BUDDHISM IN EAST ASIA

Aspects of History's First Universal Religion Presented in the Modern Context

Edited by

Anita Sharma

Masters of the Tibetan Mani Mantra

Zsoka Gelle

The Mani Lamas were storytellers in Tibet who wandered from village to village to spread the teachings of Chenrezi (Skt: Avalokiteśvara), the Bodhisattva of Compassion. They set up a little altar and a painted scroll in market places, sang their stories and pointed at different scenes in the painting to illustrate them. Many Tibetans respected a Mani Lama as a great teacher and relied on his everyday advice. The Mani Lama did *mo* - divination -, prayed for the sick and blew on smaller cuts to heal them. On the seventh week after death, when invited, he told a story about the hells in the house of the deceased. There were many famous yogis, monks, nuns and lay practitioners among the Mani Lamas. In the same time many of them were itinerant storytellers who looked more like beggars and never learnt how to write.

As the master of simple believers, the Mani Lama encourages listeners with his stories to live a virtuous existence, and reminds them of the Buddhist laws regulating everyday life. In order to multiply his merits, the lay practitioner offers a gift to the monastery, the lama, and the poor; he lights a devotional candle in front of statues of the deities, journeys to places of pilgrimage, walks round the holy objects, and asks the lamas for a blessing and an amulet. He strives to do good, in the knowledge of cause and effect, the law of the karma, the sufferings of rebirths in the six realms (Tib: *srid pa'i 'khor lo*), the horrors of the underworld, and the judgment seat of the Lord of Death. He recites the mantras of various deities, or uses a prayer wheel. Among the mantras, the one with the greatest cult is Chenrezi's (Avalokiteśvara) six-syllable mantra, the 'Om Mani Pademe Hūm', which like all mantras aids meditation and the clearing of the ego. The Mani Lama, who has received the Chenrezi initiation and is therefore the possessor of knowledge passed on from generation to generation, reinforces the importance of these actions in his listeners and explains the meaning of the six-syllable mantra.

From the 19th century many Western travelers noticed them on the streets in Tibet while singing their stories and published their photos on return[1], but Orientalists did not pay much attention to them. One of the early

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[1] John Clarke, *Tibet - Caught in Time*, New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 1997, p. 67; Sven Hedin, *Trans-Himalaya*, 2 Vols., London: Garnet Publishing, 1909, p. 394; Michael Hoffman (ed.), *Tibet the Sacred Realm: Photographs 1880-1950*, New York: Aperture, 1983, p. 134; Rolf A. Stein, *Recherches sur l'épopéeet la barde au Tibet*, Bibliothéque de l'Institut des Hautes Études

20th century scholars, Austine Waddell, made a special contribution to the subject, by publishing the sketch of a thangka used by Mani Lamas to explain *Dri med kun ldan*'s story[2] and gave a concise description of the story related to the particular scenes.[3] A few later scholars, albeit in only a few words, mentioned the existence of this tradition.[4]

In Tibetan literature, the Mani Lama appears first in a 13th century textual source, the biography of Guru Chowang, the great siddha (*Guru Chos dbang*, 1212–1273) but the tradition itself probably started much earlier. The Mani Lamas and the six-syllable mantra recited by them were made popular by Guru Chowang who, people thought, went down to the underworld to liberate his mother from hell.[5] The cult of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Chenrezi, was on the rise and, in many texts from then on, there are detailed descriptions of Delogs[6] meeting a Mani Lama in hell who is liberating human beings,[7] like in the story of Lingsa Chokyi, Karma Wangdzin and Sangye Chodzom.

However, others state that the Mani Lama tradition, like the Lhamo opera, was started by Thangtong Gyalpo (*Thang stong rgyal po*), another famous siddha living more than a century later (1361-1485).[8] Clearly, both of these siddhas had an important role in propagating the Chenrezi cult. One of the most popular Chenrezi sādhanā practised widely even today derives from

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Chinoises, 13, Paris, Presses universaires de France, 1959, P.1.

2 Vesvantara Jātaka: A Story of the former life of the Buddha when he appeared in the human world in the form of a bodhisattva called *Dri med kun ldan* who was a generous prince. The story is included in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon (*Bstan 'gyur*).

3 Austin Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet: Or Lamaism with Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism and Mythology and Its Relation to Indian Buddhism*, Cambridge, W. Heffer And Sons, 1939, p. 542.

4 Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Rome: La Libreria Della Stato, 1949, pp. 270-71.

5 Rolf A. Stein, *Tibetan Civilization*. London: Faber & Faber, 1972, p.268; Francoise Pommaret, 'Returning from hell', In: *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., New Jersey, 1997, p. 504.

6 Tib. *'das log*, someone who died, left his body, went to visit different hells and other realms, and then returned to the human world.

7 Pommaret 1997, p. 504; Laurence Epstein, 'On the History and Phychology of the 'Das-log', *Tibet Journal,* Vol. VII. no. 4, Dharmasala, 1982, p. 26.

8 *Ratnabhadra'i rnam thar*, manuscript, fs.1-19b, LTWA, Dharamsala, *Dkon rigs*, origin: Sikkim, incomplete, fs.8r-9v; Lo chen 'gyur med bde chen, *Grub pa'i dbang phyug chen po lcags zam pa thang stong rgyal po'i rnam thar ngo mtshar kun gsal nor bu'i me long gsar pa*, Bir, 1976, fs.293, 326; Janet Gyatso, Thang-stong Rgyal-po, 'Father of the Tibetan drama Tradition: Bodhisattva as Artist', In: *Zlos-gar-Performing Traditions in Tibet*, ed. Jamyang Norbu, Dharamsala,1986, p.100.

Thangtong Gyalpo's visionary experiences.[9] Some years ago I found a rare manuscript at the LTWA in Dharamsala, which shed some light on how a particular storyteller tradition relates its origin to Chenrezi through Thangtong Gyalpo. The text was incomplete, so it took me another few months to travel around and find a recording of the missing parts. This text, called Ratnabhadra's life story, is a manual describing the origin of the Mani Lama tradition, the tools and their symbolism. Some Mani Lamas used to sing it in their introductory ritual. According to the text, Chenrezi himself manifested in the human world as the first Mani Lama who received the necessary teachings from Thangtong Gyalpo at the age of thirteen:

'That time the venerable Chenrezi was staying in samādhi for the benefit of all beings somewhere in the East, on the Potala Mountain[10] and he was looking down at the four big and the other smaller continents and, by experiencing the immeasurable suffering of the six families of beings[11] caused by impermanence, the following thought arose in him:

> 'What a pain is [to see] the deviation of 'I', that tosses beings into the three lower realms![12] May my emanation be born, to eliminate the ignorance of all beings, so that they can strive for virtue.'

Then he thought to himself:

'May my emanation be born in the East, in the Dakla house, as the son of Dakpo Tashi Namgyal and Kalsang Chokyi Dolma and spread the heart of the teaching, the 'Mani Padma,'[13] on the Southern Jambu continent.'[14]

'The holy Chenrezi shot out a comet-like golden light that entered Kalsang Chokyi Dolma's heart. As long as the couple was young and their teeth were white, a son was not born to them. Now that they were old and their hair white, as the sign of the birth of Ratnabhadra, the wife, Kalsang Chokyi Dolma, had a beautiful, revelation-like dream. She told it to her husband the following way:

> 'In the East, in a place called Potala there was a high four-fold conch-shell stairway. I climbed up on it and inside there was the

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9 Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993, p. 233.

10 Tib. *ri potala*, the abode of Chenrezi, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

11 Six families of beings (tib. *'gro ba rigs drug*): gods (*lha*), demigods (*lha ma yin*), humans (*mi*), animals (*dud 'gro*), hell-beings (*dmyal ba*) and pretas (*yi dvags*).

12 The three lower realms are the realms of animals, pretas and hell-beings.

13 Short form of 'Om Mani Padme Hūm', the six-syllable mantra of Chenrezi.

14 Tib. *lho 'dzam bu gling* (Skt. Jambudvīpa), the Southern continent, which, according to Buddhist cosmology, is the known human world, India and its environs.

Great Compassionate One[15] and from his heart a golden ray of light shot out and entered the top of my head. A white Ācārya[16] came holding a crystal mālā[17] in his hand and he said to me: 'Give me lodging in your body!' then disappeared like a transient rainbow.'

'Hearing this story, the husband said: 'Your dream is beautiful. Keep your promise and go on meditating!'

'Kalsang Chokyi Dolma sat down again to immerse herself in the meditation of the venerable Tārā. After nine months and ten days, on the day of Great Miracles,[18] rainbow-tent covered the sky, a rain of flowers was falling, a sweet melody was heard from the sky and the baby was born. In the moment of birth the baby said: 'Om Mani Padme Hūm Hrī', may I be the protector of the ones without protection, may I be the defender of the ones without defence. May I show the way to all beings, who are my mothers and fathers, to the land of the Potala Mountain! 'Om Mani Padme Hūm Hrī.'[19]

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15 Tib. *'phags pa thugs rje chen po*, the epithet of Chenrezi.

16 Tib. *lo tsa ba chen po*, spiritual master, scholar.

17 Tib. *'phreng ba*, Buddhist rosary with 108 beads.

18 Tib. *cho 'phrul chen po'i zla ba*: the first fifteen days of the first month of the year, when the Buddha performed a miracle every day to strengthen the faith of his disciples. The 15th day of the Tibetan calendar is always the day of the full moon. They always perform rituals on that day because they believe,that the effect of positive actions is stronger on that day.

19 de'i tshe 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs dbang phyug gis shar phyogs ri po taa la'i phyogs nas/ nyin mtshan med par sems can gyi don byed phyir pa'i ting nge 'dzin la snyams par bzhugs nasgling bzhi gling phran thams cad la gzigs pas/ spyir 'gro ba rigs drug gi sems can thams cad la ngan song gi sdug bsngal bsam yul las 'das pa myong dgos pa 'di/ rang gis rang nyid bslus nas ngan song gsum du 'gro dgos pa 'dug pa de snying re rje/ de dag gi don du nga'i sprul pa zhig skyes nas sems can thams cad kyi blo ma rig pa bsal nas dge ba la skul nus par bya'o/ de yang shar dvags lha sgam po ru yab dvags po bkra shis rnam rgyal dang yum skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma gnyis kyi bu ru sku'i sprul pa bzhes nas lho 'dzam bu gling du chos kyi snying po 'Mani Padme'dren nus par byed dgos snyam nas 'phags pa spyan ras gzigs kyi thugs ka nas 'od zer skar mda' chad pa lta bu zhig 'phros pas yum skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma'i thugs ka ru 'thims so/ yab yum gnyis po la gzhon so dkar gyi dus su bu med pa la rgan skra dkar gyi dus su Ratnabhadra 'khrungs pa'i rtags su yum skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma la mtshan lam bzang po 'di ltar byung/ shar phyogs po taa la yin zer ba gcig tu/ dung gis spras pa bzhi btsugs pa rmis/ spras pa gcig la 'dzegs te phyin tsa na/ de'i nang 'phags pa thugs rje chen po'i thugs ka nas 'od zer dpag tu med pa 'phros pa rmis/ kho mo bdag gi spyi por 'thims pa rmis/ aa tsa ra dkar po phyog na shel 'phreng thogs pa gcig byon te/ de ring khyod kyis nga la gnas tshang zhig g-yas tshang zhig g-yar ba gyis zhig gsungs nas 'ja' yal ba ltar gyur song/ de'i lo rgyus rnams yab la zhus pas/ der dag po bkra shis rnam rgyal gyi zhal nas/ 'o kyod kyi rmi lam shin tu

The boy was named Ratnabhadra, and when he was 13, he asked his parents' permission to leave the house and study with Thangtong Gyalpo. The text describes the initiation process and the necessary knowledge a Mani Lama had to possess:

'Thangtong Gyalpo cut Rinchen Sangpo's hair, transformed his countenance, and took away his name. When taking the *genyen* (Tib: *dge bsnyen*) vow[20] Ratnabhadra received from him the name *lo chen*.[21] He was also given the initiation of the Great Compassionate yidam, the precepts and the oral instructions, as well as the consecration of Aryapalo. This is how the chain of tradition of the *lo chen*s began, which is like the river whose source leads to the snow. 'Om Mani Padme Hūm Hrī'. He also told him the highest teachings and histories of the Jina, which was followed by the liberation stories. The lama of the Chubori iron bridge spoke thus: [22]

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bzang ste/ skyes bu dam pa ru mdzod cig/ yab kyis de skad ces gsungs byung pas/ yum skal bzang chos kyi sgrol ma rje btsun sgrol ma'i sku mtshams dam po la bzhugs nas/ zla ba dgu ngo bcu song ba'i cho 'phrul chen po'i zla ba'i tshes bco lnga'i nyin/ 'ja' 'od kyi gur phub/ me tog gi char babs/ rol mo'i sgra ldir ri ri ba'i ngang nas sras gcig 'khrungs song ngo/ sras de 'khrungs ma thag tu zhal nas gtam gzhan ci zang mi gsungs par/ 'Om Mani Padme Hūm Hrī/ 'gro ba skyabs med rnams kyi skyabs su gyur cig/ 'gro ba mgon med rnams kyi mgon du 'gyur cig/ pha mar gyur ba'i 'gro ba sems can rnams ri po ta la'i zhing du ngas 'dren no/ (Ratna1 n.y.:3v-5v)

20 Genyen vow: 5 lay vows, which are the following: refraining from killing, from taking that which is not given, from sexual misconduct, from incorrect speech, and from intoxicating drinks and drugs. In the Tibetan tradition anyone can take these vows after taken refuge and bodhisattva vow.

21 *Lo chen*, short form of *lo tsa ba chen po*, meaning great translator, great scholar.

22 Grub thob Thang stong rGyal pos kyang Rin chen bZang po'i skra bcad lus bsgyur ming spos / dge bsnyen gyi sdom pa gnang nas mtshan yang Lo chen Ratnabhadra zhes bya bar mtshan gsol lo / yi dam thugs rje chen po'i dbang lung man ngag dang bcas pa gnang / gzhas yang sPyan ras gzigs Arya pa lo'i rab gnas gnang te lo chen gyi rgyud pa chu 'go gangs la thug pa lta bu de nas byung pa yin no / 'Om Mani Padme Hūm Hrī/ gzhan yang rgyal ba gong ma'i bka' dang lo rgyus thams cad zhal phye nas / da yang de'i tshe de'i dus nas / rnam thar gyi skor mdzad nas / lcags zam Chu bo ri'i bla ma grub thob Thang stong rGyal po'i zhal nas/ snga dro dus kyi tshe / bla ma gong ma rnams dang khyad par chos rgyal 'jig rten dbang phyug dang / chos rgyal Dri med Kun ldan gyis gtso byas pho rgyud kyi enam thar le'u bcu tsam dang / bram ze ma gZugs kyi Nyi ma'i rnam thar gtso byas mo rgyud le'u bdun tsam dang 'das log gLing bza' Chos skyid gtso byas pas / 'das log rnam grangs nyi shu rtsa gcig gsungs nas khyab mchis / 'o na kyang rnam thar chos tshan nyung ba gcig gnang nas 'di skad ches gsungs so / lo chen gyi gtso bo Ratnabhadra khyod rang byang / sMan sding gser gyi ldum ra de ru sgom shog gcig ces gsungs pas / Ratna1: 8r-9v.

> Among the ten chapters of the father tantra biographies, the most important [histories] are about the highest lamas, Jigten Wangchug Dharmaking, and Drime Kunden Dharmaking; among the seven chapters of the mother tantra, the history of Sukyi Nyima Brahmin woman is the most important; among the twenty-one delog histories, the [histories] of Lingsa Chokyi delog are the most important. But this is not all. In addition to these I will provide a few more liberation-histories as well. O wise Ratnabhadra, head of *lo chens*! Continue your meditation in the golden grove of Mending.'

The Mani Lamas I met had great respect for Thangtong Gyalpo, as a siddha and author of famous Chenrezi prayers, but thought, their tradition goes back well before Thangtong Gyalpo`s time. Ratnabhadra`s life story, the text quoted above, might belong just to a specific local tradition centered in Kyirong, southern part of Tibet. Buchen Norgye, an old Mani Lama from Tingri, living in South India, told me, that Thangtong Gyalpo founded only the tradition of the Lhamo opera and the stone-breaking Buchens in Spiti.[23]

The Mani Lama usually performed only four or five stories by heart (from the traditionally existing eighteen) during his life, reciting them with a melodious voice and singing Chenrezi's mantra, 'Om Mani Padme Hūm', at the end of each scene, when the audience would also join in. There were some who never learnt a single story by heart and just read the one chosen for the occasion from their books. We can divide these stories into three main groups. One portion concerns delogs (Tib: *'das log*), people who have been to the underworld and returned to the human realm to tell of the terrible suffering there. The Mani Lamas I met thought these frightening stories talking about hells to be the most important because they prevent people from committing negative actions. Some others are Buddhist *Jātaka* stories originating from India, included in the Tengyur (Tib: *bstan 'gyur*), the `Commentaries of the Buddha`s Teachings`, one of the two collections of the Tibetan Buddhist Canon. The third portion consists of Tibetan Buddhist stories urging the audience to live a virtuous life. A few of them are same as those performed in Lhamo.[24]

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[23] Tib. *bu chen*, in certain areas in Southern and Western Tibet this is a synonym for Mani Lama. On the Buchens living in Spiti see: Georges Roerich, The Ceremony of Breaking the Stone (*Pho-bar rdo-gcog*): *Urusvati Journal*, Vol.2, 25-51; H.R.H. Peter, 'The Tibetan Ceremony of Breaking the Stone', *Folk*, Kopenhagen, 1962, Vol.4, 65-70.

[24] Tib. *lha mo*, theatrical genre, probably closest to Western opera. The stories of *'Gro ba bzang mo*, *Rgya bza'i rnam thar*, *Gcung don chen dang don yod*, *Dri med kun ldan*, *Nor bzang*, *Snang bza' 'od 'bum*, *Padma 'od 'bar*, and *Gzugs kyi nyi ma* are stories performed by Mani Lamas and also as a Lhamo opera.

Usually, a Mani Lama would inherit his profession from his father who would teach him the stories. At around age thirteen when he would begin to perform, the father would give his son the first series of paintings. These scrolls usually disintegrated over time through constant use. Therefore, since it was important they be always in good condition, if a picture could not be repainted, an exact duplicate was made by a painter, often by the Mani Lama himself.

The Mani thangkas, painted scrolls used to illustrate stories, belong to the group of *namthar* [25] thangkas. The *namthar* thangkas belong to a bigger class called narrative thangkas which, unlike the Buddha depictions beyond space and time, represent several scenes and place the characters in some legendary or historical past setting.[26] The structure of the Mani thangka accords with the structure of thangkas illustrating the past lives of the Buddha: the central figure is located a little way above the centre of the composition and the story is 'read' around the central figure, clockwise from the top right. The central figure is usually a Buddha, a bodhisattva or a great teacher related to the story and the audience follows the pointing iron stick of the Mani Lama symbolically circumambulating this figure.

Tibetan storytelling with pictures borrowed various elements from India, China and Persia. After giving a general picture of the Mani Lama tradition, the following part of the article will present some evidence of Indian influence on Tibetan storytelling by using sources from Indian literature and art history from ancient times until today.[27]

There already existed in ancient India examples of scroll pictures painted onto cotton (*paṭa, paṭagaṭa, paṭaciṭra*). These could fulfill several different functions: they were hung on walls, or carried around in parades and many of them were painted to illustrate stories. Where there was a series of pictures, the relevant illustrated section was raised during the recitation. These pictures were often sewn together, creating a long scroll, and hung on a wall for the performance. When there was a whole story depicted on a single picture or on a scroll, the storyteller would point at the different scenes with a bamboo stick, just the same way as a Tibetan Mani Lama would with his iron lance[28].

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25 Tib. *rnam thar*, biography, liberation story.

26 David Jackson and Janice Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*. N Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 1988, 26.

27 With deep gratitude I thank for the three months research grant given by the Hungarian Scholarship Fund in 2003 to visit India and collect material on Indian storytelling. I'm also greatly indebted to T.K. Biswas, the director of Bhārat Kalā Bhavan that time at the Benares Hindu University, who introduced me into the art of Indian narrative paintings.

28 Tib. *lcags mda'*

Due to the perishable nature of the cloth on which these paintings were executed, the oldest surviving scroll in India is from the 15th century AD. However, architecture and ancient and medieval literature contain reminders of narrative stories and the scrolls depicting them. According to Iravati and Victor H. Mair the earliest written source on storytelling with painting is Patañjali's Mahābhāshya that describes three modes of presenting the popular episodes of Kaṅsa's killing and Bali's binding. This work, also a grammatical treatise, was written some time between 160 and 140 AD. The crucial passage occurs at 3.1.26 where Patañjali is discussing the use of the so-called historical present. He notes that in such sentences as 'He has Kaṅsa killed (i.e. he narrates the killing of Kaṅsa)...' it is proper to use the present tense, even though these events took place in the remote past, because the śaubhika (illusionist), the granthika (reciters) or the maṅkha (storytellers with pictures) represent them as actually happening in front of the audience.[29]

The first of the three modes of presentation is the representation of the episode by śaubhikas; the second describes the incidents through words composed by granthikas; and the third involves storytellers describing incidents through their painting and bringing them alive before the eyes of the audience. This reminds one of the art of maṅkhas who used to describe pictures painted on a board, which they carried from one place to another. The maṅkhas were popular artists in ancient India who, helped by music or action, narrated and explained stories or scenes depicted on a scroll in a sequence. They are mentioned in ancient Indian literature, especially in Jain texts.

Buddhist sources offer less evidence about storytellers with painted scrolls but scholars agree that storytelling with pictures has a Jain-Buddhist origin.[30] In Buddhist architecture, there are also representations reminiscent of storytelling with pictures. For instance, the gates of the Great Stūpa of Sāncī, built around 35 BC, has ends turned into volutes resembling the rolled-up ends of a scroll.[31] The middle section shows the worship of the Bodhi tree as though a section of the scroll has been unrolled for exposition. As Benjamin Rowland says - 'It is possible that these long horizontal panels terminating in tightly woven spiral volutes were transference to stone of popular picture scrolls partly unrolled for exhibition.'[32] Some Indian scholars,

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29 Victor H. Mair, *Painting and Performance - Chinese Picture Recitation and its Indian Genesis*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1997, pp. 17-19; I. Iravati, *Performing Artistes in Ancient India,* New Vistas in Indian Performing Arts 4, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2003, p. 25.

30 Partha Mitter, *Indian Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 162; Iravati, *Performing Artists in Ancient India*, p. 26.

31 Skt. torāna

32 Benjamin Rowland, *The Art and Architecture of India Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, London: Penguin Books, 1956, p. 56.

based on Rowland's hesitant opinion, state firmly that the upper part of the Torana represents a painted scroll.[33] However, we can find a much better example in one of the cave temples of Ajanta. Among several jātakas, there is a depiction of a Yamapaṭa[34] that clearly shows that Buddhists in India were fond of storytelling with pictures well before Buddhism reached Tibet.

During the centuries, several different types of maṅkhas evolved and the closest to Tibetan storytellers are the ones with Yamapaṭa. They also appear in Sanskrit dramas, for example in the first act of the Mudrārākshasa written by Viśākhadatta in the 5th to 6th entury AD. This Sanskrit play, unlike most of the others, is a purely political drama. Its seven acts describe the political intrigues of Chāṇakya, the minister of King Chandragupta of Pātaliputra, to win Rākåasa to his side. He is the former minister of the Nandas, the dynasty by whose destruction Chāṇakya secured the throne to Chandragupta. In the first act a spy comes to Chāṇakya's house in the disguise of a storyteller:

'(*Then enter a spy with a Yamapaṭa*)

> Spy – Bow to the feet of Yama; what is the use of other deities? For he takes away the struggling life of those who are devoted to others (other deities).
>
> Moreover, man can obtain his livelihood from even the dreadful Yama when propitiated by devotion. We live by means of that Yama who kills all people.
>
> I shall therefore enter this house and, exhibiting the Yamapaṭa, sing my lays.
>
> (*Walks about*)
>
> Pupil - (*Seeing him*) Good man, you should not enter.
>
> Spy - Oh Brāhmana, whose house is this?
>
> Pupil - It's our preceptor's, the Ven. Chāṇakya, of auspicious name.
>
> Spy - (*Smiling*) Oh Brāhmana, then it belongs to a relative, my own spiritual brother. Allow me, therefore, to enter, so that I will show the Yamapaṭa to your preceptor and tell him something about Duty (Dharma).
>
> Pupil - (*Angrily*) Fie upon you, fool! Do you pretend to be better conversant with Dharma than our preceptor? [35]

Although the storyteller appears on the scene only for a moment, his figure shows that already in the 5th - 6th century AD storytelling with

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[33] Shiv Kumar Sharma, *The Indian Painted Scroll*, Varanasi: Kala Prakashan, 1993, p 5; Iravati, *Performing Artists in Ancient India*, p. 31.

[34] In cave XVII there is a scroll painted on the wall showing Yama, the Lord of Death. Yamapaṭa: a roll of cloth containing a series of pictures illustrative of the exploits of Yama or connected with his court.

[35] Kale, M. R., *Vishakhadatta Mudrarakshasa, With Commentary of Dhundiraja*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi: 1965, repr. 2000. p. 176.

Yamapaṭas was an everyday profession. It was an opportunity to make a living by singing or chanting simple moral teachings illustrated with a painted scroll. It turns out from the story that the Yamapaṭika is none other than Nipunaka, Chāṇakya's own spy in disguise. His singing his song in Prākrit instead of Sanskrit shows he is of a lower social status.

The court poet of Emperor Harṣa Vardhana, Bāṇa, speaks of a similar storyteller in his work entitled Harṣacarita (The Acts of Harṣa)[36] written in the 7th century AD. In the fifth chapter, when Haråa learns his father is seriously ill, he rushes home and, as he enters the capital, he faces different scenes of the Kāli age on the street. This can be understood too as an omen of his father's advancing death. The last of these dark scenes and the most detailed is of an Inferno-showman, a storyteller, explaining the torments in Yama's realm.

'No sooner had he entered than, in the bazaar street amid a great crowd of inquisitive children, he observed an Inferno-showman[37] in whose left hand was a painted canvas stretched out on a support of upright rods and showing the lord of the dead mounted on his dreadful buffalo. Wielding a reed-wand in his other hand, he was expounding the features of the next world and could be heard to chant the following verse:

'Mothers and fathers in thousands, in hundreds children and wives
Age after age has passed away: whose are they and whose art thou?'[38]

It is important to note that, according to the narration, such paintings existed in the time of Harṣa Vardhana. This makes it probable that the Pālas, who inherited the greater part of Harṣa's 7th century empire, continued this artistic tradition. During the Pāla Empire many Buddhist scholars traveled from Bengal to the Far East and Tibet to spread the Teaching. Atiśa and Tilopa were among them, two great teachers, who played important role during the second dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet. We may assert that some of these visiting scholars or travelers could have been the ones who familiarized Tibetans with the Indian storytelling tradition. Although China also has a great tradition of storytelling with pictures, the structure of Tibetan narrative thangkas are almost identical with Indian Yamapaṭas, this is why I would suggest, that the Mani Lamas' narrative paintings must go back to an Indian origin. The tradition of storytelling with Yamapaṭas is still alive in today's India. However modernization and the growing popularity of TV and

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36 Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *The Deeds of Harṣa: Being a Cultural study of Bana's Harṣacarita*, Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1969, pp. 114-115; E.B. Cowell and F.W. Thomas, *The Harṣacarita of Bāṇa*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993, p. 136.

37 Yamapaṭṭika, who was showing a picture with Yama on it.

38 Cowell and Thomas, *The Harshacarita of Bāṇa*, p. 136.

cinema have forced many Yamapaṭṭikas to give up their vocation. One of the most interesting modern description of Yamapaṭṭikas can be found in Rudyard Kipling's father, Lockwood James Kipling's book, his Beast and Man in India:

'One of the most popular of the pictures sold at fairs is a composition known as Dharmrāj, a name of Yama, the Hindu Pluto, and also broadly for Justice. The Judge is enthroned and demon executioners bring the dead to receive their doom. The river of death flows on one side of the picture and those go safely across who hold a cow by the tail, while others are torn by terrible fishes. Cıtragupt, the clerk or recording angel of Yama, considered to be the ancestor of the kāyast or clerkly caste, sits in an office with account books exactly like those of Hindu tradesmen and, according to the record of each soul, punishments or rewards are given... Duts or executioners torture offenders, while the blest sail upwards in air-borne chariots.'[39] Under Yama is the Vaitaraṇī River where those who hold on to a cow's tail can pass but others are eaten by water monsters.

Summary

The tradition of Tibetan Mani Lamas shows many similarities to that of Indian storytellers with paintings. The vocation is inherited from the father and anyone can become a storyteller. Most of them are simple people though, coming from a lower social status. They wander and take the teachings to distant, remote settlements or to places where many people gather such as festivals and pilgrimage places. They try to convey a simple message illustrated by paintings and use a special costume for the performance during which they sing, sometimes even act, play music and dance. Their income comes from their performances. They have a great effect on their audience, especially on children, and their likeness is preserved in art and literature. Probably this kind of storytelling tradition with painting came to Tibet during the Pāla dynasty and mixed with the local storytelling tradition already present. However, the tradition of Mani Lamas in textual sources appears only in the 13-14th century, during the rise of the Chenrezi Cult. The content of the pictures change according to the historical situation and to demand but always one of the main themes is the Lord of Death and suffering in the lower realms. This is to urge people to live a more virtuous life.

In India we can still find active storytellers, especially in Andhra Pradesh, Bengal, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra, but their number is decreasing. As they have always done, they still perform stories of religious

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[39] *Ibid.*; John Lockwood Kipling, *Beast and Man in India: A Popular Sketch of Indian Animals in Their Relations with the People*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1892, p. 123.

origin, like short extracts from the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa. During colonial times, modern themes started appearing in their repertoire and, in the modern age, they have frequently been used to transfer socio-political messages. The Western Bengali Communist Movement, for instance, employed storytellers with pictures to talk to the people of poor, remote places about family planning, the necessity of birth control and other important issues.[40] The bigger Indian museums started collecting scrolls used for storytelling and the first articles and books have been published about them. These developments show us that, similar to the Tibetan Mani Lama tradition, its Indian counterpart is moving from the streets to behind glass cabinets and bookshelves.

Those few Tibetan storytellers I worked with in India all passed away in the last few years. I have not met any in Tibet, and only some old people have memories of them telling stories on the Barkhor in Lhasa. The transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next is endangered all around the world because of globalization and rapid socio-economic change. This is why it becomes increasingly important to document and make accessible endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record.

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[40] Partha Mitter, *Indian Art*, p. 162; K. Singh, 'Changing the Tune, Bengali Pata Painting's Encounter with the Modern,' *India International Centre Quaterly*, Summer 1996, pp. 61-78.