

**SALC 25200 Intro to Tibetan Literature**  
**Week 6:**  
**Folk Tales in Tibet**

*Tricksters, Mad-men,  
and Corpses, oh my!*

# Tricksters in Folklore and Literature

*What other trickster figures are you familiar with from folklore?*

*What roles do these trickster figures play for each of these narratives?*



# The Coyote in Native American folktales

# *Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby*



[http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/brer\\_rabbit\\_meets\\_a\\_tar\\_baby.html](http://americanfolklore.net/folklore/2010/07/brer_rabbit_meets_a_tar_baby.html)

# Puck in English Literature



Illustration from the title page of *Robin Goodfellow: His Mad Pranks and Merry Jests* (1629)



*Oberon, Titania en Puck with Fairies Dancing*, William Blake, ca. 1785



# Loki in Norse mythology



Loki, from an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript



Tom Hiddleston as the Loki from the movie adaptations of the *Thor* comic series

See *Lokasenna* (Loki's Wrangling), English translation  
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/poe10.htm>



*What features do the tricksters in these (and other) folk tales have in common?*

*What might be the appeal of a trickster figure? Why are they so popular in folk tales, literature, movies, etc.?*

*How does the concept of a “compassionate trickster” differ from the other trickster figures discussed so far?*

*Recall:*

“Compassionate Trickster: The Buddha as a Literary Character in the Narratives of Early Indian Buddhism” by Sara L. McClintock



## The Story of Nyichö Zangpo (Nyi chos bzang po)

[Once upon a time] there was an evil king called the King of Nedong. He had a clever minister called Nyichö Zangpo. Once, when they were about to celebrate the new year, he told the other ministers that he would be able to make the king bark on New Year's Eve. The ministers answered that it was impossible that the king would bark. On the first day of the new year, in the morning, Nyichö Zangpo [went to the king] and said, "Your majesty [Precious King], at the doors of the palace somebody is selling a watchdog. The dog has an extraordinary bark, *tsik, tsik, tsik*. If we purchased it and chained it to the doors of the palace, it would be most impressive." The king answered. "Stupid! Such a bark is not impressive!" Then, kneeling on the throne and placing his hands on the table, the king said: "*Boong, boong, boong* — now that is what an impressive bark should be like."

From *Manual of Standard Tibetan*, p. 304

# Nyichö Zangpo, minister to King of Nedong

- His stories are passed along through oral tradition in the Lhoka region, majority of which are set in Nedong.
- Shrewd minister of the tyrannical king of Nedong who is stupid, conceited, and reigns over his people with injustice and cruelty.
- Nyichö plays tricks to ridicule the king.
- His exploits are often salacious (not unlike Akhu Tönpa) but always full of humour.
- Few of these stories have been published so far.
- Some Tibetan scholars (Kalsang Khedup and Dorje Dewatshang) believe Nyicho to be the same as Akhu Tonpa.
- Others, such as Sangda Dorje who has collected and published Akhu Tönpa stories believes them to be separate trickster figures.

For more, see “The Long Voyage of a Trickster Story from Greece to Tibet” by Giacomella Orofino

## The Teacher's Momos

A long time ago there was a teacher who had three students. He would cook at least seven meat momos to fill his own belly [but no more]. In this way he would fix momos day after day, without giving any to the three students. One day, when he was making momos, one student said, “The teacher is going to fix today’s momos, but he isn’t going to eat them—I’m going to steal them.” The second student said, “If you’re able to steal from that stingy teacher’s hands, then among us two, who will have permission to get the meat and buttered food stuff, we’ll give it to you.” Saying this, the three students made a pledge.

That day, the momo meal was offered before the Teacher. Together the three students approached the Teacher and indicated they had something to say by scratching their heads and extending their tongues. Because of that, the Teacher said to his students, “What would you like to say?” One student replied “The other day it was raining in the upper part of the valley, so from underneath the corner of the house, flood waters had deposited some stuff —silver and gold and a large pot’s worth of white Tamka! ” Teacher said, “And?..” At the same time, he gave a momo to him. When he had finished eating that momo, he said, “I heard this one papa say ‘Why not give all of it to Teacher ... ?’” When he said this, the Teacher again gave him a momo. He asked “And?..” again, and so the student continued “I heard the mother say: ‘Alright then, it’s ok by me if we give half to the Teacher. Although he’s a greatly kind teacher, he stays at home a bit [too much], he can act a bit like a child going around ’” When he said this, again [the Teacher] gave a momo to him. After that, [the student relayed the words of] all the sons and daughters who spoke just like their mom. [One by one] the Teacher gave all the momos to this student. Because that teacher chose to be content with that reason, [the student] went on explaining and explaining. After the student had finished eating all the momos, he then, said “Early this morning from me, the momos were consumed/today my karma was exhausted.”[Note: This is a Tibetan play on words. One sentence had double meanings!] Thus that day the teacher did not get even one single momo.

# A “Compassionate Trickster”

*How does the concept of a “compassionate trickster” differ from the other trickster figures discussed so far?*

*Is Akhu Tönpa a compassionate trickster?*

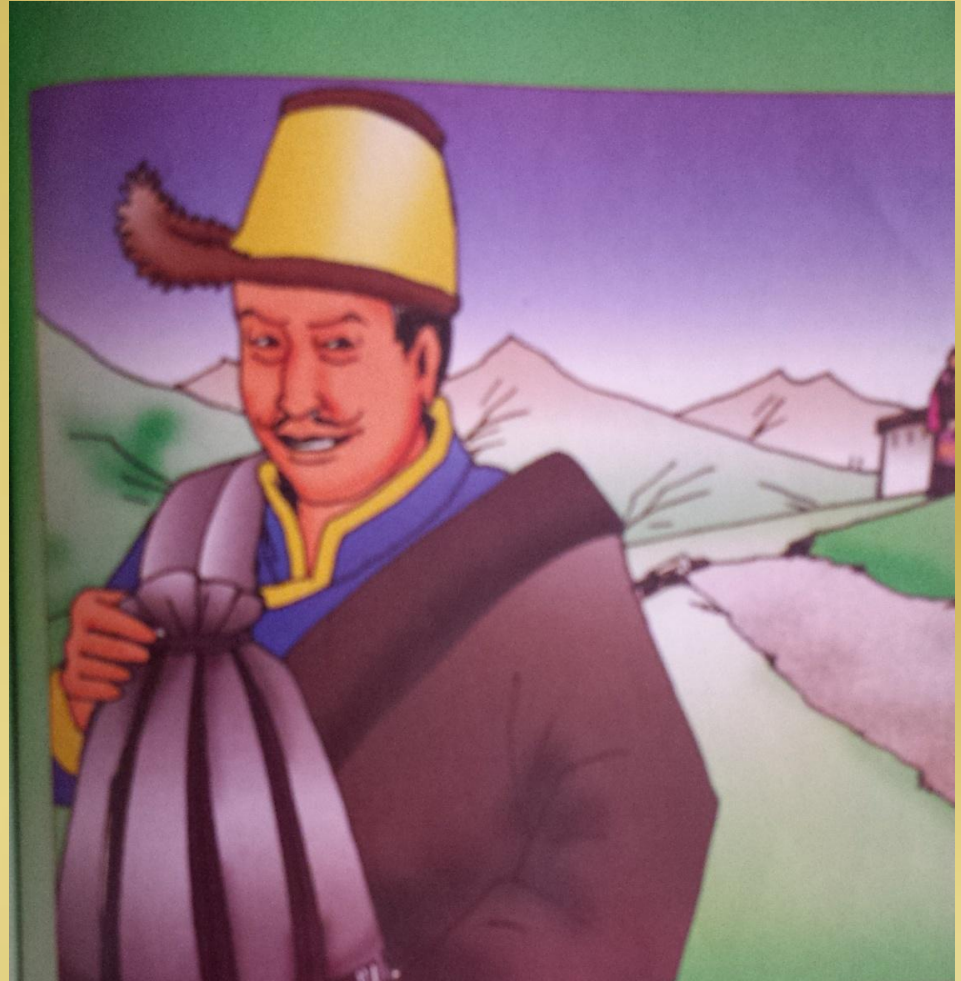


# Who is Akhu Tönpa?

- Some scholars believe him to be identical with Nyichö Zangpo.

- The Tibetan Drigung Kagyü master Rasé Chok Gyatso speculated (based on Kagyü textual sources) that:

- He was a 13<sup>th</sup> century exponent of the Drigung Kagyü school
- and disciple of Drigung Chän nga Drakpa Jungné



**A survey of 53 Tibetan students from Yul shul, Mgo log, Rma Iho, Mtsho byang, Mtsho Iho, and Mtsho nub prefectures studying at Qinghai Education College in Xining in the early 1990s revealed:**

- **All the students had heard Akhu Tempa stories**
- 33 students had heard Afanti stories,
- 3 students had heard Dran gsal stories
- 2 students had heard Sgyu ma mkhan spun drug stories,
- 2 students had heard Ge sar stories,
- 1 student had heard Rgyal po bu mo stories
- 1 student had heard Srid pa rgan po stories,
- 1 student had heard Cham pa spun gsum stories,
- 1 student had heard Mi rgan long ba stories,
- 1 student had heard Rgyal sras gnyis stories,
- 1 student had heard Khyam tshe snga lo stories,
- 1 student had heard Aa rig glen pa stories,
- 1 student had heard Heb rkyal dang rdzun Rkyal stories
- **1 student had heard Nyi chos bzang bo stories**

See Kun mchog dge legs, Dpal ldan bkra shis, and Stuart K. 1999. "Tibetan tricksters." Asian Folklore Studies 58 (1) 5-30.

# Tricksters and Mad-men

*What features do Tibetan tricksters share in common with other trickster figures?*

*What distinguishes them?*

*How does the concept of a Tibetan ‘trickster’ differ (if it does) from the concept of “mad-man” or nyönpa, from our discussion on Milarepa and the Tibetan lay tantric tradition originating from Tilopa (in India)?*

*Are Tibetan tricksters “compassionate tricksters” or are they of a different type?*

**At least two distinct and seemingly  
contradictory themes identified in Akhu  
Tonpa stories:**

- The advocate for justice, who uproots social oppression and subdues landlords and tyrants.
- And a clever swindler who is also destructive towards religion

*What other themes can you identify in Akhu  
Tönpa and other Tibetan trickster stories?*



# Corpse-tricksters?

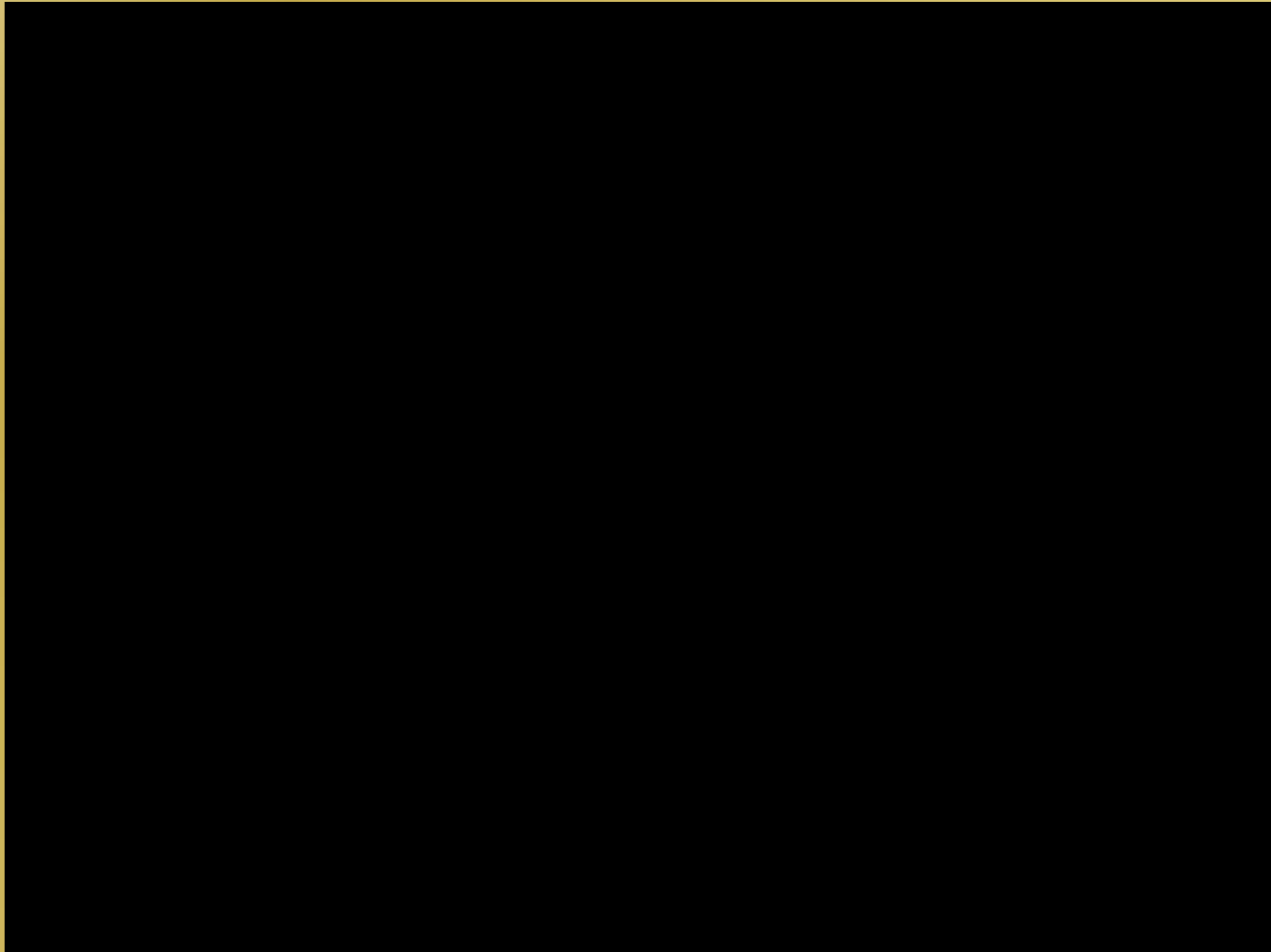
## The 25 Stories of the Magic Corpse / Corpse Stories / Stories of the Golden Corpse



From Wayne Schlepp, “Cinderella in Tibet”

### Frame story

- Prince Dechö Zangpo becomes a disciple of Nagarjuna, founder of the Madhyamika school of Buddhism, and is set the task of obtaining a magic corpse which, it is alleged, will bring about the salvation of the world.
- Proscriptions to not utter a single word as he carries the corpse away from the cemetery.
- The corpse is at pains to escape and so tells marvelous stories, the endings of which invariably bring a remark of surprise or admiration from the prince whereupon the corpse breaks his bonds and flies away each time.



Taken from the 'intermission' in a Chams (monastic dance) performance in  
Sakti (Leh, Ladakh ) July 19, 2013 --recorded by Erin Epperson (1:25)

*Next class:*

*Stories of the Golden Corpse and  
other Folk literature in Tibet*