

PETRA MAURER

**The Widow and the Adulteress.
Aspects of Gender in Tibetan *Sa Dpyad* Geomancy**

Abstract

The influence of gender pervades the various usages of Tibetan geomancy (*sa dpyad*) and those of Chinese calculation (*nag rtsis*). The moment someone consults a diviner to get his or her future calculated, be it with respect to an outlook on his or her life, his or her diseases, a marriage, the construction of a house, the planting of a field or travels, he or she is affected by gender. This is apparent not only in the fact that the astrologer is usually a man, but also in the method he uses to perform his calculations: The method of calculating a person's future varies depending on the person's gender and the dimensions calculated are assigned a gender.

Keywords: Tibetan divination, gender, Tibetan geomancy, *sa dpyad*

The influence of gender pervades the various usages of Tibetan geomancy (*sa dpyad*) and those of Chinese calculation (*nag rtsis*). The moment someone consults a diviner to get his or her future calculated, be it with respect to an outlook on his or her life, his or her diseases, a marriage, the construction of a house, the planting of a field or travels, he or she is affected by gender. This is apparent not only in the fact that the astrologer is usually a man, but also in the method he uses to perform his calculations: The method of calculating a person's future varies depending on the person's gender and the dimensions calculated are assigned a gender.

Therefore, gendered dualisms fill the Tibetan view of the world, the land, an area, the mountains and hills and the rituals associated with them, from the denotation of sites as male and female, to the effects sites have on males and females living there, to the effects on their descendants, which depends on the gender of their cemeteries. These

gendered concepts occur in all the text on *sa dpyad* I have looked at: Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho's *Vaidūrya dkar po*, the texts written by mkhas grub Karma chags med (1618–1678), the short text written by Klong chen chos dbyins stobs ldan rdo rjes (1785–1848), and those written by Kong sprul blo gro mtha' yas (1813–1899). In the latter's text, there are fewer gendered concepts; in his writings the focus is different. Kong sprul's concepts obviously belong to a tradition that is even closer related to China as already the title of his treatise on geomancy called *Tsi na'i sa dpyad gсар 'gyur lugs kyi sgo 'byed 'phrul gyi lde'u mig* shows. In several chapters, he refers to and applies the Chinese tradition of *feng shui*: the mountain on the right and the left side are tiger and dragon (*g.yas ri stag dang g.yon ri 'brug*) and they are accordingly attributed different qualities.¹

Under the aspect of gender, the determination of the right place for construction, be it for example for a house, a temple or a graveyard, turns into a complex field of knowledge in the Tibetan world. The determination of places belongs to the discipline called *sa dpyad*, usually translated as geomancy. However, the practises of Tibetan *sa dpyad* are not completely identical with geomancy as *sa dpyad* can be interpreted in two different ways: it can refer to the 'characteristics of the land', that is, geomancy, the interpretation of topographical features of an area; or else it can refer to the calculation of several dimensions in order to determine the right place for the construction. This method links the place with time.² *Sa dpyad* is a discipline within *nag rtsis*, a term which refers to a concept comprised of calculation, divination, astrology and astronomy which were imported from China and were of fundamental relevance for the prediction.³

With these methods of *sa dpyad*, the diviner can distinguish places, mountains and so on according to their suitability in terms of those appropriate for men versus those for women. The reading of the texts through the lens of gender revealed that the concept of gender is more common in Tibetan *nag rtsis* than it appeared at first glance. The way in which the dimension is calculated varies with the sex of the client. Gendered classification of the land or of the mountains in this tradition, with several sites being classified as "male" and others as "female", is very common and appears in every corner of the Tibetan world.

The following article presents some peculiarities of places that are either calculated with regard to the client's gender or determined by gendered topographical features. My explanations of gender in these texts are, therefore, divided according to the two methods of *sa dpyad*. First, I would like to introduce the gendered dimensions and gendered calculations employed in the texts and by practitioners: the *sme ba*, the *spar kha*, the signs of the zodiac, and the *sa sgo*, the dimensions used for the calculation of the future. Then, in the second part, I introduce a selection of the concepts regarding an area, its mountains and the construction of cemeteries.

¹ See Maurer 2009: 71–72.

² See Maurer, forthcoming a.

³ See Maurer 2009: 21–22; Maurer, forthcoming b.

The *sme ba*

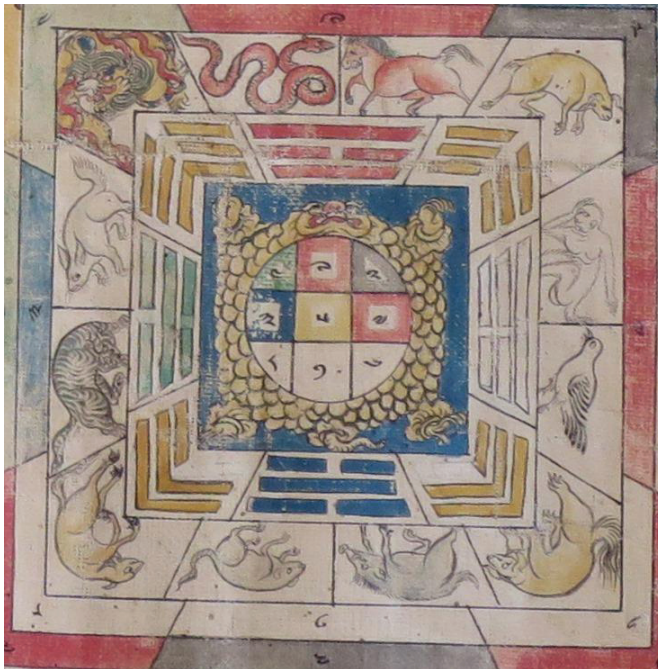
As I have just mentioned, the *sme ba* are a type of dimension used to calculate the future. Each year and each element corresponds to one *sme ba* and the *sme ba* of all persons born in one year are identical.⁴

To calculate the *sme ba* of the current year, the diviner first needs to know the person's age in order to find out his *skye sme*, the *sme ba* of his birth year.

The *sme ba* of the current year (*babs sme*) is calculated differently for men and women: for women the diviner calculates clockwise and for men he calculates anticlockwise.

The starting point for male and female, however, is the same: it is always the middle of the circle or square and moves eastwards from there. When the diviner calculates the *babs sme* of a woman he turns from the east to the southeast via the southwest and northwest, before returning to the middle.

For a man, however, the diviner starts from the east, turns to the northeast, then via the northwest, to the southwest and southeast before returning to the middle.



In the depiction above, the *sme ba* “five yellow” is placed in the middle. The *sme ba* are embedded in the cosmic tortoise, surrounded by the eight *spar kha*. The twelve signs of the zodiac form the outer circle of the square. Four colours symbolising the

⁴ See Tseng 2005: 77.

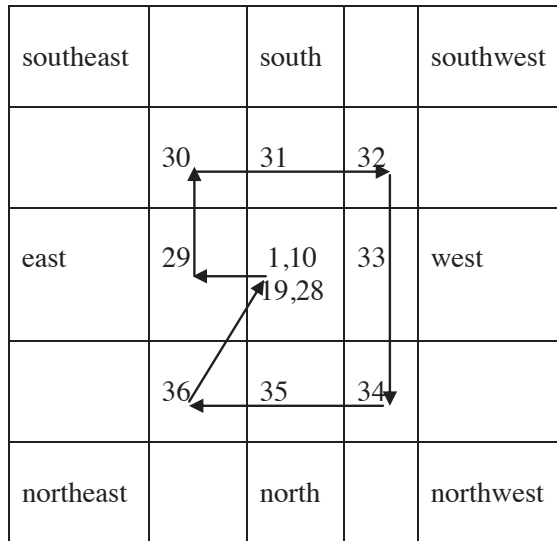
elements mark the directions: the south, with the element fire in red, is at the upper side, the east with the green wood element at the left side. At the bottom is the north with the blue water element, and on the right side is the west with the white iron element. I obtained the depiction from a large thangka that shows the calculation for a person not known to us.⁵

The year 1986, for example, is related to *sme ba* “five yellow”, so the diviner who calculates this dimension would place this *sme ba* in the middle; it is the person’s *skye sme*. Then he counts her age, which is 32 years in 2017.

The *sme ba* of the current year, her *babs sme* would be “two green”, which is placed in the upper right corner.

The method of counting is as follows:

southeast		south		southwest
	30	31	32	
east	29	1,10	33	west
	36	35	34	
northeast		north		northwest



For a man, the diviner calculates the *babs sme* by the same method, however the direction is anticlockwise, that is, starting from the middle going via east to northeast, from there to northwest and so on. If a man were 18 years old and his *skye sme* was “seven red”, then his *babs me*, the *sme ba* of the current year, would be “six white”.

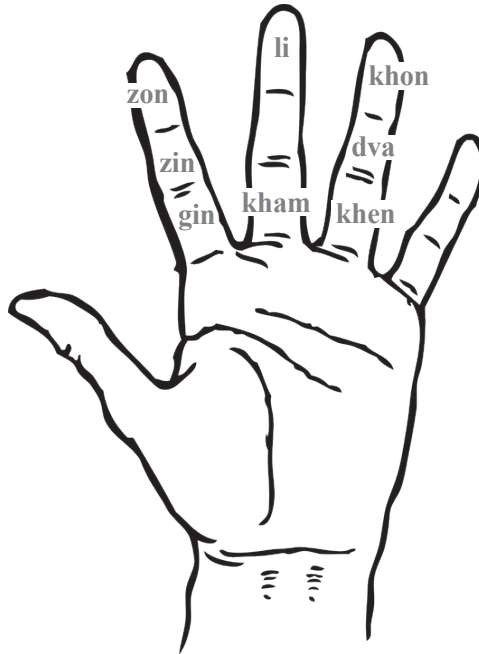
6	2	4
5	7	9
1	3	8

⁵ Many thanks to Dr. Veronika Ronge for her permission to photograph the thangka.

The *spar kha*

The more dimensions the diviner calculates, the more definite the result becomes. Another dimension he can calculate in order to predict the future, or more specifically, to determine the right construction place, is the trigrams called *spar kha*.

The *spar kha* themselves are pure symbols of the gendered dualism underlying Chinese *feng shui* as they symbolize *yin* and *yang*, the male and the female principle. They are taken from the *Yijing* 易经, “The Book of Change”, and depicted as broken and unbroken lines. They represent the cosmos with its events. The section from the *thangka* above shows them in the four main and four intermediate directions. They belong to the basic Tibetan cosmic concepts and determine, by their assignment to time and place, the Tibetan view of the world. The term *spar kha* originates in the Chinese term *bagua* 八卦. The character *ba* 八 denotes the prediction by lines visible on the back of the tortoise shell; the term *gua* 卦 denotes divination with the eight trigrams.⁶



The diviner usually uses the fingers of his left hand to count the eight *spar kha*. Eight of his finger joints correspond to one *spar kha* each. Their order is similar to that of the zodiac signs: In the lower joint of the middle finger lies the *spar kha kham*; further to the left, in the lower joint to the index finger is *gin*. In the upper two joints of the

⁶ See for example Skinner 1982: 64ff. For more information on the adaption of the *spar kha* in Tibet, see Maurer 2009: 18–19.

same finger lie *zin* and *zon*; in the upper joint of the middle finger is *li*; in the upper joint of the ring finger is *khon*; and in the middle and lower joint of the ring finger are *dva* and *khen*.

The *spar kha*, with their relation to the direction and the elements, can be arranged in a scheme corresponding to the depiction in the thangka as follows:⁷

southeast <i>zon</i> / <i>xun</i> 巽 / wind	south <i>li</i> / <i>li</i> 離 / fire	southwest <i>khon</i> / <i>kun</i> 坤 / earth
east <i>zin</i> / <i>zhen</i> 震 / wood		west <i>dva</i> / <i>dui</i> 兌 / iron
northeast <i>gin</i> / <i>gen</i> 艮 / mountain	north <i>kham</i> / <i>kan</i> 坎 / water	northwest <i>khen</i> / <i>qian</i> 乾 / sky

Moreover, as mentioned above, the *spar kha* truly represent the gendered dualism as they themselves are classified as male and female: *dva*, *khen*, *kham* and *gin* are male and *khon*, *li*, *zon* and *zin* are female.⁸ The calculation of the *spar kha* for the current year differs according to the sex of the calculated person. To give an example:

Let us say a person is 40 years old and wants to construct a house. In order to ascertain if the current year would be favourable to start the construction, the diviner counts 41 years, according to Tibetan custom. To calculate the *spar kha* of the current year, the starting point and direction of the *spar kha* are given. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho states:

*gan zag skyes pa li nas khon / bud med kham nas khen phyogs bskor /
lo re spar kha re sbyar brtsi /*

“One circles for a male person [starting] from [the *spar kha*] *li* to *khon*, for a female from [the *spar kha*] *kham* to *khen*. Each year is related to one *spar kha* each, [that is how one] calculates [the *spar kha* of the current year].”

Thus, for the calculation of a male person, the diviner starts from the *spar kha li* in the south, counting 41 years clockwise, and for a female from the *spar kha kham* in the north in the anti-clockwise direction. The directions for the gendered calculation are opposite to the calculation of the *sme ba*.

If further differentiation is required, that is to say if the person wants to know a very specific timing, the diviner can calculate the *spar kha* of the month, and those of the day and the time of the day. For further systematisation, a day and a night are divided into

⁷ For further explanation, see Cammann 1961: 37ff. and Granet 1997: 136ff.

⁸ Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Vaidūrya dkar po, stod cha*, 1996: 256. He writes: *pho mo'i dbye ba dva khen kham / gin bzhi pho la khon li zon / zin bzhi mo yin de dag rnams / li me khon sa dva lcags dang/ khen gnam kham chu gin ri dang / zin shing zon rlung rnam pa brgyad /*; Tseng 2005: 86.

eight *spar kha* each, and they last three fourths of the time of the day. In this way the diviner can calculate the most positive start for any kind of undertaking.⁹

The determination of the auspicious time for any undertaking is based on the dual concept of harmony and disharmony and the relation between the *spar kha* is either considered harmonious or unharmonious to various degrees. In the beginning of the passage, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho encodes his explanations and does not name the *spar kha* but the elements assigned:

*bzang bzhi ngan bzhi'i ngos 'dzin ni / gnam nas sa bltas lcags ri brko /
rlung gis shing bskyod mes chu bskol / de dag gnam sman rab kyi rab /*
“The identification of the four good and the four bad ones: From the sky one looks down to earth, the iron digs the mountain. The wind blows wood, the fire boils the water. These are [called] heavenly medicine and are the best of the best ones”.

With “sky” he denotes the *spar kha khen*, with “earth” the *spar kha khon*; the “iron” is *dva* and the “mountain” denotes *spar kha gin*. He assesses this relation of the *spar kha* as the most positive and any undertaking at this time will be successful.

Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho explains the *spar kha* relations further, but here he names the *spar kha*:

*li dang khen 'gras dva dang zin / khon dang kham 'gras gin dang zon
/ bdud gcod tha ma'i 'bring du brjod /*
“The *spar kha dva* and *li* disagree, *khon* and *kham* disagree and *gin* and *zon* [as well]. They are declared as the medium of the bad [ones] and are called ‘separation by the *bdud*-demons’.”¹⁰

The relation of the *spar kha* here is rather disharmonic and unfavourable. There are, however, relations that he considers to be worse; they are the bottom quality, “the worst of the worst”, and parallel to *rab kyi rab* they are called *tha ma'i tha*.

If the *spar kha* of the birth year has a bad relation to the *spar kha* of the current year (*babs spar*), the year for the planned undertaking, it is considered to be better to postpone one’s plans.

With regards to a marriage, the disharmony of the bride’s and groom’s *spar kha* might lead to further consequences: if the prediction is too unfavourable and the disharmony of the *spar kha* is one of those qualified as severely negative, the diviner might recommend that the couple cancel the marriage.

⁹ Tseng 2005: 88.

¹⁰ Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Vaidūrya dkar po, stod cha* 1997: 257; *dPag bsam ljong shing* writes *rlung gis shing bskyed* “the wind creates wood”, see Tseng 2005: 89.

However, as often as for any other undertaking, the postponement or even cancellation of a marriage is only the worst case scenario. If the plans are fixed and, for example, the couple has already settled everything, there is a possibility of preventing damage: Tibetans usually performed and still perform a ritual to influence the success of the undertaking, especially to prevent damage.

The 60 year cycle

The 60-year cycle is the third example of the gendered dimension to counting time.¹¹ After having stipulated the rat year as the beginning of the cycle (*byi ba lo 'gor bzhang pa yin*), Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, whose classification is identical to the one in the *dPag bsam ljon shing*, classifies the zodiac signs as follows:

de nas pho mo'i rnam dbye ni / byi stag 'brug rta sprel khyi pho / glang yos sbrul lug bya phag mo /¹²

“Now the distinction of male and female [zodiac signs]: rat, tiger, dragon, horse, monkey and dog are male; ox, hare, snake, sheep, bird and pig are female.”

Following this, he puts the signs of the zodiac in relation to the body element (*lus*), the prosperity element (*dbang thang*), the element for good fortune (*klung rta*) and the *bla* element. The zodiac signs are moreover related to the seasons, the days and finally even to the twelve times of the day that the diviner reckons in two hour periods.

de nas dus tshod nam langs yos / nyi shar 'brug la nyi dros sbrul / nyi phyed rta la phyed yol lug / myur kha spre'u nyi nub bya / sa srod khyi la srod 'khor phag / nam phyed byi ba phyed yol glang / tho rangs stag gi dus su brtsi /¹³

“Then one calculates the time of the dawn as hare, the time of sunrise as dragon, the morning time as snake, the midday as horse, and the afternoon as sheep. [One calculates] *myur kha*¹⁴ as monkey, sunset as bird, dusk as dog, and night as pig; midnight as rat and late night as ox and early morning as tiger.”

Through the distinction of the zodiac as male and female, any time period assigned is distinguished in terms of being either male or female. Thus, the first month of spring,

¹¹ There seems to be the concept of women coming to power if they are born in a *pho* year; Tseng 2005: 31.

¹² Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Vaidūrya dkar po, stod cha* 1997: 253; Tseng 2005: 66.

¹³ Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *stod cha* 1997: 255; see also Tseng 2005: 74.

¹⁴ The term *myur kha* can be literally translated as “the fast passing time”; it denotes the timespan between early afternoon and sunset.

for example, is assigned to tiger and male, and dawn (*nams langs*), usually mentioned as the first time of the day is assigned to hare and female.

These elements and dimensions are assessed to the time and thus create a frame. The time in general is completely structured, and this is not only cyclically in the Buddhist way, but in a type of multidimensional net. Furthermore, through the relation between the time of birth and the time of the planned undertaking and/or the current time, the personal, i.e. the individual timing, is structured in a matrix. Through the assignment to gender, time itself is gendered and dualistic.

The explanations of Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho go beyond the creation of a structure for time and timing. Besides this, he assigns a person born under a certain zodiac sign certain personal qualities. These assignments depend, furthermore, on the element and the gender of the person's birth year. Without going into further detail here, I would like to point out that this is no exception in Tibetan cultural societies. Ngawang Tsering (1657–1734), the famous yogin from Zangskar, for example, assigns in his biography a certain character to his stepmother, who is born in a tiger year. Ngawang describes his stepmother as follows:

*skyab pa bkra shis kyi bu mo bkra shis dpal mo zer ba'i stag lo ma nga
rgyal dang khens dregs can kha dbang brtsan pa zhid yod pa de sbrul
lo la yab kyi chung ma ru blangs der mo dbang che bas yab kyi gsung
la mi nyan zhing mo rang gang thad thad byed /*

“The daughter sKyab pa bkra shis, called bKra shis dpal mo [is born] in a tiger year, she is proud and arrogant, her tongue is harp. In a snake year, my father took her as his wife. She is very powerful, she does not listen to my father and does whatever she pleases.”¹⁵

The calculation of *sa sgo*

Another term just mentioned above as an example for the gendered aspects of calculation is *sa sgo*. Anthropologists saw it as skulls at a door hanging in the Mustang District in Nepal, for example, or as an apotropaic ritual in Ladakh.¹⁶

Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho uses the term in the chapter on *sa dpyad*, and as I will explain below, this term refers either to a dimension that is calculated, or to the shape of an area. It reveals, furthermore, a gendered relation of cause, that is, the *sa sgo* and its effects. The effect on male and female differs.

*de nas sa sgo brtag pa ni / shar du sa sgo byung ba na / khye'u skye
'phro chad pa yin / lhor byung bu mo mang bar 'gyur / nub tu sgo bzhir*

¹⁵ See Maurer 2015: 96.

¹⁶ See Harrison and Ramble 1998: 24; Dollfus 1994: 182, 187.

nor mi thub / byang du ma smad bya bral 'ong / byang shar byis pa'i srog la gzan / shar lhor thon bu lhag chad mang / lho nub mchin nad zha grum 'ong / nub byang byis pa gzhon la ngan / ngan pa'i sa sgo de dag spang /

“Regarding the examination of *sa sgo*: If a *sa sgo* occurs in the east, the birth of male children comes to an end. If it occurs in the south, girls are numerous. If it occurs in the west, one does not obtain wealth at the four gates. [If it occurs] in the north mother and daughter separate from worldly ways.¹⁷ [A *sa sgo*] in the northeast damages the life of children. [If it is] in the southeast, illegitimate children are often very many or few. [With a *sa sgo*] liver diseases and lameness will come. [A *sa sgo*] in the northwest is bad for the children and the youth. These bad *sa sgo* should be avoided”.¹⁸

The dimension called *sa sgo* is usually calculated in other contexts of *nag rtsis*. As Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho specifies here, the direction of *sa sgo* obviously influences the life of the inhabitants, depending on their sex. Moreover, he considers any of these effects to be negative. The *sa sgo* in the east is especially bad for the male, as it means that there are no more male descendants. Moreover, he considers the occurrence of numerous girls, which most probably refers to the birth of girls, to be negative. He also considers a *sa sgo* in the north, which denotes that a daughter and her mother will liberate themselves from worldly actions, so to say not accept their duties as housewife and lead a life free from worldly and social requirements, to be negative. His statement resonates with the contemporary negative views on the presence of nuns in Amdo, i.e. that their presence is considered to have bad consequences.¹⁹

The *rtsis mkhan* Tshe rnam in Bir, one of my informants in 2001, explained three different possibilities of calculating *sa sgo*, namely with the help of the zodiac signs (*lo rtags*), the *spar kha* and the *sme ba*.²⁰

The starting point for the calculation of a *sa sgo*, which is identical to the calculation of the other dimensions, is the birth year of the person who is receiving the reading.

The diviner conducts the count in accordance with a person's age, and the method of counting depends on the person's sex. If the diviner counts the *sa sgo* with the zodiac signs for a male person, he starts from the fire tiger year (*me stag*) and counts clockwise; for a female person he starts at the water monkey year (*chu spre*) and counts anticlockwise. If a pig year is reached while counting for the male person and a snake year while counting for the female person, these years are called that person's *sa sgo*.²¹

¹⁷ They become recluses.

¹⁸ Maurer 2009: 113, for the German translation, see 175–176.

¹⁹ See Mackley 2006: 96.

²⁰ The dPag bsam ljon shing describes even more calculation methods; see Tseng 2005: 131.

²¹ dPag bsam ljon shing 2000: 25f., see Tseng 2009: 130.

The identification of a *sa sgo* according to the *sme ba* is quite simple. The diviner does not really have to calculate the *sme ba* as they are determined as follows: the *sa sgo* of a male person (*pho'i sa sgo*) is *sme ba* “two black” (*gnyis nag*) and for a female person (*mo'i sa sgo*) it is the *sme ba* “four green” (*bzhi ljang*).²²

The astrologer Tshe nram²³ explained the simplified identification of *sa sgo* with the *spar kha* as follows: the *spar kha khon*, which is gendered as *yin* by its three short lines, corresponding to the female principle, is generally considered to be *sa sgo*. The complicated method would be the calculation. Without a gendered distinction, he claimed that it was calculated anticlockwise. And the respective direction calculated, as Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho stated in the passage above, corresponds to the *sa sgo*.

However, there are other opinions on the determination of *sa sgo*; it is not reduced to the skull at the door with the ritual or the calculation. Another possibility for identifying a *sa sgo* is the interpretation of the shape of a place. The astrologer Blo bzang chos phel from Ze phug Monastery near Odeyarapalaya in Karnataka identifies *sa sgo* by interpreting the shape of an area: he identifies places with a hollow as *sa sgo*.²⁴

According to Cornu, the orifice connecting the single stores of a Tibetan house through its vertical axis is called “door” (*sgo*): the *gnam sgo* connects with the upper store and the *sa sgo* with the lower. Symbolically, these “doors” connect the middle floor with the realm of the gods above and the realm of the earth spirits (*sa bdag*) below. He states that an astrologer will calculate if one or even both of the “doors” have to be “closed” to prevent any damage to the inhabitants.²⁵

With this last explanation, there are obviously four possibilities to explain *sa sgo*: the diviner calculates the aspect to ascertain an unsuitable timing for an undertaking. Due to its connection with the signs of the zodiac, *sa sgo* can refer to an unfavourable place that is determined by calculation. Blo bzang chos phel identifies it by the topography of the area. Finally, as the last possibility it would denote an orifice in a house that connects with the lower floor, as Cornu explains it.

Yin and yang, pho and mo in sa dpyad

The second part of the article deals with the gendered distinction of the land as Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho describes it in chapter 32 of the *Vaidūrya dkar po*. He provides a wide range of examples for the shape of the land and in what follows, I will present a selection of examples related to gender. Besides general examples for gendered places, I chose two especially striking metaphors to prove the stigmatisation of the female gender.

Chapter 32 is, like the whole compendium, doubtlessly a compilation of different works as Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho does not treat the particular subjects systematically

²² Maurer 2009: 170–171, fn. 353.

²³ Personal communication in Bir 2001.

²⁴ Maurer 2009: 69.

²⁵ Cornu 1997: 14.

and the given structure in the beginning of chapter 32 (and others) dissolves. As the *sde srid* obviously collected descriptions from other texts, generally without quoting them, whether or not these concepts reflect his own thinking remains mere speculation.

The concepts applied in this work, as in other Tibetan *sa dpyad* texts, reveal the influence of Chinese thought with its gendered powers called *yin* and *yang*, and the system for the interpretation of topographic features called *feng shui*, with its approach to the environment. As the reader will see below, the Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang* for the shady and the sunny sides of a mountain made its way into the Tibetan system of interpreting the land.²⁶

Be it a piece of land, an area, a mountain, a field, or the shape of the sky, there are forms or shapes or even names regarded as male (*pho*) or female (*mo*). They influence men's and women's characters, their lives and/or their ways of death differently.

To begin with, I will present some general assessments of places concerning their gender as Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho defines them. After he has characterised the places according to their gender, he specifies consequences that follow depending on the sex of the inhabitants that are clearly gender-related. The three genders, male, female, and neutral also occur in Tibetan medicine.

spyir na bzang ngan sa yul rnams / sa rigs gsum du shes par bya / pho mo ma ning rnam pa gsum / gdags ri pho la sribs ri mo / sgang 'bur pho la khong gshongs mo / lei rtsub pho la 'jam srab mo / skam ri pho la rlon ri mo / pho mo'i rnam dbye mi phyed cing / chu klung sa ro lhad can rnams / ma ning du ni gzung bar bya / de yang 'jig rten pa yi gnas / pho sar btab na mi dar zhing / khas drag mnga' thang cha (r. che) ba dang / rang sa zin cing mtha' ma brtan / mo sa mi dang longs spyod che / mi 'jam bkra shis tha mi 'gyur / ma ning sa rnams spang bya yin /

“In general, [concerning the assessment] of good and bad areas one should know three types of places: these three categories are male, female and neutral. The sunny side of the mountain is male; the shady side of the mountain is female. A ridge and a hillock are male, a cavity and a depression are female. [A place] that is difficult to access and uneven is male, a place that is gentle and spacious is female. A dry mountain is male, a damp mountain is female. [Some places] cannot be classified according to the categories of male and female. These [areas] are rivers containing sediments [or other] deposits, they are to be perceived as neutral. Moreover, these are places for the beings: if one erects [a building] at a male place, [the number of] men increase, they have a powerful speech and are very mighty. [If the person] has taken a place of her own [sex] the boundaries are not safe. [If one takes] a female place, the

²⁶ For an analysis of the power *yin* and *yang* in China, see Granet 1997: 86ff.

[number of] people and the possessions are large. People are gentle and happy; they will not become poor. Neutral places are to be avoided.”²⁷

The basic concept for the categorisation of a place as *pho* and *mo*, as *yin* and *yang*, the sunny and shady side of the mountain, originates in Chinese *feng shui* with its dualistic view of the world. The category *ma ning* is obviously of Tibetan origin; as to my knowledge, in *feng shui* there is no third categorization defined as neutral. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho calls certain places neutral; however, at the same time, he recommends avoiding the construction of a building in these places. This shows that they are nominally neutral but in fact he assesses them as not suitable to be inhabited, and people should not settle there. Neutral places are rare; he hardly ever mentions this type in the text.

With regard to the concepts generally applied in *nag rtsis*, it is interesting that Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho recommends not settling in places that correspond to one’s own sex. The reason for this advice is that negative consequences would follow for the inhabitants. This corresponds to the *nag rtsis* concept that predicts negative consequences if the birth year element coincides with the element of the current year, or if the zodiac sign matches with the one of the birth year.

Concrete topographical examples

Moreover, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho uses other, more detailed descriptions of an area with an assessment of their suitability for the construction of a building. In contrast to the places described above, he does not assess these places clearly as male, female or neutral. He applies, however, metaphors and descriptions that characterise them as gendered. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho does not talk about the belly of a person, but about a woman’s womb:

*'dam chu sngon mo mngal 'debs dang / ri mgo g.yogs kyis g.yogs pa 'dra /
 brla zhabs pha bong 'dam rdzab dang / na chu ljan ljin mang ba rnam /
 rang mgo zhan cing mi yi sgab / mi slebs pa yi sa ngan yin /*

“[A place] looks as if blue muddy water thrown on a woman’s womb and the tip of its mountain looks like it is wrapped with a cover. There are plenty of rocks [resembling] a human thigh. There is much mud, a swamp [and] marshy areas with foul water. This is a bad site where one’s own position is weak and one cannot compete with the other villagers.”²⁸

²⁷ Maurer 2009: 138, 241.

²⁸ Maurer 2009: 117, 187. Translation of *mi yi sgab mi slebs* according to Loden Sherab Daggyab, personal communication. For *mi yi sgab* see TCW, s.v. *sgab mo*: *grong khyer gyi mi*.

Spontaneously, the reader might ask the question: Does the women's womb weaken men? The idea would of course coincide with some of the general concepts.

Another question one can ask: Could the swamp and marshy areas with foul water have something to do with menstruation? If this association is not entirely accurate, there is still clearly a relation to the female in the sense that – as Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho describes in the passage above – damp, humid places or mountains are female.

The combination of examples from the animal and the female world to characterise the shape of areas and the consequences that follow for a woman's life is striking. The examples refer partly directly to sexual organs or body parts of a female animal or woman. The consequence given here is clearly gendered as the text gives no similar conclusion for men.

*ra yi mkhal khung lug gi ni / chu so khyi mo bong bu'i mtshan / rtsangs
pa mchil ba 'dra ba'i mjug / khyim bya'i mdongs dang btsun mo'i lte /
byan mo g.yem mor skye ba'i sa /*

“[The place looks like] a goat's renal pelvis, the urinary organs of a sheep, the genitals of female dog [or] of those a donkey [or like] the tail of something like a lizard [or] a sparrow, [or like] the spotted feathers of a domestic fowl and like the navel of a noble lady. This is the place in which married women are born as adulteresses.”

Here, clearly female gendered shapes are said to influence the life and the activities of women in a way that Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho certainly judges as negative. One could argue that the negative impact caused by the identification of the land's gender with the sex of the person is just the logical consequence of general *nag rtsis* concepts mentioned above, like the concurrence of birth year and current year. Even if this idea provides the basis for these examples, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho discriminates the female gendered land.

He talks nowhere in the text of a noble man's navel, the question of the connection between the lady's navel and the adulteress cannot really be answered. What's more, only women are accused of committing adultery; the text mentions no adulterer. It is the woman who infringes upon the social rules of life and of cohabitation; it is not the man. And it is the woman who is stigmatised by concepts declared by men. The gendered brand starts however with the author and his concepts: even if Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho is most likely not the actual author of this text, it was, with a probability bordering on certainty, not a woman but a man who delivered the first draft of the text.

To reinforce the idea of female stigmatisation, I would like to present one more metaphor that is used widely throughout the chapter on *sa dpyad* to characterise the female: the widow. Even nowadays, the term *yugs sa ma* is applied as a swearword, although Rinchen Lhamo writes in her book *We Tibetans* quite neutrally on widows. She mentions that they “are nor supposed to re-marry, but many do it nonetheless, it is not forbidden. They make their own remarriages. Others on the other hand do become nuns. Most do neither the one nor the other.”²⁹

²⁹ Rinchen Lhamo 1985: 130–131.

Although this might be true, nevertheless, widows are generally very bad news and can even affect Guru Rinpoche. A story in Mustang tells that a meeting with a widow severely compromised his power when he tried to convert the area. A certain demon called *sgo sri* is also related to the widow and has to be banned by a special ritual.³⁰

With regard to the construction of houses, a place is designated as a “widow” if it is unfavourable and unsuitable for construction. A widow with a torn blanket in particular symbolises a bad area, and the text mentions her frequently. In the following section I will quote some passages with the translation sorted by the attributes and/or the posture of the widow.

de nas 'phung sa'i ri brgyad brtag / mi rgan dpral ba lta bu dang / yugs sa phyar hrul gyon 'dra dang /

“Now the examination of the eight mountains [that denote] a damage for the area: [these mountains resemble] the forehead of an old person and a widow wearing a torn blanket.”³¹

The following passage seems to point to a certain spot, as the text describes the places quite specifically. Noticeable here is the fact that the author describes nature directly without using metaphor:

rtse na brag nag gdong pa la / shal shol chu 'bab 'khor gyi brag / gdong par de bzhin chu chung 'bebs / mdun yugs ral nag gyon pa 'dra / mtha' gzhi rong dang ngam grog mang / rtag par mya ngan 'ong ba yin /

“At the mountain peak coming forth from a black boulder flows burbling water, to the front side of the surrounding boulders little water is diverted accordingly. The frontside [of the mountain] looks like a widow wearing black woolen clothing. The ravines and canyons in the vicinity are numerous. Suffering [for the inhabitants] comes frequently.”³²

The comparison of the widow with the queen and their clothing emphasizes the striking negative assessment of the widow:

btsun mo go zu gyon'dra dang / yugs sa phyar hrul gyon 'dra gnyis / 'jam rtsub rgyan gyis bye brag dbye /

“[The land] resembles a queen wearing a pelerine and a widow wearing a ragged felt blanket. The soft and rough ornaments draw the distinction.”³³

³⁰ Information by Charles Ramble.

³¹ Maurer 2009: 122, 171.

³² Maurer 2009: 116, 185.

³³ Maurer 2009: 140, 246.

Another earmark of a widow is her shaggy or uncombed hair. Unplaited hair was, among Altaic tribes and in India, a sign of grief. The *Āśvalāyana-Gṛhyasūtra* IV, Kaṇḍikā 2.9, mentions the untying of hair as a rule in case of death. This rule might also have influenced the Tibetan view of widowhood and especially of widows.³⁴

*brag nag po / g.yag khyu gtor 'dra yugs sa yi / skra bshig mi ro mgo
gtums 'dra / gcan gzan za 'phro ... sogs sna tshogs skyon /*

“Black boulders that resemble a scattered herd of yaks, the shaggy hair of a widow, a human corpse with a wrapped head, the leftovers of wild animals and so forth; these are the various defects.”³⁵

Another example arises when Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho explains the impact of water; here it is water from a burial ground. Water can also result in widowhood in general without a gendered specification. He considers certain types of impure water, however, to cause damage to women as the text predicts widows. In addition, the female genitals symbolize incest.

*bdun pa chu ngan 'di ltar dbye / dur gyi dbyings nas chu rdol na / gyod
chu dme yugs nal gsum dang /...ko mog ba tsha'i chu byung na / yugs
sa mang la stu 'dra nas / babs na nal chu /*

“Seventhly, bad water is distinguished like follows: If water flows from an area with tombs, it is water that [causes] loss, family arguments and widowhood. If salty water flows from a puddle, widows are numerous. If [water] flows [from an area] resembling a vagina, [it is] water [that causes] incest.”³⁶

Noticeable in this passage is the widow’s posture: it is upright.

*zur rno zhing / brag chags lung la khad pa dang / yugs sa tsog ger
tshugs 'dra dang ... dur khang btab / tshe thung gri dmer 'chi ba dang /
god rkyen glo bur mang ba 'ong /*

“The edge [of a rock] is sharp, the broken rock looks as if it was nearly falling down, [it looks] like an upright sitting widow. [If] one constructs a burial ground [in such places], life will be short; someone dies at a knife during family arguments. Causes for losses occur frequently.”³⁷

This passage is problematic as the text does not denote the person who suffers the consequences. Assuming a Chinese origin, the descendants, who were usually those to construct the burial ground, would have to bear the consequences.

³⁴ See Harva 1938: 290f. Oldenberg 1886: 238.

³⁵ Maurer 2009: 119, 191–192.

³⁶ Maurer 2009: 115, 181–182.

³⁷ Maurer 2009: 115, 181.

In the same breath that Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho mentions a leper, a non-Buddhist and a Bonpo, he describes places inhabited by a widowed person – to phrase it carefully and gender free – as being “bad”. He enumerates such a place as being among those places that are unsuitable for the practice of Buddhism, and even claims the impurity of these places:

*bco lnga dam chos sgrub gnas ngan ... gti mug log pa'i gnas rnams dang /
 'byung bzhis 'jig pa'i gnas rnams dang / ser ba 'byung sad yul rnams
 dang / mu stegs bon po'i gnas mal khang / mdze yugs dme btsog mnol
 ba'i sa / de dag spang zhing dben gnas bsten /*

“Fifteenthly, the bad places to practice Buddhism: these are places whereto ignorance returned, places that were destroyed by the four elements,³⁸ chilly places where hail occurs, the homes of a non-Buddhist or a Bonpo and [places] contaminated by lepers, by widows or [anything] impure. One should avoid these [places] and live in a hermitage.”³⁹

As a last point, I would like to quote several passages that indicate an agreement with a widow. The agreement – the term used here is *kha dum byed* – conveys the impression of a positive statement. However, any of the consequences mentioned in the passage on opposing units of the house and its close surroundings are assessed as adverse.

*sgo dang rtsig zur nang dme byed ... brag zur dang 'thab na / yugs sa
 mo dang kha dum byed / ka bar 'thab na yugs mo dang / kha dum byed
 cing rang 'thag 'thab / khyim bdag gri ru 'chi ba yin /*

“If the door opposes the edge of a wall, this causes family arguments. If [the door] opposes a cliff edge [the landlord] comes to an agreement with a widow. If [the northern door] opposes a pillar the landlord comes to an agreement with a widow. [If the northern door] opposes the mill, the landlord dies by a knife.”⁴⁰

To conclude, I would like to mention a few examples of the ritual function of a widow and her items.

In a ritual for the sake of the army, that should prevent soldats to renegade, among other things charcoal, firewood and fire from a widow should be burnt (*yug sa mo las sol ba dang bud shing dang me blangs la sbar*).⁴¹

³⁸ This specification of places is without divinatory background, it extends to a place that was, for example, destroyed by a flood.

³⁹ Maurer 2009: 118, 190.

⁴⁰ Maurer 2009: 126, 207.

⁴¹ Lin 2005: 189.

The urine of a widow is required to wash the hand of the person that has to undergo an ordeal.⁴²

For the marriage with a widow Mi pham recommends a special *gto*-ritual: “If one marries a widow, one should prepare a figure that has the head of the enemy [sign] of the zodiac [signs] or [the head] of the *gshed* year of the bride that bends a bow. If one throws a spindle in front of the bride when she arrives, it prevents [from damage].”⁴³

Final remarks

The text analysed here was compiled in the 17th century, though some of the material certainly is of older origin. The examples presented show clearly the dualistic, gendered approach to time and the environment. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho describes the whole cosmos as dualistic. The ideas might be much older than the early days of the Ganden Phodrang, but the gendered view was kept alive in later texts and compilations. In *nag rtsis*, the calculation of the dimensions to predict the future depends on the sex of the person and the time, its stages and periods are gendered as all the dimensions themselves are gendered. However, the direction for the calculation of male and female changes; both are calculated clockwise and anticlockwise, thus there is obviously no real gendered discrimination. However, within the calculation for the suitable time for the bride to leave home, certain years are designated as widow-years (*yugs sa lo*): they are iron monkey, iron pig, fire dragon and fire snake, earth sheep, iron dog, female wood snake and female earth bird (*gzhan yang yus sa'i lo brgyad la / lcags kyi spral phag me'i'brug sbrul / sa lug lcags khyi shing mo sbrul /sa mo bya ste yugs lo brgyad*).⁴⁴

Places, however, can be male, female and neutral, but male and female places are much higher in number and dominant. Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho characterises an area with the respective effects on the inhabitants using stereotypes:

The male earth is heavy, difficult to access, uneven; the female earth is smooth, gentle and spacious. Humidity and dampness are attributes of female shapes; dryness is an attribute of men. Rivers with sediments or other deposits cannot be clearly assigned to one of the two genders and are neutral (*ma ning*).

Sa dpyad reveals some aspects of how the concepts of “maleness” and “femaleness” were characterised in the Tibetan culture in which they are embedded. The woman is inferior to man, she is weak as she is the adulteress, and as a widow, she creates damage in the environment and endangers man.

⁴² Schuh 1984: 294.

⁴³ *yugs sa mo bag mar len na / bag ma de'i lo dgra'am lo gshed kyi mgo cang gyi gzugs mda' gzhu 'gengs pa gcig byas te / bag ma 'ong ba'i mdun du 'phang btang na des thub bo*; see Lin 2005: 258.

⁴⁴ Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *stod cha* 1997: 354; according to Tseng 2005: 179 slightly different in the *Zla ba 'od zer*.



A widow. Cod. tibet. 896



A widow. Cod. tibet. 897

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