

## **Panel 7: Text and Practice in Himalayan Healing**

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The systemization and globalisation of sowa rigpa has seen an emphasis on the scientific basis of its curing strategies. This process has tended to over-shadow Himalayan healing practices that derive from textually-based Indo-Tibetan esoteric traditions which are, in Western scientific understanding, “religio-magical” rather than medical. This panel seeks to explore the relationship between these texts (an example in the Indic tradition would be the *Atharvaveda*) and actual curing strategies and practices in historical or contemporary Himalayan society. Possible lines of enquiry thus include (but are not restricted to), the extent to which particular esoteric healing practices (such as those of “spirit-mediums”), follow specific textual models and/or internal logic; text-based studies of particular spirit entities in disease causation and curing; historical continuities or fractures in esoteric ritual, lineage, the use of curative substances, etc; or the extent to which such practices are expressed in contemporary society or affected by the cultural expectations of different patient groups. Studies of the “religio-magical” aspects of the Gyü Shi, (*Rgyud bzhi*) particularly those sections not yet translated into European languages, are also welcome.

### **Panel Participants and abstracts**

#### **7.01 Ivette Vargas’s paper: outstanding**

#### **7.02 On the connection between tantric theory and the healing performed through spirit mediums in Tibetan communities**

**By Dawn Collins**

Tibetan Bon and Buddhist tantric rituals and those performed by spirit mediums in healing presuppose interactions with deities or spirits that betray particular cosmological frameworks for and views of the body. The connections between the theory underlying tantric ritual and ritual enacting healing by spirit mediums will be explored through the lens of the body, on a holistic paradigm within which no separation between mental and physical phenomena is understood to exist. In particular, concepts of the subtle body will be investigated and visualisation techniques employed in ritual will be examined in terms of the transformative power these are purported to employ in healing. The paper will explore the possibility of viewing the psychophysical transformation that takes place through tantra and through the rituals performed by spirit mediums as part of a general healing project whose ultimate goal could be formulated as enlightenment. It forms part of a doctoral research project on healing rituals and will incorporate preliminary findings of fieldwork in Tibetan regions.

#### **07. 03 Curriculum, pedagogy, and modernity in the early Sman rtsis khang**

**By Stacey Van Vleet**

At the turn of the twentieth century the Thirteenth Dalai Lama called for the founding of a “new lineage” of Tibetan medicine and a new institution – the Mentsikhang (Sman rtsis khang, School of Medicine and Astrology) – to cultivate this lineage. The Mentsikhang would seek to authoritatively integrate traditions from many Tibetan cultural regions and to teach through practical instruction, verbal scriptural recitations and mental transmissions put into “real practice.” Inherent in this mission was a tension between two very different understandings of medical theory, practice and pedagogy. Recent encounters with modern science prompted the founders of the Mentsikhang to focus on “empirical” demonstration of the efficacy and rigor of Tibetan diagnostic and therapeutic techniques, and to emphasize learning through practice, direct observation of the body, and empirical investigation and classification. But the curriculum of the Mentsikhang also affirmed the place of esoteric medical transmissions and astrological calculations and

cosmology, appealing in this case to the authority of a different kind of empiricism predicated on a wider Buddhist definition of experience.

This paper will analyze the collection, systematization, standardization, and institutionalization of Tibetan medicine within the Mentsikhang, especially the place of astrological and esoteric transmissions. Presenting an overview of the curriculum and pedagogy of the early Mentsikhang, I will argue that the new medical lineage was fraught by an emergent tension between religio-magical practices and modern “scientific” discipline, between oral lineage transmission and modern institutional structure, and between the authority of “rational” and esoteric experience.

#### **7.04 The Alchemy of Accomplishing Medicine (sman sgrub): Situating the Yuthok Heart Essence in Tibetan Literature and History**

By Frances Garrett

This paper focuses on the textual history of the practice of Accomplishing Medicine (sman sgrub) in the early history of medicine in Tibet. Examining primarily the G.yu thog snying thig and its relation to the early Nyingma Nectar Tantras collection, I will argue that while the Accomplishing Medicine ceremonies are in part focused on the empowerment of medicinal substances, in the ordinary sense that they are said simply to make medicines work better, there is much more to the practice than this. A long contextual history of Accomplishing Medicine links it intimately with esoteric Buddhist yogic and contemplative exercises that are heavily focused on the “alchemical” transformation of human waste products into purified sacramental substances in a process that unites practitioners with deities and that aims for supermundane results, such as the attainment of immortality and other paranormal powers. I will suggest further that this sphere of theory or practice is what accounts for the close relationship between the development of Tibetan medicine and the Buddhist Nyingma tradition in particular, and that this little-studied link is not a marginal feature of Tibetan medicine but rather one that has had a significant shaping factor on each tradition throughout history. The paper will thus help situate the esoteric practices of the G.yu thog snying thig into a larger Buddhist context, clarifying some historical relationships between medicine and religion in Tibet.

#### **7.07 “Oh fever... go to yon foreign people”: the healing traditions of the Atharvaveda, then and now**

By Alex McKay

A number of systemised healing traditions are established in the Himalayas today. Biomedicine predominates at state level (though to a lesser extent in Bhutan), while forms of *sowa rigpa*, or at least localised traditions associated with *sowa rigpa*, remain a common, perhaps the most common, resort. In addition, the Ayurvedic tradition of the Indic world is now manifest in many urban centres, and even practitioners of Chinese medical traditions may be found there. Each of these traditions, as we know, tend now emphasise their “scientific” nature and textual basis.

Yet there also exists a vast range of healing traditions outside of those which lay claim to a scientific foundation, not only those whose authority lies in religious understandings but also those which are commonly subsumed under the heading of ‘magical’. Among those traditions are those that derive from, or follow the internal logic of, healing models articulated in the Atharvaveda; a text which we may date (with the usual reservations) to around the 12<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE.

This paper will discuss the survival of certain rituals and concepts deriving from the Atharvaveda, and their manifestations in contemporary Himalayan society. In addition to noting its implications in regard to continuities in Indic culture, the paper will locate the issues within the wider framework of socio-medical status.

#### **7.08 Hook-swinging as a healing practice in North-east India. A scriptural exegesis.**

By Fabrizio M. Ferrari

Widely explored as a devotional ‘ordeal’ restricted to South Asian village traditions, hook-swinging will be here discussed as a ritual healing practice and, for the first time, a medical textual exegesis will be

attempted. Devotees engage in hook-swinging while afflicted by presences which are often regarded as diseases. By adhering to local cultural patterns and personal motivations, hook-swingers set a dialogue with a spirit/deity on a non-ordinary stage where a dance of communication, surrendering, battle and pacification is enacted. Fieldwork has been conducted in villages in West Bengal and Bangladesh where the ritual flight (carak puja or dolan seva) is performed by male devotees irrespective of their religious background in honour of a variety of deities and spirits. The research also considers hook-swinging ceremonies in the Seven Sister States as well as colonial (19th-20th century) and missionary/travellers' reports (dated back as early as the 16th century). By combining ethnographic accounts of contemporary hook-swinging in South Asia and personal stories of performers, I shall integrate this material with a historiography of hook-swinging from a textual and liturgical perspective. The role of the 'holy flyer' and that of the 'sacred flight' in a post-torture phase (i.e. the piercing of the flesh) will be discussed with reference to indigenous concepts of 'health', 'disease' and 'possession' and in relation to both Sanskrit medical treatises (Caraka- and Susruta- Samhita, but also Atharva Veda) and vernacular scriptures. The piercing followed by the suspended flight of a male human being will be therefore examined in order to establish a connection with little known Vedic healing rituals, including human sacrifice, and to explore the reasons behind existing fractures with the Sanskrit esoteric tradition.