

# TREE BEINGS IN TIBET: CONTEMPORARY POPULAR CONCEPTS OF *KLU* AND *GNYAN* AS A RESULT OF ECOLOGICAL CHANGE

JAKUB KOCUREK

PhD Student

Institute of Philosophy and Religious Studies

Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague

Náměstí Jana Palacha 2, 116 38 Prague 1, Czech Republic

e-mail: jakoc@volny.cz

## ABSTRACT

The article deals with the perception of trees in Tibet. It focuses on ideas on supernatural beings believed to dwell in trees, particularly *klu* and *gnyan*, which form a part of the popular or so called nameless religion. The study is based on fieldwork undertaken in the Tibetan areas of India and Nepal (the Spiti valley and Dolpo) among people of Dolpo origin living elsewhere and Tibetans in exile from different regions of Tibet. Gathered narratives and reappearing myth patterns are presented and discussed. The findings from the fieldwork are compared with the idea of tree beings found in ritual texts studied by Western scholars. The difference between these two sources are striking: popular traditions associate trees mainly with *klu*, whereas the ritual texts with *gnyan*. To explain the possible cause of this discrepancy, contemporary theories about the ecological history of the Tibetan Plateau are employed.

KEYWORDS: Tibet • religion • popular religion • trees • spirits • *klu* • *gnyan*

## INTRODUCTION

The paper is a preliminary study of tree beings, i.e. beings believed to dwell in trees, in the Tibetan cultural area. The study is based on fieldwork conducted in summer 2012 in the Upper Dolpo region of Nepal and the Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh, India, among Dolpo people living outside Dolpo, as well as exile Tibetans. Although the area selection was partly random, I believe that the concepts examined appear throughout Tibet. I have chosen Dolpo as an example of an archaic and remote region which, also thanks to its Bon heritage, tends to preserve ancient indigenous ideas. On the other hand, Spiti predominantly belongs to the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism.

The main goal of the paper is to examine the relationship between trees and different non-human beings, or perhaps it is better to say 'spirits', inhabiting the world of the Tibetans. Attention has been especially paid to answering the following questions: What kinds of beings are believed to live in trees? How do people recognise their presence in particular trees, and what are the practical consequences of their presence for the people? The paper maps the actual knowledge of these ideas among people, both laymen and religious specialists, householders and monastics. Thus, the paper is not

based on analysing textual sources but on the comparison of accounts gathered in the field and information found in secondary literature, which mainly derives from textual sources. I employ present studies of the ecological history of the Tibetan Plateau to attempt to explain the differences between these two.

## TREE BEINGS

The Tibetan perception that the world is inhabited not only by people, animals and plants, but also by many other usually invisible beings, is three-fold. Thus, it consists of three horizontal spheres or layers, each hosting a certain class of supernatural beings that is either divine or demonic, each layer associated with a particular colour. These layers are:

1. The underground: typically inhabited by aquatic *klu*, the colour of which is blue or white;
2. The surface: inhabited by yellow *gnyan* and red *btsan*;
3. The sky: inhabited by white *lha* (Stein 1972: 203–204; also Karmay 1998: 254).

These beings often appear to be assorted into eight classes, which is, for instance, typical for the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) school of Tibetan Buddhism (Samuel 1993: 161), but has slight variations depending on particular tradition. A list of the most common ten classes, along with brief descriptions, is presented by Geoffrey Samuel (*ibid.*: 162–163). A similar list, accompanied by pictorial depictions, appears in the study by Béla Kelényi (2003: 27–47). René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, analysing also Bon (*bon*) sources, identifies a much greater number of classes and subclasses of these beings (1996: chapters XII for *btsan*, XIV for *gnyan*, XVI for *gnyan, klu, sa bdag*). We can also divide these beings according to their attitude towards human society: positive and welcoming, ambivalent, negative and harmful. The majority of such beings are ambivalent and rather hostile towards people.

According to Philippe Cornu (2002: 248) and Samuel (1996: 162) only the *gnyan*<sup>1</sup> beings, and particularly one subgroups called *shing gnyan* (literally ‘tree *gnyan*’), dwell in trees. Similarly, Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1996: 288–290), reading primary texts, states that trees and forests represent the most typical abodes of the *gnyan* beings. Therefore, we would suppose that the main class of beings associated with trees are the *gnyan*. However, popular traditions of the people’s lived daily reality reveal a completely different picture. Generally speaking, the idea of the *gnyan* and their connection with trees is usually known to religious specialists. Nevertheless, the most common statement of ordinary people on *gnyan* is that they “of course sometimes inhabit trees”. Their trees grow in the mountains, which means that the trees are not physically close to the people, and as a consequence, lay people are usually not aware of them. An informant in Spiti (a teacher in a local village school) when questioned on *gnyan*, talked only about the mountain sheep Argali (*Ovis ammon*). In contrast, a well-educated Bonpo geshe from the Menri (*sman ri*) monastery in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, a native of Upper Dolpo, was able to provide me with much more detailed information.

According to this man, and to all sources known to me and all other informants, there are many kinds of *gnyan* which can be sorted according to their dwelling places:

tree *gnyan* (*shing gnyan*), glacier *gnyan* (*gangs gnyan*) and *gnyan* dwelling in stones and rocks (*rdo gnyan*).<sup>2</sup> Tree *gnyan* outnumber the other groups. *Gnyan* can appear in different animal forms (for instance, yak, sheep) or as humans, and are associated primarily with the colour yellow, especially in their human-like form. Tree *gnyan* dwell in many species of trees. They prefer coniferous trees, particularly pines and junipers, but deciduous trees will do as well. If their tree is cut down, they move to another one and subsequently take revenge on people causing diseases; ulcers and certain cancers are associated with them.

Furthermore, according to the *geshe* of Menri, apart from the *gnyan*, there are other beings inhabiting trees. These are *klu*, and less frequently even *lha*<sup>3</sup> and *btsan*.<sup>4</sup> I should add that the idea of *lha* and *btsan* dwelling in trees is rather new. The *lha* beings residing in trees do so only rarely and have no characteristic appearance. Most often, they give preference particularly to juniper trees (*Juniperus spp.*). In the case of cutting down their tree, they seek another tree to stay in and very seldom die, i.e. they are reborn. The *btsan* beings are usually associated with rocks, especially with rocks of a red colour, but can dwell in trees as well. Their appearance is a red human-like figure, which goes in accordance with the description of Cornu, Samuel and Nebesky-Wojkowitz. The *btsan* also overwhelmingly prefer junipers and if their abode is cut down they take revenge by causing accidents.

There is also another modality of the relationship between trees and such beings. According to the Menri *geshe*, trees can be regarded as a deity's hair or body hair. A similar example is reported by Ulrike Roesler in her study of the Reting (*rwa sgreng*) monastery in Central Tibet. The surroundings of the monastery are enclosed in a forest, a grove of very old and large juniper trees. The forest is regarded as sacred and has been incorporated into the ritual geography of the monastery. According to the local narrative, the trees originally sprouted out as the hair of the monastery's founding figure, Geshe Tonpa (*dge bshes ston pa*). To cut the trees down would mean the trespass of cutting the hair of the master himself (Roesler 2007: 130). Furthermore, in another version of the story, the trees grew from the hair of the first Tibetan Buddhist king Songtsän Gampo (*srong btsan sgam po*) which he cut off and scattered there (ibid.: 135).

By far the most important category of beings associated with trees is the *klu*, to which I shall turn my attention now. The word *klu* is the Tibetan rendering of the Sanskrit term *nāga*, the well known half-man half-snake beings of Indian mythology. These are without doubt of pre-Buddhist origin and often feature in local religious cults. *Nāgas* are associated with water in general, and also with rain and soil. They dwell in rivers, creeks, springs and lakes. In the context of Buddhism, *nāgas* are well known from the legend of the philosopher Nāgarjuna, founder of the Madhyamaka philosophical school. Nāgarjuna paid a visit to the underworld kingdom of the *nāgas* to receive the texts of the *Prajñāpāramitas*, Madhyamaka's founding scriptures. Some scholars (for example, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 290) suppose that Tibetan *klu* were originally indigenous beings that were connected to and later merged with the Indian *nāgas* after the advent of Buddhism. Yet, the origin of *nāgas* and *klu* is out of the scope of this paper. The Tibetan *klu* are likewise either of half-snake and half-human appearance, or can appear as human-like figures that sometimes have a hood consisting of snakes.<sup>5</sup> They are usually of white or blue colour, in rare cases green.<sup>6</sup> As their counterparts in India, the Tibetan *klu* are also linked to water, especially to wells, streams, lakes and rivers. According to my informants, trees along rivers, near wells and springs usually belong to *klu*.

There are several ways to recognise a particular tree inhabited by a *klu*. The tree is often dotted with tiny green spots on the trunk – we could speculate whether these could be algae. Then, according to some informants, almost all juniper trees growing near a water source belong to a *klu* and as such they feature an extraordinary crown shape and needles of a darker colour than other junipers. However, the most common answer to the question of how to recognise a *klu* dwelling in a tree was: “People simply know which trees belong to *klu* and which not.” Secondly, a common idea is that such trees are recognised by a very advanced master who happens to pass through the place. Moreover, he can also acquire this information in a dream. Thirdly, a very common and reliable method of recognition is by using the symptoms of the so-called *klu* disease (*klu nad*). If someone intentionally or unintentionally harms a *klu* tree, he or she is affected by a disease caused by the particular *klu* as revenge. There are many oral accounts of such cases. Displaying offending or impure objects such as drying washed underwear by hanging it on trees belonging to *klu* can insult them and lead to a revenge (Samuel 2007: 215–216). *Klu* are widely known to cause various kinds of skin disease, infection, often leprosy, and the appearance of scars on skin. A typical symptom is the loss of eyebrows. An informant remembered from his childhood an event that happened to him after breaking a branch of tree belonging to a *klu*; and he added he personally knew many similar cases.

Naturally, people have to cope with these problems and place their relationship with the *klu* into balance again. When someone is affected by a *klu* disease in fact the only way to overcome it is to perform a ritual presentation of offerings to the particular *klu* and appease it. Such a ritual is called *klu gtor* (*'klu + scatter [offerings]*’, i.e. sacrificial cakes called *gtor ma* and other offerings presented to *klu*) and is in most cases sufficient for the disease to disappear quickly. The offerings differ according to the kind of *klu* in question, as there are white and black *klu* (*klu dkar po* and *klu nag po*). The former are by far the most common and require only peaceful offerings, typically flowers, curd and, of course, special tormas; in contrast, the latter have to be served with alcohol and meat. The main source containing the manuals for these rituals is – in the Bonpo environment – the Klubum (*klu 'bum*), part of the Bonpo Tānjour (*bstan 'gyur*). The Klubum is a frequently used ritual manual. Marietta Kind<sup>7</sup> mentions another way of curing diseases caused by *klu*, specifically leprosy: the affected person should meditate on garudas (*Garuda*), the principle enemy of the *klu*.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the story recorded by her in Dolpo concerned an advanced lama. Thus, we can suppose that this way is restricted to masters, as none of my informants mentioned such a possibility.

My question on the consequences of the fatal damage of a *klu* tree seemed to my informants very weird. Usually, most people agreed that in such case the *klu* would cause disease for the culprits and seek a new tree, although they were unsure of this. It is evident that people are not interested in such speculations, as they prevent these trees being felled.

*Klu* are often linked to the act of founding a particular establishment, a monastery or a village. There is a repeating pattern of the unity of a *klu*, a spring and a tree. The Lhalung (*lha lung*) monastery of the Geluk (*dge lugs*) school in Spiti valley, Himachal Pradesh provides an example. In front of this small and artistically amazing monastery stands a big old willow tree (*Salix sp.*). The tree is near a spring and lungtas (*rlung rta*), prayer flags inscribed with mantras, are tied to its branches. The tree itself is protected by a



circular stone wall around which leads a short circumambulation path (*kora*, *skor ba*). Needless to say, the tree is evident to be extraordinary at first sight (see Photo 1 and 2). The only local monk residing at the monastery affirmed that both the tree and spring belonged to a *klu* staying there. The origin of the spring can be traced back to master Rinchen Zangpo (*rin chen bzang po*, 995–1055), the great translator and key figure during the second spread of Buddhism in Tibet (*phyi dar*, 11th century). Rinchen Zangpo realised, through his achieved powers, that a *klu* must be dwelling at the place, so he planted a tree for him and, as the propagator of monastic Buddhism, established a monastery at the very spot. The tree plays an important role in the religious life of the nearby village. People often come to perform the circumambulation around it. This can be undertaken at any time, but the most auspicious is the occasion of the yearly ritual dedicated to the *klu* (*klu gtor*). People suffering from skin diseases particularly, come and bring offerings. Together with that, they also bring their own medicine, called *klu sman*.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we can see that *klu* are not only associated with causing diseases, but also with the process of healing.

A similar story appears at the Samling (*bsam gtan gling*) monastery of Dolpo (see Photo 3). This famous Bonpo monastery also owes its beginnings to a very prominent human figure bestowed with the capacity of seeing supernatural beings in the landscape. Gyaltsän Rinchen (*yang ston rgyal btsan rin chen*, probably 13th century), coming from the important ritual and teachings' patri-descendent Yangal (*ya ngal*) lineage, recognised that in the small valley of the institution a *klu* was staying, and miraculously opened a spring for him. The spring has always been the only water source for the monastery and is known for its extraordinary skill: it flows in times when the teachings of Bon flourish, and dries out in the times of deterioration (Kind 2012: 193). Since Gyaltsän Rinchen's act the *klu* has become the protector and the local lord (*sa bdag*) of the place as well as of the monastery itself. Together with another local deity, the god of the nearby Mukporong (*smug po rong*) mountain, is worshiped every day in the morning with a one-hour ritual. Only peaceful offerings are presented to them. Both of them are depicted in one the main shrines of the monastery. The *klu* is of yellow colour and holding a fish in its hand (see Photo 4). An interesting feature is that a local lama said that the *klu* is a *sa bdag*. The majority of academic studies treat *sa bdag* and *klu* as separate classes of beings.

The pattern is also described by Charles Ramble from the village of Lubra (*klu brag*) in Lower Mustang. As it happens, a hero had to arrive to establish the settlement. In



Photo 1. The *klu* tree in front of Lhalung monastery. Spiti, India. Photograph by Jakob Kocurek, 2012.



Photo 2. The klu tree in detail. Spiti, India. Photograph by Jakub Kocurek.

this case, it was the Bonpo master and again holder of the Yangal lineage Tashi Gyalcän (*bkra shis rgyal mtshan*). His task at the place of what was later Lubra was not easy. He had to defeat an opposing local demon and his wife, both of whom appeared in the form of snakes. Finally, Tashi Gyalcän tamed them by oath to become protectors of the Doctrine. Then, two pine needles were stuck in the ground at the place of the taming and were covered by a basket. A sign was expected to deciding whether the site would be suitable for a village or not. After seven days a walnut tree started to sprout from the needles. This was seen as a good omen and Lubra was established. The walnut tree is still growing at its centre (Ramble 2003: 675). An interesting point is that “the descendants of *bkra shis rgyal mtshan* later went to Dolpo, where one of them founded the above mentioned Samling monastery and other religious centres” (ibid.).

In these three stories we can find the well-known pattern in Tibetan culture of taming ‘the wild’ (*‘dul ba*; see for example Samuel 1993: 217, 222). The wild, anti-structural and chaotic, is tamed and subsequently integrated into the structure and its power based on its previous anti-structural position is later used to fortify the structure. In the cases mentioned above we deal with typical stories of subduing local demonic forces; in these instances *klu* are integrated into the structure and have become protectors of the doctrine, and furthermore become linked to places representing the doctrine itself.<sup>10</sup>





Photo 3. Samling monastery, Dolpo, Nepal. Photograph by Jakub Kocurek.

### IS THE CONTEMPORARY SITUATION A RESULT OF THE PAST DEFORESTATION OF THE TIBETAN PLATEAU?

What is the cause of the discrepancy between Tibetan textual sources (analysed by Cornu, Nebesky-Wojkowitz and Samuel) and people's knowledge on the question of associating trees with particular super-natural beings? The former presents *gnyan* as the most typical tree-dwellers. The latter link trees almost exclusively to *klu*.

One explanation can be sought in Mircea Eliade's phenomenological theories of religion. Eliade would argue that naturally there is a close link between water, vegetation and soil. In the three-fold perception of the Tibetan world, *klu* are placed in the underworld. Thus, they are connected to soil and water, and then there is only a step to become connected to vegetation and agriculture. As such it is not surprising that they play a more important role in people's lives than *gnyan* and *btsan*.

Nevertheless, from the texts it is evident that the connection between *gnyan* and trees was, at least at the time of their composition, stronger. It seems to me that the awareness of *gnyan* has gradually faded and *klu* have partly replaced them and taken their roles. The Klubum is still a popular text and in use, while in contrast the *gnyan 'bum* has become neglected.<sup>11</sup> This process can be hardly explained by the presented phenomenological approach.

I believe that the question can be answered by recent studies of ecological changes happening on the Tibetan Plateau. So far, the Plateau has been understood as naturally treeless, covered by steppe, semi-desert or desert biotopes. However, Georg Miehe and others using pollen and charcoal analysis have proved that a great part of the area was in



Photo 4. The klu acting as local deity (sa bdag) of Samling monastery. Upper Dolpo, Nepal. Photograph by Jakub Kocurek.

the past forested. Furthermore, they have shown that in Central Tibet the climate is still suitable for forests to grow today and that it is possible to replant the area (Miehe et al. 2003; 2008a: 160). The major part of the anticipated former forest cover consisted of two species of juniper (*Juniperus convallium*, *Juniperus tibetica*) which grew mainly on the southern mountain slopes, whereas birch (*Betula spp.*) covered the northern slopes. River banks in valleys were dominated by sea-buckthorns (*Hippophae spp.*) and willows (*Salix spp.*). The research was mainly undertaken in South Tibet (Miehe et al. 2006; 2008a; Kaiser et al. 2009), and in Amdo (Miehe et al. 2009) and Lower Mustang (Jharkot near Mukhtinath) (Miehe et al. 2008b). According to the findings, the deforestation was caused by human activity. During the mid-Holocene climatic optimum (7000–3000 BCE) Neolithic nomads and farmers undertook the initial clearing of the forests with the help of fire in order to improve grazing opportunities for their cattle and to insure predator-free range-

lands. The data of the clearing vary for different places: Lhasa and surroundings (2700 BCE) (Miehe et al. 2008a: 171), South Tibet (from 3650 BCE) (Kaiser et al. 2009: 1552), and Jharkot in Mustang (4400–3800 BCE) (Miehe et al. 2009: 262). Since this time the forests have been under pressure of being used as pasture land, a source of timber, fire wood and material for fumigation offerings (*bsang*). The gradual destruction of the forests is also reflected in Tibetan historical sources. For instance, Miehe et al. observe: “mural paintings in the Jokhang (*jo khang*) temple in Lhasa show how logs from the neighbouring slopes were carried to the construction site situated on a wetland” (2006: 62). This implies that timber from the original forests was still available at the time of the construction of the Jokhang temple (640 CE). In Central Tibet heavier human impact and the evolution of the present desert pastures started around 1420 CE during the foundation period of the large monasteries around Lhasa (*ibid.*: 66). The process continued until the present time. For instance, in Jharkot, old people can still remember hunting in a birch forest above Mukhtinath in the 1920s – in what is today a treeless alpine environment (Miehe et al. 2009: 257). Similarly, an additional thirteen locations of juniper trees or forests have been recorded by historical documents and oral accounts. These were destroyed in wars or as late as during the Cultural Revolution (Miehe et al. 2008a: 165). However, not all of the forests have disappeared. Miehe et al. have mapped fifty-one remaining juniper groves, residua of the original cover (*ibid.*: 172–176).<sup>12</sup> The biggest, most famous and perceived as the most sacred among them is the forest of Reting. Here



trees up to a height of sixteen, and a diameter of two, metres have survived (ibid.: 170). Similarly, other remnant forest patches are viewed as sacred and monasteries have been situated in their vicinity.

As has been demonstrated, all the beings inhabiting trees either exclusively prefer junipers or show a strong inclination for them. In my opinion, this might be a consequence of the following development: The primary juniper forests on the Tibetan Plateau could have been associated with *gnyan* (maybe also *btsan* or other beings), since they were covering mountain slopes and thus belonged to the sphere of the wild environment forming an opposition to the domesticated space of settlements. On the contrary, the domesticated space hosted trees of *klu*, although these could grow outside of it, although in their vicinity. As forests were being cut down and Tibet was becoming a dry territory, trees (usually willows or sea-buckthorns) tended to remain only near water sources. Human settlements naturally developed near these water sources. These trees became associated with *klu*. The argument is also supported by contemporary popular traditions, which place the *gnyan* further apart from the sphere of humans, into mountains and into trees in mountains. Forests have represented the wild element, the abode of dangerous elements and wild animals, predators threatening people as well as their domestic animals. Similarly, *gnyan* were believed to be always badly intentioned towards people. The *gnyan* have come to represent the wild, hostile, chaotic, powerful natural forces standing in contrast to the cultural domain. The wild and malevolent character of *gnyan* is evident from the etymology of the term, given above, and also from the forms ascribed to them. These characteristics and connotations of the *gnyan* might also be followed in a Bonpo myth translated by Samten Karmay taken from the Nyänbum (*gnyan 'bum*) a collection of ritual texts dealing with *gnyan* and incorporated into the Bonpo canon (Karmay 2010). Here the primordial conflict between Man and nature epitomised mainly by *gnyan* spirits appears. The quarrel leads to the dichotomy between Man and the supernatural forces inhabiting nature. The story can be read as a metaphor for domesticating and taming the natural world. A similar picture is presented by the fundamental work of Tibetan medicine, the Gyüdzhi (*rgyud bzhi*):

In the time of the last five hundred degenerate years, when the degenerate *kalpa* arises, human beings are in poverty as their provisions decline. Having ploughed arid grassland for farming, *sa gnyan* are turned up. *Chu gnyan* are disturbed by the transformation of natural water bodies into artificial garden lakes and ponds. *Shing gnyan* are deforested and *rdo gnyan* are uprooted or overturned. (Vargas 2010: 379)

Therefore, apart from practical reasons, clearing original vegetation could also have had a cosmological character. Thus, the texts locating *gnyan* primarily in trees and forests might be preserving these old ideas. A striking fact is that these traditions are much more widespread in Upper Dolpo, where the Nyingma and Bon traditions are prevalent, than in the Gelug dominated valley of Spiti. This fact could also point to the antiquity of these concepts. The remnants of the forests represent the original chaotic anti-structure, now tamed, or rather, destroyed. This development could also be the reason for their sacredness and common placement near monasteries which function as the *pillars* of the structure. Thus, monasteries subdue the anti-structure, incorporate it into the structure and by this generate energy, which is then passed on. A similar explanation could be used for the fumigation offerings (*bsang*) which, as part of the original wild and undomesticated sphere, are perceived as endowed with power.

At this point an interesting parallel from Mongolia can be mentioned. Alena Oberfalzerová, describing Mongolian nomads' perception of landscape, writes: "The negative forces reside in solitary or dry trees or bushes, usually in a closed isolated ravine with several trees, in solitary groves, around springs, in small mountain passes, or in rocks of peculiar forms or colours" (2007: 242). Parallels with the Tibetan environment, particularly with the *gnyan*, are clear, as is the possibility that we are dealing with an ancient cultural substrate shared by both areas.

## CONCLUSION

As has been shown in Dolpo, trees are in the overwhelming majority associated with *klu*. The *klu* were the only group of 'supernatural tree dwellers' about which I was able to receive detailed information. It is evident that *klu* have the greatest practical impact on the daily lives of common people. In fact, *klu* represent the single group of supernatural beings whose link to trees is generally known. The reason is obvious, as people's dealings with the *klu* have practical consequences for them, at least in the Dolpo region and in Spiti in Himachal Pradesh. Klumbum is a widely used text. In contrast, awareness of other kinds of beings and their connection with trees is in my opinion restricted to religious specialists.

These findings stand in opposition to traditional textual sources that associate forests and trees particularly with *gnyan*. I suggest the explanation for this difference must involve taking into account the changes the natural environment in Tibet has undergone. The loss of forests in Tibet has led to a gradual forgetting of the *gnyan*. On the other hand, the *klu* have become prevalent as tree-dwelling beings, since the surviving trees were mostly located near rivers and other water sources. I have argued that felling of the original woodland might have had a cosmological dimension over and above any practical considerations: the forests represented the wild and hostile but powerful sphere opposed to domestication and tamed space. The *gnyan* and *btsan* would fall into the wild sphere, which is also reflected by the etymology of their names. Cross-culturally, anti-structural entities endowed with power often become sacred (cf. Douglas 2002). This was also the case for Tibetan sacred groves. Among the trees in Tibet, juniper has by far the most important position in hosting different classes of super-natural beings. This might be due to the special role of juniper in Tibetan culture (*bsang* offerings) and also to its high proportion in the original forest cover.

For further research I suggest similar fieldwork in wooded areas of Tibet, especially where logging has recently occurred (Kham, Bhutan and Sikkim) in order to clarify the strength of the link between the beings and particular trees, i.e. to answer the question of what happens if an inhabited tree is cut down. Then, an analysis of the textual sources, particularly of Klumbum and the most important source Nyänbum, which has so far been under investigated by Western scholars, would reveal many interesting points relevant to the topic. The data from wooded areas should be compared with those from areas formerly forested and at the present almost treeless. In addition, detailed research on the remaining groves and their role in popular religion, how they are worshipped, and local legends explaining their link to particular monasteries, is necessary.

Let me conclude with a rather provocative prediction: If reforestation of the original juniper trees takes place in Tibet in the future, might *gnyan* and *btsan* beings be back again in people's knowledge and worship practice?

### Acknowledgements

The article is based on research carried out thanks to the financial support of the Internal Grant (number VG047), Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czech Republic. For assistance in the field and help throughout the work I am grateful to Anna Sehnalová.

### NOTES

1 For the legendary background see Karmay 1998: 253–254. The word *gnyan* has several different connotations and meanings, all of them with wrathful and wild aspects: 1. wild mountain sheep Argali (*Ovis ammon*); 2. cruel, fierce, severe, “very powerful and at the same time fearful”; 3. epidemic, infectious sickness, plague (Das 1998; Jäschke 2007). The syllable features as a component of names of local deities as well as Tibetan kings. See note 4.

2 Nebesky-Wojkowitz adds that *gnyan* are often associated with meteorological conditions (rain, wind, rainbows, etc.) and celestial bodies (1996: 289).

3 A general Tibetan appellation of deities of higher status.

4 The word *bstan* (and its derived form *bstan po*) has the following meanings: 1. strong, powerful, mighty; 2. violent, forcible; 3. strict, secure (Das 1998; Jäschke 2007). As *gnyan*, *bstan* also forms a part of names of certain quasi-historical and early Tibetan kings, as the first mythical ruler Nyathri Tsänpo (*gnya' khri tsan po*), then, for instance, Lhatho Thori Nyäntsän (*lha tho tho ri gnyan btsan*). In the latter example both words appear in one name.

5 Texts also describe other forms. In this study, I work only with my findings in the field. Further see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 290–291.

6 In texts translated and quoted by Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1996) the depicted *klu* have different colours, but these three colours were mentioned by my informants.

7 Kind 2012: 264–267.

8 They have the same role as in Indian mythology, in which they are usually depicted holding snakes in their claws.

9 This is usually bought from the Tibetan Medical Centre in Dharamsala.

10 An archetypal example is the story of Padmasambhava taming local deities opposed to the introduction of the new Buddhist religion.

11 On *gnyan 'bum* see Karmay 2010: 53–68.

12 Also contains a list of the remaining groves and trees along with a brief description, including their coordinates.

### REFERENCES

- Cornu, Philippe 2002. *Tibetan Astrology*. Boston & London: Shambhala.  
Das, Sarat Chandra 1998. *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Book Faith India.  
Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London; New York: Routledge.



- Jäschke, Heinrich August 2007. *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Kaiser, Knut; Lars Opgenoorth, Werner H. Schoch, Georg Mieke 2009. Charcoal and Fossil Wood from Palaeosols, Sediments and Artificial Structures Indicating Late Holocene Woodland Decline in Southern Tibet (China). – *Quaternary Science Reviews*. Vol. 28, No. 15–16: 1539–1554.
- Karmay, Samten G. 1998 and 2005. *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet*. Vol. I–II. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Karmay, Samten G. 2010. Tibetan Indigenous Myths and Rituals with Reference to the Ancient Bön Text: The *Nyenbum (Gnyan'bum)*. – José Ignacio Cabezón (ed.). *Tibetan Ritual*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 53–68.
- Kelényi, Béla 2003. *Demons and Protectors: Folk Religion in Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism*. Budapest: Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts.
- Kind, Marietta 2012. *Bon Landscape of Dolpo: Pilgrimages, Monasteries, Biographies and the Emergence of Bon*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Mieke, Georg; Sabine Mieke, Katja Koch, Martin Will 2003. Sacred Forest in Tibet. – *Mountain Research and Development*. Vol. 23, No. 4: 324–328.
- Mieke, Georg; Sabine Mieke, Frank Schlütz, Knut Kaiser, La Duo 2006. Palaeoecological and Experimental Evidence of Former Forests and Woodlands in the Treeless Desert Pastures of Southern Tibet (Lhasa, A.R. Xizang, China). – *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology*. Vol. 242: 54–67.
- Mieke, Georg; Sabine Mieke, Martin Will, Lars Opgenoorth, La Duo, Tsering Dorgeh, Jianquan Liu 2008a. An Inventory of Forest Relicts in the Pastures of Southern Tibet (Xizang A.R., China). – *Plant Ecology*. Vol. 194: 157–177.
- Mieke, Georg; Knut Kaiser, Sonam Co, Zhinquan Zhao, Jianquan Liu 2008b. Geo-Ecological Transect Studies in Northeast Tibet (Qinghai, China) Reveal Human-Made Mid-Holocene Environmental Changes in the Upper Yellow River Catchment Changing Forest to Grassland. – *Erdkunde*. Vol. 62, No. 3: 187–199.
- Mieke, Georg; Sabine Mieke, Frank Schlütz 2009. Early Human Impact in the Forest Ecotone of Southern High Asia (Hindu Kush, Himalaya). – *Quaternary Research*. Vol. 71, No. 3: 255–265.
- Nebesky-Wojkowitz, Réne de 1996. *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of the Tibetan Protective Deities*. Kathmandu; Varanasi: Book Faith India.
- Oberfalzerová, Alena 2007. Perception of the Landscape by Mongolian Nomads. – *Pandanus '07: Nature in Literature, Art, Myth and Ritual*. Vol. 1: 235–264.
- Ramble, Charles 2003. Mustang District. – Dondrup Lhagyal, Phuntso Tsering Sharyul, Tsering Thar, Charles Ramble, Marietta Kind, *A Survey of Bonpo Monasteries and Temples in Tibet and the Himalaya*. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 671–690.
- Roesler, Ulrike 2007. A Palace for Those Who Have Eyes to See: Preliminary Remarks on the Symbolic Geography of Reting (Rwa-sgreng). – *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*. Vol. 8, No. 1: 123–144.
- Samuel, Geoffrey 1993. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.
- Samuel, Geoffrey 2007. Spirit Causation and Illness in Tibetan Medicine. – Mona Schrempf, (ed.). *Soundings in Tibetan Medicine: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. PIATS 2003: *Tibetan Studies: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford, 2003*. Leiden; Boston, MA: Brill, 213–224.
- Stein, Rolf. A. 1972. *Tibetan Civilization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Vargas, Ivette 2010. Legitimising Demon Diseases in Tibetan Medicine: The Conjoining of Religion, Medicine, and Ecology. – Sienna Graig, Mingji Cuomu, Frances Garrett, Mona Schrempf (eds.). *Studies of Medical Pluralism in Tibetan History and Society: PIATS 2006: Proceedings of the Eleventh Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Königswinter 2006*. (Beiträge zur Zentralasienforschung. Bd. 18.) Halle (Saale): International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies, 379–404.