

ACTTIL 14A1 - Tibetan Literature

Week 7:

Folk Tales in Tibet

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

Recap of Women in Literature week

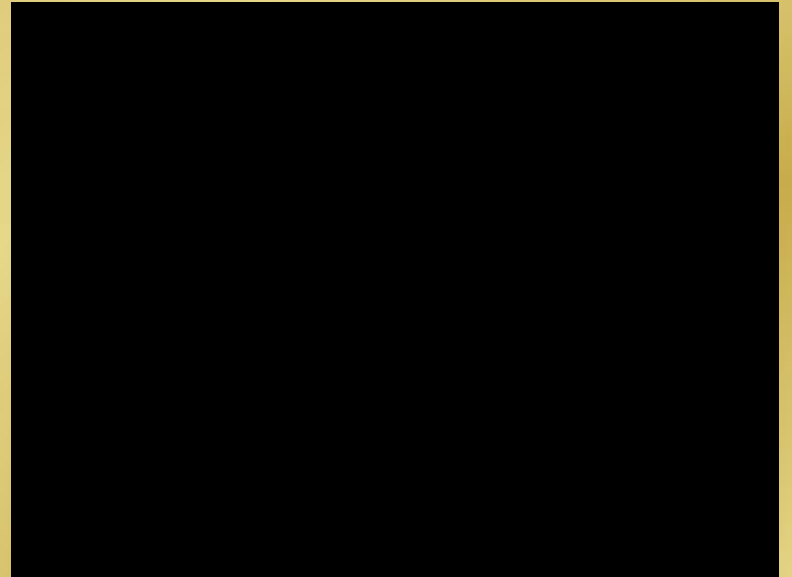
Alternate ‘careers’ for women in modern Tibet?

- **Female Oracles:** the majority of oracles recorded in modern history of Tibet are female (though high-ranking ‘important’ oracles tend to be male).
- **Female physicians:** although academic institutions administered by the Tibetan government were set up for males (including that of the traditional medicine institution ‘Men-tsi-khang’), female physicians were quite prominent in pre-1959 Tibet. Educational opportunities for medicine expanded in exile and in post-1959 Tibet.
- **Performing arts:** especially in the modern period, performing arts has become a popular vocation for women

Performing arts in Tibet

- “separate expressive spheres” for men and women in traditional Tibetan performing arts: body language, costume, behavior, assertiveness
(cf Ellen Koskoff 1989:10)
- ‘Street’ songs performed by low-literate, often regardless of gender.
- Being a performer was not a mark of status; depending on it for livelihood was!
- Social status dependent not on occupation, but whether it was the primary means of earning money.
- If performance was a side occupation, then (regardless of level of proficiency), they would have a very different social status thus in this respect women’s status was the same as men’s.
- “livelihood from roaming” (*sa-zhing-med-pa*) versus “livelihood from one’s own fields” (*sa-zhing-yod-pa*)

*Compare the following 2013 monastic
cham to a 2009 performance of
traditional song by TIPA...*



Tibetan Women in Performing Arts Today?

From Yarki 2012

Tricksters in Folklore and Literature

What 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

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.?

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 story of *Akhu Tönpa*”

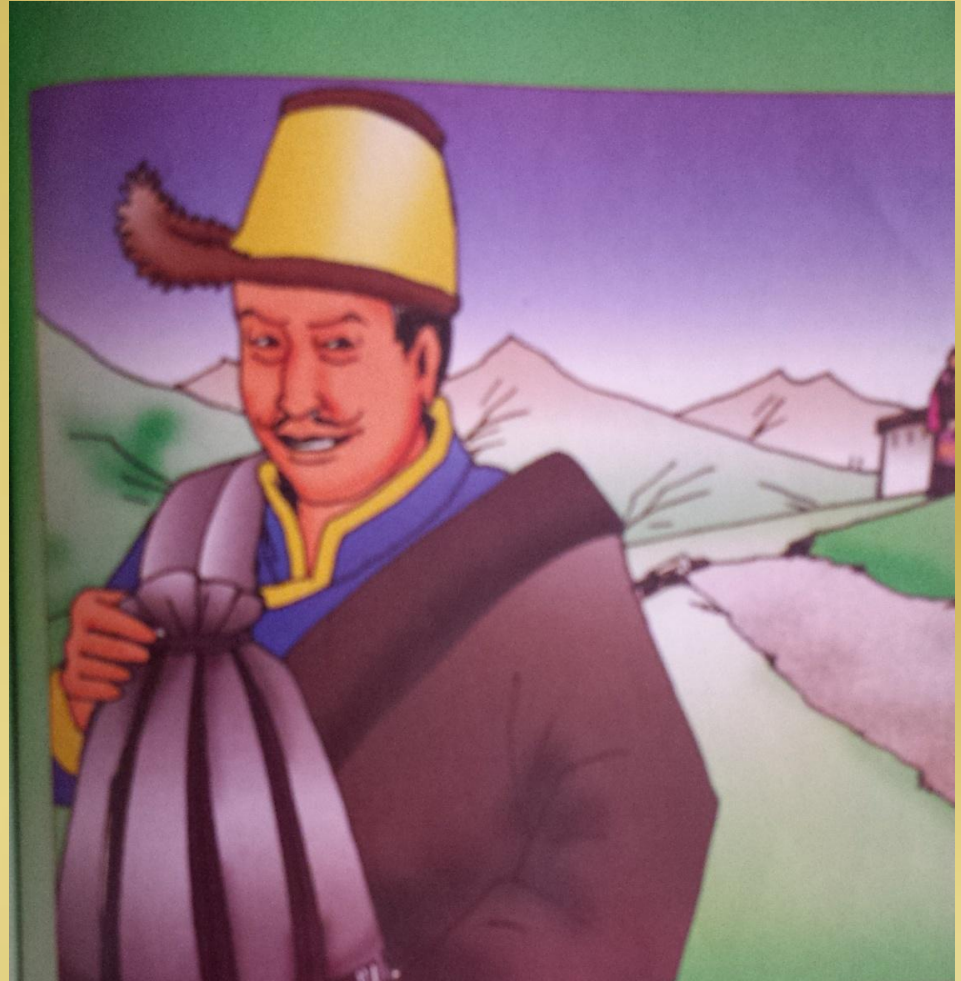
In Akhu Tönpa's valley there was a rich family. The father of this family was bald. Akhu Tönpa thought of a way to fool him. Every day he would pass in front of this family's door on his way to the lower end of the valley. One day the rich man asked him, “Hey, Akhu, why do you go to the lower end of the valley every day?” Akhu answered, “There are a lot of bald people in the lower end of the valley. I have been planting hair on their heads for a few days, but I haven't finished yet.” The rich man thought, “Until today, I've never heard about planting hair on heads. Akhu Tönpa is really clever. It is extraordinary to be able to plant hair. Well that is great!” Then, he asked: “Akhu, please could you plant hair on my head too?” Akhu answered, “Sure I will! I'll come the day after tomorrow.” Two days later, Akhu went to their house and the family served him an excellent meal. After he had eaten, Akhu told the father, “Father, please wash your head while I sharpen the awl.” Then he pulled out a big awl and began to grind it. The father asked Akhu, “Why are you sharpening the awl?” “I plant one hair in each of the spots where I stick the awl in,” he replied. The father got terribly frightened and asked, “If you stick the awl in like that, don't people die?” “Well some die, some recover and some abandon the idea and offer me (as compensation) a pat of butter.” The father of this family said, “I am also going to offer you a pat of butter.” He gave a pat of butter to Akhu, who took it back home with him.

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 13th 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.

**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?

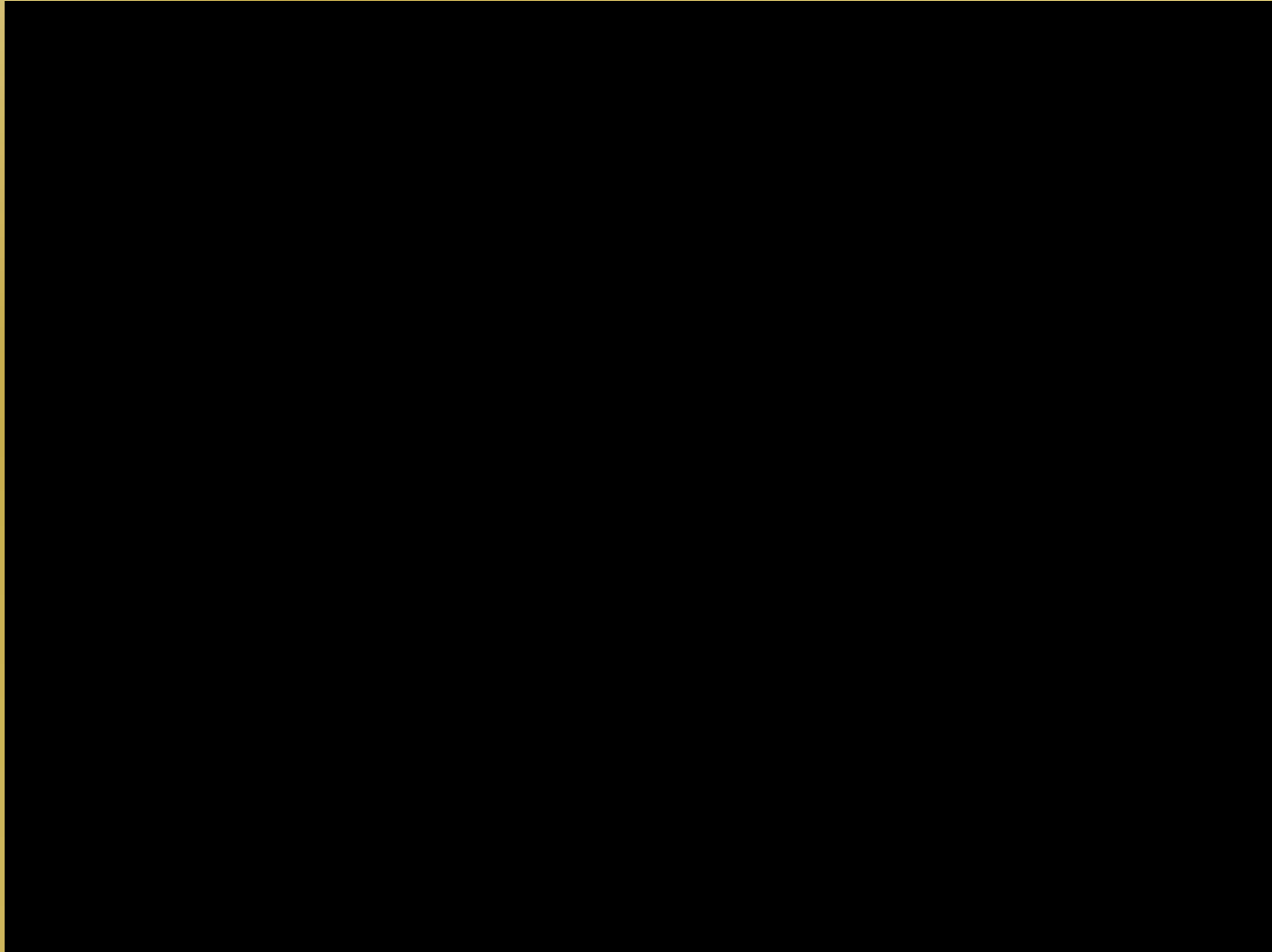
The 25 Stories of the Magic Corpse / Corpse Stories / Stories of the Golden Corpse



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)

***Vetalapañcavimsati* – “The 25 Stories of the Magic Corpse” and other variations of Corpse Stories**

- Repository of tales common to folk traditions among the peoples of Central Asia
- Frame story in which 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.
- In order to do this, the prince must observe strict proscriptions, one of which is not to 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.

From Wayne Schlepp, “Cinderella in Tibet”

Are folktales *myth*? In what way might their function be similar to that of myth?

“A myth is felt to be true whenever it functions in the discourse of a community to ground action that is itself felt to bring about the success of that community or of its individual members. It may thus be said to be true to the extent that it is felt by those who yield to its authority to promote ends that are not self-defeating.”
(Kapstein, 143)

Tibetan Folktales

Do you think the folktales we read for today reflect a 'Buddhist' morality? Why or why not?

What role do you see tricksters occupying within Tibetan stories and literature?

What role do folktales play within culture?