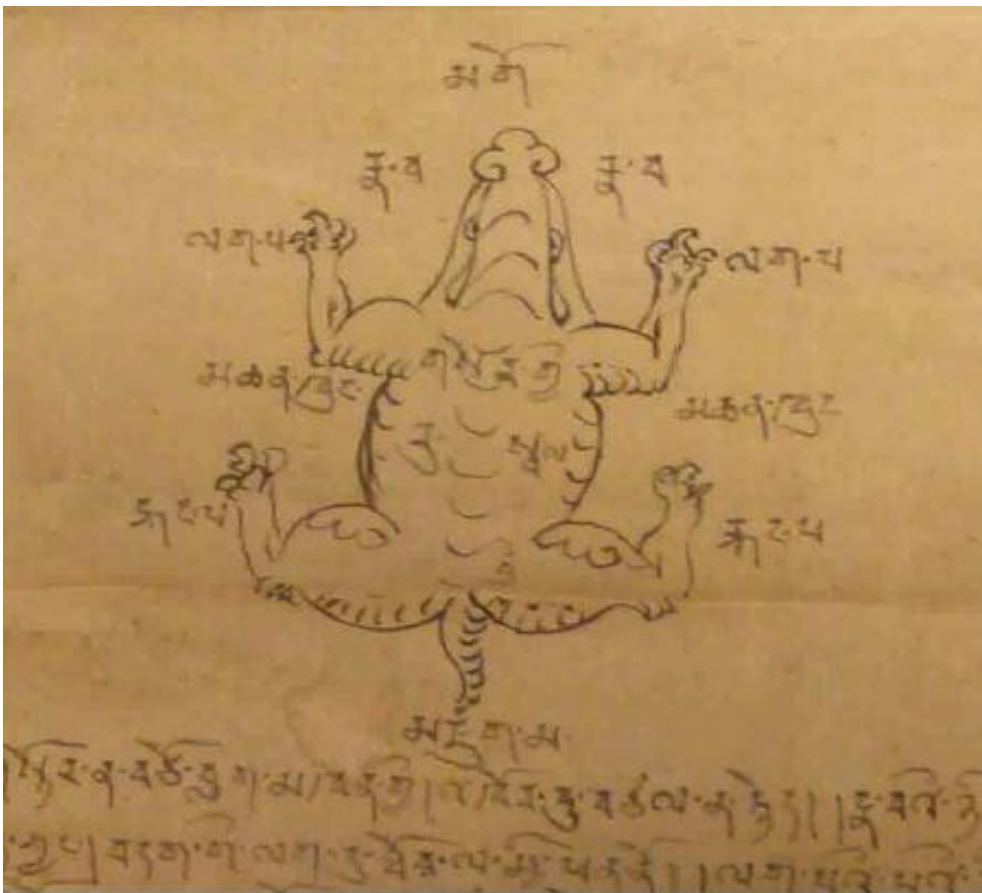


Divination and Oracles in Ancient Tibet

Dr Dawn H. Collins

Cosmology, Magic and Divination 2024



Some themes to consider

the role of time and timing in Tibetan oracular and astrological traditions such as the Kālacakra

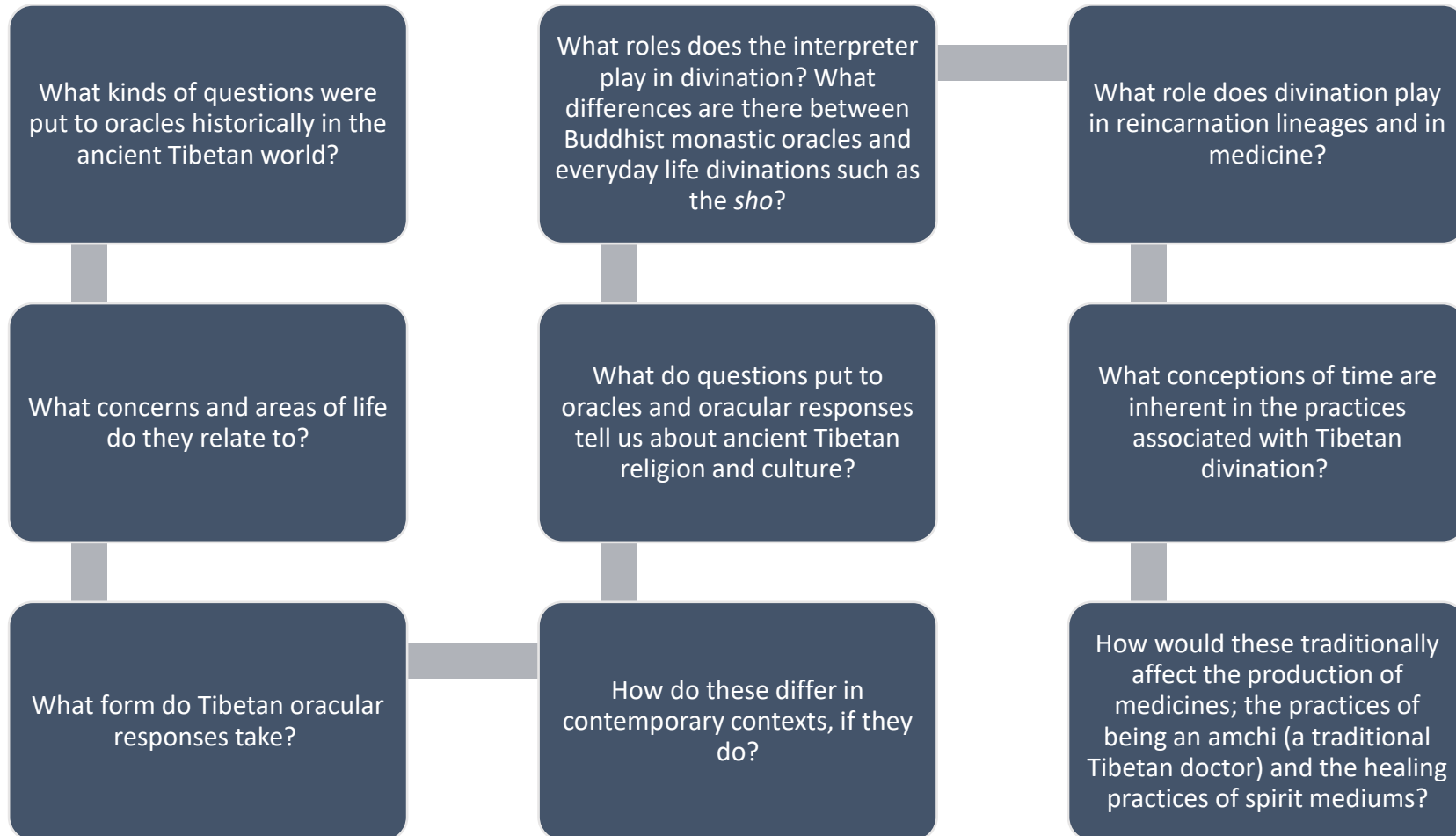


types of diviner – tantric practitioner, medic and spirit medium



the role of the interpreter in Tibetan oracular traditions and in divination

Questions to be considered



Student Activity for this Seminar: Divination and Oracles in Ancient Tibet

Please conduct some preliminary research on Tibetan Buddhist oracular and divinatory traditions and be prepared to discuss the following themes.

- the role of time and timing in Tibetan oracular traditions and astrology
- the role of the interpreter in Tibetan oracular traditions and in divination
- the role of divination in Tibetan reincarnation lineages
- the role of divination in traditional Tibetan medicine

These may be presented in your 5-10 minute presentation.



Topics to be considered

Indo-Tibetan Cosmology and Deity Presences

The Kalachakra (Wheel of Time) tantra –
Astrology and Divination

The Nechung Oracle and other Tibetan
traditions of oracular divination

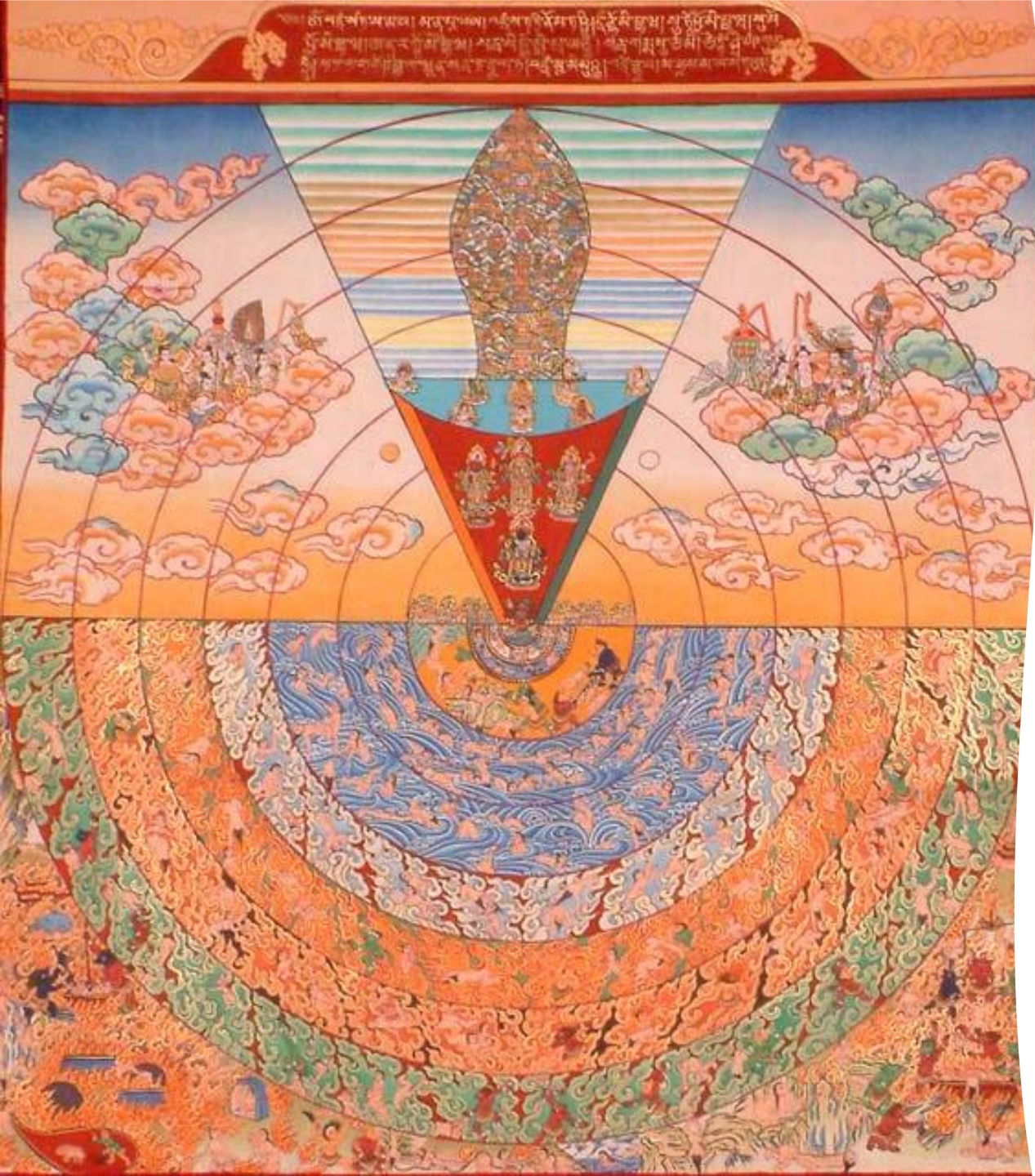
Sho, Dice and other Tibetan use of divination
in everyday life

The Mentsikhang – exploring the connection
between astrology and medicine

Divination and Diagnosis in Tibetan
worldviews



Indo-Tibetan Cosmology and Deity Presences



Indo-Tibetan Cosmology

- Deity Loka

- The whole mandala-like structure of Mount Sumeru constitutes a cakkavala, or world system
- Mount Meru, 84,000 yojanas high (a yojana is c. 3-17.5 miles)
- Halfway up Mt Meru is the Heaven of the Four Great Kings and at its peak Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods presided over by Sakka, their king and the overlord of the terrestrial realm.
- Surrounding Mt Meru are 7 circular ranges of mountains, each one half the height of the preceding one, separated by circular seas
- The whole area is surrounded by the world ocean and by a steep range of iron cliffs, forming the wall of the world
- In the outermost ocean are the four great continents, too far apart for human navigation – we inhabit the southern continent of Jambudipa, the Rose-Apple Land



Naga नाग – Guardians of the Heavens

- *nāga* inhabit *nāgaloka* and also various parts of the human-inhabited earth - some are water-dwellers, living in streams or the ocean; others are earth-dwellers, living in caverns
- They can be conceived of as followers of Virūpākṣa (Pāli: Virūpakkha), one of the Four Heavenly Kings who guard the western direction in the Mount Meru scheme of cosmos
- As guardians of Mount Meru, protecting the gods of the 33 heavens (Trāyastriṃśa) from attack by the jealous gods, the *asura*



Cosmologies and Deity Presences

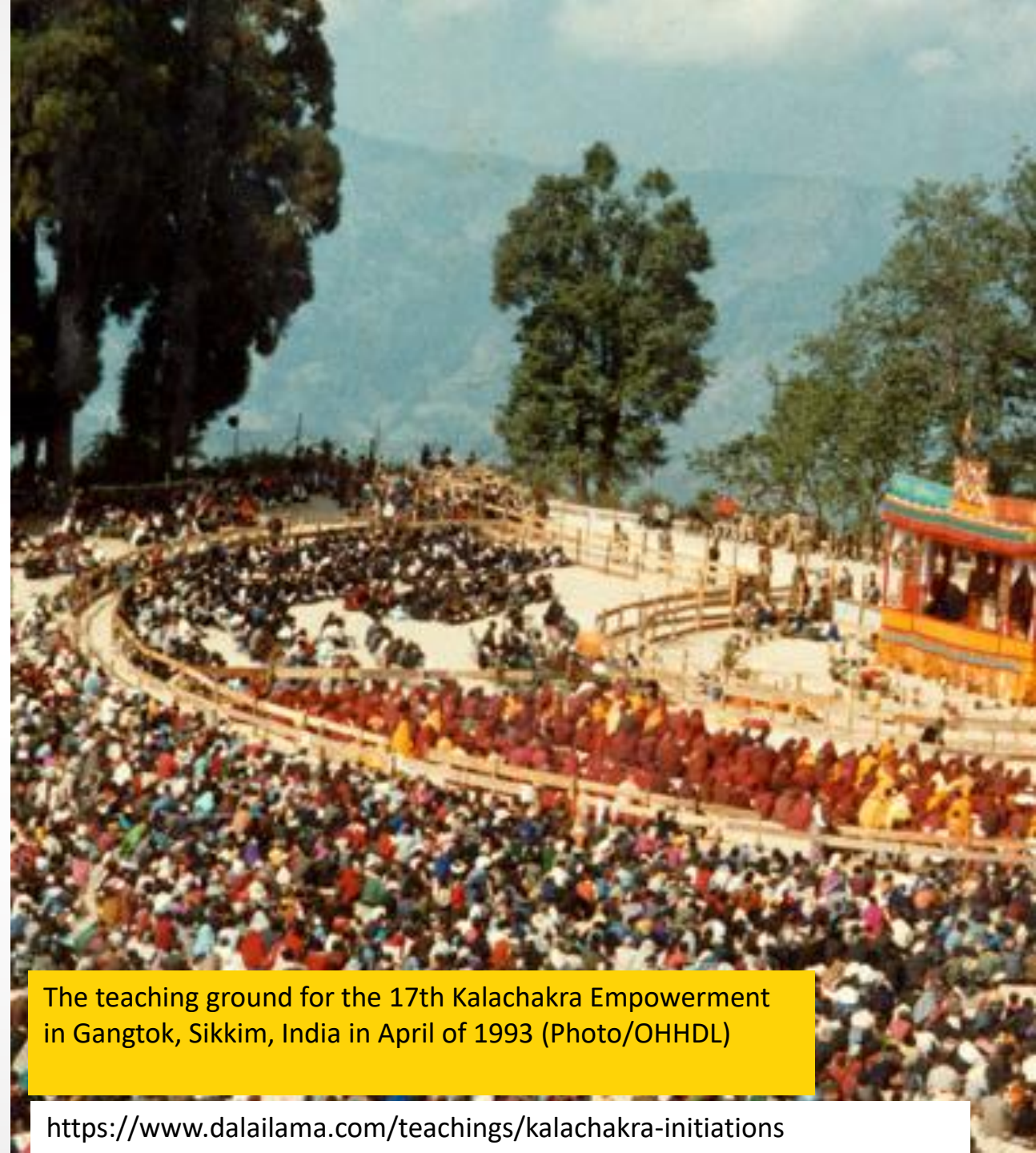
- Nagārjuna, around the 2nd Century CE, is attributed as founder of Madhyamaka Buddhist philosophy
- As can be seen from the image, he taught *nāga* alongside human students and this is normal within context of Indo-Tibetan understandings of identity and existence

The Kālacakra (Wheel of Time) tantra – Astrology and Divination

*Note that the diacritical rendition of the Sanskrit कालचक्र – Kālacakra – is pronounced 'Kaalachakra'

The history of the Kālacakra ཏཱ་བླ་འཁོར་ལོ།

- On the full moon of March/April, the twelfth month counted from the time he obtained buddhahood, the Buddha was teaching the Paramitayana at Mount Vulture Heap. At the same time he manifested another form inside the great stupa of Shri Dhanyakataka, which is near Shri Parvata in south India where he taught the Mantrayana.
- The great stupa was more than six leagues from top to bottom, and inside it the Buddha emitted two mandalas: below the mandala of Dharmadhatu Vagishvara, above the great mandala of the splendid asterisms. The Buddha was in the centre on the Vajra lion throne in the great Mandala of the Sphere of Vajra, the abode of great bliss. He was absorbed in the Kalachakra samadhi, and stood in the form of the Lord of the mandala.
- The excellent entourage within the mandala consisted of a host of Buddhas, bodhisattvas, furies, gods, naga, and goddesses. Outside the mandala the requestor was the emanated body of Vajrapani, King Suchandra of Shambhala. He had miraculously come to Shri Dhanyakataka from Shambhala, and he requested the Kalachakra for the entourage of listeners: the ninety-six emanated satraps of the ninety-six great lands within Shambhala, together with a limitless host of fortunate bodhisattvas, gods, demons, and others.
- The Kālachakra continued to be transmitted through the succession of kalkis ("chieftains") of Shambhala, and eventually it was reintroduced into India.



The teaching ground for the 17th Kalachakra Empowerment in Gangtok, Sikkim, India in April of 1993 (Photo/OHHDL)

Tibetan Deity Yoga: Ritual Process

- Preparatory phase – preparing grounds and
- evocation of the Lineage for inspiration and blessing (refuge)
- Elimination of obscuration/defilements to view (purification)
- Setting the motivation - bodhicitta (well-being)
- Front and Self Generation (Imagination)
- Dissolution, Offerings to protectors, Ablution,
- Dedication (well-being)



Tibetan Deity Yoga:

Core Aspects and Process

- Initiatory lineage – coded texts (tantra)
- Purification
- Imagination – Visualisation
- Macro/micro correspondence
- Mandala cosmos
- Union with the divine

The Kālacakra (Wheel of Time) tantra

- The symbol of the Kālacakra is composed of three figures and seven Sanskrit letters. It is said to possess the highest divine meaning and an immeasurably magical force.



Astrology and the Kālacakra

- There are a number of astrological traditions in Tibet, with lineages tied to Chinese, Indian, and indigenous Tibetan astronomical systems.
- Tibetan Astrology represents a profound synthesis of diverse knowledge, navigated and codified by leading Tibetan thinkers throughout the millennia.
- Notable for its astrological frame, earlier textual renditions of the Kālacakratantra were likely in circulation by the 10th century CE with current redaction and its commentary, the Vimalabrahmā ('Stainless Light'), in place by the 11th century CE.
- Within the Kālacakra mandala are 722 cosmological deity figures identified with elements, planets & stars - the highly complex structure of the mandala is thus interwoven with the rhythms of the heavens (c. Wallace 2004)



The Nechung Oracle and other Tibetan Traditions of Oracular Divination

The Nechung Temple, Lhasa

There are a number of oracular traditions within the Himalaya of which the Nechung is but one.

The word "oracle" is used by Tibetans to refer to a presence who possesses a medium in order to access the phenomenal natural world and the subtle spiritual realms.

Nechung Oracle is a medium of Peihar Gyalpo. Peihar is a powerful Dharma protector. Dorje Drakden (Nechung)

the Nechung Oracle plays a principal role in State and those concerning the protection of the Dalai Lamas (from the time of the 5th)

Medium can be known as *kuten*, which literally means, "the physical basis". Post-possession, the medium may require a lengthy recovery period.



The Nechung Oracle Temple and Statue at Drepung Monastery, Lhasa, TAR, PRC

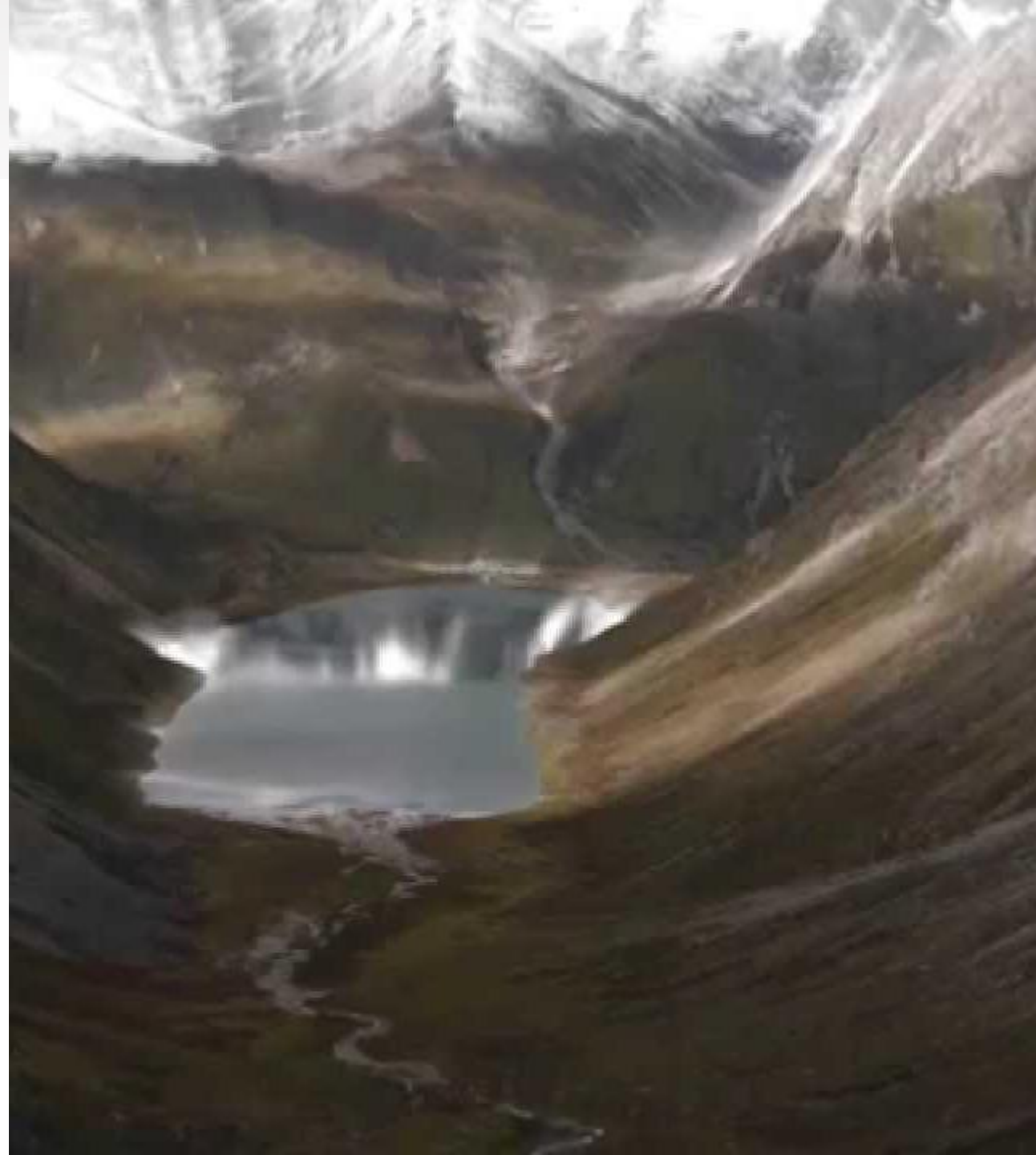
The Nechung Oracle

- The Nechung Oracle in trance during the long-life offering to the Dalai Lama at Tsuglakhang Temple in McLeod Ganj, India, on 17 May 2019. The people and deities of Tibet offered the long-life prayer to the Dalai Lama.



Lhamolhatso - the Lake of the Goddess

- Palden Lhamo's clairvoyance is manifested in her ability to predict the time and place of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama, whom she protects.
- Lake Lhamolhatso, her lake, is visited by high officials and lamas after the death of each Dalai Lama, and she is consulted there
- signs and visions appear on the surface of the lake. Examining this information, high lamas interpret clues about where and when the next Dalai Lama will be reincarnated. (for the search preceding recognition of the present Dalai Lama (Goldstein 1989, Kundun)
- Instead of Palden Lhamo herself, *dPal Idan dmag zor ma*, one of her emanations, may often be evoked (e.g. *Don kun grub pa*), though the nature of these two are identical.



Sho, Dice and other
Tibetan use of divination
in everyday life



Sho, Dice (Mo) divination in everyday life

Mo (dice divination) has been used for centuries

a Mo manual was composed by Jamgon Ju Mipham Gyaltso (a famed Nyingmapa school scholar), involving Mañjuśrī, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom

This manual is based primarily upon the Kālacakra Tantra with supplementary explanations from the 'Ocean of Dakini'

In Mo divination, the dice is rolled with a question in mind, the outcome will show an answer in the prediction manual

However, as with all divination and oracular traditions, this prediction may need some interpretation

The Bodhisattva Manjusri is said to influence Mo divination

Palden Lhamo

- Palden Lhamo is a protector goddess of the Dalai Lamas, and the supreme guardian deity of Tibet, particularly of its capital, Lhasa.
- This wrathful goddess is believed to have the clairvoyant power of seeing the future, and also, even the capability to “determine the karmic outcome of any situation” (Beer 2003: 158)
- Two or three dice are attached to her body as “magical weapons” (ibid.) with which to conduct divine deeds. If someone can successfully evoke the goddess in dice divination (Mo), it is believed possible to predict the future according to the numbers of the thrown dice, empowered as it is by Palden Lhamo’s blessings.
- Thus, religious specialists employ dice divination for various purposes, such as determining the cause of sickness for followers, prescribing treatment, and predicting the prospects for a marriage.



Sho – the game of the goddess

'*sho*, a gambling game with dice is considered as an embodiment of the divine wills of Palden Lhamo or other subordinate supernatural beings and so it is used for social determinations, such as to elect a new chief of the valley (Walsh 1906: 303-8); to judge a difficult court case (Henderson 1964); to decide the allocation of pasture land and order of distribution of irrigation water (Bauer 2004: 55-7); to call back one's soul from a demon in a ritual for soul-retrieval (Ramble 2009); and to demonstrate the victory of Buddhism and the Dalai Lama in the national festival called *tshogs mchod* (Yamaguchi 1987: 316-8).'

Murakami 2013



Turtle Divination

- A Tibetan Turtle Divination Chart for the Purpose of Finding Lost Objects. Dunhuang; 9th-10th century. Ink on paper. British Library. Or.8210/S.6878
- This chart, along with other Tibetan divination charts, is found at the back of a *Prajnaparamita Sutra* scroll written in Chinese
- The earliest known Sino-Tibetan turtle divination manuscript comes from Dunhuang (Sam van Schaik)
- Known in Tibet as the Great Golden Turtle (Maha gser gyi rus sbal)
- The turtle often features in Tibetan mytho-histories and divinatory practices
- The turtle prevents trouble and bad luck as a manifestation of Manjusrī
- It is traditionally shown lying on its back, with its head in the south and tail in the north

Yoeli-Tlalim (2014)



The Rebgong Spirit Mediums

- The Leru is a spirit medium festival held across Tibetan Buddhist villages of the Rebgong Valley (site of my doctoral field research) at harvest time
- It is predominantly aimed towards appeasing and receiving advice from the local Mountain Gods -warrior figures and yullha (local deities, regional area gods) based in ancestral legends of the region and considered to be protectors of the lands and communities
- Each village has a designated spirit medium who enters trance and receives offerings/gives predictions as the Mountain God during the festival



The Rebgong Spirit Mediums

► As can be seen in this video clip, here the possession is not that of a Buddhist protector deity, but of a mountain deity; a local deity. Yet this practice is performed by Buddhist villages and their local lamas acknowledge the influence of the Mountain deities on pragmatic levels.

► The festival is called Leru (klu rol), after the ལུ - a serpentine/water deity/spirit known as nāga in Sanskrit

► It is particularly important to keep in good relations with the nāga in order to avoid sickness and ill fortune.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIB5gALmu_g

(5.30 mins) – dance for the *le* 2.10 on this clip

Divination and Tibetan Deity Yoga: The Tantric Seer and Adept

- Initiatory lineage – coded texts (tantra) outlining deity yoga
- Realisation a process of becoming, embodying deity
- Adepts in Tantric practice develop deity-like capacities, such as other realms, clairvoyance and divination – also power over the nāga and other local deities



Divination and the use of Amulets

- Lay tantric practitioners famed throughout Tibetan regions for their powerful healing powers gained through tantric practice. This nukwa of Rebgong is performing ritual over an amulet to help a woman conceive.



Photo - Dawn Collins, 2010

The Mentsikhang – exploring the connection between astrology and medicine

The Mentsikhang

- The word mentsikhang means ‘men’: medicine, ‘tsi’: astrology, ‘khang’: house
- All traditional doctors will be tantric practitioners who utilise astrology in their production of medicines and their prescribed treatments.



Astrology and Medical Practice

- Since ancient times, astrology has been an indispensable sister-science to traditional medicine in Tibetan cultural regions, offering practitioners a valuable glimpse at underlying energetic and elemental forces that might otherwise be hidden from view.
- Tibetan Medicine is one of the few traditional medical systems to still maintain a close connection between these two sciences, united under a cohesive Indo-Tibetan cosmological framework.
- The image shown on the left is of a *Sipaho* Protective Painting. Note the turtle (bottom centre), the deity Manjusri (top centre) - who legend holds taught astrology at Wutaishan - and the kālacakra symbol (centre).
- Image: Tibet; late 18th century. Pigments on cloth; 125.1 x 92 em. Rubin Museum of Art. C2006.71.11 (HAR 65764)

(Yoeli-Tlalim 2014)



Divination and Diagnosis in Tibetan worldviews

Diagnosis, Divination, both or neither?

Consider...

- the role of divination in Tibetan traditional medicine. For example, the chapters of the medical tantras on spirit harm etc., pulse and tongue diagnosis
- Health-seeking practices as represented by the case study in my thesis – Domba the homeless wanderer (<https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/89371/>)
- Divination as key to health-seeking practices





To return to some of the questions raised at the start...

- What form do Tibetan oracular responses take?
- What roles does the interpreter play in divination?
- What role does divination play in Tibetan reincarnation lineages?
- What role does divination play in Tibetan medicine?

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Student Activity for Next Week's Seminar: Magic, Medicine, Religion and Divination in Ancient Greece

Ars longa, vita brevis

'The art is long, but life is short.' This famous Hippocratic aphorism, well known in both its Latin and English translation, is actually the beginning of a longer quotation in Greek, translated as:

'Life is short, but the art is great, the opportune moment fleeting, experimentation perilous, discernment difficult' (trans. D. G. Greenbaum)

Note: 'art' translates the Greek *techne*, which can also mean 'craft' (and from which our word technology comes). The phrase 'opportune moment' translates the Greek *kairos*. 'Discernment' translates *krisis* (from the verb *krino*, judge, discern, distinguish, decide)

Think about this quotation in regard to divination and medicine. How do medicine, rituals and doing things at the right time relate to the practice of medicine in its physical and spiritual aspects? Is there a spiritual aspect to medicine, or is it purely the physical application of remedy and treatment? What do you think the writer of the aphorism intended?