

## **External Examiner’s Report on the Dissertation of Anna Sehnalová**

### **“ The Bonpo Mendrup (sMan sgrub) Ritual: Its Medicine, Texts, Traceable History, and Current Practice “**

Submitted in 2018 at the **Department of South and Central Asia (Study Programme: History and Cultures of Asia and Africa)**

#### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

[It is advisable that the summary provided here should be no longer than one paragraph in length (longer summaries are superfluous as both an abstract and an author’s overview are mandatory components of the dissertation).]

This thesis offers a complete translation of an ‘accomplishing medicine,’ or *mendrup*, ritual text and a day-by-day ethnographic description of this Bonpo consecration rite going back to the 13th century, that took place at a Bonpo monastery in Kathmandu in 2012. The analysis focuses on the different corpi of knowledges that come together in this rite (medical, tantric, Buddhist, indigenous Tibetan). Over five chapters the thesis comprehensively discusses the textual history of the rite, the translation of the main ritual text, its contemporary practice, the ingredients used for compounding the *mendrup* substance, and the various healing properties.

#### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

[It is advisable that the evaluation of the overall level of achievement provided at this point should be about a paragraph long. A brief evaluation of this kind is particularly helpful in the case of longer reports, since the examiner’s overall opinion on the quality of the dissertation can be clearly expressed here, before a more detailed analysis of the individual aspects of the dissertation is provided.]

This thesis presents original data in the form of a well-done translation of a Tibetan ritual texts into English and a well-structured historical and contemporary contextualisation of the entire practice. Enormous amount of work went into collecting and assessing the *mendrup* texts, their lineages and historical sources, supported by detailed fieldwork and interviews with contemporary masters and practitioners of this rite. Together this

presents an innovative and original piece of work that contributes to our textual, historical, and medical understanding of ‘accomplishing medicine’ or *mendrup* practices of the Bon Tibetan world.

### III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects

[Please provide a detailed evaluation of the dissertation. Among other things, this evaluation should consider the criteria listed below (preferably providing examples from the text to illustrate all critical points).

You can either organise your comments separately, according to the individual criteria, or formulate a longer overall summary addressing all the criteria at once.

1. **Structure of the argument** [Is the argumentation lucid throughout? Is it always clear what the author is attempting to express and why he/she is doing so at specific instances in the text? Is the dissertation clearly structured? Is the dissertation aimed at achieving a clearly set objective and is the author successful in following this objective?]

The author clearly set her objectives in the introduction and follows them throughout the thesis. Each chapter brings forth interesting and original findings, which are highlighted appropriately and summarized again in the conclusion, hinting to necessary further research and accentuating the importance of the findings in the wider field of *mendrup*, Buddhist, and Bon ritual studies. The five chapters provide a sensible structure for the very diverse material. Dividing the enormous amount of data into historical (ch. 1), ethnographic, including the economic dimensions of the ritual (ch. 2), textual (ch. 3), medical (ch. 4), and the complex approaches to the healing potential attributed to *mendrup*, including its political interpretations (ch. 5) show that the author achieved a clear comprehension and overview not only of the textual material but also of the contemporary socio-political importance of the practice, and was able to present it in a well-structured manner.

2. **Formal aspects of the dissertation** [Is the author coherent in the use of abbreviations, syntax of bibliographical references, transcriptions of foreign terms, etc.? Are the footnotes formatted correctly? Is the language of the dissertation grammatically correct and free of linguistic infelicities? Is the dissertation visually well-presented, and graphically well-formatted?]

The formal aspects of the thesis are well done for the most part. The formatting of footnotes is coherent and the use of bibliographical references is consistent. The Wylie

transliteration has been used with high accuracy and phonetic transcription were added where necessary. The English language is not always grammatically correct and would require proof-reading before publication. Some language errors are confusing (e.g.: p. 218: the use of ethnic instead of ethical; p. 346: the double use of font 10). However, the flaws in language did not hamper my understanding of the content. The addition of 27 figures and 16 tables, including a sketch of the ritual mandala which explains the positioning of substances according the cardinal points are well done and add to the overall understanding of the more complex aspects of the thesis. Abbreviations for long-titled ritual texts have been adequately and consistently used. I appreciate how the author handled the very difficult issue of adding botanical identifications of the substances used. The author is clearly aware of the pitfalls of applying scientific names as a given equivalent for Tibetan substances names (p. 179-181), and limited her identifications where possible to the geographical area of Lower Mustang and the surroundings of Jharkot village in Nepal that Amchi Nyima, who was responsible for the preparation and compounding of the *mendrup*, relied on. It should have been questioned that Amchi Nyima used a Tibetan book of *materia medica* identification that was published in Chamdo, Eastern Tibet, offering substance identifications from a very different geographical area.

The appendixes are useful. For a future publication Appendix 3 should be changed into a proper glossary of technical terms. The twenty pages of Wylie transliteration of the *mendrup* ritual text in Appendix 4 are a useful reference and also point out differences of spellings across the three manuscript versions used. The coloured photographs in appendix 5 add a necessary and beautiful visual component to the thesis.

The column for weight proportions of substances in percentages in Table 4 and 5 should be deleted since no information has been included.

3. **Use of sources and/or material** [Does the author work transparently with secondary sources? Are all relevant sources made use of? Are the primary sources used properly and reference made to their original language wherever appropriate? Are the sources employed in a methodologically correct manner? If the dissertation is based on data collection, is the methodology used for data collection and analysis coherent? Are all the individual steps in data analysis justified and well executed? Is the method of data collection and processing in line with the main

research question or hypotheses tested? Does the interpretation of the results proposed by the author follow from the results of the empirical research or sources on which the work relies?

The dissertation is based on original data collection in the field during several visits to Kathmandu. Follow-up interviews were done with key informants to check difficult passages of the translation and open questions. Data analysis has been well executed. The methodology used in the field as well as during the translation process of the ritual text follow standard anthropological and philological practice with an emphasis on the translation. The three available manuscripts of the ritual were used for translation and differences have been highlighted during the analysis. The fieldwork data is descriptive and is meant to support the textual translation and analysis of the data. The author clearly and correctly demarcates her use of ethnographic methods from the discipline of Anthropology, for which a deeper theoretical analysis would have been required. The interpretation of results are based on both textual and ethnographic data, which provides a more complete picture of the *mendrup* practice. Primary sources were divided into those related to the *mendrup* ritual and other Tibetan sources and their existing English translations, which is useful for future researchers. Secondary sources have been used adequately to highlight and contextualise the analysis of the textual data presented. Results are thus based primarily on the original translation of the ritual text and the accompanying research conducted by the author.

4. **Personal contribution to the subject** [Is the dissertation merely a compilation of information, or does the author employ the primary and secondary sources to propose an original, organically formulated contribution to the field?]

This dissertation comprises an original contribution to the field, since it presents for the first time a thorough description, analysis, as well as a textual translation of the Bon *mendrup* practice dating to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and as it has survived in the exile Bon community in Nepal. Of special value is the translation and analysis of the medicinal ingredients used to compound the blessed *mendrup* substance. A mere textual translation would have been confusing and would have ignored the complex contemporary practices of identification, the use of substitutions, the skipping of ingredients, and dealing with corrupted parts of the ritual texts that practitioners have to assess and deal with to prepare the *mendrup* medicine. Interviews with practitioners

and translation of commentaries on the ingredients are an essential contribution to our understanding of the medical side of this rite. The description of the actual *mendrup* ingredient mixing, fermenting, drying, etc. and the use of the ‘fermenting yeast’ is a valuable and detailed ethnographic description and very useful for future comparative studies.

The historical assessment and the dating of the translated ritual text is of value to Tibetan and Oriental Studies and offers comprehensive examples of the early interrelationships between Sowa Rigpa medical and Buddhist/Bon ritual overlaps of healing practices and attitudes to potency (*nus pa*) and a deep integration of substances into an existing cosmological order.

Original findings of the thesis are (with one exception, see below) clearly summarized in the conclusions. They relate to the high degree of continuity of the *mendrup* practice since the 14<sup>th</sup> century due to the reliance by the Bonpo community on one key commentary by Nyö Tsültrim Gyeltsen from the 14th century, which has been elaborated on but not changed in principle over time. The increased awareness of animal welfare and vegetarianism, as well as issues of endangered species, have however, changed the contemporary use of substances significantly, details of which emerged only during the ethnographic research. The ethnographic description of the *mendrup* practice thus presents detailed material for further comparison with other *mendrup* practices in different schools of Tibetan Buddhism and will be of great value to scholars working on other *mendrup* rituals from both religious and medical perspectives.

#### IV. Questions for the author

[You may wish to propose several questions for the doctoral candidate to address at the defence. It is possible to do so in the form of a more extensive critical analysis of the dissertation. However, if you do so, you are advised to arrange your main questions into separate points.]

The only issue I was confused about reading through the thesis and that in my view requires a much clearer presentation is the use of animal and human parts. Here is my more critical analysis of that aspect of the thesis, followed by two questions for the candidate to be addressed during the defence:

What is missing in the introduction to the recipe translation in chapter 4 is an outline and a critical assessment of the use of animal and human substances. In several instances it is not clear which of the human and animals substances were actually used or skipped. While the commentary of Amchi Nyima clarifies some of the animal substance identification (p. 187-189), it does not tell us right then whether the substance was actually used. It would be helpful to add this to the commentary of the formula. The author later develops the argument that the five-fold cosmological order in the *mendrup* text offers a form of classification of animal and human substances (p. 243) and “provides a rich tool of the Tibetan Bonpo communities to conceptualise and classify the natural world around them.” (p. 249). Does this mean they only have a symbolic potency? While the classification argument makes sense, it does not answer the practical questions of how and if these substances were actually used. The author only mentions that the five tantric substances (blood, sperm, flesh, excrement, and urine) were excluded but did not mention the reasons why (p. 255). Only two animal parts (musk and porcupine pines) were substituted by plants (p. 255). After having been presented with the entire formula translation, wondering whether these partially obscure animal ingredients are actually used or not, we learn only on p.256 that during the 2012 mendrup animal parts were **not** substituted, though a list of possible substitutes was available. Similarly, on p. 257 the author states that meat did not need to be substituted. At this point, I was under the impression that animal ingredients were included as mentioned. However, on p. 258 we read that “animal and human body parts can be during the preparation either skipped, **as Amchi Nyima mostly did**, or substituted by a plant or mineral ingredient, or also by a more easily obtainable flesh (here vulture instead of human), as advised by the manual and in two cases dealt with by Amchi Nyima.” Only chapter 5 further clarifies the use of animal substances, which should at least be highlighted at the beginning of chapter 4 and also included in the commentary of the recipe.

“The substances excluded in total represented almost half of the recipe list” (p. 255) is a considerable amount. Only on p. 287 is it clarified that these were mostly animal and human substances. Chapter 5 states that animals are considered as recipients of the blessed *mendrup* substances (p. 277, 283, 284ff), which is then discussed with the author’s informants, who live in a vegetarian monastery. Their differing views on the extensive use

of animal substances in the formula itself seem to point to a fundamental change in *mendrup* practices, which should have been taken up again in the conclusion.

**Questions for the viva:**

1. Since animal ingredients were apparently ignored in the recipe, did this lead to a more symbolic interpretation of their usage in the *mendrup* ritual and actually influenced the author's symbolic interpretation of animal substances as a method of classification according to cardinal directions? Please elaborate.
2. How were the apparently 'empty' spaces of animal ingredients in the cardinal directions 'filled,' since no substitutes were used? On page 77 the author mentions "paper images" of animals but it is not clear whether these replaced the actual substances. Please clarify.

And finally a suggestion for some further research to include in future publications: Since the author drew some comparison between the *mendrup* ritual text and the medical compendium the *Four Treatises* (*rGyud bzhi*) or the *Bumzhi* (*'Bum bzhi*), I wonder if the classifications of the use of animal and human substances in chapter 20 of the Explanatory Tantra would shed some more light on the use of animals in the *mendrup* text. Even though the way of classifying the substances in the *Four Treatises* seem to differ from the *mendrup* text (the *Four Treatises* mentions, for example, invertebrates), the extensive use of animal and human substance in 13/14<sup>th</sup> century medical and *mendrup* texts might point to shared ideas regarding their potencies beyond their classificatory or symbolic use. Moreover, a comparison with the recent work by Catherine Despeux on the influence of Buddhism on the use of animal products, specifically feces, in medieval China might point to a larger network of shared ideas of animal substance use in recipes beyond the Tibetan world (Despeux, Catherine. 2017. "Chinese Medicinal Excrement. Is There a Buddhist Influence on the Use of Animal Excrement-Based Recipes in Medieval China?" *Asian Medicine* no. 12 (1-2): 139-169. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15734218-12341390>).

## V. Conclusion

[Please conclude your report with the following standardised formulation (which can be elaborated upon as needed, clarified, or prefaced with a more extensive summative evaluation):]

The conclusion of your report must include the following:

1. An unambiguous statement as to whether the work submitted meets the standard customarily required of a doctoral dissertation;
2. An explicit statement as to whether you recommend the dissertation for a public defence;
3. A proposed assessment of the dissertation, i.e. a grade of "Pass" or "Fail".

This work submitted meets the standard customarily required of a doctoral dissertation. It clearly meets the standard for a public defence. I recommend the submitted dissertation with the tentative grade of "Pass."

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