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**A Study Based on Textual and Pictorial Descriptions of the Cult of Tibetan Prayer Flags
(*rlung rta*)**

PHD DISSERTATION THESES

The subject and aims of the dissertation

Considering the extent of scientific research in Tibetan and Mongolian folk religions, the lack of studies and interest regarding the background as well as significance of prayer flags (*rlung rta*), and the mystery behind these ever present objects, seems puzzling in the least. Perhaps this dearth of knowledge about prayer flags is ascribable to the reality that those museums with Tibetan and Mongolian collections, or for that matter, private collections – since these flags are mere artefacts – show no interest in them, in spite of their defining significance and prevalence in religious practices in those regions. Curiously, few public and private collections, or libraries specializing in Tibetan literature could produce studies of ritual texts connected with prayer flags, a fact in itself defining, which makes it that much more difficult to properly evaluate them. It is for these reasons that the main purpose of my study is to collect and systematize the extant, and accessible, Tibetan texts concerning the prayer flags in Hungary, and to determine and describe, as much as possible, their significant features as well as their background.

Content and structure of dissertation

The dissertation is divided into six parts; the Introduction (1.) summarizes the extent of our knowledge on this subject, and the context in which these texts are held in the various libraries. A separate part analyzes the role and types of prayer flags, the multiplicity of their forms and methods of use, by relying on Tibetan sources (1.1.). Among the sources are various Tibetan explanatory dictionaries, the definitions offered by major Western literary sources, and the translation and analysis of the only Tibetan text (Namkhai Norbu) known to me, which determines, in a singular manner, the practical uses and roles of prayer flags in rituals. Since the Tibetan equivalent, ‘wind horse’ (*rlung rta*), has a number of meanings, I

find it more appropriate to use the Tibetan expression in place of the ‘prayer flag’ or ‘wind horse.’

It is not an easy task to summarize the ideas regarding the origins of *rlung rta*, considering that three fundamentally different views compete with each other for our scrutiny (1.2). In contrast to the opinion of Rolf A. Stein, which proffers that the *rlung rta* can be traced back to the meaning and function of ‘vital energy’ (S.: *prāna*); on the other hand, the Tibetan points of views (Namkhai Norbu, Samten Karmay), although differing from each other in a number of ways, are inclined to emphasize the background features according to Tibetan astrology (*nag rtsis*), whose roots are of Chinese origin. And there are particular questions remain about the connection (1.2.1.) of *rlung rta* and *bon*, the belief which preceded Buddhism in Tibet, because we lack sufficient data regarding their connection. Special emphasis is given to the comparison (1.2.2.) between the Mongol equivalent (M.: *kei mori*, Halha M.: *xiimori*) of *rlung rta*, because a number of opinions suggest that in several instances, the background differs from the Tibetan point of view. The significance of this issue can be appreciated when we learn that the 'wind horse' today is a symbolic animal in the state coat of arms of Mongolia (1.2.2.1.).

In the course of introducing the various depictions, visible on prayer flags, I have made a detailed analysis of the animals and deities of *rlung rta*, located in the four corners (1.3) of the flags. The roles they represent can be traced back to an earlier Chinese depiction of the universe, with animals symbolizing the four directions, although on account of the Tibetan influences and eccentricities, their roles were often changed to suit local tastes. I have also pointed out the background of the horse which occupies the centre of the flag.

It is hardly possible to make sense of the texts connected with *rlung rta* without knowing the basic astrological units (1.4.), including the notion of *rlung rta* itself; even the colour of the prayer flag is decided on the basis of astrological calculation. An astrological amulet (*srid pa ho*) which enjoys widespread use, was equally indispensable to the analysis (1.4.1., 1.4.1.1.), along with its seals (*phyag rgya*), because these elements appeared, either separately or together, on certain types of prayer flags.

The second part of the study endeavours to introduce the various types of prayer flags; although a number of variations exist, I attempted to develop a visual typology which breaks the variations down to five basic types (2.). These were analyzed on the basis of texts imprinted upon them (2.1.). Because of their combined and complex nature, the prayer flags with five permanent elements (2.2.) merited a separate chapter in the study, along with the

special type of prayer flag, which is similar in nature to *srid pa ho*, whose texts I also translated (2.3.)

The most emphatic part of the study is the third section, where various types of rituals connected with *rlung rta* are listed. I analyzed the texts as far as possible, by breaking them down to their structural elements, and translated the most important segments from them. I concluded that the most frequent is the fumigation (*bsang*) ritual, and proceeded to elaborate on four different types (3.1.1.-3.1.4.); I also collected the most the relevant, smaller texts available as well. Further, the ritual of ‘raising the pole of the prayer flag’ (*rlung rta’i ka ‘dzugs*) was assigned more of an important role, though I was able to obtain (3.2.) only one variation of it, as in the case of the thread-cross ritual of the ‘ransom rite’ (*mdos*) (3.3.). Of this last, I was able to ascertain its basic text, and the comparative analysis of the two texts merited a good part of a chapter (3.3.1.). Interestingly, the ‘origination myth’ of *rlung rta* plays a role in both texts, which allowed me to conclude that in reality, it is part of a famous, late 17th century astrological work (*Vaidūrya dkar po*). Because the myth of the tortoise, which includes all astrological categories, was given an important role here, I worked up the Tibetan sources (3.3.3.) which were accessible to me at this point. Likewise, a separate heading was given to the circle of deities around the *rlung rta*, and singled out to introduce the one with the most important role, the Chinese origin of the deity *Kong rtse*, (3.3.4.), riding on the tortoise; curiously, this deity is an important figure in the *bon* tradition as well.

Presumably a rare type of text covers the cure sacrifice (*bcos thabs*) (3.4.), and the custom of freeing (*tshe thar*) sacrifice (3.5.) rituals, of which I was able to obtain one sample of each. At the same time, the rituals of libation (*gser skyems*) (3.6.) and the initiation (*rab gnas*) ritual (3.7.) seems to crop up in several collections, and I submitted the analysis of two of those texts.

The other significant part of this dissertation is concerned with the pictorial elements which belong to certain rituals. Although indirectly linked to the depiction and composition of a prayer flag, by themselves, in the course of the rituals, they must be seen as independent pictorial types, and proceeded to identify two distinct variations. Listed in the first group are those directly linked to the depiction of the *rlung rta* ransom sacrifice (*mdos*) (4.1.), and I illustrated the system of pictures by examples lifted from the texts. The second basic type is the ‘fortification of *rlung rta*’ which, although it can be tied to the ‘raising the pole of *rlung rta*’ text type, an idea of my own suggestion (4.2.), but knowing the collected material, I could only match one of the pictures with the given text (cf. 4.2.). This may be ascribed to the fact that, while the rest of the basic components of the picture match each other, I had to presume

that the analyzed series of pictures were made specifically for a given ritual (examples of this can be found in the study).

The transcripts of the collected texts can be found in the Appendix (5.), where the translations may be compared with the original texts. Nonetheless, the transcripts themselves 'explain' the given texts, which may differ at some point in the rituals. Some of the texts contain a number of typographic errors, or mistakes, which I tried to correct as best I could on the basis of the extant variations to be found in the texts.

The sources of the dissertation

My current efforts have been greatly facilitated by the fact that the Library of Eastern Collections of the Hungarian Academy of Science could provide several, recently systematized and published texts from Mongolia, which constitutes the basis of Section 3; I expanded on the texts found in different Hungarian and foreign private collections, with newer text types as well. Because these collections contain numerous unpublished and incorrectly identified picture types, which belong to these texts, I elaborated the study with items of my own collections, including the appropriate explanation to clarify them.

The summation of research results

Using primarily Tibetan sources, the study attempts to sum up the extant knowledge regarding the practices and origins of prayer flags, and their implications as suggested by certain elements, which can be found in various depictions. Based on the material I have collected and published (Badral, 2003), the study attempted to determine the basic types of prayer flags, and related the translation of texts which can be found on certain examples. Amongst them of special note is the combination prayer flag, resulting from the identification and matching of *srid pa ho* and *rlung rta*, and the publication of texts about them. The study systematizes different texts connected with prayer flag rites, identifies the matching rituals, and emphasizes their most important features. Finally, it introduces and analyzes the unusually rare, heretofore unpublished picture types of prayer flags. The Appendix contains the elaboration and transliteration of texts used in the study, and the Bibliography relates the details and systematization of Tibetan texts collected by me.

Publications in the subject of the dissertation

A „Good Luck” Thangka-type and Its Astrological Connections. In: *Indo-Asiatische Zeitschrift*, Vol. 3. 1999, pp. 16–27.

A teremtés ideje a tibeti asztrológiában. A Kozmikus Teknős mítosza (The Time of Creation in Tibetan Astrology: the Myth of the Cosmic Turtle). In: *Közelítések az időhöz*, (Approaching Time) Tabula könyvek 3., Néprajzi Múzeum, Budapest, 2002, pp. 52–72.

The Myth of the Cosmic Turtle According to the Late Astrological Tradition. In: *Impressions of Bhutan and Tibetan Art. Tibetan Studies III. Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000*, Brill, Leiden, Boston, Köln, 2002. pp. 69–90.

“May they Here Increase! May All Gather Together!” A Woodprint and its Inscriptions from the Mongolian Collection at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts. In: *Ars Decorativa* 21, Budapest, 2002, pp. 79–102.

The “Religion of Men?” In: *Demons and Protectors* (ed.: Béla Kelényi), Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, Budapest, 2003, pp. 11–18.

The Cult of Good Luck. In: *Demons and Protectors* (ed.: Béla Kelényi), Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts, Budapest, 2003, pp. 47–78.

Forthcoming

Analysis of a *mdos* Ritual Text Connected with the *rlung rta* Tradition. *Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Königswinter, 2006*

A Lungta rítusának ábrázolásai (egy „nyomozás” története) [The Depictions of the Rite of the Lungta: a Narrative of an Inquiry]. In: *Démonok és védelmezők. Őseink nyomában Belső-Ázsiában* IV. (szerk.: Birtalan Ágnes, Kelényi Béla)

Conferences and Papers in the Subject of the Dissertation

The Myth of the Cosmic Turtle According to the Late Astrological Tradition. Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden, 2000

A teremtés ideje a tibeti asztrológiában. A Kozmikus Teknős mítosza (The Time of Creation in the Tibetan Astrology: the Myth of the Cosmic Turtle). Közelítések az időhöz, Néprajzi Múzeum, 2001

Various Depictions of the *rlung rta* Cult and their Textual Background. University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, Circle of Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, London, 2004

Analysis of a *mdos* Ritual Text Connected with the *rlung rta* Tradition. Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Königswinter, 2006

The Cult of the Wind Horse. Universität Bern, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Bern, 2007