

The Light of Kailash. A History of Zhang Zhung and Tibet: An Overview and some Reflections about Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's Trilogy¹

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Abstract

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu proposes a new outlook on the nature of the Tibetan cultural identity, which for centuries has been conditioned by the perspective of the Buddhist orthodoxy. Such view has undermined the opinion that Tibetans nurtured about themselves concerning their written language and the overall value of their civilization, especially the Bon tradition. In his *Trilogy* Chögyal Namkhai Norbu takes us along a path that starts from the origin of the Zhang Zhung kingdom and ends with the central Tibetan monarchy and the advent of the Buddhadharma in Tibet, showing the profound and diversified dimensions of this endangered civilization.

Keywords: Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, Zhang Zhung, Bon, Shenrab Miwoche, History of Tibet, *The Light of Kailash*.

La luz del Kailash. Una historia del Zhang Zhung y el Tíbet: Una visión de conjunto y algunas reflexiones sobre la trilogía por Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

Resumen

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu propone un nuevo enfoque sobre la naturaleza de la identidad cultural tibetana, que por siglos ha estado condicionada por la perspectiva de la ortodoxia budista, la cual ha socavado la opinión de los tibetanos sobre su escritura y lengua y el valor global de su civilización, y en particular sobre la tradición Bon. En su trilogía Chögyal Namkhai Norbu nos conduce desde los orígenes del reino del Zhang Zhung hasta la monarquía del Tíbet central y la llegada del dharma de Buda al Tíbet, mostrando las profundas y diversificadas dimensiones de dicha civilización —actualmente en peligro.

Palabras clave: Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, Zhang Zhung, Bon, Shenrab Miwoche, Historia del Tíbet, *The Light of Kailash*.

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1. Preface

Nowadays, when crossing a mountain pass, or welcoming the New Year, and so on, people still exclaim “lHa rGyal lo!” (Lhagyal lo), which means “The Gods are victorious!” This expression comes from a very distant point in time and can be traced back, for example, to a Bon divinatory story (Namkhai Norbu, 2013a):

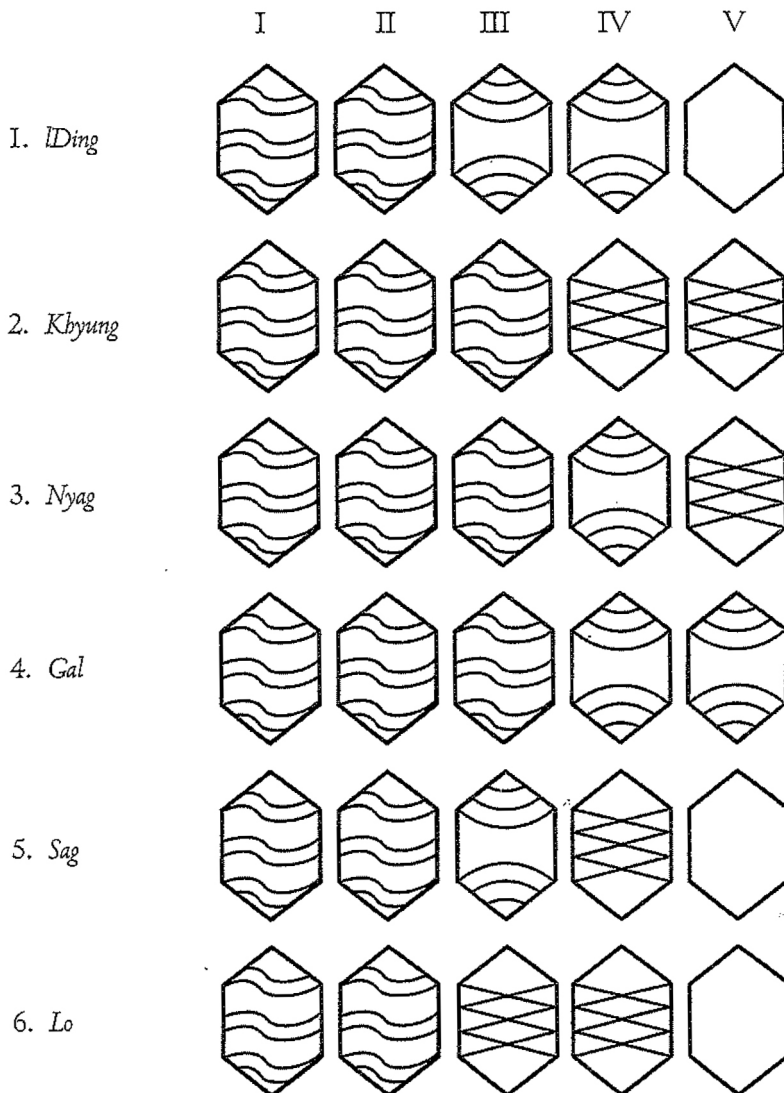
[...] The three lords were the one carrying a golden sword with a blade so sharp that it could slit silk, called the Lord Who Generates the Aspiration for Happiness from the Gods; the child with an iron saw and a goat skin coat, called the Lord Who Generates the Curse for Misery from the Demons; and Lord Phya Keng-tse Lan-med, entrusted as the judge who truthfully discerns good and evil, and decides between the victory and defeat of gods and demons.

[Phya Keng-tse said:] “The two lords will throw the *cho lo* [dominoes] until they sweat, and will fight for the gods and the demons, for life and death, virtue and iniquity. If the gods are victorious, happiness, joy, bliss, and all that is propitious will manifest and spread in this world and in the higher realms. If the demons win, plagues, famines, war, and all that is inauspicious will expand in this world. [...]”

Then the Lord Who Generates the Aspiration for Happiness from the Gods threw the *cho lo* [...]. Then the Lord Who Generates the Curse for Misery from the Demons threw the *cho lo* [...]. At that point, Phya Keng-tse Lan-med said: “Ah! Today the sun in the sky and the wind are good! The moment on earth is a joyful one. At this time, when all the planets and stars are favorable and harmonious, the twelve golden *cho lo* have been thrown in the border country of the gods and demons, and the *cho lo* have sworn the truth. [...] The *cho lo* thrown this time result in favor of the gods. People will have good years.” So he said. Then, those who had looked at the sunny slope of the mountain went away laughing, while those who had gazed at the shaded slope of the mountain left in tears.

The Twelve Combinations of the Five Cho lo




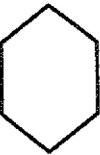
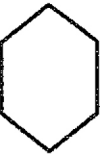


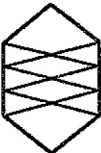




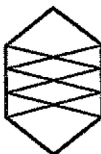




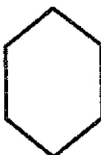

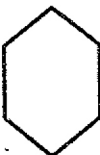

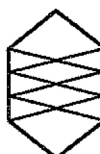
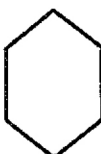




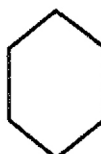
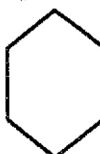

First six combinations:



The *cho-lo* thrown by the Lord from the Gods resulted in the first three combinations, the best ones, while the *cho-lo* thrown by the Lord from the Demons resulted in the last three combinations, the worst ones; hence the victory in favor of the Gods.

The Twelve Combinations of the Five Cho lo

Last six combinations:

	I	II	III	IV	V
7. <i>Gur</i>					
8. <i>Ra</i>					
9. <i>Thul</i>					
10. <i>God</i>					
11. <i>Khyal</i>					
12. <i>Kes</i>					

2. Introduction

According to the ancient worldview of Bon—the tradition that its followers consider the primeval, autochthonous spiritual and cultural tradition of the Tibetan civilization—the environment displays itself in a tripartite fashion, being composed of three different dimensions: heaven above, earth in the middle, and the subterranean world below, each dominated by different classes of beings and elemental forces.

Mythology informed liturgical practices in the form of ritual proclamations and explanations (Tib. *smrang*) about the origin of existence that re-enacted the covenant established in primordial times between human beings and those supernatural entities and forces (Namkhai Norbu, 1995, *passim*).

The ability of interfacing with, and the numerous techniques and ritual liturgies for effectively dealing with those dimensions were entrusted to, and represented the prerogative of priests (called Bon gShen-po), who were specialized in distinct and specific aspects of ritual actions (see Namkhai Norbu, 2013a: 78-85); those Bon gShen-po also performed the role of protectors of the Tibetan monarchs for generations.

From a cosmological perspective, the Bon view maintains that, in the very beginning, the universe and sentient beings were created through the interaction of the collective essence of the five elements (space, air, fire, water, earth), that generated one or more cosmic eggs, which hatched by virtue of their own power, and from whose different components, all beings of the heavenly, the intermediate, and the earthly sphere came into existence, including the primordial divine couples, progenitors of the human race, whose descendants were born as the first tribal ancestors of Tibet (Cf. Namkhai Norbu, 2013a: 38 *et seq.*, and Namkhai Norbu, 2013a: 17-40).

Bon textual sources affirm that Tibet was governed by Bon, until the country was converted to the *Buddhadharma*. In that regard, Bon and Buddhist textual sources alike, agree in saying that the first king of Tibet was gNya'-khri Tsan-po (Nya-tri Tsen-po), who is deemed to be of divine descent.

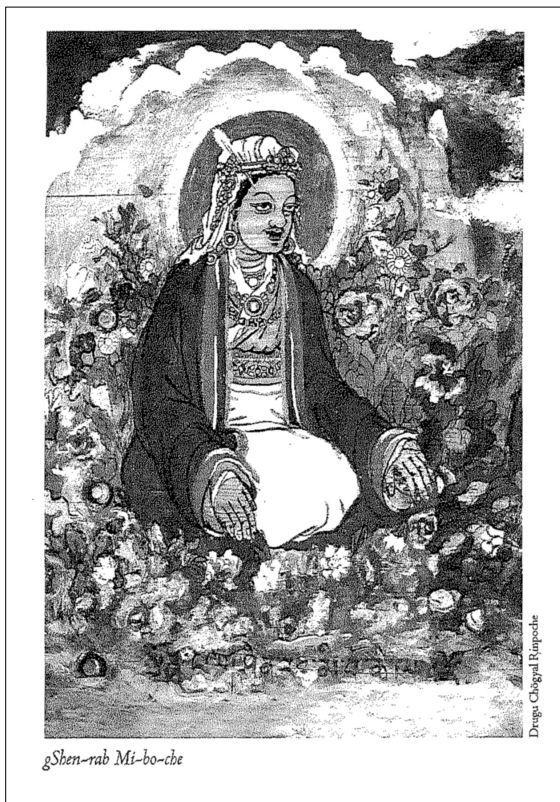
However, they disagree in terms of the number of royal dynasties that succeeded him up to Srong-btsan sGam-po (Song-tsen Gam-po, 569-650), the king who initiated the Buddhist tradition in Tibet, showing discrepancies and inconsistencies in the order of succession, so that they either mention thirty-three (Bon sources), thirty (Buddhist sources), or thirty-one monarchs (Dunhuang documents).

In the findings of Chögyal Namkhai Norbu, the kings should be reckoned as thirty-four, including the first king of Tibet, up to the father of Srong-btsan sGam-po, gNam-ri Srong-btsan (Nam-ri Song-tsen); this figure has been obtained after the Author consulted, compared, and collated no less than twenty relevant Bon and Buddhist texts, as well as the Old Tibetan Chronicles of Dunhuang (Cf. Namkhai Norbu, 2013b: 123-172).

3. Zhang Zhung and Tibet: Bon/Bod

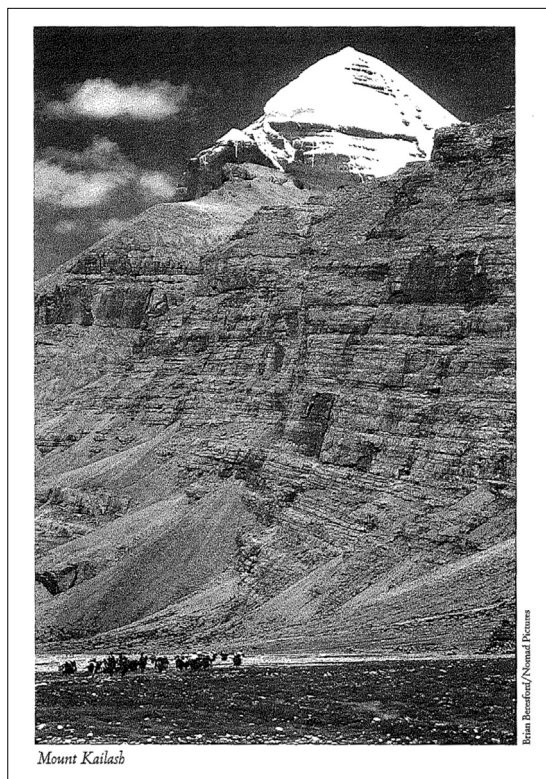
As Chögyal Namkhai Norbu (2013a: 91) writes:

Traditionally speaking, the origin of Bon teachings known as the Everlasting Bon [*g.yung drung bon*] coincides with the birth of gShen-rab Mi-bo-che in 'Ol-mo Lung-ring (see Martin, 1999: 258-301), Zhang Zhung, about 3,908 years ago. The teachings of gShen-rab became the essence of all different forms of Bon, or one of the most sophisticated of all the traditions that had been called *Bon* up to that time.



gShen-rab's legacy and the traditions that he systematized included spiritual and doctrinal teachings, as well as diagnostic and healing methods, apotropaic rituals, divinatory practices, and so on; they were translated and diffused in Tibet and other neighboring countries.

The kingdom of Zhang Zhung, with Mount Kailash at its center, and 'Ol-mo Lung-ring as the seat of the teacher, would thus represent the cradle of the ancient Bon culture.



The influence of the Zhang Zhung kingdom remained strong, until the dynasty of Central Tibet acquired supremacy, and among other territories, conquered and absorbed Zhang Zhung in the greater Tibetan empire, which flourished from the seventh through the ninth century.

In this regard, it is interesting to relate a quotation concerning the term *Bon* and the term *Bod* (Tibet), drawn by the Author from the White Annals (*Deb ther dkar po*), which were compiled by the famous scholar dGe-'dun Chos-'phel (Gendün Chömpel, 1905-1951) (in Namkhai Norbu, 2013b: 43):

According to the followers of the Everlasting Bon, in the beginning the name of the country was Bon that then became corrupted into Bod. That *bod* and *bon* could be understood as having the same meaning may seem ridiculous, but that is not the case. Before King Nam-ri Srong-btsan,² the religious system of the Everlasting Bon had spread everywhere in the country and thus it is not surprising that the name was well known. In earlier times, the Chinese called Tibet the Country of Phon [*phon gyi yul*], a term phonetically related to *bon*. Furthermore, many examples exist in the old language of the interchangeability of the two consonants *da* and *na* as suffixes, for example in *btsan po* and *btsad po* [king] and in *chun po* and *chud po* [bouquet]; it is possible that this was also the case for *bon* and *bod*. In Mongolia, some call the followers of the Bon religion *bod* or *bo*. Nevertheless, the Islamic religion that spread extensively in Kashmir is called the religion of Kashmir [*kha che'i chos*]; similarly, since the religion of gShen-rab spread in Tibet, it is possible that the name of the country was attached to that of the religion, or that the name of the religion was attached to that of the country. But other than a 2000-year-old forefather, who could answer this question?

4. Adoption of Buddhism

When Buddhism was adopted as the state religion in the seventh century, a dramatic change occurred in the cultural history of Tibet. The followers of Bon were given the option to convert, or go into exile. The new creed was embraced with great enthusiasm and devotion. India, because it was the land of the Buddha, and China, because of its medicine and astrology and the important family connections established through marriage alliances, became the two paramount models for Tibet. The tradition that had accompanied the country for thirty-four royal dynasties fell into oblivion, and with it, all aspects related to the ancient cultural identity of Tibet.

The view referring to the cultural supremacy of India and China, with respect to the indigenous Tibetan one, was consistently supported for centuries by the Buddhist orthodoxy, both at the religious and scholastic levels, maintaining that prior to the arrival of the *Buddhadharma* in Tibet, knowledge was transmitted merely in an oral fashion. The consequences resulted in the conviction that before the advent of Buddhism, Tibet was a sort of no man's land, without any cultural foundations and even, and most notably, without a written language of its own. Such viewpoint was also followed, without questioning, by the scholarly Western world.

This factor is of primary importance for understanding Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's view *vis-à-vis* the original foundations of the Tibetan cul-

tural identity. He has undertaken a very long and very meticulous research, mainly on textual sources, but also in the field, so as to be able to present a more informed, cogent, and holistic perspective, the first occurrences of which can be detected in works previously written, such as, for example, *The Necklace of gZi: A Cultural History of Tibet* (Namkhai Norbu, 1982), or lectures given at the Central Institute of Nationalities (Zhongyang Minzu Xueyuan, now the University of Nationalities, Minzu Daxue) of Beijing, PRC (1988).³

His viewpoint has been the object of criticism and denial; nonetheless, it has gradually received more attention, also in view of the researches, increased access to Bon textual sources, work with knowledgeable representatives of the Bon tradition, and conclusions, that scholars worldwide have been able to perform, share, carry out, and draw, in about fifty years of studies on the Bon tradition. It would not be inappropriate to say that they may have been prompted or inspired by such an outstanding Tibetan scholar as Chögyal Namkhai Norbu certainly is.⁴

5. Structure of the Trilogy

The threefold division of the Trilogy is meant to reconstruct a cultural and historical highway, so that readers may see the evolution of the various cultural aspects, their characteristics, as well as the transformation and changes that came about; in the specific, how the ancient *facies* of the Tibetan civilization unfolded, starting from the ones that see the Zhang Zhung kingdom as the focal *locus* of expression, together with its extensive influence over other geo-political and cultural areas of Tibet.

Thus, as I wrote in the *Translator's Foreword*, the first volume, "The Early Period, The History of Ancient Zhang Zhung," considers the rise of early human generations and the Bonpo lineages of ancient Zhang Zhung, its dynasties, language, and culture.

The second volume, entitled "The History of the Intermediate Period: Tibet and Zhang Zhung," is focused upon human generations, the Bon lineages, the spread of Bon during the lifetimes of the first Tibetan monarchs, the dynasties, written language, and civilization of ancient Tibet, as well as upon the reigns of specific kings, the Bon religion, and Bonpo religious figures (Dran-pa Nam-mkha' in particular) of Zhang Zhung during that period.

The third volume, "The History of the Later Period: Tibet," is concerned with an assessment of the genealogies, Bonpo lineages, royal dynasties

(from the first monarch gNya'-khri Tsan-po until the forty-fifth monarch Khri-dar-ma 'U-dum-btsan), language, and civilization of Tibet.⁵

6. Focal point: the written language issue

Of all the incredibly vast amount of informed and textually supported questions and issues that the Author raises, I consider the written language one of extreme importance in the overall framework of the discourse at stake. Because, what element can more consistently and undeniably define a culture, other than its written language? That is why—and also in reason of the structural limitations of this contribution—it will be the one represented here; and the best way to do it, is quoting some *ad hoc* passages from Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's own work, which are relevant and self-explanatory.

First of all, concerning the fact that technical and spiritual data and knowledge were only transmitted in an oral fashion, we read (Namkhai Norbu, 2013b: 187-188):

If people like ourselves with our present-day understanding and skill in the Tibetan language can remember with difficulty just a few details regarding, for example, the Tibetan kings that appeared before Srong-btsan sGam-po [...] or about medicine, astrology, and so on, let alone the totality of all these, how can we possibly affirm that the people of those ancient times were able to commit the totality to memory? [...] If an underdeveloped people settled in the dark country of Tibet, unable to read or write, had not only committed to memory the history of thirty-four dynasties and the details of the extensive and diversified Bonpo culture, but also preserved this knowledge from generation to generation and amplified it for the sake of posterity, it would have been a task of enormous magnitude, not an insignificant one.

Secondly, as is well known, Buddhist sources affirm that in order to devise a written language, Emperor Srong-btsan sGam-po dispatched Thon-mi A-nu, a particularly able minister, to India, in order to study the *Dharma* and to learn the Indian language. Nevertheless (Namkhai Norbu, 2013b:191-192):

Srong-btsan sGam-po was thirteen years old when he started to rule, but it was not until he was fourteen years old that the idea of a need for a written language in Tibet was envisaged. This new idea arose following circumstances related to the arrival of missives from foreign rulers, and it was not until then that Thon-mi A-nu was sent to India. Thon-mi A-nu could have well had a

variety of admirable qualities such as a good disposition, great knowledge, intelligence, and so on. In practice, however, he was sent to India, a huge, distant, and alien country, although he had no cultural background, having been born in Tibet, an obscure borderland and [according to this account] lacking a written language. In those times there were no good roads, let alone airplanes, trains, cars, or bicycles, as at present. Narrations of voyagers to India undertaken by great translators such as Vairocana and others, relate this obstacle.

Thus, firstly, how long would it have taken to go to India from Tibet? Then, a Tibetan person with no cultural background arriving in India would initially have had to study the local idioms in order to communicate minimally with the Indians. How long would that have taken? And how much time would he have needed, once arrived, to become proficient in the written language, meet with the *paṇḍitas*, and having met them, to study the Sanskrit language and the texts of Buddhist philosophy? Obviously all that could not have been accomplished immediately. Then how long would it have taken Thon-mi A-nu [...] to return to Central Tibet? [H]ow much time would the creation of a new written language and [...] the translation of several texts [...] from Sanskrit into Tibetan have taken, in order to present, as it is claimed, a new written language to the king? If we consider all this from the viewpoint of feasibility, we can be absolutely sure of the impossibility of realizing this plethora of activity in the short period of time that extends from when Srong-btsan sGam-po was fourteen until he reached the age of sixteen...

...that being the time traditionally considered for the taking place of the event. However—and this is where the Author's careful study and analysis of sources reveal its congruity—he also cites a very authoritative text of the Buddhist tradition in which it is stated that the minister Thon-mi *transformed* the written language [*yi ge bsgyur*] (Namkhai Norbu, 2013b: 175).

Thirdly, by delving into, and examining different texts pertaining to the Bon tradition, in which it is stated that spiritual teachings were committed to writing, he concludes that the existence of a written tradition prior to Srong-btsan sGam-po can be demonstrated (Namkhai Norbu, 2013b: 178-181), and specifies that (Namkhai Norbu, 2013b:192):

The forms of writing used by the ancient Tibetan people prior to the Tibetan *dharma*rāja Srong-btsan sGam-po were none other than *smar chen* and *smar chung*, that is to say, the old script of Zhang Zhung.

Bilingual Transliteration of Old Zhang Zhung and Tibetan

Zhang-zhung sMar script, or Old Zhang Zhung Writing, with Tibetan Transliteration

[t]he calligraphy of the written language of the Tibetan people of ancient times made it difficult to use. Thon-mi A-nu was asked to devise a new system for the Tibetan written language, taking the Indian one as example,

thus fulfilling the need of the Tibetan people for a more convenient writing style. This new system would represent at the same time a suitable tool for translating into Tibetan the Word of the Victorious One originating in India, the treatises of subsequent savants, and the numerous and extensive teachings that had appeared until then, while also facilitating discussions on the profound meanings of *dharma* terms in the Sanskrit language. If a written language had not existed in Tibet before then, the sentence “Thon-mi Mi-chung Sambhoṭa transformed the written language” would be unjustified, since there would have been nothing for him to transform, just as determining the sharpness and length of the horns of rabbits and horses is impossible because their heads bear no such appendages.⁶

7. Conclusions

Consequently, the reasons why the Author has chosen the title *The Light of Kailash* (*Ti se'i 'od snang*) should become clear. Chögyal Namkhai Norbu has attempted the complex endeavor of re-evaluating the foundations and developments of the Tibetan culture, through a standpoint that takes into account the entirety of relevant elements and their subsequent implications. It is not a matter of negating or debasing the orthodox view; but rather, of embracing a more open-minded investigative approach based upon history and archaeology and devoid of prejudice and fabrications, unsupported, as the Author says, by logic and reason.

That can only be actualized, *in primis*, by giving due credit to Bon textual sources and by reconsidering the undeniable import of the ancient Tibetan civilization, starting by looking at its first, original Light.

This is not an issue that can only concern the new Tibetan generations and the need and efforts for preserving and contributing to the development of a cultural identity in a very complex and delicate environment, which, in itself, is a daunting task. It is an issue that involves all of us, because the Tibetan civilization, with its richly diversified dimension, has made a significant and specific contribution to the evolution of the cultural and spiritual heritage of this planet; in deepening our understanding of it, we could ensure that it may continue to do so.

Notes

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- at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany.
- 2 *I.e.*, the father of Srong-btsan sGam-po.
- 3 They can be considered as a preliminary version of *The Light of Kailash*.
- 4 For selected bibliographic references see Namkhai Norbu 2013a, *Translator's Foreword*, p. 7, note 1; p. 8 and notes; p. 9, and note 7.
- 5 Cf. Namkhai Norbu 2013a, p. 10. The third volume is being finalized at the time of this writing and will be forthcoming shortly.
- 6 For the whole discussion see Namkhai Norbu 2013a, pp. 149-166 and Namkhai Norbu 2013b, pp. 173-202.

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List of Illustrations:

- Images of *cho lo*, from Namkhai Norbu (2013a: 209-210).
- Image of gShen-rab Mi-bo-che, from Namkhai Norbu (2013a: 76).
- Image of Mount Ti-se, from Namkhai Norbu (2013a: 14).
- Images of Zhang Zhung script with Tibetan transliteration, from Namkhai Norbu (2013a: 165-166).