

A Note on Tibetan Mu

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For the cognate set "sky" Bradley (1979:324) reconstructs a Proto-Loloish form *mo². He also compares a related Burmese form mui: "sky". Examples of this type were used by Benedict (1972:148, no. 488) to reconstruct a Proto-Tibeto-Burman form *r-muw ~ *r-mew having the sense "sky, clouds, fog". Written Tibetan (WT)* is represented in Benedict's comparisons by the word rmu-ba "fog". In the present note I wish to draw attention to several more Tibetan words which may be of interest here.

The WT word dmu (variant: rmu) is glossed in Jäschke's dictionary as a "a kind of evil demon". Das' dictionary gives a slightly more detailed gloss: "a malignant spirit, a kind of evil demon that causes dropsy in those on whom his malignant eye falls." The word dmu is in fact an element in several words for edemata, e.g. dmu-chu (chu "water") "dropsy"; dmu-skran (skran "tumor, fleshy excrecence") "edema, tumor". Hoffmann (1950:141) encountered dmu in his investigations on the origins of the Bon religion. He comments, "Von grosser Bedeutung müssen in der alten Zeit die Dmu (auch Rmu, Smu geschrieben) gewesen sein, während sie heute hinter anderen Geistern mehr zurücktreten und fast nur noch in den Namen einer von ihnen gesandten Krankheit fortleben: dem dmu-č'u..." Working at about the same time, Tucci, by close examination of Bon texts was able to throw more light on the nature of the dmu (1949:714): "As demons the dMu are included in the eight classes of the lha sriṅ sde brgyad.... Perhaps some diseases like dropsy were considered to be caused by the dMu.... Even drought is caused by them.... These traditions show therefore that the dMu were a class of beings who may be noxious to men. They did not reside in the subterranean world, but in some heaven. They in fact belong to the steṅ class of beings, viz. to those who stay in high spheres...(emphases added, WSC); in their place there was a lake of molten metal; this was the abode where the deceased went after death with the help of a ladder or a rope. Upon earth there was a class of priests who boasted of having the power to lead the deceased there because they held the ladder or the rope...." Later (op.cit. p. 733), Tucci discusses the descent from heaven of the mythical first king of Tibet. This, he points out, "was accomplished by means of the rope rMu t'ag (thag-pa "rope, cord" WSC) or the ladder rMu skas (skas-ka, skas-pa "ladder" WSC). This was the normal communication between earth and heaven and the means by which the deceased of the nobility, kings, and notables ascended to heaven...." More information on traditional beliefs about the dmu has since been gathered

*Written Tibetan is understood here as the language of literary texts dating from after the orthographic reforms implemented during the reign of Khri-gtsug-lde-brtsan (r. 815-838). The reforms are dated to the period 826-827 by Huang (1981:203 and 232, n. 3) and Wang (1982:9 and 13, n. 23). Old Tibetan (OT) is taken to denote the language of texts written before the reforms.

by de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1956), and his findings bear out those of Tucci. We may add here that the compound rmu-thag is also well known in the alternative spelling dmu-thag and that smu-thag too is attested in the texts.

R.A. Stein (1959) was interested in the word dmu as a tribal name, but he noted clearly (p. 20) that "dmu est aussi une espèce de divinités du ciel." Later he pursued this point further and suggested (p. 64) that the syllables dmu, rmu, etc. have the basic sense "sky". In connection with this hypothesis he cited from Ch'iang languages a number of forms (p. 63, Table) which we would now recognize as probably belonging in Benedict's cognate set no. 488. Stein's idea seems to have gained general acceptance among Tibetologists (cf. for example Hoffmann 1976:95-6). Hoffmann, in fact, translates the term rmu (~dmu)-thag as "sky-rope", echoing Tucci's earlier "heavenly rope" (1949:733).

If we now move beyond WT and into texts of the Old Tibetan (OT) period, we find that the word dmu (variant: rmu), though it does not occur in the early inscriptions, is nonetheless attested in the Dunhuang documents (e.g. Thomas 1957:73, line 266; 75, line 321; Stein 1959:62). It seems to refer to the same sky deities seen in the WT texts. In addition to dmu (~rmu) we also find in Dunhuang texts another interesting term, mu-smān (smān "female spirit, goddess, fay, etc."). In a penetrating study of early Tibetan belief systems A. Macdonald has investigated the occurrences of mu-smān in several Dunhuang documents (1971:274; 291-309; see especially 295-7). In one such text (Fonds Pelliot Tibétain 1047) she found mu-smān co-occurring with gnām-smān (gnām "sky, heaven") in reference to the same supernatural beings. It seems clear that these were sky goddesses, and more recently Stein (1983:201) has in fact referred to Macdonald's finds as "mu-smān ou gnām-smān, 'fées du ciel'". The word gnām-smān survives in WT sources (for examples, see de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1956:181, 200, etc.). Mu-smān seems unknown outside OT texts. It is probable that the syllable mu- of mu-smān means "sky, heaven".

An almost certain survival of this mu- occurs in the WT compound mu-sangs (sangs "purified, clear, cleansed"), a cultic word of the Bon religion, glossed by Das as "the sky (mystical)" (for discussion see Stein 1959:59-60). Possible further examples may occur in the names of certain of the mythical and early historical Tibetan kings, e.g. Mu-khri-btsan-po (mythical); Mu-ne-brtsan-po (r. 797-799 ?), etc. Haarh (1969:139) has suggested that Mu- in the name Mu-khri-btsan-po is a "metaphor" for gnām "heaven".

Let us now summarize our findings. In OT there was a syllable mu-, probably meaning "sky, heaven", which is attested in the compound mu-smān "sky goddess" and perhaps in certain royal names. There was also another word, attested in two forms, dmu and rmu, which was the name of a type of sky deity. It seems possible that dmu ~ rmu were derived from mu- "sky" by prefixation. In the OT lexicon mu- was a peripheral form, a bound-word found only in a very limited number of compounds, in contrast to gnām which was the general word for "sky" and could occur both alone and in compounds (e.g. gnām-sa "heaven and earth"), and to dgung which

occurred in certain specialized phrases and expressions such as dgung-du gshegs "to go to heaven, die" and dgung-dang-'dra-ba "like unto heaven, heavenly", etc. In WT the syllable mu- survives apparently only in mu-sangs, a Bon religious word for "sky", and perhaps also in the royal names. Dmu and rmu, joined by a third form, smu, survive in WT and the folk mythology as the name of a malevolent demon, primarily known as the cause of certain diseases.

In conclusion, I suggest that OT mu- "sky, heaven" be added to Benedict's cognate set no. 488 "sky, etc." as directly comparable to the Burmese and Loloish forms and that OT dmu ~ rmu "sky deities" be appended as possible derivatives of mu-.

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