgyud schools. Also the 'Phyong rgyas ruling house, in western Yar lungs, was rising to constitute an influential local power.¹³

These families served at court in the most prominent positions, intermarried with the ruling house, and controlled wealth and military forces of their own. Therefore, with the Phag mo gru pa cracking under internal divisions and lack of offspring, which engendered the occasional void of power, the most ambitious clans seized the opportunity to expand their territories, to influence the agenda and appointments of the central government, and to eventually determine the succes-

¹⁰ An overview of the Phag mo gru estates (*gzhis k[h]a*) and fortresses (*rdzong*), with their respective locations, is found in CZAJA 2013: 462–73. See also SØRENSEN AND HAZOD 2007: 208–9, n. 542. TUCCI 1949, vol. 1: 27, makes the following distinction: “The office of *rdzong dpon*, at least for the principal *rdzong*, was not hereditary; perhaps in the beginning it had been conferred for life, but did not pass from father to son. (...) The office of *rdzong dpon* therefore had nothing in common, at least in the beginning, with the allotment of feuds (*gzhis ka*) given as a temporary or permanent apantage to families who had deserved well of the sDe srid, or to monasteries to whose masters the latter might be particularly attached. Of course, as the Phag mo gru family became weaker, some vassals who had contracted marriage ties with it and thus increased their authority, tried by intrigue or arms to get a permanent hold on feuds conferred upon them temporarily by reason of their office.” This last is a reference to the Rin spungs pa.

¹¹ On the history of the Shar ka ba and the principality of rGyal rtse, see EVERDING 2017; LO BUE 1992. Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan of the sGer clan served as *nang blon* of 'Jam dbyangs Gu shri Śākya rgyal mtshan (1340–1373), was appointed *rdzong dpon* of Rin spungs, and married a daughter of the ruler's brother Śākya Rin chen (1347–1426). His daughters married the younger son of Śākya Rin chen, i.e. *che sa* Sang rgyas rgyal mtshan (1389–1444), who fought for the throne with his own son Grags pa 'byung gnas (1414–1444/5), but eventually lost. The following ruler Kun dga' legs pa (1433–1482/3), also a son of *che sa* Sang rgyas rgyal mtshan, married a Rin spungs wife, with whom, however, serious conflict arose (see below). For the Rin spungs family history, see CZAJA 2013: 481–93, 565, fig. 16; TUCCI 1971: 238–40.

¹² See SØRENSEN AND HAZOD 2007: 759–69; WYLIE 1980. The sNe'u *rdzong dpon* Nam mkha' bzang po, and the 'Ol kha stag rtse *rdzong dpon* Brag dkar Rin chen dpal sponsored the 1409 sMon lam festival, and the construction of Ri bo dga' ldan (1409), and 'Bras spungs (1416) monasteries.

¹³ For the lHa bug pa can family, see GYALBO, HAZOD AND SØRENSEN 2000. For the Yar rgyab family, see FERMER 2009: 40–57; 2017. For the Bya pa ruling house, see CZAJA 2013: 473–81, 563, fig. 14. For the 'Phyong rgyas family, see CZAJA 2013: 494–500.

sion on the secular throne of sNe gdong, and on the abbatial thrones of rTse thang and gDan sa mthil.

In 1432, at the death of the powerful and charismatic ruler Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1374–1432), the Phag mo gru pa could not find a consensual agreement on the succession at sNe gdong. In 1434, when the most influential exponent of the lHa gzig family, the abbot of gDan sa mthil *spyān snga* bSod nams rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po (1386–1434), passed away, internal fighting exploded, in what was to be known as “the year of the internal collapse of the Phag mo gru.”¹⁴ Indeed, even though the immediate confrontation was rapidly settled in favour of Grags pa ’byung gnas (1432–1444/5), it marked the beginning of the struggles within the ruling house that were to last for over a century. At the death of Gong ma Grags pa ’byung gnas, the two heirs to the throne were both too young: the deceased ruler’s half-brother Kun dga’ legs pa (1433–1482/3) was eleven, while the only son, Ngag gi dbang po (1439–1491), was five years old. This was the occasion for the ambitious families of central Tibet to strengthen their position: the Rin spungs pa, in particular, seized the strategically important fortress of bSam grub rtse (gZhis ka rtse), and in the following years continued to increase their power in gTsang, and at court.¹⁵ In 1448, Kun dga’ legs pa was enthroned at sNe gdong, and soon married the lady Chos dpal bzang mo of the house of Rin spungs. However, due to the influence of two officials, the *ka bzhi pa* brothers, over the ruler, a harsh confrontation begun between two groups at court: on the one hand, the Gong ma, supported by the sNe’u and ’Ol kha families, on the other hand, his wife and his son, who had settled at rTse thang, supported by the Rin spungs pa, lHa Bug pa can, Yar rgyab pa, and Bya pa. The animosity between these two groups was destined to last.¹⁶

Ngag gi dbang po became the natural candidate to the throne for the latter faction. After serving only one year as *spyān snga* of gDan sa mthil, in 1458 he

¹⁴ This is the famous statement from the *New Red Annals*; see DTMPMS 83: ‘*di la stag mo sde bzar chen mo zhes pa dang/ phag mo gru pa nang zhig pa’i lo zhes kyang zer*; cf. Tucci 1971: 219, “This period is known as the great anarchy of the year of the tiger, and as the year of the internal collapse of the Phag mo gru-s.” For *spyān snga* bSod nams rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po, see SERNESI 2010a.

¹⁵ The leader responsible for building the family’s power at this time was Nor bu bzang po (1403–1466). The date of the takeover of bSam grub rtse is not clear: it is usually understood by scholars as being 1434, but see now the convincing arguments for 1446 in CZAJA 2013: 223–25, n. 54. This Rin spungs leader was also a generous patron of the Sa skya school, financing the construction of the monasteries of Byams chen chos sde and sKyed mo[s] tshal, both in the Rong chung valley close to Rin spungs fortress.

¹⁶ The *New Red Annals* explicitly mention the influence of the *ka bzhi pa* officials as the source of contention; see Tucci 1971: 222. The exact nature of this appointment and the identity of the functionaries remain however obscure. The same source (*ibid.*) states that “sMyon pa of dGe mo took the dignity of *ka bzhi*; after him it was taken over by the *dge slong* of sBal mig; the younger brother of this *dge slong*, called lNga dar, took possession of the dignity of eastern *ka bzhi* and became master of lNag.” I take the latter two as the brothers hostile to the Rin spungs pa. In 1467, an incident possibly exacerbated hostilities between the factions: a sNel chief assassinated the ‘Brug nang so Rin chen dpal bzang at Rwa lung. This was the father of ‘Brug smyon Kun dga’ legs pa (alias ‘Brug pa Kun legs) (1455–1529), who was then reared by his aunt within the Yar rgyab house at Gong dkar fortress, and later served the Rin spungs leader Kun tu bzang po (b. 1445). See SØRENSEN AND HAZOD 2007: 500, n. 167, 763, n. 8–9; EHRHARD 2002: 46, n. 15.

was put down by his uncle Kun dga' legs pa, and could gain back the seat only in 1473. In 1476 Chos dpal bzang mo died, soon followed by his son, so that the fight between sNe gdong and rTse thang was temporarily settled. The Gong ma's opposing faction, however, strengthened its position in Yar lungs, where the Rin spungs pa occupied some estates, and did not renounce its plans. In 1480, a major attack conducted in Yar lungs by the officials of Rin spungs, g.Yung, Yar rgyab, and Gong dkar was completely successful: the *ka bzhi pa* officials, evidently the leaders of the rival forces, were deposed, and the attack proceeded into the sKyid shod region, where the Rin spungs pa seized the strategically crucial fortress of Chu shul lhun po, situated at the confluence of the gTsang po and sKyid chu rivers. Therefore, in 1481 Ngag gi dbang po was enthroned in place of his uncle, who died shortly afterwards, and the Rin spungs strongman mTsho skyes rdo rje (1450–1510/13), who had led the campaign, was granted the foremost position at court, with the title of *blon chen*. In the meanwhile, the leaders of the Karma bKa' brgyud school were increasing their power over the religious and political scene: these were the 7th Karma pa (Zhwa nag) Chos grags rgya mtsho (1454–1506), and the 4th Zhwa dmar pa Chos grags ye shes (1453–1524). In particular, the latter secured the confidence of the ruler, who asked him to look after the future of his young child, now the only heir of the lHa gzigz Rlangs clan. When Ngag gi dbang po died, in 1491, the boy was only three, and the void of power was naturally filled by the *blon chen*, who took the regency in 1492, while the Zhwa dmar pa occupied the throne of gDan sa mthil in the following year: these two men, together with the Rin spungs commander Don yod rdo rje (1463–1512), were now *de facto* ruling central Tibet. In 1498 came the final act: Don yod rdo rje allied with the Bya ruler bKra shis dar rgyas (d. 1499), to attack their old enemies of sNe'u rdzong, and take control of lHa sa. The campaign was thoroughly successful, and the sNel family was eliminated from the political scene. The loss of their most trusted and powerful supporter was at that time a major setback for the dGe lugs school. Indeed, during the following nineteen years, with lHa sa under the control of the Rin spungs pa, the dGe lugs religious leader dGe 'dun rgya mtsho (1476–1542) had to avoid the city and his home monastery, and the school was excluded from the sMon lam festival, now celebrated by bKa' brgyud and Sa skya masters. Following the military campaign, in 1499, the young Phag mo gru ruler Ngag dbang bKra shis grags pa (1488–1563/4) was enthroned, but he was not yet able to actually control the reign's policies, firmly in the hands of the powerful noblemen and generals at court. He was also married to a daughter of Don yod rdo rje, named Legs mtsho rgyal mo. At the turn of the century, and for another ten years, the Rin spungs pa were at the height of their power, controlling together with their allies, by military and diplomatic means, the whole of dBus gTsang.

At the death of the family's strongmen, however, the ruler was able to downsize the Rin spungs power in dBus. Supported by the noble families of sKyid shod, in 1516 he could seize back the city of lHa sa and the fortress of Chu shul lhun po.

The army's commander, f lha bsrung, was of the dGa' ldan family, which became the foremost force in the region.¹⁷ The ruler Ngag dbang bkra shis grags pa also took a second wife born within the sNel aristocracy, Sangs rgyas dpal 'dzom ma, and, together with her, supported the dGe lugs school. Indeed, in 1517, dGe 'dun rgya mtsho was enthroned at 'Bras spungs, received the endowment which would become the dGa' ldan pho brang, and could lead again the sMon lam festival, at the head of 1500 'Bras spungs monks and 300 Se ra monks.

Madmen and Monks

It was against this background that some exceptional figures, wandering yogins keen to a somewhat unusual behaviour, played a significant role in the evolution of Tibetan buddhist cultural constructions (*imaginaire*). All the most famous holy madmen (*smyon pa*), indeed, lived in the second half of the 15th century: gTsang smyon Heruka (1452–1507), 'Brug smyon Kun dga' legs pa (alias 'Brug pa Kun legs) (1455–1529), and dBus smyon Kun dga' bzang po (1458–1532), together with others such as Padma gling pa (1450–1521), sometimes called Mad Treasure-revealer (gTer ston smyon pa), and Thang stong rgyal po, the Madman of the Empty Valley (Lung stong smyon pa).¹⁸

As Gene Smith observed already in 1969, in his introduction to *The Life of the Saint of gTsang*:

The *smyon pa* is a phenomenon that suddenly seemed to flower during the 15th century, that appeared in an age of fervent religious reform and doctrinal systematisation. The *smyon pa* is the antithesis of the scholastic monk; yet to view the phenomenon simply as a reaction against the monastic reforms and dGe lugs pa rationalism misses much of the point. The *smyon pa*, too, represented a force of reform. (...) [T]he *smyon pa* represents an attempt to rededicate the Dkar-brgyud-pa sects to old truths and insights that were being forgotten. (...) I think that the evidence is fairly conclusive that the *smyon pa* phenomenon was, at least partly, a reaction against the hereditary lineages with their prestige and wealth. It was an attempt to reinvest the Dkar brgyud pa tradition with some of its former religious fervor, the incandescent spirituality of the

¹⁷ Ra nu lha bsrung was fathered by the sNel leader dPal 'byor rgyal po (d. 1490), who had been a powerful opponent of the Rin spungs growing power, and had sided with Kun dga' legs pa. Ra nu lha bsrung's mother was of the 'Ol kha stag rtse ruling family. It seems that he had a deep resentment against the Rin spung pa written in his family history.

¹⁸ For dBus smyon, see EHRHARD 2010b; DiVALERIO 2016. For 'Brug smyon, see STEIN 1972; for Padma gling pa, see ARIS 1988; HARDING 2003; for Thang stong rgyal po, see STEARNS 2007, especially pp. 58–80 for the master as the Madman of the Empty Valley. On the issue of holy madness in this historical context and some of the issues I raise in this chapter, see also DiVALERIO 2015a.

early yogis. The chief symbol of this movement was Mi la ras pa, who had never been a monk, the mystic poet who had founded no monastery or school, a saint who remained a legend. (SMITH 1969: 1–3)

The madmen were indeed products of their time, which was all but stagnant, and inspired creative responses to the rapidly changing religious and political environment. The crisis of the Phag mo gru pa that started in the 1430s marked the beginning of a long period of political instability, and showed the weaknesses of the “hereditary religious nobility” that controlled most of the greatest monasteries and their vast estates. At the same time, the swift rise of the dGe lugs pa had a profound impact on religious discourse, sectarian self-definitions, and the equilibrium and relations among the different lineages and schools. In the new context of an intense competition for political favour, economic support, and control of the territory and its resources, the different schools engaged in confrontation over veridicality, and space for creative thinking, and religious reform, was opened up.

As many Tibetan prominent thinkers, “Tsong kha pa may justly be described as being both a *conservative traditionalist* and a *creative restorer/renovator/innovator*. But he would surely have disavowed ‘originality’ in its frequent modern sense of the reverse of traditionalism. . . .”¹⁹ Indeed, the notion of originality carries the negative idea of fabrication, and in Tibetan it is expressed as personal invention, something self-built (*rang bzo*). On the contrary, the reformer, or innovator, is understood as a restorer of the true meaning, a retriever of the hidden intention (*dgongs pa*) of the Buddha, the most faithful exegete of the scriptures, against distorted views, losses of memory, and flaws in the transmission. In this sense, while proposing an unprecedented philosophical view or religious behaviour—when it passes the test of reasoning and scriptures—he may be considered a *traditionalist* at the same time. In a cultural context that, as mentioned above, is primarily concerned with its past and its heritage, the discourse would even more tend to be constructed as the restoration of long forgotten fundamental truths. The privileged resource for this task is the *topos* of visionary encounter and teaching, that is able to bring together the concern for both traditional authorisation and modern interpretation.

While the dGe lugs pa fostered scholasticism, mass monasticism, and the strict observance of the monastic code, the madmen promoted an alternative model to the scholar-monk, searching in the past and in the scriptures for their own authorising referents. Their model is one of solitary asceticism and integral commitment to the practice of tantras. Indeed, the tendency to understand the tantric scriptures in a more literal way, and maintain their subversive, shocking and inspiring potential, had never been swept away, and re-emerged at times in Tibet in the practice of eccentric masters. Their Indian models were obviously the *siddhas*, who figure

¹⁹ SEYFORTH RUEGG 2004: 329. See *ibid.*, for Tsong kha pa’s contempt for *rang bzo*, and his task “to penetrate, and to interpret as faithfully as possible, the final import, the ‘intent’ (*dgongs pa*), of the thinking of