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The Intertextuality of *Sgrung*
and the Question of Social Authority

Based on Derrida's notion of genre participation and Briggs and Bauman's theory of the intertextuality of genres, this article reassesses emic and etic definitions of *sgrung*, with the aim to propose its classification as a Tibetan intertextual genre that is in dialectic confrontation with history (*lo rgyus*). It analyzes the interdependent relationship between social groups and cultural production to understand the articulation of genres and authority in contemporary *sgrung* narration performed in a Tibetan community located in Amdo (Qinghai, PRC).

Keywords: Tibetan—*sgrung*—genre—intertextuality—authority

Storytelling creates and circulates moral values, religious beliefs, cultural traditions, and a sense of historical and political changes. By causally and chronologically arranging contents into specific pieces of narratives (Jannidis 2003, 36), the act of narrating is a context-dependent discursive practice that actively shapes social realities. Narratives in fact are "a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience and ultimately of ourselves" (Rapport 1999, 75). By giving voice to the experiential dimension of the individual, stories disclose the polyphony of the many truths of a tradition, without pursuing the all-inclusiveness of a grand theoretical truth (Squire 2008, 45).

In post-Mao China, the Tibetan term *sgrung* conveys quite different types of "truths." It mobilizes the personal experiential dimension of the narrator, who through the complex interplay of genres seeks a space of expression at the margins of the master narrative of the nation state and its monopoly over the legitimacy of narrating.[1]

Sgrung can be defined as a narrative in prose or verse, of variable length, with flexible registers, targeting different audiences, and told for different purposes. Due to the great flexibility of its form and content, it eludes univocal correspondence with any of the conventionally established genres in Western theory—that is, myth, legend, epic, and folktale. Although these genre labels share certain similarities with *sgrung*, they are not linguistically and culturally marked as restrictive genre labels in the Tibetan context.

Earlier Western theories of genre either implicitly or explicitly naturalized genres as "sets of textual features that can be enumerated" (Cobley 2006, 41), treating them as objective categories that could be applied to any cultural context. However, the translation and the reception of any genre in a new milieu are affected by the already existing literary authority, social values, and epistemological discourses that elevate or relegate them within already existing hierarchies (Bassnett 2006).

The process of standardizing the formal features and contents of non-Western texts and structurally matching them with Western genre labels was inspired by "an untenable monologic perspective on signification" (Cobley 2006, 47).[2] Therefore, Western genre classification has often acted as a "powerfully essentializing discourse" (Farrell 2003, 283). Nevertheless, later performance-oriented, contextual, and intertextual approaches to genre theory (Frow 2006, 6–28) have unpacked Western genre labels and explored non-restrictive definitions that better reflect the

plurality of epistemic stands and the specific cultural and historical perspectives on textual production.

In this respect, putting Tibetan genres in communication with Western genres is a theoretical work that can help with promoting a mutual enrichment of concepts across languages and cultures and contribute to a more context-sensitive theorization.

Based on the analysis of Tibetan literary works' titles, Orna Almogi (2005, 29) recognizes the difficulty of finding one-to-one equivalents between Tibetan and English genre terms: on the one hand, some single Tibetan genre terms are so broad that in English they correspond to a number of genres; on the other hand, some distinct Tibetan genres can be covered by a single English genre. *Sgrung* is a case in point of the first type. Translation in Western languages cannot adequately account for the genre comprehensiveness of *sgrung*. Consequently, any clear-cut definition turns into an arbitrary attempt at assimilating it to a single genre category that excludes the others.

However, for the scope of this article, the question of the translatability of *sgrung* in other cultural contexts is subordinate to the primary aim of identifying its genre definition and redefinition in the original Tibetan milieu. This is a relevant issue that pertains to a number of Tibetan genres and that can be better addressed at the intersecting knot between emic classifications and etic standardization (Ben-Amos 1969, 215–16; Rheingans 2015, 16–21).

Previous studies have touched upon the classification of Tibetan genres as part of basic questions about the emergence and development of Tibetan literature. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (1996, 19–20) proposed to favor "family resemblances"—the similar and overlapping features that Tibetan literature shares with other worldwide literary expressions—over a Western essentialist definition of literature. Afterward, both Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (2008) and Lama Jabb (2015) highlighted that new Tibetan literary themes and forms were the result not only of the post-1980s political and economic reforms but also of Tibetans' own engagement with modernity, in continuity with the past. More specifically related to Tibetan genres, Jim Rheingans (2015) offered an in-depth theoretical discussion on the blurred classification of Tibetan texts into fluid genre categories.

The wide spectrum of texts labeled as *sgrung* is epitomized by the topics and formal features of renowned Tibetan works such as *Ge sar rgyal bo'i sgrung*, *A khu ston pa'i sgrung*, and *Mi ro gser kyi sgrung*. In these rather different types of *sgrung* oral transmission coexists with textualized versions in written form. The open corpus of Gesar is the paradigmatic and longest example of a *sgrung* that exists in both oral and written forms. In contemporary People's Republic of China (PRC), it is still constantly expanded with new episodes through the performances of literate and illiterate storytellers that are initiated by dreams, deity possessions, or other suddenly acquired abilities. Furthermore, since the 1950s there has been an increase of state-sponsored textualization, translation into Chinese, and multimedia publications (Thurston 2019, 120–22).

However, as a genre label, *sgrung* also applies to shorter autobiographical oral narrations that unfold in accordance with peculiarly Tibetan ways of cultural

production and transmission, where dreams, memories of previous lives, visions, auspicious and inauspicious omens, and demonic and divine encounters are integral components of the story. The emphasis on verbal communication and the implicit contrast with written texts make *sgrung* frequently appear in conjunction with a number of other Tibetan terms (for example, *ngag rgyun*, *bshad rgyun*, *kha gtam*, *gtam rgyud*, *sgrung gtam*, and *sgrung rgyud*), which all convey the basic meaning of "oral tradition" and further acquire context-dependent specific meanings.

In order to seek a satisfactory genre definition for the heterogeneous Tibetan texts that are labeled as *sgrung*, we need to dismiss monolithic and normative rules of genre attribution that assume structural correspondences between text, genre, and genre label. Once we acknowledge the variation of texts and the permeability of genre divisions, we can lay different foundations for the relationship between texts and genres. In the words of Jacques Derrida (1980, 212), "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging." Tibetan texts that exhibit different formal structures and topics under the same label of *sgrung* reveal that, while sharing an array of features that validate their classification under the same category, they participate in different genres.

Along the same lines, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs's formulation of the intertextuality of genre offers a methodologically text-centered orientation that effectively accounts for the variety of Tibetan *sgrung*. Elaborating on Mikhail Bakhtin's denial of genre as an inherent property of texts (Bakhtin 1986, 74–77), they argued that "genres may be seen as . . . complex frames of reference for communicative practice" (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 141). In asserting that genres are frames of reference to which texts adhere only to a certain extent, the focus of genre definition shifts from abstract genre labels to the context-dependent relationship among real texts, authors, performers, and recipients.

Instead of being an immanent property of texts, genres become reconfigured as the result of the participatory process engaged by the narrator and the audience in linking a text to other texts. Rather than forcing texts into one *a priori* standardized genre, viewing them as acts of communication values the network of hierarchical and horizontal relations that bond the narrator-author and the audience-readership in classifying Tibetan storytelling within certain genre frames. Being acts of communication in the making, the participation of a text in the *sgrung* genre can only be assessed *a posteriori*. In this way, genres are transformed into flexible heuristic tools that are not rigidly applied but remain open to a range of texts that cross-linguistically and cross-culturally exhibit features that, by approximation, express participation in different genres.

Therefore, *sgrung* can be seen as a kaleidoscope of possible intertextual genre frames, rather than being pinned down to a discrete genre label. As one rotates the kaleidoscope, pieces of narrative-glass shatter in the lens and assume specific configurations. The narrator, together with the audience, gazes into the kaleidoscope, wherein they contextually and temporally share different narratives.

The next section will consider how *sgrung* simultaneously shows significant contiguities and discontinuities with another established genre label in Tibetan

tradition, *lo rgyus*. The discussion will serve to further explore the correlation between the narrator's authority and genre classification.

EMIC GENRES AND ETIC RESEARCH: *SGRUNG* AND *LO RGYUS*;
COMPETING EPISTEMOLOGIES OF BELIEF AND SCIENTIFIC-OBJECTIVE TRUTH

Before the postmodern epistemological turn exposed the historical and cultural contingency of any form of knowledge (Susen 2015, 40–63), Western researchers long overlooked the emic self-representation of ancient and modern civilizations, whose epistemology developed far away, either in time or space, from the West. This trend neglected the potential contribution that those stories, dismissed as untrustworthy legends or myths but claimed to be historical by locals, could have offered to the study of geographical knowledge, interethnic exchanges, material culture, and socio-political organization of the non-West. Moreover, this biased approach failed to recognize that time and space, as well as history and geography, are culturally specific notions that deeply affect the perception of what counts as truth. In an enlarged perspective, the dominant Western discourse of what makes any piece of narration eligible to be historically valuable, or more generally reliable, has prevented us from seeking a deeper understanding of cultural production in the non-West.

The strict application of a distinction between fiction and non-fiction is a culturally constructed and not natural one. Thus, it should be employed with great caution in different cultural contexts wherein history is primarily expressed in a narrative format and the notion of historical truth does not necessarily imply that the reported events are verifiable according to a scientific-objective assessment of documentary evidence. In the Tibetan context, for example, the participation of mountain deities in community life is constantly evoked, especially in those minor events that were left out of the official records; the spreading of a plague, the sudden death of livestock, unexpected precipitation, and bad harvests are unfortunate events that can be addressed through ritual negotiation with the territorial deities. Similarly, family histories intermingle with dream encounters and epiphanies. The divine intervention in a community's past not only enhances the authority of mountain deities but, based on the continuance with the past, also helps to establish the legitimacy of the present order. Moreover, the authority of the source, namely a ritual text or an elder eyewitness, invests a story with the power of a historical account, especially when a piece of narrative is denied access to official memory practices.

Lo rgyus is the most widely used term for "history" in Tibetan. In the list of different genre labels that hint at history content, Dan Martin (1997, 14–15) defines *lo rgyus* as "by far the broadest genre-term that we might translate as 'history', covering as it does both the secular and the religious." However, if *lo rgyus* and *sgrung* are simply translated as "history" and "story," and thus charged with the epistemological incompatibility between scientific-objective truth and belief that we would attach to them in a Western cultural setting, they become very misleading labels that oversimplify and reduce them to two unrealistically separate categories.

Yet, if *sgrung* and *lo rgyus* are not in dichotomous opposition, what does in fact make them so close and even overlapping intertextual genres?

Lo rgyus *as narrative*

Lo rgyus is primarily a cultural elaboration of events that have happened or are believed to have happened and may include elements that are not historically documented but are interwoven with beliefs and legends, individual perspectives, and community bias. Similar to *sgrung*, *lo rgyus* is essentially a narrative production (Vostrikov 2014, 61–62; van der Kuijp 1996, 42; Gentry 2010, 133–34). Although narratives labeled as either *sgrung* or *lo rgyus* cannot always be considered historical in a Western sense, the Tibetan claim on the historicity of either of them cannot be simply rejected.

Lo rgyus *as vertical lineal transmission*

The concept of *lo rgyus* is intimately related to the notion of transmission, which is suggested by the use of Tibetan words such as *rabs* and *rgyud* (generation, lineage, genealogy, succession) in texts labeled as *mi rabs* (human generations), *rgyal rabs* (royal genealogies), *lha rabs* (gods' lineages), *rus rgyud* (clan ancestry), and *chos rgyud* (religious lineages). *Lo rgyus* has a connotation of a direct vertical linkage from the past to the present; the same linearity and continuity characterizes also the descriptive terms for "oral tradition": *ngag rgyun*, *bshad rgyun*, *kha gtam*, *gtam rgyud*, and *sgrung rgyud* that, as mentioned earlier, are closely related *sgrung*. The similar meanings of *rgyud* and *rgyun* (flow, continuum, uninterrupted line) further suggest the vicinity of the concepts of *lo rgyus* and *sgrung*.

Lo rgyus *as not necessarily committed to scientific-objective truth*

The continuous lineal transmission of certain contents from the past to the present, displayed by both *lo rgyus* and *sgrung*, does not imply an explicit or implicit commitment to scientific-objective truth. Narrative strategies and formulae provide indications about the narrator's and the audience's positioning and expectations toward the narration and further situate it within its genre frame of reference. Peter Schwieger (2013, 70–76) describes Tibetan history as "a method to organize the collectively shared fund of cultural knowledge" that legitimizes truth—though not necessarily qualified in scientific-objective terms—and ensures continuity with the "remembered past."

Two Tibetan scholars on sgrung *and* lo rgyus

When turning to emic research perspectives on Tibetan genre, we find that in the past decade Tibetan scholars have outlined the ambiguous inclusiveness of *sgrung* and its dialogue with other adjacent genres, including *lo rgyus*.

Nor-bu dbang-ldan emphasizes the semantic polyvalence of *sgrung* and attempts to account for it in relation to other Tibetan categories and in contrast to its assumed Chinese and English genre counterparts. He notes:

> In Tibetan, the meanings of the objects designated by the term *sgrung* are very
> wide but it is difficult to find a parallel term in both Chinese and Western cul-

tures. The only correspondences with Chinese are between *lha sgrung* and 神话 [*shenhua*][3] and between *gtam rgyud* and 故事 [*gushi*]. In English, with the exception of *gtam rgyud* (story) and *lha sgrung* (myth, which in Chinese is also expressed with the phonetic calque [迷思 *misi*]), there is no other equivalent term. Under the original Tibetan *sgrung*, not only the orally transmitted *gtam rgyud* and *sgrung gtam* merge together, but also a long historical poem like *Gesar gyi sgrung* is named with the inclusive label *sgrung*. In Chinese and in other languages we still cannot find an adequate descriptive term that includes in one word [the meanings of] *lha sgrung*, *gtam rgyud* and long historical poem, like the Tibetan *sgrung*. (Nor-bu Dbang-ldan 2012, 45–46)

While the author expresses dissatisfaction with the search for an exhaustive translation—and even with the translatability—of *sgrung*, he actively engages in the interlinguistic and intercultural dialogue with Chinese and English genre labels to elaborate his intertextual definition of *sgrung*.

Another Tibetan scholar, Klu thar, elaborates a definition of *sgrung* that explicitly contrasts its features with *lo rgyus*. When stating that "in general, the relationship between *lha sgrung* and *lo rgyus* is similar to the relationship between folk literature and authored literature" (Klu-thar 2008, 191), the author juxtaposes *lo rgyus* and *lha sgrung* in connection with the concept of authorship. If *lo rgyus* is the output of an individual effort of writing, *lha sgrung* lacks a distinct source of origin and is anonymously stored in folk literature. At the same time, he acknowledges that many *sgrung* are blended into the structure of Tibetan historical works, and historiography relies on them for shedding light on the history of the remote past. Rather than valuing *sgrung* per se, Klu-thar takes a functionalist approach that suggests that *sgrung* contributed to fill the lacunae of history until, with the advent of writing, it was substituted by the writing of *lo rgyus* and relegated to a lower level. As he clearly states: "the important [aspect] of the interdependent relationship between Tibetan *sgrung*, *gtam rgyud* and *lo rgyus* is that in the earliest times, when there was no writing, they were the same thing, but when written language was established, their relationship was not the same anymore" (Klu-thar 2008, 194).

The above definitions acknowledge the intertwinement of *sgrung* and *lo rgyus* but overall emphasize differences, instead of promoting contiguity. The two Tibetan scholars are concerned with delimiting *sgrung* to handle fictional content and stress its oral origin and transmission and its low degree of reliability and authority in opposition to *lo rgyus*.

Such a clear-cut genre division seems rather new, and it might be the result of the strictly scientific-objective notion of history that was introduced into Tibetan cultural life during the aftermath of the Chinese takeover in the twentieth century.

In China, early twentieth-century Chinese writing of history as the linear and progressive periodization of the past (Duara 1995, 33–40) anticipated the establishment of Marxist "scientific historiography," which consolidated Chinese history writing as the history of the nation and delegitimized other local, unofficial histories (Weigelin-Schwiedrzik 2005). This process changed the understanding of what kind of truths would be acceptable in post-1949 Tibetan history writing too. As a result, the emic genre *lo rgyus* was redefined according to scientific-

objective criteria, and its traditional genre authority was appropriated by the state. The porous, dialectic, and ambiguous genre categorization of Tibetan narratives about the past as either *lo rgyus* or *sgrung* was substituted by the introduction of a sharper difference between *lo rgyus* and *sgrung* and the dismissal of other histories—other sources of truths—as not authorized to enter the domain of history.

I suggest that more insights on the contemporary Tibetan emic understanding of both *lo rgyus* and *sgrung* might come from dedicating greater attention to *sgrung* telling that expresses specific worldviews through the retrospective arrangement of experiences and events. This material contributes to demonstrating that in the narration of *sgrung* dreams, prophecies, rituals, and geopolitical events dialectically produce a dense global narration that enhances a locally entrusted authoritative interpretation of the past that does not coincide with *lo rgyus*.

Contemporary *sgrung* narration:
Voices from northeastern Rtse-khog County

In the second part of this article, I introduce extracts from three oral *sgrung* that I recorded in the northeastern area of Rtse-khog County (Rma-lho Prefecture, Qinghai Province). These verbal expressions shed light on how the authority of the narrators, the intertextuality of *sgrung*, and its interaction with *lo rgyus* expand and challenge the assumed rigidity of genre categories and make them more open to reflect actual texts.

The narrators are three community elders from Ke-ri'i khyi-lnga tribe, aged between sixty-five and eighty, who spent a major part of their lives herding livestock in Rdo-lung, a valley located to the northeast of Dme-shul township in Rtse-khog County. I went to Rdo-lung in the summer of 2014 to attend the yearly *la rtse*[4] ritual, which took place on the top of the nearby 5,000-meter mountain of A-myes Brag-dkar. Before starting the uphill trek, one villager intrigued me with the story of how the homonymous local deity had moved from the neighboring area of eastern Mang-ra Prefecture in 1957 and took his present dwelling in Rdo-lung. The three *sgrung* that I am about to show all revolve around the memories of this event.[5]

The 2014 *la rtse* ritual, performed on the fifteenth day of the sixth lunar month, was a particularly significant one. People of Rdo-lung were in fact preparing to substitute the old *la rtse*, erected in 1957 and recently destroyed by lightning, with a new one (see figures 1–4). This immediate event prompted the narration of memories about the *la rtse* built in 1957 and fragmented pieces of local history. In this way, the contemporary reiteration of the *la rtse* ritual offered a communicative space where elements of *sgrung* and *lo rgyus* merged into a single narrative of the past, validated by the trust and familiarity of the audience with the recounted events.

At the core of the narratives, the triggering motivation for the movement of the local deity A-myes Brag-dkar from Mang-ra County to Rdo-lung valley was rather profane. Long-term fights over the pastures between Khe-ri'i khyi-lnga and Klu-tshang tribes often culminated in murders and revenge. In order to stop them

Figure 1: Original square hole dug in 1957 to prepare the construction of the *la rtse*.
All photos by Valentina Punzi.

Figure 2: Wooden poles used for the *la rtse* built in 1957.

Figure 3: Ritual objects that were buried in the square hole under the old *la rtse*.

Figure 4: Wooden poles prepared for the new *la rtse* in 2014.

and prevent future contentions, A-lags Rdzong-dkar invited A-myes Brag-dkar to move closer to Rdo-lung.

Nyi-ma introduced the social context at the time:

> In the past, at the time of the old society,[6] eight or nine revenge murders happened between Klu-tshang and us. They were killing here and there; there were many murders. It was in the year 1949, no . . . it was in the year 1957. From our place here we went there to kill three men from Klu-tshang. Now fifty years have passed, I don't remember it clearly. However, at that time it was around the year 1995 or 1996, our two villages held a discussion about the murders that had happened in the past and found an agreement. Forty or fifty years had passed since that revenge and it caused harm to unity, so our elders in the village said, and our elders said that this is the truth.[7]

A-lags Rdzong-dkar held a big fumigation of juniper branches and built a *la rtse* on the top of the new designated mountain in Rdo-lung area that would host A-myes Brag-dkar, far away from its original site in the area of Klu-tshang tribe, in eastern Mang-ra Prefecture.

Ye-shes recounts that,

> The place where the *la rtse* was erected is called Chu-'phen-sgang, at that time that place was called Chu-'phen-sgang. The exact place where the *la rtse* was erected is called Chu-'phen-sgang. Previously, this place had a different name, it was called Dge-bsnyen-rdo-ri-nag-po. The *la rtse* was erected on the fifteenth day of the sixth [lunar] month. A-lags Rdzong-dkar placed A-myes Brag-dkar here in Rdo-lung. When A-lags Rdzong-dkar offered fumigation, it smoked in the direction of Brag-dkar. Afterward, Brag-dkar settled in a closer place. A-lags Rdzong-dkar erected the *la rtse* and built the palace. If we say the reason why A-myes Brag-dkar had to settle, [it is because] we and Klu-tshang didn't have a good relationship and we killed some men."[8]

Nyi-ma determines the temporal frame of the event according to his autobiographical data: "When I was eleven, A-lags Rdzong-dkar arrived to this place, that year was between 1956 and 1957, yes, at that time I was a child, I was around six years old. A-lags Rdzong-dkar said: 'It will be good if powerful protector deities come to you [your place]. I will build a *la rtse*.' At that time I was a child. They say that when the seventh month came, he [A-lags Rdzong-dkar] came again and built the *la rtse*."[9]

Pleased by the fragrant smoke, A-myes Brag-dkar was attracted from a distance of about sixty miles to the new dwelling mountain, situated, this time, at equal distance between the two tribes.

The three narrators recalled not only the building of the *la rtse* and the fumigation ritual performed by A-lags Rdzong-dkar but also the manifestation of good omens such as a sudden snowfall, a rainbow that appeared from the mountain peak, and a water spring that emerged from the ground. These details are given from the eyewitness perspective of the narrator and are presented to the audience as persuasive evidence in the narration. The empirical evidence of these phenomena is agreed upon in the act of communication with the audience, which is recep-

tive and accepts it as valid. Zla-ba said, "When A-lags Rdzong-dkar and I, the two of us were sitting down, because it was intensively snowing, from inside the mountain itself the sun rose; a rainbow appeared; inside the mountain, a rainbow appeared from the peak."[10]

The narration continues with Ye-shes saying,

> Now I am old, at that time A-lags Rdzong-dkar built the *la rtse* of Brag-dkar. Inside the *la rtse* he placed A-myes Brag-dkar. There are many ways of saying, many stories. I don't know them clearly; they are all things I heard. However, I saw this one in person. I was a child, but I still remember it clearly now. That day when they built the *la rtse*, it suddenly snowed and because a rainbow appeared, many good omens manifested. The thoughts and consciousness of elders were very joyful. Some [say] it was the blessing of A-myes Brag-dkar, while calling A-myes Brag-dkar with a loud voice, some [say] it was the blessing of A-lags Rdzong-dkar. I forgot what they said. That day from the peak of the mountain a water spring started flowing and people carried water from the mountain peak with teapots. It was like that. After that, A-myes Brag-dkar settled down as our protector deity.[11]

After these extraordinary events, the conflicts between Khe-ri'i khyi-lnga and Klu-tshang were solved and both tribes were grateful to A-mye Brag-dkar.

The accumulated hatred between the two tribes finds a ritual solution with the building of the *la rtse* and the moving of the local deity A-myes Brag-dkar. Mountains and their dwelling deities are conceived as emblematic centers around which the surrounding landscape and its inhabitants are arranged. The movement of mountain deities involves the creation of new centers that are empowered by their presence (Buffetrille 1996, 77–90). The relocation of A-myes Brag-dkar to a place equidistant from the pastures of Khe-ri'i khyi-lnga and Klu-tshang granted a rebalance in the power relations between the two groups. Although the major historical events of that time stand in the background and do not emerge in the narration, the narrators acknowledge that the mountain deity successfully mediated the conflict and ensured the protection of the communities under his jurisdiction. Like in the previous case, this is presented to the audience as an empirical truth that the narrators directly witnessed.

The *la rtse* was set in 1957; therefore, it inevitably recalls direct memories and experiences of the Great Leap Forward (1958–61), which are often too painful to be directly recounted (Makley 2005, 45–46). The introduction of collectivization reforms had devastating consequences on agricultural production in the PRC, causing one of the world's worst famines in the twentieth century. In Amdo the year 1958 is a chronological and political turning point that is remembered as being even worse than, or at least an anticipation of, the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) (Yang 2012).

Nevertheless, the political circumstances are not totally absent but are subtly embedded in autobiographic memories that indicate the tension with the political events that at the time were unfolding and gradually intruding into Tibetans' lives. For example, Ye-shes talks about the white conch-shell used by A-lags Rdzong-dkar. He said that, "After the Great Cultural Revolution arrived, we couldn't

perform the *la rtse* ritual. The white conch-shell of A-lags Rdzong-dkar also disappeared; this white conch-shell was taken away by the [Chinese] state during the Great Cultural Revolution. Previously, in order to ask for blessing, if the sound of that white conch-shell [was heard] three times, A-myes Brag-dkar would arrive."[12] This object becomes the silent epitome of political and social changes that happened in Rdo-lung. The democratic reforms in the 1950s, the Great Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, and the omitted "normalization" and revival of religious activities in the 1980s lose their specific temporal coordinates and conflate into a single stretch of narration.

Sgrung narrative is built through a dialogue among genres that exploits verbal strategies to bring the narrator's voice closer or farther from the narration. On the one side, he/she reports what he/she heard as indirectly acquired knowledge; on the other side, he/she places himself/herself as agent in the narrated story: these two extremes are negotiated in the narration through expressions that manifest the detachment from taking responsibility for the reliability of what is recounted, the most common ones being *bshad tshul mang gi* and *bshad rgyun mang gi* (there are many ways of saying). This attitude is also clearly expressed in the opening by the three narrators. Nyi-ma said: "I don't know clearly the history of A-myes Brag-dkar, however, there are many ways of saying, many *sgrung*. Old men don't know [much], these are just the thoughts of old men."[13] In a rather similar fashion, Ye-shes marked the limits of his narration by confronting it with the legitimate truth and authority of national histories: "All that I said is just stories, just tales; it is not like telling the history of India or China, all that I said is just (oral) stories."[14] Lastly, Zla-ba also stressed the unreliability of these orally transmitted stories that he just heard. He kept repeating: "This is an oral story, a spoken story, no one knows whether it is true history or not; this is what we heard, this is an oral story that we old people [tell]."[15]

The narrators rely on the instrumental use of "gaps" (Briggs and Bauman 1992, 148) to operate a transformational process of genre within the same text. The narration about the movement of A-myes Brag-dkar into the valley of Rdo-lung is a clear example of the intertextuality of *lo rgyus* and *sgrung*. Genre shifts to the point that the listener is not sure whether he is supposed to interpret the narrative. However, by formally categorizing their narrations as *sgrung* and by emphasizing oral transmission as an indication of the unreliability of autobiographic *sgrung*, the narrators express their meta-judgments about the history genre as a prerogative of national history that they are interdicted from accessing. The lack of explicit historical contextualization of one's individual memories and the rather neutral tone of the narrative could suggest that, "presumably, the context is regarded as common knowledge which does not need further explanation" (Erhard 2013, 110). However, it can also originate from the distance the narrators perceive from the history genre. This co-occurrence pushes the narrators to avoid venturing in the narration of grand historical events and to dismiss the narration of their autobiographic experiences as "just stories."[16]

The performance of the *la rtse* ritual serves as the triggering event for narrating the *sgrung* and provides a frame for articulating and reframing local historical

events, like the past tension between the two tribes in the 1950s, which would otherwise remain an unknown piece of local history. The selection of what pieces of narratives can be qualified as *lo rgyus* is operated by the master narrative of the state, which silences, or at best marginalizes, the expression of alternative Tibetan histories. This is the case for many fragmented narrations that are often the only accessible source to shed light on local histories in Amdo for the years before and after the launching of the Great Leap Forward in 1958, which marked the rupture with the past order of Tibetan society and the acceleration of its forced inclusion in the new-born Chinese nation-state.

The insistence on qualifying personally witnessed events as *sgrung* sets the margins of a safer space that is not sanctioned with the authority of the state. Yet, the narrators display a great ability to incorporate different genres and exploit intertextual gaps to supplement *sgrung* with different sources of authority that legitimize the narration. The three narrators embedded the ritual within the *sgrung* by directly inserting the recitation of the oral *bsang mchod*[17] of A-myes Brag-dkar:

> Kyee! In the palace of the snow mountain
> To conquer the thundering enemies and obstructers
> Great powerful *nag phyogs dgra lha*
> Old Rock Brag-dkar with the retinues
>   Receive these smoke and fire offerings
>   That fill all over the sky, the earth, and the middle space!
> Protect the Teachings of Buddha!
> Make sentient beings happy and prosperous!
> Drive away from us and the livestock sickness, evil influences, and obstacles!
> Increase lifespan and spread the wind horse!
> Accomplish any object of thought!
>   Rule over the sentient beings of the three worlds!
>   Destroy enemies and obstructers of the three realms into irreducible parts!
>   In brief, entrust all actions,
> Quickly accomplish all the spiritual acts![18]

In the context of this *sgrung* narration, the ritual text is a transposition of the ritual into a verbal expression that contributes to the intertextual shaping of authority in the narration. Its sudden introduction reflects a hybrid coexistence of form and content: prose and verse, individual creativity of the *sgrung*, and shared experience of the *la rtse* ritual. This interplay of genres within one narration happens in the act of communication with the audience and confirms the definition of *sgrung* as an intertextual genre. From the formal-structural point of view, this interchange of prose and verse is observable in the much longer *sgrung* of Gesar, wherein the alternation between prose and verse vivifies the narration and helps its memorization.

The oral *bsang mchod* is further imbued with the authority of A-lags Rdzong-dkar, the protagonist of the ritual, the respected religious authority, who is a protagonist in the story and to whom the authorship of the *bsang mchod* is ascribed. Nyi-ma told:

> When I was a child, I believed in A-myes Brag-dkar. Formerly, A-myes Brag-dkar was the protector of an evil mountain; afterward, I also know that A-lags Rdzong-dkar brought him closer. A-myes Brag-dkar used to dwell on a mountain in the area of Mang-ra, A-lags Rdzong-dkar brought him to the mountain in this place. This *bsang mchod* is the *bsang mchod* of A-lags Rdzong-dkar. A-lags Rdzong-dkar passed away ten years ago. His native place was Hor (in western Rtse-khog County); he was a lama without equivalent in Khe-ri'i khyi-lnga; we two were friends.[19]

Despite the fact that texts like this *bsang mchod* are characterized by a rigid and repetitive structure, a high degree of semantic similarity, and a suspension of the timeframe, they also stand for the authority of their author. Rather than being just decontextualized and immutable expressions of a tradition inherited from the past, rituals are reinterpreted to communicate alternative authoritative truths in the contemporary socio-cultural and political environment.

When Tibetan narrators choose to fully integrate these verses, not indispensable to the plot of their story, within *sgrung*, they are validating the content of their prose part and empowering it with the authority of the *bsang mchod* and its author in the specific context of the narration. If the community entrust rituals, their religious performers, and their textual sources with authority, individual laic narrators borrow and reflect it into their narrations in order to claim the same credibility. Rather than suggesting a fracture with the past, new contents take shape within the traditional form of a ritual text and simultaneously affirm continuity and innovation.

Genre classification and sources of authority

Since there is no exact correspondence between texts and genres, the genre attribution of a text is the outcome of a context-dependent process of negotiation with other texts and genres. In contemporary storytelling in this Amdo community, *sgrung* and *lo rgyus* are not in dichotomous opposition. Instead, in response to the state monopoly over history, they have become increasingly closer intertextual genres that express different sources of authority.

The narrator and audience together shape both the production and the reception of *sgrung*. In the narrating process, intertextual gaps articulate the proximity to one genre or the other and characterize the power relations between the narrator and the audience as a dialogic process that is based on a common understanding of truthfulness and authority. In telling their version of events and making a claim on truthfulness, instead of bearing responsibility alone, the narrators call on the authority of a community-shared ritual. The integration of a ritual text in verses within a prose narration testifies to the fact that the narrator seeks a source of authority to grant legitimacy and reliability to the narration, though this was originally only a contextual element to his/her autobiographic narrative.

In analyzing the power relations that join the dominant and the subjected in the act of communication, Pierre Bourdieu (1991, 116) pointed out, "the symbolic efficacy of words is exercised only in so far as the person subjected to it recognizes the person who exercises it as authorized to do so or, what amounts to the

same thing, only in so far as he fails to realize that, in *submitting to it*, he himself has contributed, through his recognition, to its establishment." However, in the extracts that were presented the narrators effectively voice alternative versions of the past that engage with but do not submit to the state-monopolized historiography or *lo rgyus*. By choosing instead the label of *sgrung* for autobiographic pieces of narrative, they secure an independent space of expression for neglected and deleted pieces of history. In doing so, they submit their narration of the past to an alternative hierarchy of genres that highlights community values and disregards the endorsement of the state.

Until the establishment of the PRC, the narrative format has been the most relevant common feature between *sgrung* and *lo rgyus*, whereas adherence to scientific-objective truth only became a trait of distinction with the advent of state-led history writing. In the present political arrangement, the historical narrative of the state claims exclusive authority, whereas *sgrung* is dismissed as mere stories. However, *sgrung* de facto guarantees a venue for alternative Tibetan histories that draw authority from other sources and contextually challenge official history writing in post-Mao China.

Author

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Notes

1. Contemporary trends in narrative research benefitted from the contributions of both the humanist and the poststructuralist traditions in treating narratives as models of resistance to existing structures of power (Andrews, Squire, and Tamboukou 2008, 4).

2. Since the time of the Aristotelian theorization of genres—based on Plato's earlier reflections on poetry as *mimesis*—Western genre labels and their respective definitions have been developed, disputed, and partially standardized in literary studies, linguistics, folkloristics, and related disciplines.

3. *Lha sgrung* is itself a loanword of recent introduction into Tibetan, translated from the Chinese *shenhua* to render the genre label "myth," which traditionally was not identified as an independent genre from *sgrung*.

4. *La rtse* is a ritual cairn erected on the top or in the proximity of those mountains considered to be the abodes of territorial gods. Since different villages might share the worship of the same territorial god but still erect their own *la rtse*, there is no exact correspondence between the number of territorial gods in Amdo and that of *latse*. The preparation of the appropriate site to build a *latse* requires geomantic calculations and the performance of ritual actions involving the excavation of an ideal palace for the territorial god, symbolically represented by a square hole in the soil, covered on the top with tree branches. In order to preserve the inviolability and invisibility of this innermost part, a conic-like structure of wooden poles, prayer flags, and arrows is erected around it.

5. I wish to express my gratitude to my two anonymous Tibetan friends who accompanied me during the half-day trek to the site of the *la rtse*. Their encouragement made the effort more bearable and the journey more joyful. I had previously been several times in this area between 2010 and 2014, while carrying out fieldwork for my PhD. However, it was only in the summer of 2014 that I was finally allowed by the same interviewees, being respected elder members in Rdo-lung, to walk up to the *la rtse* site. As is the case in most places in Amdo, men almost always attend the *la rtse* annual ritual exclusively.

I am also deeply thankful to the three elders who shared their stories with me. People in Rdo-lung indicated them to be knowledgeable in local history and local lore, and I received their explicit consent to report our conversations. I had informal conversations with them in the courtyard of a household, where they were present at the same time and therefore could listen and react to each other's stories. After responding to a few of my general questions about the theogony of A-myes Brag-dkar, each narration unfolded in a rather independent flow. However, in order to protect their privacy, all the mentioned names are pseudonyms. I am fully responsible for the translation into English and for the interpretation of this material, which might not reflect their views. The recordings have been transcribed and textualized in Tibetan and, for the sake of improving comprehension, certain spoken expressions, typical of Amdo dialect, have been rendered in more standard written Tibetan.

6. The expression "old society" (*spyi tshogs rnying ba*) is politically connoted. It refers to the pre-Communist "feudal" society as a conceptual opposition to the "new society" (*spyi tshogs gsar ba*) of post-1949 China.

7. *sngon chad spyi tshogs rnying ba'i skabs su Klu-tshang ra nga tsho'i bar du mi sha brgyad dgu zhig yod/ phar la bsad/ tshur la bsad nas mi sha de mo mang bo zhig yod/ bzhi bcu zhe dgu lor/ ma red/ nga bdun lor/ nga tsho'i sa khul 'di nas nga tshos piar Klu-tshang gi mi gsum bsad thal/ da lta lo lnga bcu 'gor ba red/ da ngas gsal bo zhig mi dran/ yin na ra na ning spyi lo go lnga go drug yar mar la nged sde ba gnyis kyis sngon chad kyi mi sha de la bshags pa brgyab nas 'grigs mthun go/ mi sha de lo bzhi bcu lnga bcu lhag 'gor yang mthun sgril la gnod gi zer nas nga tsho'i sde ba lo lon rnams la bshad/ nga tsho'i sde ba'i rgad po rnams kyis yang de bden gi zer//*

8. *la rtse bstod sa der deng ma chu 'phen sgang zer/ dus skabs de chu 'phen sgang zer gi/ chu 'phen sgang nas la rtse brtsigs nar mo/ chu 'phen sgang zer gi de'i sngon na yang mying zig yod gi da de'i sngon na dge bsnyen rdo ri nag po zer gi/ da lo rgyangs gi da drug pa'i bco lngar bstod gi yod gi/ a lags rdzong dkar tshang gi A-myes Brag-dkar Rdo-lung 'di la bkod/ A-lags Rdzong-dkar bsang zhig phul nas/ phar phyogs brag dkar gyi phyogs su 'then song/ de nas Brag-dkar tshur bkod de bsten pa red/ A-lags Rdzong-dkar gyis la rtse bstod de pho brang brtsigs pa red/ a myes brag dkar bsten dgos gyi rgyu mtshan ngas ci bshad na/ nga tsho dang klu tshang gnyis ma 'grig pas nga tsho'i mi 'ga' bsad song//*

9. *nga lo bcu gcig yin dus/ A-lags Rdzong-dkar gnas 'dir slebs pa red/ da spyi lo nga drug nga bdun gyi bar/ red/ nga de dus byis pa red/ nga drug lo red/ bar gan nas a lags rdzong dkar gis da khyod tsho la gzhi bdag btsan po zhig yon na yag gi ngas khyod tsho la rtse zhig la bstod/ da skabs der byis pa red/ zla bdun pa thon na khong tshang phyir yong nas la rtse bstod gsungs ki/ nga byis pa red//*

10. *nga dang A-lags Rdzong-dkar kher mo nyi ma gnam babs bas bsdad yod dus/ nyi ma shar ri rang gi nang nas 'ja' shar red/ ri rang nga 'ja' gzig mgo 'di nas shar//*

11. *da nga rgan la song/ de dus A-lags Rdzong-dkar gyis Brag-dkar la rtse bstod gyi yin/ la rtse nang du a myes brag dkar bkod kyin yin zer nas/ bshad rgyun mang gi ngas gsal bo zhig mi shes kyi/ tshang ma go thos tsham red/ 'di nga rang bltas myong/ nga byis pa yin na ra da dung gsal bo dran gi/ nyin der la rtse bstod dus glo bur du kha ba babs/ da rung 'ja' shar nas rtags rten 'brel ya mtshan pa mang bo bstan song/ rgad po bsam shes rnams dga' drags nas/ la las de ni A-myes Brag-dkar gyi byin brlabs red zer nas/ skad chen pos A-myes Brag-dkar zhes 'bod kyin la las a lags rdzong dkar tshang gi byin brlabs red zer/ ngas da rung bshad rgyu brjed/ nyin der ri rtse nas chu mgo brdol byung/ mis ja ma rnams kyis ri rtse nas chu 'khur ma dgos/ da de mo red/ de nas A-myes Brag-dkar nga tsho'i gzhi bdag la bkod pa red//*

12. *da rig gnas gsar brje chen po thon btang zig de nas da nga tsho la rtse bstod ma thub gi/ da A-lags Rdzong-dkar gyi dung dkar ra med gi/ dung dkar 'di rig gnas gsar brje'i nang na rgyal khab gis khyer song ni red/ sngon la dung dkar de byin rlabs brgyab be dung gi skad gsum thongs na A-myes Brag-dkar thon dgos//*

13. *A-myes Brag-dkar gyi lo rgyus 'di ngas gsal bo zhig bshad mi shes/ bshad rgyun mang yod/ sgrung mang yod/ sgrung mang yod/ da rgad po lo lon de mo mi shes ki/ da rgad po'i bsam tshul de mo red//*

14. *ngas bshad pa tshang ma ngag rgyun red/ sgrung red/ stod rgya gar gyi lo rgyus dang/ smad rgya nag gi lo rgyus bshad pa de mo ma red/ ngas bshad pa tshang ma ngag rgyun red/ sgrung red/ stod rgya gar gyi lo rgyus dang/ smad rgya nag gi lo rgyus bshad pa de mo ma red/ ngas bshad pa tshang ma ngag rgyun red//*

15. *da 'di kha rgyun red/ bshad rgyun red/ ngo ma lo rgyus yin min sus ra shes ni ma red go/ rna thos yin na de mo zig yod gi/ lo lon bzo'i bshad rgyun yin//*

16. In the context of having their *sgrung* recorded the narrators might have also anticipated a potential gap between their epistemic stand and mine. This might have contributed to their reluctance to qualify as historical their autobiographical experiences.

17. *Bsang mchod*s are auspicious texts that accompany the offering of barley, juniper fumigation, alcohol, yoghurt, and occasionally meat to invoke the benevolent intervention of territorial gods in human matters. When a written text of the *bsang mchod* exists, its length varies from a few lines to more than ten folios.

18. *Kyee// gangs dkar lhun po pho brang nas// dgra bgegs chen la pham pa'i phyir// nag phyogs dgra lha mthu po che// rdza rgan brag dkar 'khor bcas kyi// gnam sa bar snang khyon gang ba'i// bsang gsur mchod pa 'di bzhes la// rgyal ba'i bstan pa srung ba dang// 'gro la bde skyid ldan gyur cig// bdag cag mi nor 'khor bcas kyi// nad gdon bar chad bzlog pa dang// tshe bsod dpal 'byor rlung rta dar// bsam pa'i don rnams myur 'grub mdzod// khams gsum skye 'gro dbang du bsdus// sa gsum dgra bgegs rdul du rlogs// mdor na bcol ba'i las kun rnams// myur du 'grub pa'i 'phrin las mdzod//*

19. *nga byis pa yin dus A-myes Brag-dkar la bsten pa red/ sngon chad a myes brag dkar ri ngan gyi gzhi bdag red/ rjes su A-lags Rdzong-dkar gyi tshur bkod pa de ngas ra shes ki/ A-myes Brag-dkar Mang-ra phyogs kyi gnas ri de ru yod pa A-lags tshang gyis gnas 'di'i gnas rir bkod pa red/ 'di A-lags Rdzong-dkar gyi bsang mchod red/ da lta A-lags Rdzong-dkar tshang sku gshegs nas lo bcu lhag 'gor song/ khong tshang gi sku yul hor phyogs nas red/ nged Ke-ri'i khyi-lnga'i bla ma dpe med pa zhig red/ bla ma dang nged gnyis na zla yin//*

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