

# The Shuk-den Affair: Origins of a Controversy<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years the community of Tibetan Buddhists has been agitated by an intense dispute concerning the practice of a controversial deity, Gyel-chen Dor-je Shuk-den (*rgyal chen rdo rje shugs ldan*). Several Tibetan monks have been brutally murdered, and the Tibetan community in general and the Ge-luk tradition in particular have become profoundly polarized. Outsiders have been puzzled by the intensity of this dispute, for it concerns an unusual type of deity, the dharma protector (*chos skyong srung ma*), the concept of which is difficult to understand within the modern view of religion as a system of individual beliefs.

Despite the importance of these events and the coverage that it has received in both print and electronic media, modern scholars have remained relatively silent on the subject. One reason for this is that few scholars are willing to enter into a conflict as highly charged as this one. Moreover, the dispute concerns a rather baroque area of the Tibetan religious world that is neither well known nor easy for a modern observer to conceptualize. Nevertheless, this scholarly silence is regrettable, in that it has allowed less well-informed viewpoints to acquire legitimacy. It has also contributed to the irrational atmosphere that has surrounded this question.

In this essay, I will attempt to fill this scholarly gap and to promote a more rational approach by examining the quarrel surrounding Shuk-den and delineating some of the events leading to the present crisis. I will examine the narrative of Shuk-den's origin, focusing on the meaning of the hostility toward the Dalai Lama which it displays and which is confirmed by recent events. The irony is that Shuk-den is presented by his followers as the protector of the Ge-luk (*dge lugs*) school, of which the Dalai Lama is the (*de facto*) leader. How can there be a practice in the Ge-luk tradition opposed to its own leader? To answer this question, I will examine the historical development of the Shuk-den practice. I will first consider the events related in the Shuk-den story. I will then turn to later historical developments, in particular the way in which Pa-bong-ka (*pha bong kha*, 1878-1941), the central figure in the Shuk-den lineage, developed this practice in response to contemporary events. I will also examine some of the events that took place in India in the 1970s when the "Shuk-den Affair" started to emerge. I will show that although the dispute concerning this deity has an important political background, it primarily concerns the orientation of the Ge-luk tradition and its relation to other Tibetan Buddhist traditions. In

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exploring these questions, I will also seek to answer other related questions such as: Why is Shuk-den so controversial? Is the practice of propitiating Shuk-den different from the practices associated with other protectors? Why has the present Dalai Lama been so opposed to the practice of propitiating Shuk-den? These are some of the questions that I seek to answer in this interpretive essay. What I will not attempt to explain are the more recent events that have unfolded in the 1990s. These events are still shrouded in controversy and will need to be established with any reasonable degree of objectivity before they can be interpreted.

In order to address some of the questions just mentioned, I explore the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den as it has been understood over time. In doing so, I follow the critical methods of the historical approach, whose assumptions are quite different from those of the believers. I examine how Shuk-den is presented in the rare texts where he appears prior to the contemporary period, that is, as a worldly deity (*'jig rten pa'i lha*) who can be propitiated but not worshiped. His followers often reply that this description refers to the interpretable meaning (*drang don*) of the deity, not its ultimate meaning (*nges don*), for in such a dimension Shuk-den is said to be fully enlightened (*nges don la sang rgyas*).<sup>2</sup> It is this kind of normative distinction that I leave aside in this essay intended for a modern audience.

## The Founding Myth

When asked to explain the origin of the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den, his followers point to a rather obscure and bloody episode of Tibetan history, the premature death of Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen (*sprul sku grags pa rgyal mtshan*, 1618-1655). Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was an important Ge-luk lama who was a rival of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngak-wang Lo-sang Gya-tso (*ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho*, )1617-1682).<sup>3</sup> Drak-ba Gyel-tsen and Ngak-wang Lo-sang Gya-tso were born at a crucial time in the Ge-luk tradition. The tradition had by then survived a protracted civil war with the forces of Tsang (*gtsang*) backed by some of the other Tibetan Buddhist schools. It had not yet won the war but had begun to establish an alliance with Mongol groups that would allow it to triumph two decades later. Around the same time, two of the most important Ge-luk lamas had died: the fourth Dalai Lama and the second reincarnation of Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba (*bsod nams grags pa*,) 1478-1554), who was one of the most important Ge-luk teachers during the sixteenth century. Between the two boys, Ngak-wang Lo-sang Gya-tso was chosen as the Fifth Dalai Lama over Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, who was designated by way of compensation as

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<sup>2</sup> Tri-jang Rin-bo-che, (The Music that Rejoices the Ocean of Pledge Bound, Being an Account of the Amazing Three Secrets [of Body, Speech and Mind] of Great Magical Dharma Spirit Endowed with the Adamantine Force, The Supreme Manifested Deity Protecting the Ge-den Tradition (dge ldan bstan bsrung ba'i lha mchog sprul pa'i chos rgyal chen po rdo rje shugs ldan rtsal gyi gsang gsum rmad du byung ba'i rtogs pa brjod pa'i gdam du bya ba dam can can rgya mtsho dgyes pa'i rol mo,) Collected Works, Delhi: Guru Deva, 1978), V.5-159, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's lineage is said to go back to Dul Dzin Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, a direct disciple of Dzong-ka-ba. This lineage is, however, a kind of spiritual lineage and quite different from the recognized lineage of a lama. See Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement to the Explanation of the Preliminaries of the Life Entrusting [Ritual]) (rgyal chen srog gtab gyi sngon 'gro bshad pa'i mtshams sbyor kha bskong,) Collected Works, New Delhi: Chopel Legdan, 1973), VII.517-532, 520.

the third reincarnation of Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba.<sup>4</sup> This choice did not seem, however, to have resolved the contention between the two lamas, as they remained rivals at the heads of two competing estates known as the “Upper Chamber” (*zim khang gong ma*) under Drak-ba Gyel-tsen and the “Lower Chamber” (*zim khang 'og ma*) under the Dalai Lama. During the next two decades, the struggle between the forces of Central Tibet supported by the Mongols of Gushri Khan and the forces of Tsang continued, gradually turning to the advantage of the former party. Due to his connection with the Mongols, which had been established by the Third Dalai Lama and reinforced by the Fourth, the Fifth Dalai Lama and his party were able to establish their supremacy. In 1642, the Fifth Dalai Lama became the ruler of Tibet and entrusted the actual running of the state to his prime minister, So-nam Choe-pel (*bsod nams chos 'phal*). This victory, however, still did not eliminate the rivalry between the two lamas and their estates. Very little is known about the events that took place in the next ten years but it seems quite clear that there was a contentious between the two lamas' estates. What is less clear is the reason behind this conflict. Was Drak-ba Gyel-tsen perceived as a focus of the opposition to the rule of the Fifth Dalai Lama and his prime minister within the Ge-luk hierarchy? Was there a personal rivalry between the two lamas? Or was the main reason for the tension a dispute between Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's family, the Ge-kha-sas, and So-nam Choe-pel, as a recent work argues?<sup>5</sup>

What seems to be well established is that in these circumstances, in 1655, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen suddenly died. The exact conditions of his death are controversial and shrouded in legends. Some of the Fifth's sympathizers claimed that there was nothing extraordinary in Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death. He had just died of a sudden illness. Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's sympathizers seemed to have disagreed, arguing that he had died because he had not been able to bear the constant efforts from the Dalai Lama's followers to undermine him. Others claimed that he was killed while in the custody of the prime minister. Still others claimed that he submitted himself voluntarily to death by strangulation or by suffocation in order to become a wrathful protector of the Ge-luk tradition.<sup>6</sup> In a particularly dramatic and highly revealing account, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death is described as occurring after a traditional religious debate that he had with the Fifth Dalai Lama. As an acknowledgment of his victory, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen had received a ceremonial scarf from the Fifth. Shortly after, however, he was found dead, the scarf stuffed down his throat.

Whatever the exact details of his death, the important point is that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death was perceived to be related to his rivalry with the Fifth Dalai Lama. It was also taken to have been violent and hence the kind of death that leads people to take rebirth as dangerous spirits. According to

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<sup>4</sup> Sang-gye Gya-tso (*sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*), explains that after Ngak-wang Ge-lek (*ngag dbang dge legs*) had died, the second reincarnation of Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba was found in the Ge-kha-sa (*gad kha sa*) family. He adds: "Although he had hopes for being the reincarnation of the All-knowing Yon-ten Gya-tso, he was made the reincarnation of Ngak-wang Ge-lek" (*thams cad mkhyen pa yon tan rgya mtsho'i sprul sku yong du re yang ngag dbang dge legs kyi sprul sku byas pas*). *Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho, (Vairya-ser-po)* (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1960), 72.

<sup>5</sup> *Dol rgyal zhib 'jug tshogs chung, (Dol rgyal lam shugs ldan byung rim la dpyad pa)* (Dharamsala, 1998), 25-35.

<sup>6</sup> *Tri-jang, (Music,)* 101-109.

standard Indian and Tibetan cultural assumptions, a person who is killed often becomes a ghost and seeks revenge. In his famous description of the demonology of Tibet, Nebesky-Wojkowitz provides several examples of the transformation of a person into a spirit due to a violent death.<sup>7</sup> Such a spirit is considered more dangerous when the person has religious knowledge, which is said to explain the particular power of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's spirit. He<sup>8</sup> is not just one among many protectors but a particularly dangerous one as the vengeful ghost of a knowledgeable person who died violently and prematurely. According to the Shuk-den legend, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen manifested himself as a (*gyel-po*,) i.e., the dangerous red-spirit<sup>9</sup> of a person, often a religious one, who is bent on extracting revenge against those involved in his death. Since he had been an important lama, however, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen turned his anger from a personal revenge to a nobler task, the protection of the doctrinal purity of the Ge-luk tradition. According to the legend, he first manifested his wrathful nature by haunting his silver mausoleum, which became animated by a buzzing noise, and by inflicting damage on his own estate. Then the monks serving the Fifth Dalai Lama began to encounter difficulties in performing their ritual duties.<sup>10</sup> Finally the Dalai Lama himself became the target. He began to hear noises such as that of stones falling on the roof, which became so loud that it is said that he could not eat his meals without monks blowing large horns on the roof of his residence. Frightened by these wrathful manifestations, the prime minister So-nam Choe-pel decided to get rid of the troublesome silver mausoleum by packing it into a wooden box and throwing it in the Kyi-chu river. Carried by the current the box reached Dol, a small pond in Southern Tibet. It is there that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's spirit resided for a while in a small temple built for him at the order of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who decided to pacify his spirit by establishing a practice of propitiation under the name of *Gyel-chen Dor-je Shuk-den* (*rgyal chen rdo rje shugs ldan*) and entrusting it to the Sa-gya school.<sup>11</sup>

This story is striking. In particular, its undertone of hostility toward the Dalai Lama is remarkable given that the Dalai Lama represents to a large extent the ascendancy of the Ge-luk school, also the school that the Shuk-den rituals seek to protect. Our first task here is to explain the meaning of this narrative, an important task given that the recent events in India seem to illustrate its hostility toward the Dalai Lama. The most obvious and tempting explanation are to assume that this story is primarily a political tale reflecting the tension between a strong Dalai Lama and a restive Ge-luk establishment. This may surprise an outside observer for whom the institution of the Dalai Lama is a Ge-luk creation and

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<sup>7</sup> R. Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (*Oracles and Demons of Tibet*). (The Hague: Mouton, 1956).

<sup>8</sup> In this essay I will treat deities as "real persons" since they are experienced as such by Tibetans.

<sup>9</sup> Such a spirit is also called (*tsan*) (often but not always the spirit of a monk who has either fallen from his monastic commitment or has been killed), who lives in rocks and must be pacified with special red offerings. Tibetans speak of eight classes of gods and spirits (*lha srin sde bryad*). See: Samuel, (*Civilized Shaman*) (Washington: Smithsonian, 1993), 161-163.

<sup>10</sup> Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement,) 521.

<sup>11</sup> Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement,) 523 and Tri-jang, (Music,) 105.

represents the power of this school. This interpretation appears more credible to an insider who knows that the Dalai Lama institution rests on a complex coalition in which the Ge-luk school is central but which includes other people, such as members of aristocratic families, adherents of the Nying-ma tradition, etc.

In such a coalition, the relationship between the Dalai Lama and the Ge-luk establishment is difficult and must be carefully negotiated. The delicacy of this situation is illustrated by the question of the leadership of the Ge-luk tradition. The nominal leader of the Ge-luk school is not the Dalai Lama but the Tri Rin-bo-che (*khri rin po che*), the Holder of the Throne of Ga-den in direct line of succession from Dzung-ka-ba. But in times where the Dalai Lama is strong, the leadership of the Holder of the Throne of Ga-den, who is chosen among the ex-abbots of the two tantric colleges,<sup>12</sup> is mostly nominal, and the Dalai Lama exercises effective leadership over the Ge-luk school through his government.

The Ge-luk school and more particularly its three large monasteries around Lhasa have played a leading role in the Dalai Lama's rule in Tibet. They have supported and legitimized his power and have received in return considerable socio-economic power. But this power also has been a source of tension with the Dalai Lamas, particularly when he was a strong personality who had his own power basis and intended to lead. In the history of the Dalai Lamas, there have been three such politically powerful figures: the Fifth, the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lamas, and all three have had serious difficulties with the Ge-luk establishment. It is also these same three Dalai Lamas who are said to have had problems with Shuk-den. Shuk-den could then be a manifestation of the political resentment of the Ge-luk hierarchy against the power of a strong Dalai Lama seeking to restrict and control it. The dispute surrounding Shuk-den would be a thinly disguised way for Ge-luk partisans to express their political opposition to an institution that does not sufficiently represent their parochial interests, an opposition manifested in the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation against the Fifth Dalai Lama.

I would argue that although tempting, this reading of the Shuk-den story is inadequate for at least two reasons. First, it fails to differentiate the stages in the relations between the Dalai Lama and the Ge-luk establishment. It is true that these relations have often been tense. But to run together the opposition between the Fifth Dalai Lama and the Ge-luk hierarchy, and the tension surrounding the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Dalai Lamas fails to take into account the profound transformations that the Dalai Lama institution has undergone, particularly around the turn of the eighteenth century. Secondly, the political interpretation of the saga of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation is anachronistic, confusing the story and the events that it narrates. Or, to put it differently, this interpretation fails to see that we are dealing here with two stories: the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, a seventeenth century victim of the Fifth Dalai Lama's power, and the story of Shuk-den, the spirit in charge of maintaining the purity of the Ge-luk tradition as understood by his twentieth century followers. The former narrative is clearly political but is not about Shuk-den. It concerns the nature of the Dalai Lama institution and its relation to the Ge-

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<sup>12</sup> The Tri-ba seems at first to have been elected, which would have strengthened his position. Later he was selected by the Dalai Lama. When did this change occur? Only further research will provide an answer which will greatly help us in understanding the history of the Ge-luk tradition.

luk hierarchy in the seventeenth century. The latter is about Shuk-den. It is mostly religious but does not concern the Dalai Lama's political power.

To further clarify these two points, I will examine the political context in which the Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's story took place and the nature of the Dalai Lama institution at that time. I will then consider the events surrounding Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's tragic death in a historical perspective, and try to reconstruct the way in which it was understood by his contemporaries.

## The Historical Context

The events surrounding Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death must be understood in relation to its historical context, the political events surrounding the emergence of the Dalai Lama institution as a centralizing power during the second half of the seventeenth century. The rule of this monarch seems to have been particularly resented by some elements in the Ge-luk tradition. It is quite probable that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was seen after his death as a victim of the Dalai Lama's power and hence became a symbol of opposition.

The resentment against the power of the Fifth Dalai Lama was primarily connected to a broad and far-reaching issue, the desire of some of the more sectarian Ge-luk hierarchs to set up a purely Ge-luk rule. Some even seem to have argued for the suppression of the schools against which they had fought for more than a century, particularly the Kar-ma Ka-gyu, tradition.<sup>13</sup> The Fifth seems to have realized that such a rule would have had little support and would have exacerbated the intersectarian violence that had marred the last two centuries of Tibetan history. To avoid this, he attempted to build a state with a broader power base, state which he presented as the re-establishment of the early Tibetan empire. His rule was to be supported by the Ge-luk tradition, but would also include groups affiliated with other religious traditions.

The Fifth was particularly well disposed toward the Nying-ma tradition from which he derived a great deal of his practice and with which he had a relation through his family. This seems to have created a great deal of frustration among some Ge-luk circles, as expressed by several popular stories. The stories frequently involve a colorful figure, Ba-ko Rab-jam (*bra sgo rab 'byams*), who was a friend of the Dalai Lama. In the stories, he is often depicted as making fun of the Fifth Dalai Lama. For example, one day he comes to see the Dalai Lama, but the enormous Pur-ba (ritual dagger) he wears in his belt prevents him from crossing the door, an obviously sarcastic reference to the Nying-ma leanings of the Fifth Dalai Lama.

In the light of this opposition, it would seem that the narrative of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation makes perfect sense. Is not the Shuk-den story about the revenge of a group, the Ge-luk hierarchy, in struggle against the Fifth's strong centralizing power? Although tempting, this interpretation completely ignores the historical transformations of the Dalai Lama institution. In particular, it ignores the fact that after the Fifth's death the Dalai Lama institution was taken over by the

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<sup>13</sup> E.G. Smith, "Introduction," (Kongtrul's Encyclopedia of Indo-Tibetan Culture) (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1970), 17.

Ge-luk hierarchy and radically changed. To put it colorfully, if Drak-ba Gyel-tsen had manifested as Shuk-den to protect the Ge-luk hierarchy against the encroachments of a Dalai Lama not sufficiently sympathetic to the Ge-luk tradition, this vengeful spirit would have been out of business by the beginning of the eighteenth century when his partisans, the Ge-luk hierarchy, won the day!

As long as the Fifth was alive, the Ge-luk hierarchy had to endure his rule, but his death changed the situation. His prime minister Sang-gye Gya-tso (*sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*) at first tried to conceal this death. When this proved impossible, he attempted to continue the Fifth's tradition by appointing his candidate, Tsang-yang Gya-tso (*tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho*), as the Sixth Dalai Lama. But with the latter's failure to behave as a Dalai Lama, Sang-gye Gya-tso lost the possibility to continue the task started by the Fifth. A few years later (1705) he was killed after being defeated by a complex coalition of Ge-luk hierarchs involving Jam-yang-shay-ba, the Dzungar Mongols and Lhab-zang Khan with the backing of the Manchu emperor.<sup>14</sup>

After this defeat, the role of the Dalai Lama was transformed. His political power was limited and the nature of the ritual system supporting the institution was changed, as we shall see later. In these ways, the institution of the Dalai Lama became a more purely Ge-luk creation. Hence, it makes very little sense to speak of Shuk-den as representing the spirit of Ge-luk opposition to the Dalai Lama institution after the demise of the Fifth, for by then the institution had become to a large extent favorable to the Ge-luk hierarchy. Admittedly, there were a few incidents between the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and some elements of the Ge-luk tradition. There was also some resentment against the high-handedness of this ruler but these were minor and should not be blown out of proportion.

### **Did Drak-ba Gyel-tsen become a spirit?**

This interpretation is confirmed by an analysis of the view of the contemporaries of these events. In the founding myth of the Shuk-den practice, the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death and wrathful manifestation is presented as the view of his followers. Given the cultural assumptions of Tibetans, this scenario cannot be dismissed without further analysis. Impressed by his violent and premature death, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's followers may have begun to propitiate his spirit in an atmosphere of strong hostility against those who were thought to have been responsible. But although this scenario is culturally plausible, is it historical? That is, did Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's followers think of him in this way? This question is more difficult, given the paucity of contemporary sources, but it needs to be asked, for we cannot simply assume that these legendary episodes reflect the perception of contemporaries. In fact, there are indications that they do not.

The most decisive evidence is provided by the later Ge-luk historian, Sum-pa Ken-po ye-shay Pel-jor (*sum pa mKhan po ye shes dpal 'byor*), 1702-1788), who reports for the year 1657 (Fire Bird) the following:

The assertion that this Tibetan spirit (*bod de'i rgyal po*) is Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, the reincarnation of the Upper Chamber, is just an expression of prejudice. Thus, I believe that the rumor that it is So-nam Choe-

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<sup>14</sup> L. Petech, Introduction to Sangs-rgyas-rgya-mtsho, (Vaidrya-ser-po), xi-xii.

pel, who after passing away in the same year is protecting the Ge-luk tradition having assumed the form of a dharma protector through his “great concern for the Ge-luk tradition,” is correct.<sup>15</sup>

This passage is significant in several respects. First, it confirms the fact that there were stories of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen becoming Shuk-den quite early on. Although Sum-pa does not mention the deity by name, it seems quite clear that this is who he has in mind. But it also shows that Sum-pa Ken-po does not concede the identification of Shuk-den as the wrathful manifestation of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, which he takes to be an insult to “the reincarnation of the Upper Chamber.” In what is probably a tongue in cheek tit-for-tat, he rather identifies the troublesome spirit with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen’s enemy, So-nam Choe-pel, the hated first prime minister of the Fifth Dalai Lama whom he sarcastically credits with a “great concern for the Ge-luk tradition.”

Second, Sum-pa’s remark is important because it reflects the view of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen’s sympathizers as the respectful epithet (“the reincarnation of the Upper Chamber”) makes clear. Sum-pa was the disciple of Jam-yang-shay-ba (*‘jam dbyangs bzhad pa,*) 1648-1722), one of the leading Ge-luk lamas opposing the Fifth and his third prime minister (*sde srid*) Sang-gye Gya-tso.<sup>16</sup> Thus, when he denies that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen had become Shuk-den, Sum-pa is reflecting the views of the people who considered Drak-ba Gyel-tsen with sympathy as an unfortunate victim of a rule they resented. The ironical remark about So-nam Choe-pel (“his great concern for the Ge-luk tradition”) and his identification as Shuk-den confirms this. Sum-pa disliked So-nam Choe-pel, whom he considered responsible for the Fifth’s rule and Drak-ba Gyel-tsen’s death.

Sum-pa’s remark, however, raises a question. For, who then are the people claiming that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen had become Shuk-den if not the followers of this lama? Could it be that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen’s followers had changed their minds by the time Sum-pa Ken-po wrote his account (1749)? Though further investigations may change our view, the evidence seems to suggest that this is not the case. The people who were identifying Shuk-den as the wrathful manifestation of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen were not his followers but his enemies, i.e., the Fifth Dalai Lama and his followers. This seems to be the implication of comments by Sang-gye Gya-tso when he says, referring to Drak-ba Gyel-tsen:

After [the death of] Ngak-wang So-nam Ge-lek (Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba’s second reincarnation), [his reincarnation was born] as a member of the Ge-kha-sa family. Although [this person] had at first hopes

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<sup>15</sup> bod de'i rgyal po ni gzim khang gong ma sprul sku grags rgyan zer ba ni chag(s) sdang gi gtam kho nar zad do/ des na bsod nams chos 'phel ni lo 'dir 'das nas khong dge lugs la thugs zhen ches pas chos bsrung ba'i tshul bzung nas dge lugs pa skyong zhes grags pa bden nam snyam mo/. (Rehu mig or chronological tables) in Sum pa mkhan po, (dPag bsam ljon bzang) (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1959), 70-1.

<sup>16</sup> This opposition had come to the fore when the prime minister tried to entice the Lo-sel-ling college of Dre-bung monastery to adopt the fifth Dalai Lama's works as its textbooks in place of Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba's works. After the college's refusal, Sang-gye Gya-tso asked Jam-yang-shay-ba to refute Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba. This was an attempt at strengthening the government's control over the monasteries as well as a way of removing Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's posthumous influence, two goals with which Jam-yang-shay-ba had little sympathy. Hence, the latter refused to oblige.



for being the reincarnation of the All-knowing Yon-ten Gya-tso (the Fourth Dalai Lama), he was made the reincarnation of Ngak-wang So-nam Ge-lek and finally ended in a bad rebirth.<sup>17</sup>

Although Sang-gye Gya-tso is not explicit, his words seem to refer to the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's reincarnation as a spirit such as Shuk-den. This is confirmed by the Fifth Dalai Lama, who describes Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's demise as leading to his becoming a spirit. The Fifth explains that:

Due to the magic of a spirit (?), the son of the noble family Ge-kha-sa turned into a false reincarnation of Ngak-wang So-nam Ge-lek and became a spirit [motivated by] mistaken prayers (*smon lam log pa'i dam srid*).<sup>18</sup>

What this quote indicates is that after Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death the claim that he had become a spirit such as Shuk-den was not a praise of his followers, but a denigration, not to say downright slander, by his enemies! It is not Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's partisans who were identifying him as Shuk-den, but his adversaries who were presenting this scenario as a way to explain away the events following his tragic demise.

We must wonder, however, why the Fifth Dalai Lama and his followers were interested in propagating the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation, a story which the latter's followers were keen to dispel? The answer to this question is bound to be tentative and highly speculative, and it is unlikely that any clear historical evidence will answer this question. Nevertheless, I think that it is not unreasonable to assume the following scenario. Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's premature death must have been a momentous event in Tibet at that time. It must have created a considerable malaise among Tibetans, who consider the killing of a high lama a terrible crime that can affect a whole country (as attested by the perception of the Re-ting affair in this century). Such a perception of misfortune must have been accompanied by events perceived as bad omens. There were probably stories of the possession and destruction of objects associated with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, as reported in the founding myth. Finally, there was the fact that the reincarnation of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen seems not to have been sought for, an extraordinary occurrence given that he was the reincarnation of Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba, one of the foremost Ge-luk lamas.<sup>19</sup>

It is in these circumstances that the story of his wrathful reincarnation must have appeared, not as a vindication of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, but as an attempt by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his followers to explain the absence of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's reincarnation and to shift the blame for the bad omen that had

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<sup>17</sup> (de'i rjes su gad kha sa pa'i nang so gro (grod?) lhug thog mar thams cad mkhyen pa yon tan rgya mtsho'i sprul sku yong du re yang ngag dbang bsod nams dge legs kyi sprul sku byas pas mthar skye gnas mi bzang bar gyur to/) Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, (Vaidrya-ser-po) (Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1960), 71-2.

<sup>18</sup> gad kha sa lags a rgyal gyi 'phrul la brten ngag dbang bsod nams dge legs dpal bzang gyi sku skye rdzus ma lam du song ba smon lam log pa'i dam srid gyur te/.Fifth Dalai Lama, (Collected Works,) vol. Ha, 423-4. A similar scenario is presented in the Fifth's autobiography. Both passages were quoted by the present Dalai Lama in a talk given in Los Angeles, June 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Some stories present the Nga-ri Rin-bo-che as the reincarnation of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen but they are hard to trace and are probably significantly posterior to the facts here discussed.

followed his death. These events were not the karmic effects of his violent death but the results of his transformation into a dangerous spirit. The Fifth Dalai Lama mentions that after Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's demise his spirit started to harm people. In order to pacify him, the Fifth had a small temple built near the pond of Dol, but this did not help and the reports of harm continued unabated. With the help of several important lamas such as Ter-dag Ling-pa (*gter bdag gling pa*,) 1646-1714), the Fifth decided to launch a final ritual assault and to burn the spirit during a fire ritual in which the spectators were said to have smelled the odor of burnt flesh.

As we realize, this description of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's posthumous fate is highly partisan and it is no surprise that his sympathizers rejected these explanations. They were keen on keeping the blame on the party of the Dalai Lama, arguing that the unfortunate events were not due to the wrathful reincarnation of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, who had taken rebirth as the emperor of China.<sup>20</sup> Finally, there are other stories that seem to hint that the evil spirit connected with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was already active prior to the latter's demise, even as early 1636.<sup>21</sup> If Shuk-den was already active prior to Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's tragic demise, how can he be the latter's wrathful manifestation? These conflicting stories show that what we have here is not a unified narrative but several partly overlapping stories. The founding myth of the Shuk-den tradition grew out of a nexus of narratives surrounding these events and developed in accordance with the new changing historical circumstances. It is not the account of the followers of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, as claimed by Shuk-den's modern followers, but it is only one of the many versions of the bundle of stories surrounding these tragic events. In fact, the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's demise as it appears in contemporary sources has little to do with Shuk-den. It is not about the deity but about Drak-ba Gyel-tsen. Only much later, when the significance of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's story faded, did this story resurface and get taken as the account of the origin of Shuk-den.

The fact that the founding narrative of the Shuk-den practice is largely mythological does not mean that we should dismiss it. Rather we should inquire into its meaning. This is what I will do in the later pages of this essay, where I examine the story of the violent manifestation of Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen as the founding myth of the tradition of those who propitiate Shuk-den. Before going into this, we need to inquire about the history of this propitiation. For, if this practice did not start with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death, where does it come from? And the Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's story was later recast as the founding myth of the Shuk-den lineage, when did this appropriation take place?

## The Early History of a Practice

To understand the history of the Shuk-den practice, we need to examine the way in which this deity has been considered throughout most of the history of the Ge-luk tradition. To his twentieth century followers, Shuk-den is known as (*Gyel-chen Dor-je Shuk-den Tsal (rgyal chen rdo rje shugs ldan rtsal)*),

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<sup>20</sup> In reference to the year 1655 (Wood Sheep), Sum-pa-mkhan-po notes: "[Birth of] the Kangshi emperor renowned as the reincarnation of Tul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen (sprul sku grags rgyan skye bar grags pa'i khang zhi bde skyid rgyal po) (Rehu mig,) 70.

<sup>21</sup> in his autobiography, the Fifth Dalai Lama mentions the existence of a harmful spirit around the pond of Dol. See (Du ku La'i gos bzang,) II. Ý157.a-.b.

the “Great Magical Spirit Endowed with the Adamantine Force.”<sup>22</sup> If we look at earlier mentions, however, we can see that Shuk-den also appears under another and less exalted name, i.e., as (*Dol Gyel* (*dol rgyal*)). Even Pa-bong-ka calls him in this way when he says: “The wooden implements (i.e., crate) having been thrown in the water, the pond of Dol became whitish. After abiding there, he became known for a while as (*Dol-gyel*).”<sup>23</sup> This name helps us to understand how Shuk-den was considered in the earlier period, that is, as a troublesome but minor spirit, an interpretation confirmed by the explanations concerning Drak-ba Gyel-tsen’s reincarnation.

The name (*Dol Gyel*) is quite interesting, for it yields a possible explanation of the origin of Shuk-den. It suggests that originally Shuk-den had a close regional connection with the area of the Tsang-po and the Yar-lung valleys where the pond of Dol lies. There, Shuk-den/ Dol-gyel was considered a (*gyel po* (*rgyal po*)), that is, the dangerous red-spirit of a religious person, who had died after falling from his monastic vows or had been killed in troubling circumstances.<sup>24</sup> Shuk-den/ Dol Gyel would then be a spirit from Southern Tibet, potentially troublesome like other red-spirits. No wonder then that his identification with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was rejected by the latter’s followers as an insult to this important and unfortunate lama.

We find confirmation of Shuk-den’s regional connection in the description given in 1815 by a Nying-ma teacher Do Kyen-tse (*mdo mkhyen brtse ye shes rdo rje*). While narrating his travels, he mentions the unpleasant presence of Shuk-den in Southern Tibet. On his way to Lhasa, after passing through the Nying-ma monastery of Dor-je Drak, Do Kyen-tse arrived in the area of Dra-thang (*grwa thang*) where Gyel-po Shuk-den (this is the name he uses) was active. Nevertheless, the spirit was unable to interfere with his travel and he reached his destination safely.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the existence of a deity, Dol-gyel/ Shuk-

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<sup>22</sup> Pa-bong-ka gives the following gloss of Shuk-den's name: "[This] great protector, who holds the adamantine force which is all pervading regarding the destruction of the army of the devil, [this] spirit who is a war god, the protector of the Ge-den tradition, who assumes the pretense of being a worldly boastful god though he is beyond the world, is well known "Great Magical Spirit Endowed with the Adamantine Force" (de ltar 'jig rten las 'das kyang dregs pa'i zol 'chang dge ldan bstan srung dgra lha'i rgyal po/ bdud kyi sde 'joms pa la thogs pa med pa'i rdo rje'i shugs 'chang ba bstan srung chen po rgyal chen dor je shugs ldan rtsal zhes yongs su grags pa.(Supplement,) 528.

<sup>23</sup> shing cha rnam chu la bskyur ba dol chu mig dkar mor chags pas der gnas pas re zhig bar du dol rgyal zhes grags. Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement,) 521.

<sup>24</sup> Another informant has suggested that Shuk-den became at some point a monastic deity in charge of eliminating rogue monks who had broken their vows but still pretended to be pure. This hypothesis would account for the monastic appearance of Shuk-den's main form (for a description of Shuk-den's five forms, see Kelzang Gyatso, (Heart Jewel,) 77) and provide a precedent for Shuk-den's opposition to Ge-luk practitioners who have adopted Nying-ma teachings. From punishing rogue monks, it is quite easy to imagine how Dol-gyel could have been transformed into a deity punishing "rogue Ge-luk-bas"! I have not found, however, any source confirming this hypothesis. That such a type of deity exists among Tibetans is well established (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (Oracles,) 207), but the connection with Dol-gyel or Shuk-den remains unfounded.

<sup>25</sup> phyi'i nang du nged rang phyir ldog cing/ sku tshab drung du phyin nas smon lam rnam par dag pas mtshams sbyar nas/ dur khrod du zhag gcig bsdad pas tshar slong gi mtha' rdzogs pa byung/ de nas theg cing btsan thang g.yu yi lha khang du zhag gcig bsdad/ rim bzhin gtsang chu'i srib ngos nas/ byams pa gling dang o rgyan smin grol gling/ thub bstan rdor brag sogs la mchod mjal zhus/ lcags la'i sras mkhan rin po che dang mjal zhing thugs yid gcig

den, and his regional connection with the area of Southern Tibet seem to have been well established quite early on.

This regional connection is further confirmed by the fact that Shuk-den was propitiated in some of the monasteries of the same area, particularly in Sam-ye (*bsam yas*), which was by then Sa-kya. There Shuk-den appears as a minor but dangerous worldly protector. This also suggests that this deity was first adopted by the tradition of the monastery of Sa-gya,<sup>26</sup> a hypothesis further confirmed by the reference in the founding myth to his being taken over by the holder of the Sa-gya throne So-nam-rin-chen (*bsod nams rin chen*). In one of the versions, Shuk-den first attempts to go to Ta-shi Lhung-po, the residence of his teacher, the First Pen-chen Lama, Lob-zang Cho-gyen (*blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan*,) 1569-1662). He is prevented from doing so by Vaibravala (*rnam thos sras*), the supra-mundane protector of the monastery. He is then taken in by So-nam-rin-chen, who pities him and writes a text for his propitiation. This reference to the holder of the Sa-gya throne.

So-nam-rin-chen throws some interesting light on the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation and the establishment of the Shuk-den cult entrusted to the Sa-gya. It seems at first to confirm this story until we realize that So-nam-rin-chen was born in 1704, long after the events surrounding Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's tragic demise. This considerable gap suggests that the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation as Shuk-den is a later creation, which incorporates a variety of narratives rearranged in the light of later situations. The founding myth of the Shuk-den practice is not a historical account but one of the many versions of a nexus of stories surrounding these tragic events, which developed gradually in the light of new historical circumstances.

Although So-nam-rin-chen's role in the Shuk-den's saga is more than questionable, his contribution to the tradition of this deity is not deniable. The small text that is attributed to him does seem to exist. It is the first ritual text focusing on Shuk-den that I have been able to trace. It can be found in the collection of ritual texts for the protectors of the Sam-ye monastery and confirms the existence of the practice of Shuk-den early on in the Sa-gya tradition.<sup>27</sup> Its title ("The Request to the Gyel-po [for the] Termination of Ganepa") suggests that Shuk-den was considered as an effective spirit in charge of clearing away obstacles (Ganepa being the king of obstacles).<sup>28</sup> Shuk-den does not seem to have played, however, a

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'dres su gyur/ grwa thang du rgyal po shugs ldan nas cho 'phrul sna tshogs byung yang nye zho ma nus. Bde bar lcags zam chu bo rir slebs. Autobiography of Mdo Mkhayen brtse Ye shes rdo rje. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, 1974), 148.

<sup>26</sup> The practice of propitiating Dol-gyel seems to have been absent in the Ngor-ba or Tshar-ba branches of the Sa-gya tradition. It disappeared from the tradition of Sa-gya, perhaps due to the realization of its sectarian implications.

<sup>27</sup> PI 480/ IASWR microfilms 08.043. ,Dpal bsam yas lhun gyis grub pa'i gtsugs lag khang gi srung ma phrin las kiy mgon pa kun khyab rdo rje drag po rtsal gyi spyen 'dren bskang pa phrin bcol, 12.b-16.a. It is by no means sure, however, that the present version is identical to the text written by So-nam-rin-chen. The colophon mentions the fact that the text was revised (bcos) by Ngak-wang Kun-ga Lo-dro (ngag dbang kun dga' blo gros). The text is found among a collection of ritual texts of Anye Zhab (amyes zhabs ngag dbang kun dga',) 1597-1659).

<sup>28</sup> rgyal gsol log 'dren tshar gcod.

major role in the Sa-gya tradition, where he seemed to have remained a dangerous though minor worldly protector. This is confirmed by a story told by Ka-lu Rin-bo-che, who mentions coming across a small Sa-gya temple for Shuk-den in Western Tibet and the profound fear that this deity inspired in the care-taker of this temple.<sup>29</sup>

The regional connection with Southern Tibet and the sectarian link with the Sa-gya tradition are further confirmed by Stanley Mumford's anthropological description of the propitiation of Shuk-den in the Himalayan region. In his study of the religious life in the remote village of Tsap in Nepal, Mumford describes the practice of Shuk-den as a Sa-gya practice well established among the Tibetans of the region. In a small text used for this practice Shuk-den is presented as a worldly protector in charge of bestowing wealth, food, life and good fortune, of protecting the dharma, preventing its destruction, and of repelling the external and internal enemies of the ten regions. Finally, Shuk-den is invoked as a special protector of the Sa-gya tradition: "Protect the dharma in general, and in particular the Sakyapas. I praise you, who have agreed to be the Srungma of the Sakyapas".<sup>30</sup>

Given this evidence, it is reasonable to assume that the practice of Dol-gyel was at first a minor Sa-gya practice later adopted by the Ge-luk tradition. But here another difficult question remains. When did this happen? The evidence available establishes that the practice of propitiating Dol-gyel existed in the Ge-luk tradition during the eighteenth century. One of the clearest proofs appears in the biography of the Ge-luk polymath Jang-gya-rol-bay-dor-jay (1717-1786), written by his disciple Tu-gen-lo-sang-chogyi-nyi-ma (*thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma*), 1737-1802).<sup>31</sup> Tu-gen reports that Jang-gya mentions that Dol-gyel was propitiated by several Ga-den Tri-bas. After several unfortunate events, another Tri-ba, Ngak-wang Chok-den (*ngag dbang mchog ldan*), 1677-1751), the tutor of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kel-zang Gya-tso (*bskal bzang rgya tsho*), 1708-1757) put an end to this practice by expelling Shuk-den from Ga-den monastery.

This mention of Dol-Gyel is quite interesting for a number of reasons. First, it dates the practice of propitiating this deity in the Ge-luk tradition. This practice must have existed prior to Ngak-wang Chok-den's intervention, and it must have had a certain extension to have been adopted by several Ga-den Tri-bas. Second, it attests to the troublesome character of this deity. However, no connection is made with Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen. Jang-gya was after all one of the followers of Jam-yang-shay-ba, one of the main Ge-luk hierarchs opposed to the Fifth, and hence not inclined to consider favorably the story of Shuk-den as Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation. Finally, this passage illustrates the minor status of this deity in the Ge-luk tradition at that time, as Jang-gya mentions the expulsion of this deity in passing. This impression of small importance is confirmed by the fact that it is so difficult to document

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<sup>29</sup> One of the main sources in this essay is the present Dalai Lama, who has done a great deal of excellent research concerning Shuk-den, tracing several mentions of this deity in the early stages of the Ge-luk tradition. Here I am borrowing from his talk given on the 8th of May 1996.

<sup>30</sup> S. Mumford, 'Himalayan Dialogue (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1989), 264.

<sup>31</sup> Collected works of Thu-bkwan Blo-bzang-chos-kyi-nyi-ma (Delhi :Ngawang Gelek Demo, 1969-1971), I.5-831, 221.b. Quoted by the Dalai Lama in his talk of the 8th of may 1996.

the practice of Shuk-den prior to the beginning of this century. But if Dol-gyel, as he is called by Jang-gya, is minor, why did Ngak-wang Chok-den and Jang-gya oppose his propitiation? Possibly because of its troublesome character. Jang-gya mentions that the Tri-bas who propitiated Dol-gyel encountered difficulties but he does not elaborate. Another possible reason for expelling Dol-gyel from Ga-den is that no mundane deity is allowed to remain permanently in Ga-den. Even Ma-chen Pom-ra, the local god (*yul lha*) of Dzong-ka-ba, the founder of the Ge-luk tradition, is not supposed to stay in Ga-den overnight, and must take his residence below the monastery.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the political connection alleged by the Fifth Dalai Lama's followers between this deity and their nemesis, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, may have played a role, though this is far from sure since by this time the story of the latter's demise must have started to fade away. Jang-gya may not have opposed the practice in general, for we find a representation of Shuk-den in a collection of thanka paintings given to Jang-gya by the Qianlong Emperor. Because the thanka is not dated, we cannot be sure of the date of its appearance in the collection. Despite this uncertainty concerning some details, an impression emerges which suggests that around the middle of the eighteenth century Dol-gyel was a troublesome but minor deity propitiated by some Ge-luk lamas.

The practice of Dol-gyel or Shuk-den also surfaced as an issue during the rule of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, who put restrictions on the oracle for Shuk-den but did not prohibit his activities completely. Dol-gyel could be propitiated in his proper place in the order of Tibetan gods, namely, as a minor mundane deity. His oracle was permitted only at certain fixed locations such as Tro-de Khang-sar (*spro bde khang gsar*) in Lhasa or Tro-mo (*gro mo*) in the Chumbi valley, but not in any of the large monasteries. Finally, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and his government applied pressure on Pa-bong-ka to desist from propitiating Shuk-den. They were particularly displeased by the diffusion of the Shuk-den practice in Dre-bung. They perceived these efforts as attempts to displace Ne-chung, who is, as we will see later, the worldly protector of the Dre-bung monastery and the Tibetan government. Hence, they ordered him to abstain from propitiating Shuk-den altogether. According to his biographer, Pa-bong-ka promised not to propitiate Shuk-den any more.<sup>33</sup>

These events seem to indicate that the propitiation of Shuk-den had spread to a certain extent during or just prior to the rule of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. This may have been due to a gradual spread of this practice during the nineteenth century, particularly its second half. This practice was widespread enough during the time of the Thirteenth to raise some concern in governmental circles. But even then references to Dol-gyel or Shuk-den remain very rare. Although the Thirteenth opposed what he saw as an excessive emphasis on Shuk-den by Pa-bong-ka, the issue was minor and there was little controversy concerning the practice of this deity.

Thus, what emerges from this impressionistic survey is that Shuk-den was a minor though troublesome deity in the Ge-luk pantheon throughout most of the history of this tradition. This deity does not seem to have been considered early on as Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's manifestation, except by his enemies, who

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<sup>32</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (Oracles ,) 210.

<sup>33</sup> Lob-zang Dor-je, (Biography of Pha bong kha ( pha bong kha pa bde chen snying po dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa), 471.a-.b.

intended the identification disparagingly. Its gradual adoption in the Ge-luk tradition does not show any relation with either Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba or his third reincarnation, Drak-ba Gyel-tsen. Shuk-den seems to have been adopted by Ge-luk lamas because of his power as a worldly deity, not on the basis of a connection with Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba's lineage. Lamas who are part of this lineage do not show any special inclination toward Shuk-den. Moreover, the monks of the Lo-sell-ling college of Drebung, who take Pen-chen So-nam-drak-ba's works as their textbooks (*jig cha*) and consider him as perhaps the foremost interpreter of Dzong-ka-bag's tradition, have had very little connection with Shuk-den (with a few individual exceptions).

How is it then that this minor spirit coming from an obscure location in Central Tibet has become the center of raging controversy that has cost the lives of several Ge-luk monks and continues to threaten the unity of the Ge-luk tradition? Moreover, how is it that this deity is now so pervasively identified with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen by his staunchest supporters, who take this connection as a vindication of both Shuk-den and Drak-ba Gyel-tsen?

## **The Rise of a Spirit**

To answer these questions, we must consider the changes that took place within the Ge-luk tradition during the first half of the twentieth century due to Pa-bong-ka (1878-1941) and the revival movement that he spearheaded. Though Pa-bong-ka was not particularly important by rank, he exercised a considerable influence through his very popular public teachings and his charismatic personality. Elder monks often mention the enchanting quality of his voice and the transformative power of his teachings. Pa-bong-ka was also well served by his disciples, particularly the very gifted and versatile Tri-jang Rin-bo-che (*khri byang rin po che*,) 1901-1983), a charismatic figure in his own right who became the present Dalai Lama's tutor and exercised considerable influence over the Lhasa higher classes and the monastic elites of the three main Ge-luk monasteries around Lhasa. Another influential disciple was Tob-den Lama (*rtogs ldan bla ma*), a stridently Ge-luk lama very active in disseminating Pa-bong-ka's teachings in Kham. Because of his own charisma and the qualities and influence of his disciples, Pa-bong-ka had an enormous influence on the Ge-luk tradition that cannot be ignored in explaining the present conflict. He created a new understanding of the Ge-luk tradition focused on three elements: Vajrayogini as the main meditational deity (*yi dam*), Shuk-den as the protector, and Pa-bong-ka as the guru.

Like other revivalist figures, Pa-bong-ka presented his teachings as embodying the orthodoxy of his tradition. But when compared with the main teachings of his tradition as they appear in Dzong-ka-ba's writings, Pa-bong-ka's approach appears in several respects quite innovative. Although he insisted on the Stages of the Path (*lam rim*) as the basis of further practice, like other Ge-luk teachers, Pa-bong-ka differed in recommending Vajrayogini as the central meditational deity of the Ge-luk tradition. This emphasis is remarkable given the fact that the practice of this deity came originally from the Sa-gya tradition and is not included in Dzong-ka-ba's original synthesis, which is based on the practice of three meditational deities (Yamantaka, Guhya-samaja, and Cakrasamvara). The novelty of his approach is even clearer when we consider Pa-bong-ka's emphasis on Tara Cintamani as a secondary meditational deity, for this practice is not canonical in the strict sense of the term but comes from the pure visions of one of Pa-bong-ka's main teachers, Ta bu Pe-ma Baz-ra (*sta bu padma badzra*), a figure about whom very little is presently known. We have to be clear, however, on the nature of Pa-bong-ka's innovations. He did not

introduce these practices himself, for he received them from teachers such as Ta bu Pe-ma Baz-ra and Dak-po Kel-zang Kay-drub (*dwag po bskal bzang mkhas grub*). Where Pa-bong-ka was innovative was in making formerly secondary teachings widespread and central to the Ge-luk tradition and claiming that they represented the essence of Dzong-ka-ba's teaching. This pattern, which is typical of a revival movement, also holds true for Pa-bong-ka's wide diffusion, particularly at the end of his life, of the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den as the central protector of the Ge-luk tradition. Whereas previously Shuk-den seems to have been a relatively minor protector in the Ge-luk tradition, Pa-bong-ka made him into one of the main protectors of the tradition. In this way, he founded a new and distinct way of conceiving the teachings of the Ge-luk tradition that is central to the "Shuk-den Affair."

In promoting Shuk-den as the protector of his charismatic movement, Pa-bong-ka did not invent the practice of this deity, which he seems to have received from his teachers,<sup>34</sup> but he transformed a marginal practice into a central element of the Ge-luk tradition. This transformation is illustrated by the epithets used to refer to Shuk-den. Instead of being just "The Spirit from Dol" (*dol rgyal*), or even the "Great Magical Spirit Endowed with the Adamantine Force" (*rgyal chen rdo rje shugs ldan rtsal*), he is described now by Pa-bong-ka and his disciples as "the protector of the tradition of the victorious lord Manjushri (i.e., Dzong-ka-ba)" (*'jam mgon rgyal ba'i bstan srung*)<sup>35</sup> and "the supreme protective deity of the Ge-den (i.e., Ge-luk) tradition" (*dge ldan bstan bsrung ba'i lha mchog*).<sup>36</sup>

These descriptions have been controversial. Traditionally, the Ge-luk tradition has been protected by the Dharma-king (*dam can chos rgyal*), the supra-mundane deity bound to an oath given to Dzong-ka-ba, the founder of the tradition. The tradition also speaks of three main protectors adapted to the three scopes of practice described in the Stages of the Path (*skyes bu gsum gyi srung ma*): Mahakala for the person of great scope, Vaibravala for the person of middling scope, and the Dharma-king for the person of small scope.<sup>37</sup> By describing Shuk-den as "the protector of the tradition of the victorious lord Manjushri," Pa-bong-ka suggests that he is the protector of the Ge-luk tradition, replacing the protectors appointed by Dzong-ka-ba himself. This impression is confirmed by one of the stories that Shuk-den's partisans use to justify their claim. According to this story, the Dharma-king has left this world to retire in the pure land of Tushita having entrusted the protection of the Ge-luk tradition to Shuk-den. Thus, Shuk-den has become the main Ge-luk protector replacing the traditional supra-mundane protectors of the Ge-luk tradition, indeed a spectacular promotion in the pantheon of the tradition.

Pa-bong-ka's promotion of this deity has several reasons. There was an undeniable personal devotion to Shuk-den in Pa-bong-ka derived from his early experiences, dreams or visions. This devotion was also

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<sup>34</sup> Ta bu Pe-ma Baz-ra and Dak-po Kel-zang Kay-drub are often mentioned as sources of the Shuk-den teachings

<sup>35</sup> Pa-bong-ka, *Collected Works*, VIII.498, 533.

<sup>36</sup> Tri-jang, (*Music*), 5.

<sup>37</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (*Oracles*), 5.



based on a family connection, for Shuk-den was his mother's female god (*skyes ma'i rgyud kyi lha*).<sup>38</sup> Pa-bong-ka's writings reflect this strong devotion to Shuk-den, as is shown by the following passage:

Praise and prostration through remembering your three secrets [to you] the violent poison for the obstacles, the enemies, [and] those who have broken [their] pledges, [to you] the magical jewel who fulfills the hopes and wishes of the practitioners, [to you] the only life tree [i.e., support] in protecting Dzong-ka-ba's tradition.<sup>39</sup>

The very real personal devotion found in many of the Shuk-den texts written by Pa-bong-ka and his disciples explains Pa-bong-ka's fervor in diffusing Shuk-den. From the viewpoint of his followers, it is the most important element of Pa-bong-ka's heritage.

There is, however, another element that must be examined in order to understand the troublesome nature of the practice of Shuk-den, namely, the sectarian stance that it reflects. This is where the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen becomes relevant again. For Pa-bong-ka, particularly at the end of his life, one of the main functions of Gyel-chen Dor-je Shuk-den as Ge-luk protector is the use of violent means (the adamant force) to protect the Ge-luk tradition. Pa-bong-ka quite explicitly states:

Now [I] exhort to violent actions Shuk-den, who is the main war-god of Dzong-ka-ba's tradition and its holders, the angry spirit, the Slayer of Yama (i.e., Yamantaka or Manjushri in his wrathful form)....In particular it is time [for you] to free (i.e., kill) in one moment the enemies of Dzong-ka-ba's tradition. Protector, set up [your] violent actions without [letting] your previous commitments dissipate. Quickly engage in violent actions without relaxing your loving promises. Quickly accomplish [these] requests and entrusted actions without leaving them aside (or without acting impartially). Quickly accomplish [these] actions [that I] entrust [to you], for I do not have any other source of hope.<sup>40</sup>

This passage clearly presents the goal of the propitiation of Shuk-den as the protection of the Ge-luk tradition through violent means, even including the killing of its enemies. We should wonder, however, what this passage means? Is it to be taken literally? And who are these enemies?

To answer these questions in detail would take us beyond the purview of this essay. A short answer is that in certain ways the statements of this ritual text are not very different from the ones found in

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<sup>38</sup> Lob-zang Dor-je, (Biography of Pha bong kha,) 471.b.

<sup>39</sup> hung/ blo bzang bstan pa srung ba'i srog zhing gcig/ rnal 'byor 'dod pa'i re skong yid bzhin nor/ dam nyams dgra gegs srog la ha la'i dug/ khyod kyi gsang gsum dran pas bstod phyag tshal/ Pa-bong-ka, (Collection of [Rituals] concerning the Circle of Offerings, The Special Offering of Drinks, [and] the Exhortation to Action of the Powerful Protectors of Buddhism [the propitiation of] Wealth Gods and Spirit (mthu ldan bstan srung khag gi 'phrin las bskul gser skyems tshogs mchod sogs dang/ gnod sbyin nor lha' skor 'ga' zhig phogs gcig tu bkod pa,) Collected Works, New Delhi: Chopel Legdan, 1973), VII.451-497), 467.

<sup>40</sup> hung/ khro rgyal gshin rje gshed/ 'jam mgon bla ma tsong kha pa'i/ bstan dang bstan 'dzind dgra lha'i gtso/ shugs ldan drag po las la bskul/ ... khyad par blo bzang bstan pa'i dgra/ skad cig sgrol ba'i dus la bab/ sngon gyi dam tshig ma gyel bar/ chos skyong drag po'i las la bzhengs/ snying ring thugs dam ma lhod par/ dra po'i las la myur du chos/ bskul zhing 'phrin las bcol ba'i las/ bstant snyoms ma mdzad myur du sgrubs/ bdag la re sa gzhan med kyi/ bcol ba'i 'phrin las myur sgrubs. Pa-bong-ka, (Collection ,) 468-469.

similar texts devoted to other mundane protectors. By itself, this text does not prove very much. Combined with Pa-bong-ka's other writings, however, the statement about killing the enemies of the Ge-luk is more than the usual ritual incitements contained in manuals for the propitiation of protectors. Consider this rather explicit passage contained in an introduction to the text of the empowerment required to propitiate Shuk-den (the *srog gtad*,) about which more will be said later):

[This protector of the doctrine] is extremely important for holding Dzong-ka-ba's tradition without mixing and corrupting [it] with confusions due to the great violence and the speed of the force of his actions, which fall like lightning to punish violently all those beings who have wronged the Yellow Hat Tradition, whether they are high or low.[This protector is also particularly significant with respect to the fact that] many from our own side, monks or lay people, high or low, are not content with Dzong-ka-ba's tradition, which is like pure gold, [and] have mixed and corrupted [this tradition with ] the mistaken views and practices from other schools, which are tenet systems that are reputed to be incredibly profound and amazingly fast but are [in reality] mistakes among mistakes, faulty, dangerous and misleading paths. In regard to this situation, this protector of the doctrine, this witness, manifests his own form or a variety of unbearable manifestations of terrifying and frightening wrathful and fierce appearances. Due to that, a variety of events, some of them having happened or happening, some of which have been heard or seen, seem to have taken place: some people become unhinged and mad, some have a heart attack and suddenly die, some [see] through a variety of inauspicious signs [their] wealth, accumulated possessions and descendants disappear without leaving any trace, like a pond whose feeding river has ceased, whereas some [find it] difficult to achieve anything in successive lifetimes.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, which is based on notes taken by Tri-jang during a ceremony given by Pa-bong-ka and published in his *Collected Works*,) Pa-bong-ka takes the references to eliminating the enemies of the the Ge-luk tradition as more than stylistic conventions or usual ritual incantations. It may concern the elimination of actual people by the protector. But who are these people?

A number of people may be included in this category. Several Nying-ma lamas have claimed to have been the target of Shuk-den, who is often greatly feared by the followers of this school. In this passage, however, Pa-bong-ka seems to have in mind less members of other schools than those Ge-luk practitioners who mix Dzong-ka-ba's tradition with elements from other traditions, particularly the

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<sup>41</sup> zhwa gser gyi bstan pa la log par spyod pa'i 'gro ba mchog dman kun la drag po'i che pa thog ltar 'beb pa la 'phrin las kyi shugs shin tu myur zhing/ drag shul shin tu che bas na/ rang phyogs kyi ser skya mchog dman mang po zhig kyang rje'i ring lugs gser sbyangs btso ma lta bu 'di nyid kyis go ma chod par gzhan phyogs pa'i lta grub 'khrul pa las kyang nyid 'khrul mu 'byam du song ba'i lam log lam gol gyi grub mtha' myur myur mo dang/ zab zab mor grags pa mang po zhig bse bslad byas pa la brten nas bstan bsrung gnyan po 'dis rang gzugs dngos su bstan pa dang/ khrog gtum 'jigs shing rngams pa'i rnam 'gyur mi bzad pa'i cho 'phrul sna tshogs pas kha cig myo zhing 'bog pa dang/ la la khong khrag 'dren cing glo bur du tshe'i 'du byed pa/ 'ga' zhig mi 'dod pa'i ngan lta ci rigs pas dpal 'byor 'du longs rigs rgyud dang bcas pa ltag chu chad pa'i rdzing bu ltar rim bzhin rjes shul med par btang ba dang/ skye ba'i phreng ba gzhan mar 'gar yang ci byas pa la lam du rgyu dka' ba sogs mngon sum du byung ba dang 'byung 'gyur mang po mthong thos kyi yul du 'gyur pa ltag pas blo bzang rgyal ba'i bstan pa grub mtha' chal chol gzhan gyis bse bslad med par 'dzin pa shin tu gal che zhing. Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement ,) 526-527.

Nying-ma Dzok-chen to which he refers indirectly but clearly.<sup>42</sup> The mission of Shuk-den as defined here is to prevent Ge-luk practitioners from mixing traditions and even visiting retribution on those who dare to go against this prescription.

This is also the central message of the founding myth of the Shuk-den practice as defined by Pa-bong-ka and his followers. Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen becomes a wrathful deity to visit retribution, not on those who caused his death, but on those who defile Dsong-ka-ba's pure tradition. According to the legend, Shuk-den takes the Fifth Dalai Lama as his target because the latter was eclectic, including in his practice many elements from the Nying-ma tradition, which provoked the anger of Shuk-den as a guardian of Ge-luk orthodoxy. Pa-bong-ka is quite explicit:

Because the All Seeing Great Fifth practiced and developed all tenets of the old and new [schools], this great protector through the power of previous prayers produced a variety of extremely frightful appearances to the supreme Powerful King (the Fifth Dalai Lama) in order to protect and defend spotlessly Dsong-ka'ba's great tradition.<sup>43</sup>

We may now understand the peculiar fate of the story of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's wrathful manifestation as Shuk-den, which shifted from a slander of the former into a praise of the latter. Pa-bong-ka was aware of the stories surrounding Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's death but understood them quite differently from the way contemporaries of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen had. For him, the narrative was not about Drak-ba Gyel-tsen but about Shuk-den and the identification of the latter with the former was a way to legitimize the diffusion of a practice that had been previously marginal.

The choice of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen was particularly meaningful for Pa-bong-ka, who had been pressured by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to renounce his practice of Shuk-den and may have been somewhat resentful. He may have felt a communion with Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, who like him had been the object of unwelcome attention from a strong Dalai Lama. More importantly, however, Pa-bong-ka must have felt that Drak-ba Gyel-tsen's alleged posthumous antagonism to the Fifth Dalai Lama's eclecticism paralleled his own opposition to the adoption of Nying-ma teachings by some Ge-luk-bas. Shuk-den's anger against the Fifth Dalai Lama is not directed at the Dalai Lama institution (*per se*) but at the Nying-ma leanings of the Fifth. Finally, the choice of Drak-ba Gyel-tsen as the source of the Shuk-den lineage was an ideal way to legitimize an originally Sa-gya practice. By tracing back the lineage to Drak-ba Gyel-tsen, Pa-bong-ka could present the Shuk-den practice as authentically Ge-luk and reinterpret its undeniable roots in the Sa-gya tradition as an interlude in an essentially Ge-luk story.

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<sup>42</sup> The ironical words (myur myur mo dang/ zab zab mo) are clear references to Dzok-chen, which characterizes itself as having the most profound view and the fastest path.

<sup>43</sup> kun gzigs lnga pa chen po grub mtha' gсар rnying thams cad 'dzing skyong spel bar mdzad pas/ chos skyong chen po 'dis sngon gyi thugs smon gyi dbang gis 'jam mgon bla ma'i ring lugs dri ma med par bsrung zhing skyong ba'i phyir/ rgyal dbang mchog la shin tu 'jigs su rung ba'i rnam 'gyur sna tshogs ston pa'i gzigs snang byung ba na/ Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement , )521. This text consists of notes taken by Pa-bong-ka's secretary Lob-zang Dor-je during one of Pa-bong-ka's Life Entrusting (srog gtad) ceremonies.

## Keeping the Ge-luk Tradition Pure

We now begin to understand the main message of the founding myth of the Shuk-den practice. We are also in a position to grasp some of the reasons for the troublesome nature of this deity and we understand the history of this myth, which is a classical case of invention, or, perhaps re-invention, of tradition in which past events are re-interpreted in the light of a contemporary situation. Still, a few questions remain. For example, why was Pa-bong-ka so emphatic in his opposition to Ge-luk eclecticism? Why did he worry so much about this limited phenomenon which was no threat to the overwhelming domination of the Ge-luk tradition in Central Tibet? It is true that several important Ge-luk lamas such as the Fifth Pen-chen Lama Lob-zang Pal-den (*blo bzang dpal ldan chos kyi grags pa*,) 1853-1882) and La-tsun Rin-bo-che (*lha btsun rin po che*) were attracted by Nying-ma practices of the Dzok-chen tradition. But this phenomenon remained limited in Central Tibet. Why did Pa-bong-ka feel the integrity of the Ge-luk tradition threatened?

To answer, we must place Pa-bong-ka in context. The idea of keeping the Ge-luk tradition pure (*dge lugs tshang ma*) was hardly new. It may even date to Kay-drub's tenure as the second Holder of the Throne of Ga-den during the first half of the fifteenth century. It appears that Kay-drub urged his followers to stick to Dzong-ka-ba's views and scolded those who did not. This approach became stronger during the seventeenth century, probably as a result of the civil war that led to the emergence of the Dalai Lama institution. But even then, not all Ge-luk-bas agreed with this approach. For example, the Fifth Dalai Lama advocated a more eclectic and inclusive approach.

As we have seen, his approach did not meet the approval of several Ge-luk hierarchs. After their victory at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the more restrictive view became dominant. It is only much later, around the turn of the twentieth century that this issue resurfaced in connection with the success of the Non-sectarian (*ris med*) movement in Eastern Tibet, which developed as a reaction against sectarian abuses among Non-Ge-luk schools. It was intended to promote a more ecumenical atmosphere among these schools, but it was also a way for the weaker traditions to oppose the dominant Ge-luk tradition by presenting a united front. Their strategy was remarkably successful, and in short order the movement revived Non-Ge-luk institutions and greatly strengthened their position, particularly in Kham. It also influenced several important Ge-luk lamas, as we will see shortly.

This success could not but worry the more conservative elements of the Ge-luk establishment. Pa-bong-ka was particularly worried about the situation in Khams, which influenced his view of other traditions. In an earlier period of his life, Pa-bong-ka was rather open-minded. He had received several Dzok-chen teachings and was eclectic himself, despite his close personal connection with Shuk-den, his personal deity. After receiving these teachings, however, he became sick and attributed this interference to Shuk-den's displeasure. He thus refrained from taking any more Dzok-chen teaching and became more committed to a purely Ge-luk line of practice. Nevertheless, Pa-bong-ka did not immediately promote Shuk-den as the main protector of the Ge-luk tradition against other schools, perhaps because of the restrictions that the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and his government placed on his practice of Shuk-den. The situation changed after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933. Shortly after, Pa-bong-ka left Lhasa and visited several important Ge-luk monasteries in Khams, the area where the Non-sectarian movement was the strongest. There he could not but notice the strength of this movement as well as

the poor shape of the Ge-luk institutions. Whereas in Amdo and Central Tibet, the Ge-luk school's hegemony was overwhelming and the challenge of other schools had little credibility, the situation in Khams was quite different. Ge-luk monasteries were large but had little to show for themselves. There were very few scholars and most monks were almost completely illiterate. Moreover, the level of discipline was poor. Given that situation, the success of the Non-sectarian movement was hardly surprising.

Pa-bong-ka perceived this situation as a serious threat to the overall Ge-luk supremacy, and this led him to a more sectarian and militant stance. He saw the inclusion by Ge-luk-bas of the teachings of other schools as a threat to the integrity of the Ge-luk tradition. The task of protecting the tradition from such encroachments was assigned to Shuk-den, the protector with whom he had a strong personal tie. This renewed emphasis on Shuk-den was also made possible by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's death which removed the restrictions imposed on Pa-bong-ka's practice and diffusion of Shuk-den.

The sectarian implications of Pa-bong-ka's revival movement and the role of Shuk-den therein became clear during the 1940s, when the cult of Shuk-den spread in Khams and the Ge-luk tradition became much more aggressive in its opposition to the other schools. Under one of Pa-bong-ka's disciples, Tob-den Rin-bo-che, several Nying-ma monasteries were forcefully transformed into Ge-luk establishments and statues of Guru Rin-bo-che are said to have been destroyed. In certain parts of Khams, particularly in Ge-luk strongholds such as Dra-gyab and Cham-do, some Ge-luk fanatics tried to stamp out the other traditions in the name of Shuk-den. It is hard to know, however, what Pa-bong-ka thought about these events, which may have been the work of a few extremists. It is clear, however, that since this time Shuk-den played a central role for Pa-bong-ka, who continued to promote his practice to support Ge-luk exclusivism after his return to Central Tibet.

We now start to understand Shuk-den's particularities and the reason he is controversial. First is his origin as Dol-gyel, an angry and vengeful spirit. This makes him particularly effective and powerful but also dangerous according to standard Tibetan cultural assumptions. Second is his novelty as the protector of the tradition of the victorious lord Manjushri, the protector of a Ge-luk revival movement who is said to replace the main supra-mundane protector of the tradition. This promotion is all the more controversial that it is recent, for Shuk-den was nothing but a minor Ge-luk protector before the 1930s when Pa-bong-ka started to promote him aggressively as the main Ge-luk protector. Third is his sectarian role as Do-je Shuk-den, that is, holder of the adamantine violence now understood to be aimed at keeping the Ge-luk tradition separate from and above other schools. Shuk-den is now depicted by his followers not just as the main Ge-luk protector, but as the one in charge of visiting retribution on those Ge-luk-bas tempted by the religious eclecticism of the Non-sectarian movement.

Still, for many years nothing happened. Some Ge-luk teachers may have been uncomfortable at the promotion of Shuk-den but there was no reason to engage in a controversy with Pa-bong-ka, who was popular but just one among many important Ge-luk lamas. Despite some tension between him and the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, no major differences surfaced and the Ge-luk tradition seemed strong and united. After the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, there was very little discussion concerning Shuk-den. Pa-bong-ka's promotion of Shuk-den's cult and its founding myth were not considered threatening to the Tibetan government or the young new Dalai Lama, for the cult was not opposed to the Dalai Lama

institution but affirmed the primacy of the Ge-luk tradition, a goal shared by many in the Tibetan government. In later years, the importance of Pa-bong-ka's lineage was further reinforced by the nomination of Tri-jang as the Junior Tutor of the Dalai Lama.

The exile both confirmed this situation and changed it. Pa-bong-ka's disciple Tri-jang became in exile the main source of teaching and inspiration for the Ge-luk tradition. The Dalai Lama was still young; his other tutor, Ling Rin-bo-che, had a modest personality that took him out of contention and most of the other great Ge-luk lamas remained in Tibet. The preeminence of Tri-jang further strengthened the position of Pa-bong-ka's lineage as embodying the central orthodoxy of the tradition. Moreover, Tri-jang seems to have been personally extremely devoted to Shuk-den. In his commentary on Pa-bong-ka's praise of Shuk-den,<sup>44</sup> Tri-jang devotes several pages to explaining the many dreams of Shuk-den that he had from the age of seventies-jang stressed this practice among his disciples and pushed the glorification of Shuk-den even further than Pa-bong-ka, insisting on the fact that this deity is ultimately a fully enlightened Buddha who merely appears as a mundane deity.

Ge-luk teachers who were uncomfortable with this situation could say little against Tri-jang, the Dalai Lama's own teacher. Moreover, everyone (myself included) was won over by Tri-jang's astonishing qualities, his command of the Tibetan tradition, his personal grace, his refined manners, his diplomatic skills, and commanding presence. Finally, there was no reason for open controversy, for there was enough room in the tradition to accommodate several views. Ling Rin-bo-che offered an alternative to those who did not completely share Tri-jang's orientation. Thus, at the beginning of the 70s, the tradition seemed to be strong and united in its admiration of its great teachers, the Dalai Lama and his two tutors, a trinity that almost providentially seemed to be the mirror image of the original relation between Dzong-ka-ba and his two disciples. Nobody would have dreamed of the crisis that was about to come.

## The Dispute Begins

The situation began to deteriorate in 1975, a year which can be described as the Ge-luk (*annus terribilis*.) In this year a book (henceforth the "Yellow Book") written in Tibetan about Shuk-den by Dze-may Rin-bo-che (*dze smad rin po che*,) 1927-1996) was published.<sup>45</sup> Retrospectively, we can say that the whole affair started from this book and the Dalai Lama's reaction to it. Prior to its publication, there was no controversy concerning Shuk-den. There may have been some tension between the Dalai Lama and some Ge-luk-bas. Some of the more conservative elements may have believed that the three monasteries should rule the Tibetan state and hence have resented the power and orientation of the last two Dalai Lamas. These elements may have also tended toward the Shuk-den practice. Thus, elements of resentment, suspicion and discontent provided the background for the present crisis, but

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<sup>44</sup> Tri-jang, (Music. )

<sup>45</sup> See above for the bibliographical reference.

they did not create it. The present crisis is a new phenomenon, largely a product of contingent circumstances and even coincidence.

The Yellow Book was intended to complement Tri-jang's commentary on Pa-bong-ka's praise of Shuk-den.<sup>46</sup> It consists of a series of stories which the author had heard informally from his teacher Tri-jang during the many years of their relationship which he wanted to record for posterity before the death of his teacher. The book enumerates the many Ge-luk lamas whose lives are supposed to have been shortened by Shuk-den's displeasure at their practicing Nying-ma teachings. First, the Fifth Pen-chen Lama, Lob-zang Pal-den, is described as the object of Shuk-den's anger because he adopted Nying-ma practices. Despite the repeated warnings of the protector, Lob-zang Pal-den refused to mend his ways. After an unsuccessful ritual self-defense, which backfired, Lob-zang Pal-den died at the age of twenty nine.<sup>47</sup> The book cites several other Ge-luk lamas who had similar fates. Most noticeable is the long description of the Re-treng (*rwa streng*) affair. According to this account, Re-treng's tragic fate is not due to his real or alleged misdeeds,<sup>48</sup> but because he incurred the wrath of Shuk-den by practicing Nying-ma teachings.

Another particularly revealing story is that of the preceding reincarnation of Zi-gyab Rin-bo-che (*gzigs rgyab rin po che*), a lama from Tre-hor, who first studied at Tra-shi Lung-po where he became learned and then developed a link with the Sixth Pen-chen Lama Tub-ten Choe-gi-nyi-ma (*thub stan chos kyi nyi ma*,) 1883-1937), who asked him to stay with him. Because of the past Pen-chen lama's eclectic ritual practice, Zi-gyab studied and practiced Nying-ma teachings. Later he decided to receive one of its central teachings, Jam-gon Kong-trul's (*'jam mgon kong sprul*,) 1813-1899) (*Rin chen gter mdzod*) from Kyung Rin-bo-che (*khyung rin po che*). According to the story, Shuk-den warned Zi-gyab against this course of action. When the lama refused to heed the protector's advice, he fell sick and died suddenly without having been able to listen to the (*Rin chen gTer Mdzod*). In short order Kyung also died suddenly after several ominous signs of Shuk-den's anger. Shuk-den's anger at Zi-gyab's attempt to receive the (*Rin chen gter mdzod*) is particularly revealing in view of the central place held by this collection of teachings in the Non-sectarian movement.

Whatever the intentions of its author, the main message of the Yellow Book is hard to miss. Ge-luk lamas should absolutely not practice the teachings from other schools, otherwise they will incur Shuk-den's wrath and die prematurely. The author of the Yellow Book was repeating the views already expressed by the two most important figures in the tradition of Shuk-den followers, Pa-bong-ka and Tri-jang, as illustrated by the above quote (for the former) and claimed by the book itself (for the latter).<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tri-jang, (Music. )

<sup>47</sup> Or thirty according to the Tibetan way of counting years. Dze-may, (The Yellow Book,) 4.

<sup>48</sup> M. Goldstein, (A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951 )(Berkeley: University of California, 1989), 310-363.

<sup>49</sup> When compared to Pa-bong-ka's explicit stance, Tri-jang's stance toward other schools seems more moderate. In fact, it is clear that for him the devotional element is much more important than the sectarian element in the practice of Shuk-den. This is why some of his disciples seem to be genuinely surprised when they are accused of

The Yellow Book provided a number of cases that illustrate this point, emphasizing that the dire warnings were not empty threats but based on “facts.”

The Dalai Lama reacted strongly to this book. He felt personally betrayed by Dze-may, a lama for whom he had great hopes and to whom he had shown particular solicitude. More importantly, he felt that the Yellow Book was an attack on his role as Dalai Lama, a rejection of his religious leadership by the Ge-luk establishment, and a betrayal of his efforts in the struggle for Tibetan freedom. In 1976 the first signs of the impending crisis appeared which I will explore in some detail, since I do not believe that these events have been well documented even by Tibetans. I will use my own memories to supplement the sketchy public records.

One of the first public manifestations of the Dalai Lama’s state of mind was his refusal, after the Tibetan New Year of 1976, of the long life offerings made by the Tibetan government. Traditionally, the Dalai Lama accepts such an offering after the New Year as a sign of the pure bond (*dam tshig tshang ma*) that exists between him and Tibetans: this bond is based on his commitment to continue his work as Dalai Lama and the Tibetans’ allegiance. His refusal signaled in effect that he thought that the bond had been undermined and that the behavior of Tibetans was incompatible with his remaining as Dalai Lama. When pressed by the National Assembly to accept the offerings, the Dalai Lama sent back even stronger signals, mentioning dreams in which dakinis had entreated him to return to the pure realms. The refusal of the offerings of long life was already bad enough. The mention of these dreams was akin to a declaration of intention to abandon this world and his role therein. This sent the Tibetan community into a veritable ritual frenzy. The state oracle of Ne-chung ordered Tibetans to recite an enormous number of Mani, the mantra of the bodhisattva Avalokeshvara of whom the Dalai Lama is said to be a manifestation.

At that time I was living at the Rikon monastery in Switzerland. I did not witness the scenes I am describing but heard about them from Tibetan friends and read reports in the (*Shes Bya*) review in Tibetan. I remember very clearly, however, the emotion that the news created among the monks living in Switzerland. Some were devastated, crying openly. I also remember the many hours that the Tibetan community in Switzerland spent reciting the number of required mantras. I was puzzled by the fact that not all Ge-luk monks seemed equally affected. Some seemed to be distinctly cool, despite their participation in the public rituals intended to protect the life of the Dalai Lama. Why were they so unmoved by the news of the Dalai Lama’s reaction?

The answer, about which I had no idea at the time, was that they agreed with the views expressed by the Yellow Book. Hence, they were less than moved by the Dalai Lama’s negative reaction. They understood that it manifested a profound division within the Ge-luk tradition, a division about which they could not but worry. Primarily, however, they saw his reaction as a rejection and a betrayal of the teachings of his tutor, Tri-jang, whom they considered to be the main teacher of the Ge-luk tradition and

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being sectarian. Nevertheless, Tri-jang does point to the connection between the Fifth Pen-chen Lama's tragic fate, his Non-sectarian (*ris su ma chad pa*) orientation, and Shuk-den's action.(Music,) 134.



the guardian of its orthodoxy. They also may have foreseen that the Dalai Lama would counterattack. The crisis that has agitated the Ge-luk school since then had begun.

In the mid 1976, the Dalai Lama finally accepted the long life offerings of the Tibetan government and the Tibetan people. He would lead them after all, but this was not the end of the story, for he would also take strong actions to strengthen the loyalty of the Ge-luk establishment. His offensive started at the beginning of 1977 when Dze-may was publicly berated for his book. He was expelled from one of the public teachings that the Dalai Lama gave that year. The Dalai Lama also began to apply pressure against the practice of Shuk-den, laying several restrictions on the practice. The three great monasteries of Dre-bung, Ga-den and Se-ra, which traditionally, though not unambiguously, have supported the Tibetan government and the two tantric colleges were ordered not to propitiate Shuk-den in public ceremonies. Moreover, several statues of Shuk-den were removed from the chapels of the three monasteries. Finally, the Dalai Lama ordered the monks of Se-ra in Bylakuppe not to use a building originally intended for the monthly ritual of Shuk-den. Individuals could continue their practice privately if they so chose, as long as they remained discreet about it.

## **The Ritual Basis of the Dalai Lama Institution**

Many found the Dalai Lama's reaction excessive. After all, the views expressed by the book were rather unexceptional. The book was undeniably sectarian, but this is not rare in any of the four (or more) Tibetan schools. Similar sectarian views were held by Pa-bong-ka.<sup>50</sup> Even the Non-sectarian movement had at times used its inclusive strategy against the dominance of the Ge-luk school. Thus, the mere presence of a sectarian element in the Yellow Book could not justify or explain the Dalai Lama's strong reaction. We need to find another explanation.

Throughout the crisis, the Dalai Lama has gone to great lengths to explain his position. At first reserved to a limited audience, these explanations, some of which are of great scholarly quality, are now available in Tibetan and are invaluable to understand the present crisis.<sup>51</sup> The Dalai Lama repeatedly points to the relation between Shuk-den and the ritual system underlying the institution of the Dalai Lama as the source of the problem.

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<sup>50</sup> The best example of Ge-luk sectarianism is perhaps Sum-pa ken-po ye-shay-bel-jor's attack on the Nying-ma tradition. There has been, however, another tradition of Ge-luk thinkers who have defended and exemplified a more enlightened and tolerant view. Tu-gen rejected the conclusions of his teacher Sum-pa Ken-po and defended the authenticity of the Nying-ma tradition. See M. Kapstein, "The Purificatory Gem and its Cleansing", (History of Religions )28 (1989) 3, 217-244. Another example is Jang-gya. More enlightened Ge-luk thinkers such as Tu-gen or Jang-gya should not be thought of as eclectic. They were not arguing for a more inclusive religious practice, as did the Fifth Dalai Lama, but for a more tolerant outlook within a purely Ge-luk practice.

<sup>51</sup> His collected speeches from 1978 to 1996 on the subject have been published in (Gong sa skyabs mgon chen po mchog nas chos skyong bsten phyogs skor btsal ba'i bka' slob) (Dharamsala: Religious Affairs, 1996).(henceforth DL)

The institution of the Dalai Lama is not just political, but also rests on an elaborate ritual system, which has undergone several transformations. When the Fifth Dalai Lama assumed power after 1642, he attempted to build a broad-based rule legitimized by a claim to reestablish the early Tibetan empire. This claim was supported by an elaborate ritual system, which sought to reenact the perceived religious basis of the Tibetan empire. This ritual system was not limited to the practices of the Ge-luk tradition but included teachings and figures closely associated with the Nying-ma tradition, the Buddhist school that for Tibetans has a close association with the early empire. The ritual system involves an extremely complex network of practices which cannot be examined here. Two elements require mention, however.

The first element is devotion to Padmasambhava, the semi-mythical founder of the Nying-ma tradition. His role is central to the ritual system as conceived by the present Dalai Lama, for Guru Rin-bo-che is responsible for taming the negative forces in Tibet. According to legend, he started the practice of transforming pre-Buddhist deities into worldly protectors by binding them through oaths. He is in charge of making sure that these gods keep their word, and he is the guarantor of all the worldly protectors of the Tibetan world.<sup>52</sup>

The second element of this ritual system is the primacy of the protector Ne-chung. Like most other collective entities in the Tibetan cultural landscape, the Dalai Lama and his government have mundane protectors, who are often described as the “Two Red and Black Protectors” (*srung ma dmar nag gnyis*). The black protector is identified as the Great Goddess (*dpal-ldan lha mo*), the Tibetan equivalent of (*Maha-devi*). The identification of the red protector has varied over time, but since the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ne-chung has been recognized as the red warrior deity protecting the Dalai Lama institution.<sup>53</sup> Together, they are taken to protect the Dalai Lama and his institution, including the Tibetan government.

Ne-chung is one in an important group of deities named “the five kings” (*rgyal po sku lnga*,) lit., five king-bodies) who are considered to be the manifestations of Pe-har, the deity appointed by Padmasambhava as the main guardian of Buddhism in Tibet. Among the five deities, Ne-chung is usually identified with Dor-je Drak-den (*rdo rje grags ldan*), the speech deity of the five kings.<sup>54</sup> Because of his connection with Pe-har, the guardian deity of Buddhism during the early Tibetan empire, the Fifth Dalai Lama and his government have chosen Ne-chung as the “Red Protector” thus emphasizing their

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<sup>52</sup> DL, 24. This fact is recognized even by Shuk-den's followers. Pa-bong-ka describes how Pe-har, the main protector appointed by Padmasambhava, is supposed to have incited Shuk-den into protecting the Ge-luk tradition. Pe-har is depicted as saying: I have been assigned by Guru Rin-bo-che to protect the Nying-ma tradition and hence cannot protect Dzong-ka-ba's tradition, the only truly faultless tradition. You should do it. (Supplement,) 519.

<sup>53</sup> Heller, "Historic and Iconographic Aspects of the Protective Deities," 483.

<sup>54</sup> Nebesky-Wojkowitz, (Oracles ,) 107. The five king-bodies represent the five aspects of the group of deity: body, speech, mind, quality and action. Ne-chung is identified with Dor-je Drak-den, who represents the speech aspect, whereas Pe-har represents the action aspect.

connection with the early empire and strengthening their legitimacy. This choice further reinforced the centrality of Guru Rin-bo-che, and reflected the Fifth Dalai Lama's personal association with the Nying-ma tradition.

The Yellow Book and the propitiation of Shuk-den threaten this eclectic system centered on the worship of Guru Rin-bo-che and the propitiation of Ne-chung. By presenting Shuk-den as a deity in charge of visiting retribution upon those Ge-luk who have adopted practices from the Nying-ma tradition, which is based on and closely associated with the devotion to Guru Rin-bo-che, the Yellow Book undermines the ritual system underlying the Dalai Lama institution, and the present Dalai Lama's efforts to implement this system more fully. I also believe that the timing of the Yellow Book was particularly disastrous.

In his early years, the present Dalai Lama followed the advice of his teachers and practiced an almost purely Ge-luk ritual system. In doing so, he was continuing the tradition of the last seven Dalai Lamas, who had adopted a strictly Ge-luk ritual system as the religious basis of their power. Important changes were introduced after the death of the Fifth and the defeat of his party, when the role of the Dalai Lama and the ritual system supporting the institution were changed. Instead of an eclectic system emulating the religious basis of the early empire, a more purely Ge-luk ritual system was installed under the auspices of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kel-zang Gya-soothe monks of Nam-gyel, the personal monastery of the Dalai Lama, were replaced by monks from the Ge-luk Tantric Colleges and the Nying-ma rituals that they had performed were discontinued.<sup>55</sup> This situation continued into this century, forming the religious practice of the young Fourteenth.

As the Fourteenth became more mature, however, he started to question this orientation. He felt a strong appreciation for the Fifth's political project, which he has described as a master plan for building Tibet into a nation able to take part in the history of the region rather than a marginal state governed by religious hierarchs mostly preoccupied with the power of their monasteries and estates.<sup>56</sup> He also felt a strong religious bond with the Fifth and gradually came to the realization that he needed to implement the latter's ritual system. Consequently, he abandoned his Shuk-den practice in the mid-seventies, for he could not keep propitiating this deity while using Ne-chung, the protector associated with Guru Rin-bo-che and with whom he had had a special relation for many years.<sup>57</sup> He also attempted to promote the role of Guru Rin-bo-che in the ritual system of the Tibetan state. Only by strengthening this role, which he saw as vital to the integrity of the ritual basis of the Tibetan state, could the cause of Tibet be

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<sup>55</sup> gDong-thog mentions the discontinuation of the practice of 'Jam dpal gshin rje tshe bdag.(Gong sa skyabs mgon rgyal ba'i dbang po mchog gi lha srung bsten phyogs bka' slob la rgol ba'i rtsod zlog bden gtam sa gzhi 'dar ba'i 'brug sgra) (Seattle: SaPen Institute, 1996), 23.

<sup>56</sup> Oral interview given during the second visit of the Dalai Lama in France (1987).

<sup>57</sup> DL., 17-20. In his account of the genesis of the Shuk-den affair, the Dalai Lama described his complex relation with Ne-chung concerning Shuk-den. He first tried to prevent Ne-chung from expressing through his oracle resentment against the success of Shuk-den, labeling this protector "the teacher of novelty seekers" (a sras mkhan po), and complaining that the practice of Shuk-den weakens him (DL, 20).The Dalai Lama ordered Ne-chung to keep silent on this topic, realizing the conflict that would be unleashed if he gave in to Ne-chung's requests.

successful. Were not the political difficulties experienced by Tibetans signs that this ritual support had been undermined?

As an expression of his resolve to return to the ritual system developed by the Fifth Dalai Lama, the present Dalai Lama developed the role of Nying-ma rituals in the practice of his own personal Nam-gyel monastery. The monastery's repertoire was expanded from the usual Ge-luk tantric rituals to include typical Nying-ma practices such as Vajra k^laya and others. He invited several Nying-ma lamas to give teachings and empowerments to his monks. He also ordered them to do appropriate retreats. I remember the tongue in cheek comments of some of my friends of the Nam-gyel monastery about their "becoming Nying-ma-bas." They were surprised, taken aback and uncomfortable, for the rituals of the Nam-gyel monastery had been for many years Ge-luk, not very different from that of the two tantric colleges. They were ready to follow the Dalai Lama, however, despite their obvious misgivings.

Another key element in the Dalai Lama's strategy of returning to the Fifth's ritual system was the institution in October 1975 of a yearly ceremony of making a hundred thousands offerings to Guru Rin-bo-che. The collective worship of Guru Rin-bo-che would restore the synergy that existed between this figure and the Tibetan people, thus strengthening the power of the gods appointed by Guru Rin-bo-che to protect Tibetans from danger. But this event was not very successful. Many Ge-luk monks and nuns felt rather lukewarm, if not downright hostile, toward Guru Rin-bo-che, and abstained from attending the event. They profoundly resented the adoption of rituals they saw as coming from an alien tradition.

This was precisely the time that the famous Yellow Book first circulated, a coincidence I consider particularly unfortunate.<sup>58</sup> Although the connection between the low attendance at this new ceremony and the book is hard to establish, the Dalai Lama felt that the Yellow Book had contributed to the lack of support among Ge-luk monks and nuns. More importantly, he felt that the appearance of such a book precisely when he was trying to restore the ritual basis of the Tibetan state represented an act of open defiance by the very people, the high Ge-luk lamas, who were supposed to support him. These were the same people who had thwarted the attempts of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama toward reform with tragic consequences for Tibet. These were also particularly difficult times for Tibet politically. The repression in Tibet had gone on practically uninterrupted since 1959 and there seemed no end in sight. The sadness and even desperation thereby induced in the exile community and the Dalai Lama must have contributed to the crisis.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> This was also the time when the Dalai Lama was trying to prevent Ne-chung from expressing his resentment against Shuk-den. The Dalai Lama felt that the publication of the Yellow Book made this self-imposed restraint impossible. His efforts at moderation were not recognized and imitated. Henceforth, he felt that he could not stop Ne-chung from complaining and demanding that Shuk-den stop his activities. See DL, 20.

<sup>59</sup> A factor in the developments analyzed here has been the political situation in Tibet. The Dalai Lama and the exile community have felt a strong urgency to do something about the situation in Tibet and that has probably exacerbated the "affair." It is not without reason that the most acute crises in the "Shuk-den Affair" have occurred in moments (1975, 1996) where, for different reasons, the situation of Tibet seemed most difficult. R. Schwartz mentions the role that millenarian elements such as oracles and protectors have played in contemporary Tibetan political actions during the most difficult times when rational modes of action seem impossible and hopeless. See (Circle of Protest) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 226-231.

Finally, the Dalai Lama felt directly attacked by the Yellow Book. For, after all, who was the person who was designated as a potential target of Shuk-den, the person who was undermining the purity of the Ge-luk tradition by adopting practices from the Nying-ma tradition, if not he? Also, the Dalai Lama felt that this book was working against his efforts to promote harmony among the Tibetan schools. The matter was made much worse by the attribution of the opinions expressed by the Yellow Book to Tri-jang, who, to my knowledge, has never rejected this attribution. In fact, everybody assumed that Dze-may had indeed reported the words of his teacher and this is why the book was thought to be particularly damaging. What could the Dalai Lama say against his own teacher?

## The Role of Shuk-den

If we can recognize the Dalai Lama's reasons for reacting to the diffusion of the Yellow Book, we have yet to understand the place of the practice of Shuk-den in this affair. Why focus so exclusively on the propitiation of Shuk-den? We need to consider briefly the role of mundane protectors in Tibetan culture. Mundane protectors (*'jig rtenpa'i lha*) are guardians in a universe alive with forces which can quickly become threatening, and are considered by Tibetans to be particularly effective because they are mundane, i.e., unenlightened.<sup>60</sup> They share human emotions such as anger or jealousy, which makes them more effective than the more remote supra-mundane deities (*'jig rten las 'das pa'i lha*), but also more prone to take offense at the actions of humans or other protectors. Shuk-den, for example, is presented as being hostile to those Ge-luk-bas who do not stick to the pure tradition of Dzung-ka-ba and seek the teachings of other traditions. Shuk-den is also said to undermine Ne-chung, who is said to resent Shuk-den's role and actions. Ne-chung is often depicted as acting out of resentment against and jealousy toward Shuk-den, prodding the Dalai Lama to act against Shuk-den, to abandon the propitiation of this deity, to ban his practice, etc. The Dalai Lama himself has described on numerous occasions the strength of his relation to Ne-chung and the role of this deity in his decisions concerning Shuk-den.<sup>61</sup> Although the decision to limit the role of Shuk-den in 1970s cannot be solely attributed to Ne-chung, this deity has played an important role in the Dalai Lama's decisions.

We may wonder about the meaning of these conflicts between deities, their resentment against each other. What does it mean to say that Ne-chung resents Shuk-den, that he asked the Dalai Lama to ban him? For traditional Tibetans, such a statement is perfectly clear and does not require any further explanation, since it refers to entities whose reality is as certain as that of the solar system is for scientifically educated people. The propitiation of these entities is an integral part of their culture, and the conflict between worldly protectors or gods is a normal occurrence in a universe which is filled by entities who can harm humans. I remember at one point becoming quite close to a young lama and his servant. I used to eat with them, until one day I was told that my visits were not welcome any more. They had had bad dreams, one of the privileged channels through which protectors communicate with

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<sup>60</sup> Technically, mundane protectors are defined as deities who have not attained the noble path (*'phags lam*, *aryamarga*) in their spiritual development.

<sup>61</sup> DL., 17-9.

humans.<sup>62</sup> According to these dreams, their protector was unhappy at my visits. My god apparently did not agree with theirs!

For modern educated people such an explanation is hardly satisfying. In the case of personal relations, incompatibilities can be easily explained as temperamental. But what does it mean for Shuk-den and Ne-chung not to get along? To understand this aspect of Tibetan culture, we need to realize that protectors are not just individual guardians but also protect collective entities. Monasteries, households of lamas, regional houses in large monasteries, and clans or families have their own protectors. This collective dimension of protectors is most relevant to the present conflict between Shuk-den and Ne-chung, which is quite obviously a reflection of the conflict between two groups, the conservative Ge-luk-bas, who resent the Dalai Lama's reliance on the Nying-ma tradition, and the g'groups who accept or support the Dalai Lama's eclectic approach. The relation between groups and worldly protectors becomes clear if one remembers that the deities who are protectors are defined as such because they protect the person or the group, often by violent means, from enemies. These enemies are described as the "enemies of Buddhism" (*bstan dgra*); they are the "other" in opposition to which the person and the group define their identity. The connection between group and protector is very close.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made here. In the case of supra-mundane protectors, enemies of Buddhism threaten Buddhism as well as their own spiritual welfare.<sup>63</sup> The violence that protectors unleash against them is said to be strictly motivated by compassion and aims at benefiting the beings who are its target, much like the actions of bodhisattvas described in the Mahayana literature.<sup>64</sup> This violence is impartial and cannot be used for one's personal advantage. However, the violence of mundane deities is quite different, for it involves quasi human emotions. Since these deities experience these emotions, they are thought to be partial and can be enrolled in actions performed on behalf of the person or the group who propitiates them. The term "enemies of Buddhism" is used and the practitioner or the group will ask the protector to get rid of these beings. But in this case the term "enemies of Buddhism" refers less to the objects of compassionate and impartial violence than to the being perceived by the person or the group as threatening. An "enemy of Buddhism" may belong to a rival Buddhist group, or may be a member of one's own tradition, such as Ge-luk practitioners who are interested in other schools such as the Nying-ma.<sup>65</sup> We now begin to understand the close connection between group identity and mundane protectors, and the reason why the propitiation of some protectors can be quite troubling.

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<sup>62</sup> The other channel is the possession of a person, who is often appointed to this office. Such a person functions as the basis (*sku rten*) for the deity, who speaks oracularly through his or her mouth.

<sup>63</sup> I am explaining the Tibetan understanding of supra-mundane deities, who are mostly Indian in their origin. Whether these gods were understood in India in the same way is a different question.

<sup>64</sup> The classical example in the Mahayana sutras is found in the story of the bodhisattva killing the person who was about to murder five hundred people on his ship. See G. Chang, (*A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*) (Delhi: Motilal, 1991), 452-465.

<sup>65</sup> Pa-bong-ka, (*Supplement* ,) 526.

Moreover, the close connection between group and protector is not just symbolic, it is also inscribed in the nature of the practices relating to protectors which is based on the notion of loyalty. The relation between a person or group and the protector is described as being based on the maintenance of “pure bond” or “pure commitment” (*dam tshig tshang ma*). This notion of pure bond is particularly important in Tibetan Buddhism, where there is a strong emphasis on preserving the commitment between students and their teachers, especially in the context of tantric practice. But this sense of loyalty goes well beyond the domain of tantric practice. It plays a vital role in the social life of Tibetans, who put a great emphasis on personal friendship and group loyalty. It also informs a part of Tibetan political life, as we noticed earlier.

It is this same sense of loyalty that lies at the basis of the relations between protectors and their followers. This is particularly true regarding the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den, a practice based on the taking of a solemn oath similar to that of friends swearing life-long loyalty to each other. The propitiation of Shuk-den requires a ceremony called “life entrusting” (*srog gtad*), during which the followers and the deity are introduced to each other by the guru who confers the empowerment.<sup>66</sup> The follower swears his or her fidelity to Dor-je Shuk-den who in exchange promises to serve him or her. It is clear that this practice fosters a very strong loyalty to the deity and by extension to the group that the deity represents.

In Shuk-den’s case, devotion has been strengthened further by the central role of the charismatic teachers Pa-bong-ka and Tri-jang, who have transformed this formerly minor practice into one of the main elements of the Ge-luk tradition. Because of the central place of keeping commitments to one’s guru among Tibetans, and because of the considerable personal qualities of these teachers, they have succeeded in inspiring an extreme devotion in their followers, who seem to value their commitment to these figures more than anything else. In fact, from the point of view of many of Shuk-den’s followers, the devotion to teachers such as Pa-bong-ka or Tri-jang is the basis for the practice of Shuk-den. They propitiate this deity first and foremost because it is the protector recommended by their guru. This situation has contributed significantly to the polarization that surrounds the issue and has further enhanced the troubling potential of the Shuk-den practice. For when the Dalai Lama opposes Shuk-den, the followers of this deity feel his opposition is directed against the founding fathers of their own tradition, and hence an attack against their own group. They also feel misrepresented when they are accused of being sectarian, for in their perspective the sectarian element pales in significance when compared to their commitment to their guru and his tradition.

Nevertheless, groups may feel that they fit the description “enemies of Buddhism” as defined by the Shuk-den rituals, even if the threat they imply is not implemented or is considered secondary by their practitioners. Thus the claim that the practice of Shuk-den disrupts the functioning of the Dalai Lama

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<sup>66</sup> This ceremony, which does not seem to have any source in the Indian tradition, is not unique to Dor-je Shuk-den. It seems to exist for some other worldly gods as well where it is called “life empowerment” (*srog dbang*). It does not appear that these ceremonies are practiced in the case of protectors such as Ne-chung, but I have not been able to obtain clear information on this point.

institution becomes-special-character: footnote.<sup>67</sup> But, as we saw earlier, a number of Nying-ma rituals are precisely the basis of the Dalai Lama institution as understood by the Fifth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lamas. Does it not follow that the present Dalai Lama is the “enemy of Buddhism” as implied by the practice of Shuk-den?

Most of Pa-bong-ka’s followers would answer this question in the negative. They would argue that their practice is primarily not directed at anybody but stems from their religious commitments. Nevertheless, the fact that this shocking statement seems to follow logically from the way the practice of Shuk-den has been defined by its main proponents explains the challenge that such a practice raises for the leadership of the Dalai Lama. It also throws some light on the claim that Ne-chung resents Shuk-den’s success. Since Ne-chung is taken as the preeminent protector of the Dalai Lama, he must indeed be disturbed by a cult that takes the very people he is meant to protect as its target. Finally, we understand the divisiveness of the practice of mundane protectors such as Shuk-den and the danger of violence that it contains. For, after all, what can one do with the enemies of Buddhism but fight them? We are also able to answer one of the questions raised at the beginning of this essay: is the practice of Shuk-den different from the practices associated with other protectors? It is clear that there are other worldly protectors within the world of Tibetan Buddhism. It is also clear that Shuk-den as a deity does not appear to be very different from other worldly protectors who are all perceived to inspire awe and fear and hence have the potential for being put to troubling uses, though the particular cultural scenario associated with Shuk-den, i.e., being a spirit of a dead religious person (*rgyal po*), may mark him as a particularly fierce deity. A similar cultural scenario, however, is alleged in the case of Ne-chung, a deity sometimes presented as the spirit of a monk who broke his vows.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the root of the problem raised by the Shuk-den affair is not the particular nature of the deity. So why is the practice of Shuk-den so problematic?

The answer is to be found in the sectarian ways in which this practice has been defined by its founders. Shuk-den was re-invented during this century not just to satisfy the worldly purposes of individuals or particular institutions, but also and mostly to affirm and defend the identity of a revival movement opposed to other religious groups, particularly within the Ge-luk tradition. Shuk-den is the protector in charge not just of protecting individual practitioners but the integrity of the Ge-luk tradition as conceived by its most conservative elements. It is this aggressively sectarian use of this deity that has been particularly problematic. The practices associated with the other protectors are different in that they are used by monasteries, lama’s estates, families, or individuals for this-worldly purposes as piecemeal elements of a traditional network of religious practices, not to affirm a systematically sectarian outlook. As such they do not map into any large-scale socio-political distinction and their potential for abuse remains limited.

This sectarian stance is the central message of the founding myth of the Shuk-den tradition, the wrathful transformation of Trul-ku Drak-ba Gyel-tsen into Shuk-den and his hostility to the Fifth Dalai Lama. This

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<sup>67</sup> Pa-bong-ka, (Supplement ,) 526-527. See above.

<sup>68</sup> Lob-zang Cho-phel, (*gzhung lan drang srong rgan po'i 'bel gnam*) (Delhi: Dorje Shugden Society, 1997), 120.



hostility reflects the attitude of a part of the Ge-luk tradition which advocates a strictly Ge-luk practice and opposes the importation of Nying-ma teachings into their tradition. This opposition between two visions of the Ge-luk tradition focuses on the figure of the Dalai Lama because of the way in which the Fifth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lamas have considered the institution they represent, i.e., as resting on an eclectic religious basis in which elements associated with the Nying-ma tradition combine with an overall Ge-luk orientation. Shuk-den, then, is less the spirit of the Ge-luk political resentment against a strong Dalai Lama, than it is the spirit of a religious resentment against a perceived threat to the integrity of the Ge-luk tradition. The target of Shuk-den is not the Dalai Lama (*per se*) but the accommodation toward other schools, particularly the Nying-ma, shown by the Fifth and the Fourteenth Dalai Lamas, an attitude perceived by Shuk-den's followers as a defilement of Dzung-ka'ba's tradition.

When this sectarian orientation is combined with some of the particularities of the Shuk-den tradition such as the central role of charismatic figures such as Pa-bong-ka and Tri-jang, the extreme devotion they have inspired in their followers, as well as the intensity of the loyalty developed by the Shuk-den cult based on the life entrusting ceremony mentioned above, the troubling events that have revolved around the practice of Dor-je Shuk-den become less surprising. The strong opposition of the present Dalai Lama also becomes more understandable. For a sectarian opposition to the Dalai Lama institution cannot help but have strong political implications in contemporary Tibetan society where this institution plays such a large role. The practice of propitiating Shuk-den threatens this institution and undermines its ability to function as a rallying point for Tibetans. Is it then surprising if he opposes it so vigorously?