

གནམ་གྱི་ཁྲི་བདུན་
THE SEVEN STARS OF HEAVEN
A GIFT FOR A RECONVALESCENT ❖

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From times immemorial, stars and stellar constellations have helped human travellers to navigate the endless seas and the endless deserts and steppes. Twenty-seven (or twenty-eight) of the constellations, so-called lunar mansions, Sanskrit नक्षत्र, Tibetan ལྷ་སྐྱེས་, further help the moon (and the sun) to navigate the sky. In many cultures, stellar constellations, be it the lunar mansions or the constellations of the zodiac, have also been accepted as a means to navigate through one's personal life. Many constellations, therefore, have been associated with auspicious, if not even healing properties, or also the opposite. The 17th lunar mansion འཕྲུལ་ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ is called 'causing welfare, happiness', the 24th ལྷ་སྐྱེས་, 'requiring a hundred physicians'.* Accordingly, Tibetan astrology is in part concerned with illnesses and their sources: རྟོག་ཚུལ་ 'calculating the illness(es)'.†

The constellation considered to be most helpful for the travellers and nomads of the northern hemisphere is constituted by the ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'Seven Brothers, Stars of the North', the seven stars of the Great Bear, also known as ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'Seven Siblings' or as ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'Seven Spots (?)' (perhaps rather: 'The Seven Seers' as equivalent for the Sanskrit name: सप्तर्षि 'The Seven R̥sis', if ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ could be derived from ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'announce'). The constellation once upon a time most helpful for the agriculturalist consisted of the ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'Six Siblings', the Pleiades, also known as ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ལྷ་སྐྱེས་ 'Six Mothers [one] Son' (together seven stars). Either one or the other constellation (or perhaps even both) plays a crucial role in the legitimization myths of the Tibetan emperors.

The difficulty of Old Tibetan texts is often claimed to be the result of the ancient authors' predilection to speak in riddles, which we cannot solve by rational means. However, most of the oldest Tibetan documents were written for administrative purposes. Some of them were political propaganda, intended to legitimise the ruling family or to con-

struct the fiction of a ‘nation’. If, at the time of their composition, these texts were as enigmatic as they are now, they would have failed to serve their exoteric, political purpose. Therefore, if we are able, by means of careful internal analysis, historical and cross-linguistic comparison, to establish a different meaning of a word, which, much better than the conventional dictionary meaning, fits into the particular context, we should not miss the chance to reconstruct a little piece of evidence from the ancient language.

One of these enigmatic or forgotten words is མི་ ‘star’, appearing, e.g., in Pt 1038, Pt 1286, and ITJ 0731. This word, which figures so prominently in Tibetan royal (and noble) names, is usually understood as referring to a ‘throne’. Hence, the legendary first king གཉའ་མི་བརྩན་པོ་ ‘Neckthrone’, the brothers ཉ་མི་ ‘Fishthrone’ and ཤ་མི་ ‘Deerthrone’, and the legendary first Tibetan ‘dynasty’, the གནམ་གྱི་མི་བདུན་ ‘Seven Thrones of Heaven’.

Nobody seems to have wondered that the word ‘throne’ does not really make sense in the names of archaic tribal leaders. From the perspective of the classical vocabulary, one could at least have thought of a nominal derivation of the verb འཕྲིད་ ‘lead’, which could have yielded a ‘leader, duke’ (e.g. of the Fish and the Deer clan, if ཉ་གཉའ་ should be analysed as ‘fish’ and ཤ་ as ‘deer’).

However, the association with the heaven in the ‘dynastic’ name གནམ་གྱི་མི་བདུན་ suggests yet another etymology. The title refers to the first segment of the prehistorical or mythical lineage of the Tibetan kings, comprising 7 to 9 generations. This diachronic or vertical relation is actually a reflection of an earlier synchronic set, or horizontal relation, namely that of the seven Khri, seven siblings, the sons of ཡབ་ལྷ་བདག་བླུག་, living in heaven. The middle one, མི་འོ་བདུན་ཚོགས་, lit. ‘the Middle of the Seven of the *Khri*’, i.e. the fourth Khri, fathers the one who descends to the earth to become the first mythical ruler: གཉའ་མི་བརྩན་པོ་

། ལྷ་གནམ་སྤེང་ནས་གཤེགས་པའ། གནམ་ལྷ་བླ་ན། ཡབ་ལྷ་བདག་བླུག་བཞུགས་པ་འོ་སྐལ། གཅེན་གསུམ་གཙུང་གསུམ་ན།
 མི་འོ་བདུན་ཚོགས་དང་བདུན། མི་འོ་བདུན་ཚོགས་ཀྱི་སྐལ། མི་ཉག་མི་བརྩན་པོའ། ས་དོག་ལ་ཡུལ་ཡབ་ཀྱི་རྗེ།
 དོག་ཡབ་ཀྱི་ཆར་དུ་གཤེགས་སའོ།

‘Having come from above the sky of the gods, the son of Yab.lha Bdag, drug, who dwells aloft the heavenly space: Khri.ñi Bdun.tshigs, [the one] between three elder brothers [and] three younger brothers, [thus] seven with Khri.ñi Bdun.tshigs, [his] son: Khri Ñag.khri btsan.po, the lord, who is the patron of the country in the earthly narrowness, [he] came like the rain as the patron of the (narrow) earth.’ (See Zeisler 2011: 173 for the translation.)

Pt 1038, ll. 13-17 has an interesting variant, where, according to my understanding, the middle brother of the Khri first stays in ས་ག་དོག་རྒྱག་ the six-fold Libra constellation.* There he is met by a delegation of ministers, priests, and other domestics in search for a ruler:

གནམ་རིམ་པ་བརྟུག་སྲུམ་གྱི་ཉེང་ན། བློ་བར་ལ་བདུན་ཚོགས། ཤེས་བཞི། གནམ་གི་ལྷ་ལས། ས་ག་དོག་རྒྱག་དུ།
འབྲང་འགོ་ནག་གི་ རྗེ་ཕྱིད་གི་རྗེ། དུད་རྒྱལ་ཚག་ལྷ་ཕྱིད་ཀྱི་ལྷ་ར། རྣོན་པོ་ལྷ་རྗེ་གས། བོན་པོ་མཚོ་གཙོ། ལྷག་ཚང་ཤ་ལྷུག།
མྱི་རྗེ་ལྷ་དང་བདུད། དུ་བརྟུག་ནས། ལྷལ་བོད་ཀ་གལག་རྒྱག་དུ་བྱོན་ཞེས་མཚོ།

‘It is said that ... from aloft the 13th level of the sky, the one to be called The Middle of the Seven, the In-Between of the Khri, from the gods of the sky, [he descended] to the six spheres of the Libra constellation;²¹ «(As) lord for the upright, the black-headed, the ones without lord and as life-support for the bent, the maned ones, the ones without life-support»: when the ministers, Lho and Rñeg, the priests Mtshe and Gco, and the domestics Śa and Spug requested among gods and demons «a lord for the men», he came (down) to the six precipices [of] the land Bod.ka.’ (See Zeisler 2011: 174ff. for translation and notes.)

It seems thus that the deity and ruler-to-be is no longer residing in the upper-most heaven but still in a sphere above the earth, when the delegation to the gods and other spirits arrives. It would be somewhat against the logic of the epic traditions, if the ruler-to-be had already come down to the earth. Cf., e.g., the Kesar/ Geser epic, where one of the future uncles goes to the heavenly realm to ask the highest deity (mostly Brahma) to send down one of his sons as a ruler for the rulerless men. The descent from the upper-most heaven might have involved only one or several stellar constellations.

Given the alternate spelling གནམ་ལ་དྲི་བདུན་ in Pt 1286, instead of the གནམ་གྱི་བློ་བརྟུག་, and given also the alternative rendering of དྲི་གུམ་ as བློ་གུམ་, I had suggested (in Zeisler 2011: 197f.), that བློ་ might perhaps be a conventional rendering of a word originally pronounced as /t(h)ri/, which might correspond to the Žaň.žun name for a celestial body: *Triki*. The latter may or may not be derived via metathesis from Sanskrit कृत्तिका, the Pleiades.

While the Pleiades are conceived of having seven members in Europe as well as in China, in India as well as in Tibet only six elements are recognised, cf. མིན་རྒྱག་ ‘Six Siblings’ or Six Sisters’. Similarly, in Kashmiri as spoken in the Neelam Valley in Pakistan, the constellation, called Kretsa, consists of six stars (Khawaja Rehman, p.c.). The number, however, is not fixed: Urdu speakers call the constellation سات سیلیوں کا جھکا *sāt sahelion kā jhamkā* ‘the earring of the seven girl friends’ (Ruth Laila Schmidt,

p.c. or also the ‘constellation of the seven girl friends’ as Rainer Kimmig, p.c., suggests to translate), and in Tibetan, one finds the alternative name མ་བླ་ལྷ་བླ་ (BRGY), which indicates that there are six mothers and one son, together seven elements. The difference in numbers may result from fluctuations in brightness of one of the stars.^{‡‡}

The Pleiades are one of the most important constellations in Indian and Tibetan astrology. Their importance stems from the fact that some five thousand years ago, they had indicated the spring equinox and thus the beginning of the agricultural year. They appear as one of the first entries in the lists of the twenty-seven ལྷ་སྐོར་ or lunar mansions. In a Tibetan treatise, found in the Peking edition of the Tibetan Tripiṭaka, the ལྷ་སྐོར་ even head the list (Petri 1966: 85). This order is also followed in a Uyghur astrological fragment (ibid., p. 84). In the Uyghur tradition there is mention of a special blessing, namely to be reborn under the sign of the Pleiades (ibid. pp. 88, 90). In the Lower Ladakhi marriage songs, the /smindruk/ (ལྷ་སྐོར་) constitute one of the /rhtemrbel cobgyat/ (རྟེན་འབྲེལ་བཅོ་བརྒྱད་) ‘eighteen auspicious connections’.

What I did not yet know, when I made the above suggestion, is that Written Burmese has a word quite similar to ལྷ་, namely *khray* ‘star’. This is obviously the same word, only the vowel is slightly different. But this kind of difference is quite common among the so-called Tibe-to-Burman (or Sino-Tibetan) languages, as can be seen below.

This word is particularly attested in the modern Lolo-Burmese languages as /khzə⁵⁵/ in Achang, /krei/ in Arakanese, /kji⁵⁵/ in Bola, /kji⁵¹/ in Atsi, /kji³¹/ in Langsu, /kji³²/ in Leqi, /tɛ²²/ in Rangoon, and as *krai* (or *kray*) in Written Burmese (STEDT, see also Matisoff 2003: 23) and as /gji/ in Tangut/ Xixia (STEDT). Retroflex variants are found in various languages, cf. /dʒi⁵⁵vu³³/ in Muya (Minyak), /dzə³⁵/ ~ /dzə¹³/ ~ /dʒi³⁵/ in Pumi languages, /dzɛ/ in Mianchi (Qiang), /tʂa²¹/ in Ahi, /tʂə³⁵si³¹la⁵⁵/ in Southern Nusu, /tʂi³¹/ or /tʂi³⁵/ in Namuyi, and /tʂi⁵⁵/ in Ersu (STEDT).

Matisoff takes the presumed root **gray* (STEDT), **grəy* (Matisoff 2003: 512, 669) or **gra:y* (ibid., p. 212, 512, 669) ‘star’ to be a Tibe-to-Burman word, related to the verb **gra:y* ‘scatter, disperse’ and the adjective **glay* ‘wide apart’ or ‘scattered wide’ (as stars are scattered across the sky; cf. Matisoff 2003: 211, n. 59, 221 and STEDT). He adduces Achang: /kzə³¹/ ‘wide (in diameter), coarse’; Rangoon: /tɛ²²/ ‘wide’, and Written Burmese *khrai*, *khyai*, *khyâi* ‘make wide apart’, *kjaɰ²* ‘be wide’ (the last one a phonetic rendering), with *klay* ‘wide’ in Inscriptional Burmese (STEDT). The alternation between an alve-

olar trill (*r*) and a palatal glide (*y* or *j* in the phonetic alphabet) is very common within the Tibeto-Burman languages, it is also attested in Old Tibetan (cf. here the names ཤ་ཁྱི་ and ཉ་ཁྱི་ in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*) and in the eastern-most Tibetan dialects. But in this context, one should also note Sanskrit $\sqrt{k\bar{r}}$ and \sqrt{kar} ‘strew, scatter’ with *kīrna* ‘strewn’ and *kiran* ‘ray’ from the first root and *kiraṇa* ‘dust, sun dust’ from the second. This could indicate that an Indo-Aryan verb root was the ultimate source for Tibetan ཁྱི་ and Burmese *khray*. Linguist contact between Burma and India certainly existed, and the word could have been borrowed via Burma into other Tibeto-Burman languages.

It might, therefore, be possible that *khray* and ཁྱི་ are a common heritage from an earlier stage of Tibeto-Burman. It might also be possible that the word ཁྱི་ was borrowed into Tibetan from some Tibeto-Burman language or even that the word for ‘star’ was borrowed into Tibetan and Lolo-Burmese and other Tibeto-Burman languages from a non-Tibeto-Burman language. Whatever the origin of the word ཁྱི་ ‘star’, it was lost again from Tibetan and was replaced by ལྷ་མ་ (which might be a secondary development of ཁྱི་, involving some complicated sound laws, which cannot be discussed here).

In this connection, the name element ཁྱི་ལྷ་མ་, as, e.g., appearing in the name of མང་སྒོན་མང་རྩན་’s mother, ཀོན་ཙོ་མང་མ་རྩི་ཁྱི་ལྷ་མ་, is of great interest. Most probably, we deal here with a translational compound, that is, the second element translates the first, foreign or obsolete, element, so that this part of the name could be translated as ‘Star-Astron’.*

It follows from this etymological relation that there is no obvious reason to associate the word ཁྱི་ with Zhangzhung *triki* or Sanskrit कृत्तिका. Accordingly, there is also no necessity to associate the ཁྱི་བདུན་ only with the Pleiades.

An alternative candidate is the constellation of the ཅུང་གི་ལྷ་མ་ལྷུན་བདུན་ ‘the Seven Brothers, Stars of the North’, the seven stars of the Great Bear. The Great Bear and the Little Bear are the northern-most (or circum-polar) constellations and throughout the year, they hardly change their position with respect to the horizon (except circling around the polar star). They are thus visible throughout the year. Both point directly to the Polar star. But the Great Bear is more easily detectable and hence the more important of the two. The Great Bear, known as सप्तर्षि or ‘The Seven Ṛṣis’ in India, is the best-known extra-zodiacal sign in India and Tibet (Petri 1966: 88). Arguably then, the Great Bear, the highest constellation in the sky, may stand for the highest heaven, where the ཁྱི་བདུན་, the ‘Seven

Stars' reside. While all other major constellations, and especially the lunar mansions and the zodiac signs, rise from the eastern horizon and sink down again to the western horizon in the course of the year, this constellation does not come down to the horizon in the course of the year.

Hence, in order to descend to the earth, the future ruler has to shift from the highest position of the heaven, to one of the constellations that move down to the horizon. Whether it is the Libra or any other constellation would perhaps not matter much. But there could have been other mythological reasons for such a choice, one of which could have been the number of the elements, which constitute a constellation. It is conspicuous that the numbers six and seven play an important role – perhaps because they sum up to thirteen, which, according to Pt 1038 stands for the highest realm of heaven? Another reason for choosing the Libra could have been the fact that the Libra or rather the star Spica (measured as 0° Libra, 29° Virgo) is the reference and starting point for the siderian circle in Indian astrology.* It seems that while the Pleiades once marked the spring equinox, at the same time, the Libra or the Spica marked the autumn equinox.*

It would appear then that the Great Bear is the most likely candidate for the ཁྲི་བདུན་. This is not to say that the Pleiades are completely ruled out. One could also think that the ruler-to-be, who goes down to the earth, corresponds to the star that fluctuates in its visibility: when the star is invisible, the ruler has gone to rule the people on earth. When the ruler returns (after death), the star becomes visible again. As already stated (Zeisler 2011: 198), this might actually be the ultimate reason for the Old Tibetan name of the 'mad' king: ཇི་གུམ་ alias ཁྲི་གུམ་ 'the star that died' (certainly not 'the one who was killed by a knife', which is grammatically impossible as the verb 'kill' involves a past stem འགུམ་).

And finally, it is also possible that the two concepts concerning the seven stars of the Great Bear and the seven or six stars of the Pleiades had got fused at some time in the unknown prehistory of Tibet.

༄༄། ཁྲི་བདུན་གྱི་འགྲུ་ལོ་གསལ།།



NOTES

♣ This essay is based on the first part of the lecture I gave at the IATS 13, Ulaanbaator 2013.

★ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakshatra>. The idea is that even the best physician cannot cure a patient when the moon is in this constellation.

✦ <http://www.tibet-astro.de>.

* Due to a missing ཚོག་, the first element is often interpreted as སྐ་གྲོག་, although there is a line break after སྐ་ག་.

△ It may be noted that according to the received Tibetan astrological knowledge, the Libra constellation consists only of four stars, cf. http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetische_Mondhäuser. With the present-day light pollution, even in Ladakh, one can hardly see the four stars that form a trapezoid. But it seems possible that the question, which stars belonged to this constellation, was answered differently in different times. In the western tradition, the depictions differ. The one given in Wikipedia shows five stars forming a triangle from which the two ‘scales’ hang down; the trapezoid is thus open ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_\(constellation\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_(constellation))). However, the depiction given in astronomical charts (e.g., <http://news.astronomie.info>) may show a closed trapezoid of four stars and a handle below, formed by two stars, or it may show a triangle plus the two ‘scales’ plus a further star below the left scale (cf. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_\(constellation\)#mediaviewer/File:Libra_IAU.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_(constellation)#mediaviewer/File:Libra_IAU.svg)): Beta Librae or Zubeneschamali on the top, Alpha Librae or Zubenelgenubi on the right side, Gamma Librae or Zuben-el-Akrab on the left side form the triangle. The ‘scale’ on the right side is formed by Sigma Librae or Brachium or Cornu. These four stars form the trapezoid. The left ‘scale’ (or the handle which would start from Sigma Librae) is formed by Upsilon Librae and Tau Librae shortly below. Hence the whole constellation would consist of six stars. It further seems that in the Indian tradition, the Spica, one of the brightest stars, which according to western Astrology, belongs to the Virgo, is conceived of as belonging to the Libra (measured as 0° Libra, 29° or 30° Virgo, cf. <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyotisha>), or at least as defining the boundary of the Libra, as each constellation or mansion is measured with 30°. In that case, one could easily think of a sixth star between the trapezoid and the Spica or of the Spica adding to the above mentioned five-star formation.

⚡ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plejaden>.

* Translational compounds are relatively frequent in Tibetan, see here, e.g., also the discussion of the name མྱེ་བྱ་ ‘Man-Andros’ (Zeisler 2001: 145 and 153), but they are not at all a Tibetan peculiarity. In Berlin, there is a small lake called Krumme Lanke, with both words, one German, one Sorbian, referring to the shape of the lake, namely ‘crooked’. In this case, as possibly in the case of the just mentioned མྱེ་བྱ་, the first element translates the second.

★ <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyotisha>.

★ [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waage_\(Sternbild\)](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waage_(Sternbild)), [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_\(constellation\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libra_(constellation)).



ABBREVIATIONS

- BRGY Bod-Rgya tshig.mdzod chen.mo, Zhang Yisun, 1993
STEDT Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus, Matisoff, 2011ff.

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