Keeping the Faith Alive: The Tertön as Mythological Innovator in the Tibetan Treasure Tradition

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Abstract

This paper presents a phenomenological study of how the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism preserves its religious beliefs amidst significant external and internal cultural shifts through an agency of mythopoesis intrinsic to its theological doctrine. The Nyingma School is singular in the world of Buddhism for its recognition of tertöns, or "Treasure revealers," who are men and women believed to possess mystical powers that enable them to discover and decipher sacred texts and religious relics hidden throughout the Tibetan landscape by Buddhist luminaries and masters of the past. These teachings and objects, known as Terma or Treasures, are then shared with the community, monastic and secular alike, to advance their quest for enlightenment and liberation in a world they perceive to be in perpetual decline. This study will demonstrate how the mythopoeic function of the tertön has been efficacious in preserving the Nyingma community’s faith in the Buddhist mythos as that mythos is communally perceived from their idiosyncratic worldview. From the specific example of the Nyingma’s Terma tradition, a general conclusion can be drawn that an internal means of mythopoesis is instrumental to the perpetuation of religious and spiritual belief systems whose worldviews become increasingly vulnerable to the momentous changes with which globalization has impacted the modern world.
Keeping traditions alive is important for teaching the next generation about a particular or shared past. Traditions are beliefs or behaviors that are passed down from one generation to the next within a certain group or society. Often, traditions are related to one's nationality or religion. Some traditions are secular and celebrated amongst a wide range of diverse populations. According to About.com, it is important to keep traditions because they help an individual to establish an identity. For children, this is very important to positive emotional development. Traditions help to tether As the Treasure tradition develops, the manner in which Padmasambhava and other treasure concealers — both Buddhist and Bon — hide these teachings comes to be distinguished into several types. The basic form of the story is that the Treasures are buried in the physical world — in, for example, the ground or a stone or a pillar. Treasure-like claims can be found in the colophons of some of the early Tibetan Snying thig (Nyingthig, "Heart Sphere") scriptures, but the Treasure tradition in its full form only emerges gradually. These texts describe the consumption of small rolls of paper inscribed with Tibetan graphemes. Written with ink prepared from blood, musk or other ingredients, and often stuffed with such materials as aconite or fingernails, these edible amulets are meant to serve a wide range of practical needs, from increasing one’s merit or wisdom or winning arguments, to protecting against thieves, contagious disease, spirit possession or dog bite. As we will see below, edible letter “recipes” may also prescribe Buddhist visualization practices. The practice of edible letters is strangely unexplored in s...