

Beyond the Secret (*gsang ba*): The Performativity of Citation in an Exile Tibetan Buddhist Ritual

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the Nechung *kang-so* (*bskang gso*), a ritual performed at Nechung monastery in exile, and deemed *secret* (*gsang ba*) by the monks. In my interactions with the monks, this *secret* presented itself as an unremitting series of contradictions and conundrums. I attempt here to portray and understand them. I posit that the *secret* invoked an implicit “cultural concept” (Silverstein 2004), namely, the *kang-so*’s transmissibility. For the *kang-so*’s transmission within the monastery involved a specific semiotics of authorization, rooted in a karmic ethic. To reveal the *secret* to me was to extricate the esoteric ritual from that traditional “social organization of interdiscursivity,” and the ethic shaping it (Gal 2018). The monks’ citations of the esoteric ritual, whereby they spoke to me of the *secret*, thus performed an alteration in the *kang-so*’s transmissibility, a reorganization of the esoteric ritual’s interdiscursivities, toward enabling its “circulation” among academic publics.

bshad ma chog pa de la gsang ba zer gyi red¹

—Ven. Tenzin Gaphel, Nechung monk

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1. “The secret is that of which one may not speak.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. My research focused on the *kang-so* ritual and thus involved “classical Tibetan,” that is, the written language

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The Nechung *kang-so* (*gnas chung bskang gso*) is a Tibetan Buddhist ritual, performed to propitiate the Nechung deity and exhort him to protect the Dalai Lama, the Buddhist faith, and the people of Tibet. It is performed daily at Nechung monastery in Dharamsala, in the Himalayan foothills. At the start of my fieldwork, the monks were unanimous: The *kang-so* was *secret* (*gsang ba*); I could not study it.²

My fieldwork at the monastery in exile, spread out between 2001 and 2010, totaled some two and a half years. All through those years, all I encountered in relation to the *kang-so* was the *secret*, concealed from me during the first half of my fieldwork and then gradually, to some extent, revealed in the second. I heard tell of a Tibetan man and an occidental woman, researchers both, who had visited the monastery in previous decades, separately, attempting to study the *kang-so*. Illness and insanity, inflicted by the wrathful deity it was said, had forced each to abandon the attempt. I also learned that the monks themselves did not particularly speak of the *secret* in relation to their own study and practice of the *kang-so*: A teacher to the novice monks once explained that the latter were taught the *kang-so* in their first years at the monastery but that they were not taught that it was *secret*. A first conjecture regarding the *secret* then is that, for it to appear, an outsider had to be involved. The *secret* might thus seem to possess a “sociological form,” distinguishing Nechung monk from outsider (Simmel 1906, 463).

From start to finish, the *secret* presented itself to me as an incessant, inexorable series of conundrums. I introduce it here in like fashion, drawing together ethnographic bits and pieces, casting about for coherence, with a view to crafting an answer to the question: what was the *secret*?

I discovered early on that a copy of the *kang-so* scripture was publicly available at the nearby Tibetan library.³ Bemused, since I had been denied access to it within the monastery, I mentioned this to the Nechung Medium, a key authority figure, but he appeared unconcerned. This particular conundrum resolved itself somewhat once I started studying the ritual: I learned that the *secret*, in the first instance, indexed an intricate poetic patterning of the rituals that formed a *kang-so* performance. For the *kang-so* consisted in a number of separate rituals, the sequencing of these within the monks' performance being different from the sequence

of the scriptures (Miller 1976, 103–25; Agha 1993, 109–11). Dialectal variations at the monastery not being salient here, I represent Tibetan citations using the Wylie (1959) transliteration system and in roman. Where phonetic renderings are mentioned, they follow the spelling suggestions of the Tibetan and Himalayan Library tool (<http://thlib.org/reference/transliteration/>).

2. I use the italicized form *secret* to refer to and index the notion of “*gsang ba*” that I encountered at the monastery in exile. The unitalicized form, “secret,” indexes the general, cross-ethnographic notion.

3. The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

printed within the scripture. One of the monks said this was a means of preserving the *secret* despite the scripture's public accessibility.

The conundrums, however, did not cease there. Several monks indicated that specific rituals within the *kang-so* had to be kept *secret*.⁴ One reason cited was that outsiders might otherwise develop “wrong views” (*log lta*). Now the verses of a number of those rituals had long been cited in various academic publications. Yet, when I mentioned that to one of my main *kang-so* teachers, the Ven. Tenzin Gaphel, he was carelessly dismissive. A second conjecture to which this seems to point is that, for the secret to appear, a Nechung monk had to be involved. If the monks were not involved—as they were not in case of those published works or the placement of the scripture in the library—there was apparently no *secret* per se.

On one occasion, I baldly asked the Ven. Tenzin Gaphel what the *secret* was. His reply, delivered with a slight chortle, was that the secret was that of which one may not speak, cited in the epigraph. The context of his statement included the fact that he, the Nechung monk, was the holder of the *secret*, of which he could not, would not speak to me, the outsider. His words instance the third conjecture: The secret appeared in interaction.

Combining the three conjectures, we have the beginnings of a sketch of the *secret* at Nechung in exile: The *secret*—only partially explained by the poetic patterning that it indexed, of the *kang-so*'s rituals—appeared in interactions involving the Nechung monks, as speakers, and an outsider, as addressee. Interaction is, of course, precisely the focus that many anthropological studies of secrecy have adopted in their departure from Georg Simmel's model. For Simmel, secrecy's sociological form was adequately understood once the distinction between secret holders and outsiders was clear (1906, esp. 463–64). The conundrums I encountered, mentioned above with more to follow, indicate that this does not suffice to understand the *secret*. Post-Simmelian studies of secrecy have stressed the need to study communication and language in use (Bellman 1984, esp. 140–44; Luhrmann 1989, 153ff.; Zempléni 1996), examining the range of metapragmatic regimentations shaping secrets in interaction, from explicit stipulations (Silverstein 2009; Mahmud 2012) to implicit, co-occurring configurations of signs (Masquelier 1993; Bonhomme 2018). Anthropologists have thus focused on the actualized states mediating secrets: objects (Myers 2002; Gal 2017, 143–45; Wirtz 2018), from bodies to books (Jones 2011; Vapnarsky 2021), narrative, and writing (Robbins 2001; Déléage 2013; Debenport 2015), including the anthropological

4. In at least some cases, the injunction concerned a ritual printed within the *kang-so* scripture that did not require changes in sequencing within the ritual performance. It would thus seem that it was specifically the *contents* of that ritual that had to be kept *secret*.

representation itself (Debenport 2015, 141; Hartikainen 2019; see Jones 2014, 56–60, for an overview). These analyses inflect mine.⁵

Further conundrums, however, presented themselves. If the monks had been unanimous regarding the *secret* at the start of my field years, by the end, the situation had changed starkly. Their unanimity had vanished, to be replaced by a veritable cacophony of views. For some monks, none of the *kang-so*'s rituals were *secret*. For others, some but not all were *secret*, though there was no consensus regarding which rituals were *secret*. Finally, a handful of monks considered that the *kang-so* was *secret* tout court and remained silent on it. One of them once explained his reason: he feared Nechung's wrath.

Simmel's notion of secrecy's sociological form breaks down in the face of the monks' plethora of views: The sociological diacritics discernible at the monastery (to be discussed) showed no clear correlation with the various views on the *secret*. Furthermore, there was little accord across the monks' views, the same ritual being deemed *secret* by some though not by others. Most disappointing of all, the plethora of views, ranging across the gamut as they did, dashed all hopes of an ethical anthropological representation of the *secret*.

The welter of conundrums for long stymied my analytic efforts. It finally pushed me to look beyond the *secret* in interaction.⁶ In doing so, I draw on Michael Silverstein's (2004) theorization of *cultural concepts*: Named notions and elicited taxonomies, Silverstein avers, can only get us so far in understanding the cultural conceptualizations on which people implicitly draw in discursive interaction. It is necessary to look, or listen, beyond surface linguistic forms, with a view to discerning the cultural concepts that lie implicit or immanent within language-in-use, and that are invoked or "summon[ed] to the here-and-now" by the use of words and expressions (634). He discusses the example of the cultural concept of "edibility" that is implicit in Thai villagers' taxonomies of animals (634–38; see also Silverstein 2013). Taking up Silverstein's proposition, I suggest that the *secret* is better understood as a surface form in interaction. The underlying cultural concept at issue was what I will term the *kang-so*'s *transmissibility*

5. Here, I cite theoretical trends manifest in the anthropology of secrecy, without referencing the Tibetanist literature on the subject. Researchers in the latter field, Tibetanist José Cabezon remarks, generally manifest a "principled reluctance" to adopt "grand theories" (2010, 13). Accepting these disciplinary predilections, I employ the literature of each to a different end, delving into (linguistic) anthropology for cross-ethnographic theoretical possibilities and drawing on Tibetan studies for comparative, contextual, ethnographic data.

6. This article is a second iteration of my writing on the *secret*, the first being my dissertation (Nair 2010). There, I adopted an ad hoc approach, describing the monks' disparate views on the *secret* and then arbitrarily adhering to the views of one of them, namely, the Nechung Medium. I was thus able to cite aspects of the *kang-so* ritual. While the dissertation is useful for its ethnographic data, I now find its approach unviable on both ethical and epistemological grounds, ignoring as it does the presenting ethnographic fact of the monks' plethora of views on the *secret*.

(divesting the word here of its standard medical connotations). It was this immanent cultural concept that bodied forth in the monks' diverse views on the *secret* in relation to my research and writing on the *kang-so*.

In Silverstein's model, cultural concepts are irreducibly "indexical," indexing inhabitable social roles and stances that participants may adopt interactionally, and "dialectical," shaping and shaped by macrocontextual factors (2004, 639, 644).⁷ This article unfolds below accordingly. I first discuss three aspects of the macrocontext that dialectically shaped the *kang-so*'s transmissibility: the monastery's context in exile; the conceptions of (collective) karma in terms of which the monks couched their notions of types of person; and the broader institution of tantric secrecy, the *kang-so* being a type of tantric ritual. I then discuss the microcontexts of the interactions focused on the *kang-so*—those involving the monks alone, which typically did not involve the *secret*, and those involving the monks and myself, which typically did. I focus on three aspects of these interactions: the artifactualized forms involved; the participation frameworks; and, crucially, the types of speech acts in which the monks engaged.

Various conundrums begin to resolve themselves. While the views on the *secret* did not clearly correlate with specific social typifications within the monastery, the cultural concept that it invoked, the *kang-so*'s transmissibility, does. The monks' plethora of views on the *secret* boil down to two principal types of speech acts: citation and silence. Each speech act performed a distinct stance relating to the *kang-so*'s transmissibility, being rooted in a specific ethic and semiotics of authorization: Silences performed the *kang-so*'s verses as being "undecontextualizable" (Fleming 2018), rooted in a karmic ethic and in the extant authorizing semiotics of the oral transmission lineage, within which the monks were embedded as recipients and transmitters of the *kang-so*. Citations, by contrast, articulated a gap that separated the ritual verses cited from the monks who cited them (see Nakassis 2013, e.g., 56–57). This citational gap enabled a new line of transmission that was grafted onto the extant transmission lineage (see Gal 2018, 16–21). Citations thus instantiated a new semiotics of transmission, rooted in an "ethic of estrangement," an ethic characterizing modern social imaginaries like publics (Warner 2005, 113). An analysis of the monks' speech acts permits me, in the end, to assess anew the ethics of my own anthropological representation

7. Silverstein subsequently reformulated his notion of cultural concepts in terms of the "trimodal semiotic" of signification—circulation—emanation (2013, 363). I draw on both formulations but rely to a greater extent on the notion of the cultural concept, since it really was the idea of looking (or hearing) beyond surface elicitations that helped me get a handle on the *secret* at Nechung. Additionally, "emanation" (*sprul pa*) is already a dedicated term in the Tibetan Buddhist register; I use it sparingly in its Silversteinian sense.

of the *secret*. Note that, in the interest of handling the *secret* delicately and to avoid the risk of denaturing it, I will refrain from citing the *kang-so*'s rituals for the present.⁸

Sociological Diacritics at Nechung in Exile

I begin my discussion of the macrocontext of the *kang-so*'s transmissibility with a description of the monastery in exile. I present its state of disarray and several diacritics distinguishing its monks, salient to understanding the *secret*.

Nechung at Dharamsala was a small monastery, its monks numbering between 70 and 100 during my years there. The original monastery was established near Lhasa in the seventeenth century (Thupten Phuntsok 2007, 3; Bell 2021, 129–30). Reestablished tenuously in exile over the 1970s and 1980s (Thupten Phuntsok 2007, 153–55), the monastery had become quite prosperous by the time of my research. This was due in part to the efforts of the Nechung Medium, a highly charismatic figure. More importantly, though, it was due to the importance accorded by the present, fourteenth Dalai Lama to the Nechung Oracle, that is, the Nechung deity, possessing and speaking through the Medium. The Nechung deity (*gnas chung chos skyong*, the Nechung Dharma Protector) has been oracularly consulted by the Dalai Lamas for several centuries, during the trance ritual (*spyan 'dren*), that is inserted, when required, into the *kang-so* ritual performance.⁹ These consultations were established anew in exile, with the Dalai Lama, the exile government (the Central Tibetan Administration), and other high lamas and associations regularly seeking the Oracle's advice (Nair 2010).¹⁰

Despite its prosperity, the monastery was in a fair state of disarray. Over my field years, it lost a number of monks, among them many trained *kang-so* practitioners and teachers. Two monks died, and others chose to leave for diverse

8. There were, furthermore, unspoken "public secrets" (Taussig 1999) relating to the *kang-so*, of which I do not speak. Additionally, I bracket the complex and violent "Shugden affair," also part of the *kang-so*'s macrocontext (Dreyfus 1998). Graham Jones (2014, 54) remarks appositely that the anthropology of secrecy is itself, perhaps inevitably, "a potentially recursive practice of knowledge transposition."

9. Macdonald (1978); Heller (1992; 1997, 118–21); Thupten Phuntsok (2007, 39–63); Bell (2021, 167–94). The government of the lineage of the Dalai Lamas began in the seventeenth century and ended in 2011, when the present Dalai Lama retired as the political head of Tibetans. The period of my research (2001–10) thus pertains to a specific historical moment, one that lasted from roughly 1959 (when the present Dalai Lama escaped into exile) until 2011. The possibly altered valence of the Nechung deity—and hence of the Nechung *kang-so*—since 2011 lies outside the scope of my research. On the post-2011 context in this regard, see Jigme Yeshe Lama (2018); Pema Choedon (2021); and also Mills (2018), who argues that little has changed despite the Dalai Lama's retirement.

10. On the widespread practice of oracular and divinatory consultation in Dharamsala, see Sidky (2011); Turpeinen (2019); in Tibet, see Makley (2018, 67–104). The Nechung Oracle is the most important of them all.

reasons.¹¹ The monastery supplemented its numbers by bringing in several batches of children, who joined as novice monks and spent 3–5 years memorizing Nechung’s ritual repertoire, including those of the *kang-so* (Thupten Ngodup et al. 2009, 298; Nair 2010, 301ff.). The ratio of senior monks to novice and less senior monks thus declined significantly over my years there.

Three sociological diacritics are relevant here: A first is the level of seniority. I use the labels *novice*, *less senior*, and *senior monk* as expedients. The monks whose views I discuss here were, in fact, all senior monks. They alone were entitled to express an opinion on the *secret* and my research, being trained *kang-so* practitioners who had typically held one or more positions of responsibility at the monastery, whether ritual, pedagogic, or administrative. They numbered around 20, and their ages ranged from the late twenties to the eighties. The oldest among them was the Ven. Thupten Phuntsok. Frail and ailing during my time there, he had previously been the monks’ main *kang-so* teacher and had occasionally conducted classes to instruct the adult monks on the profounder aspects of the *kang-so* (see Thupten Ngodup et al. 2009, 112–18). The other important senior monk was, of course, the Nechung Medium, the Ven. Thupten Ngodup (Thupten Ngodup et al. 2009). He played a key role in my research, as we will see below.¹²

A second diacritic was the life stage at which the individual had entered the monastery in exile—whether in his youth or as an adult monk, having fled his monastery in Tibet. Most of the former, but only some of the latter, had received the old monk’s teachings on the deeper aspects of the *kang-so* practice.

The third diacritic was then the monk’s receipt, or not, of the old monk’s advanced teachings on the *kang-so*. Once he became too frail to teach, and some years before his demise in 2008, the old monk set down his teachings (*khrid*) in writing. Another monk had audiotaped him reading the manuscript together with the *kang-so* scripture. Tapes and photocopies of the manuscript circulated within the monastery, though I did not attempt to find out to what extent or how the monks used them.¹³

Space constraints do not permit a thick description of the monks and their diverse views on the *secret* (see Nair 2010). Suffice it to say that there was no clear

11. On the vicissitudes of Tibetan monasticism in exile, see Dreyfus (2003, esp. 327); Nair (2010, esp. 51–52); Lempert (2012, esp. 163).

12. A third important figure was the Nechung Rinpoche, the monastery’s reincarnate lama. He was a shy, young boy at the time; we never spoke.

13. I do not discuss diacritics that did not differentiate the senior monks, such as the receipt of the Nechung life entrustment ritual (*gnas chung srog gtad*; Nair 2010, 291 n. 9). All the senior monks had received this ritual so that it could not be salient to understanding the differences of their views on the *secret*.

correlation between view of the *secret* and type of monk, distinguished in terms of the above diacritics. The *secret*'s sociological form within the monastery was, at best, obscure, no doubt inflected by the monastery's state of disarray and the heterogeneity of the monks' relationships with the Nechung *kang-so*.¹⁴

The Discourse on Karma at Nechung

A second salient aspect of the macrocontext was the discourse on karma (*las* in Tibetan). I encountered *karma* and its related terms in elicitation, in the *kang-so*'s verses, in documents pertaining to the consultation of the Nechung Oracle, and even beyond Nechung in the surrounding lay community (Nair 2010). *Karma* is best understood as one of a family of terms that pertain to what may be termed the underlying cultural concept of the "state of fortune" of individuals or groups.¹⁵ It was relevant to the *kang-so*, as the ritual could only be revealed to an "appropriate vessel" (*snod rung*), that is, a person who possessed adequate stores of karmic merit (*bsod nams kyi tshogs*). I mention two aspects of karma here: its potentially collective and its forever hidden nature.

First, the discourse at Nechung focused not merely on karma but on collective karma (*spyi mthun gyi las*), given the idea that social groupings on different scales could have a shared karma (Nair 2010, 339ff.; Mills 2015). This would explain why the monks appeared indifferent to publicly circulating artifacts relating to the Nechung *kang-so*—the scripture at the library, its contents cited in academic publications: They were not involved in the *kang-so*'s revelation in those instances; they were not part of the group to which accrued the collective karma thus generated.

14. Also within the further reaches of the macrocontext was the original Nechung monastery in Tibet (Bell 2021); see also Kapstein (2006) for a perspective on Tibet. The *kang-so*'s transmissibility, no doubt, had a very different shape there. That, however, lies outside the scope of my research. See, nevertheless, Tibetologist Christopher Bell's (2013, 2021) exquisite study of the historical and textual development of the cult of the Nechung deity. Bell indicates that Nechung suffered extensive damage during the Cultural Revolution and was much diminished when he visited. Its monks were eager to help him transcribe, scan, and photograph ancient documents and murals, with the goal of preserving them (2021, 139–41). Bell visited the monastery in exile several times and notes that the monks there were comparatively reticent, invoking the notion of secrecy in relation to at least one scripture (2013, 25–26, 37 n. 55; 2021, 24–25). However, he did not seek to study the ritual practice, which in my experience seemed to be the key locus of the *secret* (personal communication, March 2023; 2021, 99).

15. There are other contexts in which the term *karma* is less or scarcely used, this state of fortune being invoked using other terms or only implicitly. On "fortune," see da Col (2012); Makley (2018). On the host of terms relating to such fortune, see Norbu Chopel (1983); Cuevas (2008, 46–47); Cabezon (2010, 20–21); da Col (2012, esp. 78–81). On the variegations of karma specifically, see Lichter and Epstein (1983); Tillemans (1999, 29, 34 n. 13); Sonam Rinchen (2006); Thupten Ngodup et al. (2009, 195); Nair (2010, 97–98, 292–93); Mills (2015); Hartmann (2023). On collective (mis)fortune and collective karma on various scales of social and political grouping, see Nair (2010, 341ff.); da Col (2012, 86–88); Mills (2015); Makley (2018); Sihlé (2021, e.g., 169). Note also that I use the term *bad karma* as an expedient, to designate the karma accruing to sinful actions—wrong views, for example.

Second, karma is a “radically hidden” phenomenon (*shin tu lkog gyur*; see Tillemans 1999, 29). It is forever hidden from ordinary humans. Only its ripened effects are “manifest” (*mngon gyur*) to them, every single aspect of a person’s life and environment being the ripened effect of his or her hidden karma. Karma is known only to the omniscient Buddhas and to gods like Nechung, who possess a certain clairvoyance (Nair 2010, 97 n. 25). The senior monks thus faced a problem when it came to revealing the *kang-so*: Karma being hidden, they could not know who an appropriate vessel was. They therefore adopted the following convention: Little boys or adult monks who joined Nechung were appropriate vessels. Their status as Nechung monks was a symbol, in the Peircean sense, of their karmic adequacy. I return to this convention below, in relation to the semiotics of authorization shaping the *kang-so*’s transmission.

This convention, of course, could not be applied to outsiders like me, to whom the *kang-so* was accordingly *secret*. The monks were thus unanimously against my research at the start.¹⁶ The Nechung Medium, however, told me early on that I was not yet ready to study the *kang-so*, and that when I was, he would permit me to study it. This he did in August 2004, though I never managed to elicit an explanation of how he arrived at this judgment. Not one of the other monks accepted his view on the matter, however, and my research remained stalled. The monks finally suggested putting the question to the Nechung Oracle. This was done in December 2005, midway through my field years. What the Oracle said and how I eventually came to study the *kang-so* is a long story that I would have to treat elsewhere. Suffice it to note that the Oracle, in response, prescribed the performance of a host of rituals, stating that, if these were performed appropriately, and if I worked hard as envisaged, then “great excellent accumulations [of karma would accrue]” (*legs tshogs che*; see Nair 2010, 284). His terse response thus recursively hinged on my—hidden—karma. And the monks unanimously deemed it ambiguous. Nevertheless, they helped me get the rituals performed at a nearby monastery, this being the standard mode of implementing such prescriptions (see Cabezon 2010, 20). Once I had sponsored those and several other rituals, at the other monastery and at Nechung as well, somehow, a sufficient number of monks arrived at the decision that the Oracle’s words represented authorization of my research. I was thus finally able to begin my study of the *kang-so*, in

16. I would speculate that gender was not an overriding factor at the monastery in exile, given that the discourse there referenced one male researcher who was driven insane and forced to abandon his research and that Bell too faced some reticence there (2013, 25–26, 37). On the range of attitudes toward women in the context of oracular rituals, see Havnevik (2002); Diemberger (2005).

late 2006. We will return to the Oracle's pronouncement below, in considering the monks' speech acts.

Secrecy in Tantric Ritual

The monks explained that the Nechung *kang-so* was of the Secret Mantra (*gsang sngags*) type, also known as tantra (*rgyud*; see Bell 2021, 72–90).¹⁷ The broader institution of tantric secrecy was thus a key part of the *secret's* macrocontext. Two aspects of this macrocontext are important here: the stated reasons for tantric secrecy in general; and the Dalai Lama's innovation in addressing his secret tantric discourse to *publics*.

One reason for keeping tantras secret (*gsang ba*), already familiar to the reader, is that karmically inadequate persons encountering them could develop wrong views (*log lta*), to which would accrue bad karma, which must be prevented. A second reason is to prevent the karmically inadequate from attempting to practice such rituals. For the tantras could be “dangerous” not only to those persons themselves (Beyer 1973, 57; Gyatso 1998, 187) but also to others against whom the rituals could be malevolently aimed (Cuevas 2010, 175).¹⁸

The reason why such wrong views might occur, and why inappropriate practice might be dangerous, has to do with the fact that tantras typically involve acts that would appear to transgress conventional morality and ethics (Mayer 2015, 390): Within the ritual envelope the practitioner visualizes himself or herself as a Buddha (a meditational deity, *yi dam*), and then performs—generally, meditatively visualizes the performance of—antinomian acts. The acts are considered to be performed with a pure motivation of great compassion and an understanding of the true nature of reality. Consequently, no bad karma would accrue to such ritual actions, as it would in extraritual life (Cozort [1986] 2005, 32–33; see Gyatso 1998, 186; 2002, 184; Bentor 2015). The uninitiated could misconstrue or incorrectly perform these acts. Hence the need for secrecy.¹⁹

In case of the *kang-so*, the main type of act that could conceivably have been viewed as antinomian was the exhortation of Nechung to perform wrathful acts: The monk, ritually visualized as a Buddha, would, out of great compassion, exhort Nechung and the other Dharma Protectors to annihilate the Enemies of the

17. The term *kang-so* references two ritual actions: *Kang-wa* (*bskang ba*) means to propitiate, and describes the ritual acts of making libations and oblations to the Dharma Protectors. *So-wa* (*gso ba*) means to mend, to repair, that is, to repair inadequacies or errors in the propitiation (Nair 2010, 3; Bentor 1996, 328–29). The *kang-so* belonged to the treasure (*gter ma*) type of tantras (see Gyatso 1986, 1998).

18. On tantric ritual, see Tenzin Gyatso ([1975] 1987); Hopkins (2008).

19. On tantric ritual acts involving wrath, see Dalton (2011); and see Sihlé (2013) on such acts in lay tantric practice. On those involving desire, see Cozort ([1986] 2005); and see Gayley (2018) on such acts in nonmonastic contexts.

Teachings (*bstan dgra*), those who harmed Buddhism and its practitioners. For the Dharma Protectors, and Nechung foremost among them, are a class of deities who are oath-bound to protect the Tibetan Buddhist faith from such enemies (Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1998, 94ff.; Bell 2020, 55–64). Nechung, as was mentioned, is additionally sworn to protect the lineage of the Dalai Lamas. Outsiders could construe such violence as being antinomian. However, Nechung, the monks explained, was a highly advanced Bodhisattva, very close to attaining enlightenment; he would wield wrath without wrath, with great compassion toward all sentient beings. His compassionate wrath would destroy vast quantities of bad karma, saving Enemies of the Teachings from countless bad rebirths. This then was Nechung's wrath, said to have wrought illness and insanity in the cases of those two researchers, and the monks feared it.²⁰

The tantras have thus traditionally been kept secret, hidden from the karmically inadequate. For many decades, though, the Dalai Lama and various high lamas have chosen to publish their teachings on the most secret of tantras. The Dalai Lama has regularly bestowed mass initiations upon throngs of tens of thousands, all in multiple languages. How might we understand this in relation to the *secret*?

The stated reasons for choosing such an address of publics vary. Some high lamas stress the need to preserve tantric practice, post-1959 (Patrul Rinpoche 1998, xlv). The Dalai Lama avers that the tantras have been excessively disseminated by and to unauthorized, inappropriate vessels (Tenzin Gyatso [1975] 1987, 15–21). His duty is, accordingly, to dispel the prevailing wrong views, and this is best done using the same means that generated them.²¹ The issue is a complex one. We will only concern ourselves with two aspects: the differences between the addressees, and the ethic in case of traditional tantric transmission versus in such public address.

The addressees of the traditional transmission lineage are individuals, personally vetted by a ratified teacher, who addresses his or her tantric teaching to them, orally, in moments of copresence. This address is founded in a karmic ethic. By contrast, taking the Dalai Lama's address as exemplary, the addressees of published and broadcasted tantric teachings are strangers, of the generic sort that constitute modern social imaginaries—publics, nations, markets (Warner

20. On the complex, often discordant views of the ontological status of the Nechung protector and the various deities collectively referenced by the name (particularly the god Pehar), see Thupten Ngodup et al. (2009, 105); Nair (2010, 61 n. 22, 241); Bell (2016, 148, 183–84; 2021, 64–68).

21. On the dissemination of tantras in modern times, see Lopez (1998, 46–85, 156–80); Wedemeyer (2013).

2005, 74–76; also Graan 2022). This address hinges on an ethic of estrangement (Warner 2005, 113). The two modes of address are thus coupled with differences in the “societal arrangements” constituted around them (Gal 2018, 22; see also Agha [2011] on the mediated practices involved). The rise of publications on tantras, for well over a century now, has thus involved a loss of traditional authority, which was previously constituted solely within oral transmission lineages. In taking up a public address, the Dalai Lama then draws on his own revered status to establish an authoritative center within modern organizations of interdiscursivity, from which may “emanate” (Silverstein 2013) anew the authorized, authoritative meaning of the tantras as he and the high lamas see this.²²

* * *

We have examined three key aspects of the *secret*'s macrocontext: exile, karma, and tantric secrecy, including the innovation by the Dalai Lama and other high lamas in addressing teachings on the most secret tantric rituals to publics. We are now ready to consider the face-to-face interactions revolving around the *kang-so* at Nechung.

Text Artifacts and the *Kang-So's* Poetic Patterning in Performance

Of the text artifacts that mediated interactions focused on the *kang-so*, we are concerned with three: the *kang-so* scripture, the old monk's instructional manuscript (*khrid*), and his audiotaped reading of that manuscript together with the scripture.²³ The scripture was what the novice monks used in their memorization of the *kang-so*; it served as an aide-mémoire (*dran gso*; Nair 2010, 69). The old monk's instructional manuscript and audiotapes were aimed, in his absence, at teaching monks who were already fully fledged *kang-so* practitioners various pro-founder aspects of the meditation.

Crucially, none of the three artifactualized forms followed the sequencing of verses of the *kang-so* ritual performance itself, that is, the order in which the monks chanted the verses. The printed rituals were instead mixed or “shuffled”

22. The Dalai Lama's address of the publics of tantras must be viewed in the context of another public address in which he has long engaged in exile, namely, that of what may be termed “sympathetic publics” (see Fennell 2012). Michael Lempert (2012) has analyzed how, in exile, the Dalai Lama has been integral to a vast, multisited, multiscalar project of crafting interdiscursivities between stereotypic exile Tibetan subjectivities and particular fractions of the modern liberal subject. Evincing such similarities in addresses to First World publics could elicit sympathy and, potentially, political support for the Tibetan ethnonationalist project. Interestingly, in addressing such sympathetic publics, the Dalai Lama aligns Buddhism with values that, at least stereotypically, “emanate” (Silverstein 2013) from First World centers of power. This contrasts with his address of the publics of tantric secrecy, where he is himself part of the authoritative center, and the addressees must align themselves with the Buddhist values he “emanates.”

23. I do not discuss the documents involved in oracular consultations (Nair 2010, 354–58). These documents were not *secret*, though they were sometimes private.

(*dkrugs*), as the Ven. Tenzin Gaphel once put it, explaining that this was a technique to maintain secrecy (cf. Bentor 2009; Cabezon 2010, 15). The instructional manuscript and audiotapes thus concealed the *secret* in the same way as the scripture.

While the overall logic of organization of the rituals (see Nair 2010, 76; cf. Cabezon 2010, 17–18) was the same in the ritual chant and the scripture, the ritual chant nevertheless differed from the scripture's printed order in the following three ways: First, the order of invocation of certain deities was shuffled in the scripture, whereby the cardinal directions with which several deities were associated in the ritual chant were different from those printed in the scripture. The mandala visualized in practice was thus different from the one represented in the scripture. Second, ritual acts were regularly repeated in the chant: lines and verses performatively instantiating a specific ritual act were taken from different rituals, composed by different authors and printed at different locations within the scripture, and chanted contiguously to form a dense set of laminations of that ritual act.²⁴ Finally, the ritual chant as performed involved various verses that were not printed in the scripture. These served to laminate particular ritual acts even more densely, and with verses from other scriptures.²⁵ These three sets of strategies served to poetically pattern the ritual chant (see Silverstein 2004, 626). This was what the term *secret* indexed in the first instance. I only outline this elaborate poetics since, as mentioned, I will not be citing the *kang-so*'s rituals here.

The other text artifact involved in my interactions with the monks was, of course, my own (at that time, future) writing on the *kang-so*, in English, for academic audiences, as I regularly stressed.²⁶ Speaking to me of the *kang-so* was no straightforward matter for the monks. They could not simply adopt the Dalai Lama's mode of public address; they lacked the sociocultural warrant to do so. For the Dalai Lama was, in essence (*ngo bor*), a Buddha (as were the high lamas in general).²⁷ His every action was thus essentially compassionate, enlightened, and beneficial to all beings. He could address publics on the subject of tantras and that could only be to the good. The monks, by contrast, being (self-professedly)

24. See Sihlé (2010, 40), whose informants used the term "grouping" (*spel*) for an apparently similar practice of lamination.

25. The list of rituals in their performed order was printed (citing the first few words of verses) and circulated among the novices. However, the printout did not include the more intricate differences between ritual chant and scripture as printed (shuffling within a single folio, incomplete mantras, etc.). Such details were taught through oral transmission alone.

26. The *kang-so* type of ritual has known far less publication than the highest, most secret tantras; see the assessments and references in Egyed (2000, 11–12); Bell (2021, 12–17). Knowledge of the *kang-so* ritual type has thus generally remained secret, ensconced within traditional oral transmission lineages.

27. The Dalai Lama is an emanation of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, in turn an emanation of the Buddha Amitabha.

mere humans, could not lay claim to such capacities. In revealing the *secret* to an outsider, they implicated themselves in any collective karma that accrued to that revelation and to future revelations to others by that outsider (on collective karma, see Mills [2015, 190, esp. 193–95]). This was why addressing me regarding the *kang-so* was anything but anodyne. To understand their situation, let us consider the address via which they received and transmitted the *kang-so*, within their oral transmission lineage.

Participation Frameworks and the Transmission Lineage's Semiotics of Authorization

I have mentioned that the scripture served the monks as an aide-mémoire, each monk being himself an embodied repository of the *kang-so* ritual. For me, by contrast, it was the scripture itself that was the repository of the *kang-so*, once the monks had explained how its printed verses were patterned in the performance. Our distinct perspectives on the scripture indexed our different participant roles in interactions focused on the *kang-so*. In particular, the monks' perspective on the *kang-so* indexed their embedding within a semiotic process of authorization.

The monks' oral transmission lineage, via which they received and taught the *kang-so*, consisted in the lamination of a symbol, an index, and an icon: as mentioned, simply being a Nechung monk symbolized the person's karmic adequacy and status as an appropriate vessel for receipt of the Nechung *kang-so*. Next, the monks, embodied repositories of the *kang-so*, performed the ritual and, in doing so, indexed their receipt thereof, in moments of orality and copresence, from their teachers, who had in turn received those verses from their teachers, and so on, all the way back to first, divine utterers and teachers, who were in essence Buddhas.²⁸ Finally, in the ritual performance, each monk's body, speech, and mind (*lus ngag yid gsum* [nonhonorific]) iconized the Body, Speech, and Mind (*sku gsung thugs* [honorific]) of the divine first utterers of the ritual verses via the aforementioned indexical chain.²⁹ These were the laminations that constituted the semiotics of

28. The composers of the *kang-so*'s rituals are generally deemed Buddhas in essence (see Bell 2013, 143–53). The transmission lineage ultimately traces back to a primordial Buddha, the tantras being ceaselessly and nondualistically taught by the latter (Gyatso 1986; 1998, 158, 199). A couple of the *kang-so*'s rituals are, however, attributed to the Nechung Oracle and to an eighteenth-century Nechung Medium (Bell 2013, 335–41). I bracket these in the present discussion, not having elicited explanations from the monks about their transmission. Nevertheless, I think one can safely assume that they would trace these transmissions too back to an in-essence Buddha.

29. More precisely, the body, speech, and mind of the *kang-so* performer would ritually transform into the Body, Speech, and Mind of the meditational deity, a Buddha, within the ritual chronotope (Gyatso 1998, 189–94). This transformation was first taught by the rituals' divine composers, so that the monk performing the ritual simultaneously diagrammed the Body, Speech, and Mind of those divine composers via the transmission lineage. Ultimately, then, the monk dynamically figured "Buddha nature," the conception that

authorization (see Silverstein [2004, 626] on the similar semiotics of the Eucharist; Lempert [2012, 59–61] on the figuration of authoritative tradition in the context of monastic debate; and Agha [2007a, 167–70] on such register models).³⁰ Crucially, each lamination involved the Nechung monk himself. He was thus indefeasibly linked with the *kang-so* within the “social organization of interdiscursivity” that was the oral transmission lineage (Gal 2018).

Outsiders were excluded from every lamination of this semiotics.³¹ There was no established convention by which the monks could infer their hidden karma. As nonpractitioners, outsiders would never embody the *kang-so* or indexically iconize the lineage bearers. To them, the *kang-so* was then *secret*; to study the *kang-so* was to risk incurring bad karma and Nechung’s wrath.

In my case, it was with the Nechung Oracle’s pronouncement of December 2005 that the sea change occurred. For the monks who remained silent, the Oracle’s words were ambiguous. For the monks who spoke to me, however, his pronouncement symbolized his authorization of my research, constituting the first lamination of a new semiotics, authorizing a new line of transmission that could be grafted onto the old one (see Gal 2018, 16–21). To understand the further laminations involved, we now consider the monks’ principal speech acts.

The Monks’ Speech Acts and a New Semiotics of Transmission

Consider first the interactions involving only monks, namely, their chanting in the ritual performance and the novices’ scripture classes. The principal speech acts involved were ritual performatives that performed the ritual act they described. In these, the event of the monks’ chanting was simultaneously nominally and reflexively calibrated with the events they chanted (see Silverstein 1993, 48–53; 2021). On the one hand, the event of chanting (within the temple, within the ordinary, everyday world) was stipulated as belonging to a realm that is ontically distinct from that of the events chanted (the divine realm of the ritual, in which the monks were Buddhas exhorting Nechung, etc.). The event of chanting and events chanted were thus nominally calibrated. On the other, the event of

there was “no absolute metaphysical or ethical distinction to be made” between sentient beings and the primordial Buddha, everything being ultimately nondual (cited in Gyatso 1998, 199; see Patrul Rinpoche 1998, 407; Hopkins 2008, 45–64).

30. Crucially, my representation of this semiotics of authorization is entirely schematic. Tibetan Buddhist traditions have theorized and discoursed upon it vastly, over centuries. See the classic studies of Tibetanist Janet Gyatso (1986, 1998), who discusses the complicated semiotics and, ultimately, “asemiotic” (nondualist) origins and transmission of treasure texts (*gter ma*), the category of tantric texts to which the Nechung *kang-so* belongs.

31. By outsiders, I mean persons like me: external to the *kang-so* ritual tradition and with no intention of practicing it. The ritual itself was traditionally practiced by monks and lamas of several monasteries apart from Nechung (Thupten Phuntsok 2007, 156–58; Bell 2021, 144–66).

chanting was metapragmatically regimented as being one and the same as the events chanted (through the use of spatial deictics, first person pronouns, etc.). The event of chanting and events chanted were thus reflexively calibrated. The simultaneity of these two calibrations entailed that the event of chanting and the chanted events were chronotopically superimposed, the ontically distinct realms being, then, one and the same within the ritual envelope.³²

In interactions with me, the monks' principal speech acts were of two types: citations and silences. In their citations, the events of citation were reportively calibrated with the ritual events they cited. This reportive calibration was explicit, their citations being marked by the quotative clitic, a certain sibilance audible at the end of each citation (cf. Lempert 2007; 2012, 34). Now reportive calibration marks the event of citing as necessarily chronotopically distinct from the event cited (Nakassis 2013, 56–57). In citing the *kang-so* to me, the monks then articulated an irreducible gap between themselves within the event of citation, and the events cited.³³ This was a key departure from their ritual utterances, wherein there was no such gap.

Juxtaposed with citations, the monks' silences then appear as refusals to cite the ritual verses to me, that is, as refusals of precisely this gap, between themselves within the event of citation, and the ritual events cited. On a higher metapragmatic level, then, the monks' silences performed the view that the *kang-so*'s verses were undecontextualizable from their traditional oral transmission lineage: when uttered by the monks, semiotically indefeasible from their transmission lineage, the verses were rigidly performative, possessed of a perduring (pragmatic) "force" (Fleming 2018), producing particular (metapragmatically stipulated) effects across contexts.³⁴ For instance, in the monks' idiom, if an outsider encountered the verses, that could generate bad karma and provoke Nechung's wrath. The monks' silences thus performed the stance that they could not transmit the *kang-so* outside their transmission lineage.³⁵

The monks who cited the *kang-so* to me were performing a very different stance on the *kang-so*'s transmissibility; they effectively performed a new semiotics

32. In the novices' scripture classes, the simultaneous nomic and reflexive calibrations were between the novice's event of chanting and the ontically other, divine realm of the events chanted, into which the novice was being inducted, wherein he would eventually diagram the ritual verses' divine first utterers.

33. I draw here on Asif Agha's (2007b) discussion of an event's chronotopes as essentially linking representations of not only time and space but also personhood.

34. While Luke Fleming focuses mainly on negatively valued linguistic-cultural forms—curse words, for example—he notes that rigid performativity is not confined to these (2018, 575 n. 13).

35. The monks did cite the *kang-so* to each other, but this would not have presented problems if all present were appropriate vessels. Furthermore, laity visited the temple during the daily *kang-so* performance. This too was not problematic, perhaps since, in the ritual, the monks uttered only ritual performatives, so that laity were never addressees.

of transmission. Their citational gap enabled, as such gaps do, the indexical iconicity (via image, diagram, or metaphor) of the cited events across events of citation.³⁶ This gap proleptically figured the future gap that would obtain between themselves and the monastery, on the one hand, and the *kang-so*'s verses, on the other, the latter circulating across events of citation, among academic publics, in my writings and in writings that cited mine. And all those indexical iconicities involved in all those citations were possible because a significant number of monks had chosen to view the Nechung Oracle's 2005 pronouncement as symbolic of his authorization of my research. This was the new semiotics of transmission performed by the monks' citations. It enabled the monks to delink their utterances of the *kang-so* from themselves and a karmic ethic, relocating the verses within an ethics of estrangement, free to circulate among strangers (see Warner 2005, 113). In other words, the monks performed and instantiated a new transmission line or social organization of the *kang-so*'s interdiscursivities.³⁷

Conclusion

We may now gather together the various conjectures and analyses proposed, with a view to answering the question: What was the *secret* at Nechung in exile?

The conjectures I proposed at the outset indicated that the *secret* appeared in interactions involving the Nechung monks, as speakers, and an outsider, as addressee. The monks thus taught me that the *secret*, in the first instance, indexed the specific poetic patterning of the *kang-so*'s rituals in their performance, most of the rituals being printed within the Nechung scripture, itself publicly available at the Tibetan library. This alone, however, did not suffice to explain the various conundrums I encountered: the monks' plethora of disparate views on the *secret*; their indifference to the public availability of the scripture at the library and to publications citing the *kang-so*, despite their idea that encountering the *kang-so* could generate wrong views in karmically inadequate outsiders. I therefore chose to look beyond the *secret*, positing that it invoked an implicit cultural concept (Silverstein 2004), namely, that of the *kang-so*'s transmissibility. I presented three aspects of the *secret*'s macrocontext—exile, karma, tantric secrecy—with a view to analyzing the microcontexts of interactions revolving around the *kang-so*.

36. On these types of iconicities, see Peirce (*EP* 2:273–74).

37. Two notes on citation: First, linguistic anthropologists have long stressed the multiple performative possibilities of linguistic constructions, depending on sociocultural and linguistic context (e.g., Monod-Becquelin and Becquey 2013, 111–19). The monks' citations were similarly significant when understood in contrast with their ritual performatives and silences. Second, I do not argue that the monks intended their citations to instantiate this new semiotics of transmission. This new semiotics was, rather, the result of a distributed agency (Enfield 2017), spread—minimally—across the figures of the Medium, the Oracle, and the monks who cited the ritual verses to me. This agency will have to be discussed elsewhere.

The monks' plethora of views on the *secret* boiled down to two principal types of speech acts: silences and citations of the *kang-so's* rituals. The semiotics of authorization operative within the monastery involved laminations of the Nechung monk as a sign: as a symbol of his own karmic adequacy to receive the *kang-so*, and as an indexical icon of the first, divine utterers of the verses. By remaining silent, the monks performed the indefeasibility of this semiotics, rooted as it was in a karmic ethic.

The Nechung Oracle's pronouncement was that, if my research was conducted and his prescriptions fulfilled, "great excellent accumulations [of karma would accrue]." A sufficient number of monks took it to symbolize his authorization of my research. They accordingly cited the *kang-so's* verses to me, articulating a gap between the verses cited, and themselves as citers within the event of citation. This gap proleptically figured the gap that would obtain between themselves and the cited verses, the latter involved in new circulations to academic publics, circulations rooted in an ethic of estrangement. This was the new semiotics of transmission that undergirded my study of the esoteric *kang-so*.

The ethics of my own anthropological representation of the *secret* has tormented me for many years: Was it ethical or not? My representations would now appear to be both ethical and unethical. They may even be neither ethical nor unethical. None of these possibilities can be excluded. This is inevitable since the monks invoked two distinct conceptions of the *kang-so's* transmissibility, through citation and silence. Irrespective of this ethical dubiety, though, any such anthropological representation is a moment in a new social organization of the *kang-so's* interdiscursivities: a new transmission chain stemming from the Nechung Oracle's pronouncement, grafted onto the traditional oral transmission lineage. This, then, was the performativity of citation at the monastery in exile: it reshaped the *kang-so's* transmissibility, establishing the Nechung Oracle as an authority from which could "emanate" (Silverstein 2013) the meaning of the *kang-so* and, hence, of the *secret*.

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