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"THE TALE OF THE MOON CUCKOO" BY STAG-PHU-BA BLO-BZANG
BSTAN-PA'I RGYAL-MTSHAN AND ITS SPREAD IN CENTRAL ASIA

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"The Tale of the Moon Cuckoo" (*mGrin sngon zla ba'i rtogs brod*)¹ written in 1737, is a story about an Indian prince who was robbed of his human body and lived in a bird's body until his death preaching the Teaching of Buddha to people and animals. It did not become popular in Tibet. But soon after it was translated into Mongolian in 1770, it became extremely popular among the Mongols as a book and as a play-performance.

1. Brief contents of the Tale

The action in the Tale takes place in ancient India soon after Buddha's nirvāṇa. In the country of Vārānasī a king named Kulān-rājā reigned. His wife was Matimahāni, the incarnation of Tārā, and daughter of the king of Jālandhara. They had an only son named Chos-kyi dga'-ba who was a clever, religious boy. Through malicious intrigues, the son of the military commander La-ga a-na, who was a mean person, became the prince's closest friend. Once a yogin taught both Chos-kyi dga'-ba and La-ga a-na how to transfer one's consciousness to the body of a dead person.

After his mother's death the prince was full of grief. Then he married the princess gSer-bzang-ma and four other noble girls. The prince was spending most of his time with gSer-bzang-ma instructing her in the Teaching of Buddha. One of his other wives became jealous and started to urge La-ga a-na to plot against Chos-kyi dga'-ba. Once the prince and La-ga a-na went with other youths to the forest to enjoy themselves. In a tricky way La-ga a-na insisted that he and the prince should enter the bodies of two dead cuckoo-birds. But when they did so, La-ga a-na entered the body of the prince and threw his own body into the river. So Chos-kyi dga'-ba remained in the body of the cuckoo, and La-ga a-na returned to Vārānasī in the body of the prince. Some people, including gSer-bzang-ma, soon understood that this was not the true prince. Since the king had no other son, the false prince held his position and even became the king of Vārānasī.

Meanwhile the true prince was living in the forest as a cuckoo named mGrin-sngon zla-ba ("Blue-throated Moon"). He very much regretted his fate but received consolation from bhikṣu Dri-med-dpal, ḍākinīs, and other divinities. He was preaching Dharma to the birds and animals, and the glory of this miraculous bird spread everywhere. He was even invited by the monks of Vārānasī who wished to listen to his sermons. When La-ga a-na heard about this he understood who this bird was and attempted to kill it, but was instead killed himself by a ḍākinī. Immediately his body (i.e., the body of the prince) was entered by the consciousness of 'Od-ldan, a small bird who was a great friend of mGrin-sngon zla-ba. The prince-cuckoo continued his life in the forest, and travelled preaching the Dharma all over India. He met his wife gSer-bzang-ma and father Kulān-rājā, but refused to stay in the palace garden or to enter the body of the dead youth. When he died, his body was buried with great honours.²

The Tale is divided into nine chapters. The prince Chos-kyi dga'-ba (mGrin-sngon zla-ba as the cuckoo) was regarded by the author of the Tale,

sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, as being one of his former incarnations.

2. Tibetan editions

The wood-block edition of the Tale which is described in the catalogues (a copy of it is also kept in the library of the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg Branch under the number Tib. B 6815) was printed from one set of blocks.³ It was engraved in the 'Bras-spungs Monastery on the initiative of Gāu-dge-slong 'Jam-dbyang dbang-rgyal. But it also contains another, earlier colophon in verse saying that its previous printing was made in the dGon-klung Byams-pa gling Monastery on the initiative of Dharmavajra alias Chos-kyi rdo-rje.⁴ Chos-kyi rdo-rje was the "secret name" (*gsang mtshan*) of Thu'u-bkvan Blo-bzang chos-kyi ñi-ma (1737-1802).⁵

By chance, in early 1993 I discovered a copy of the 18th century dGon-klung edition of the Tale among the uncataloged "damaged and incomplete" Tibetan books in the collection of the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg Branch. Fortunately, the text is complete, although the book itself is slightly damaged. Since this edition of the Tale is not mentioned in any of the printed catalogues, I will give a brief description of it here: wood-block, ff. 1-134r, 53 x 8 (38.8 x 6.4) cm, 6 lines; left marginal title: *rtogs brjod*.

3. Mongolian translations and editions

In 1770 the Tale was translated into Mongolian by the order of lCang-skya Rol-pa'i rdo-rje (1717-1786). The translator Dai güüsi Ngag-dbang bstan-'phel (1700-1780) was one of the most celebrated Mongolian learned lamas of the 18th century. The text of his elegant translation of the Tale was engraved in Peking and many prints were made from these wood-blocks. It is found in almost every collection of old Mongolian books.⁶ Later this translation was also engraved and printed in a Buriat monastery.⁷

Translation of a prayer by the prince-cuckoo from the fourth chapter of the Tale was made in 1870 by a learned Buriat lama who styled his name in Sanskrit as Vagindra-Sumati-Kalpa-Bhadra-Dāna (his official surname was Dylgyrov).⁸ It was printed in the Buriat Onong cügel grva-mtshan Monastery (better known by its Russified name Tsugol'skii datsan). This translation differs from the translation of the corresponding passage made by Ngag-dbang bstan-'phel.

An opera in Mongolian called "The Life Story of the Moon Cuckoo" (Mong. *Saran kökügen-ü namtar*) was composed about 1850 by a Mongolian incarnated lama-poet bsTan-'dzin rab-rgyas (1803-1856). The "libretto" of this opera is divided into nine parts (chapters) thus following the original work. The opera was performed in different monasteries of Outer and Inner Mongolia until the 1920s. The performance usually took place in summer and lasted from one to fifteen days. A written "libretto" of the opera based upon the three Mongolian manuscripts was published in Mongolia in 1962.⁹

It should be noted here that the narrative passages occupy little space in the text of the Tale itself. For the most part the text consists of dialogues, sermons, prayers and other kinds of speeches. That is why it could have been easily transformed into a dramatic performance of any kind.

4. Evidence about the author

In the colophon written by himself, the author gave his name in a somewhat strange form, Mati (=Tib. *blo*).¹⁰ The reason for this is as follows. One of the characters of the Tale prophesied to the prince-cuckoo that "when the impurity of the degenerate age will reach its end, you under the name Mati will narrate about the present events" (*'dus kyi yang snigs tha mar gyur ba'i tshe // ma ti'i ming gis da lta'i lo rgyus gleng*).¹¹ The complete name of the author, Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, is given only in the colophon written by Dharmavajra. Thus the name Mati is the Sanskrit translation of the first syllable of the author's name (a kind of prophecy-style obscurity).

I have not been able to find his biography, but a short biography of his next incarnation, Blo-bzang chos-kyi dbang-phyug, is available.¹² It is said there that the latter was born in 1765, and was soon recognized as the incarnation of sTag-phu sprul-sku Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan.¹³ This means that the author of the Tale died in 1765, or very soon before. It is known from other sources that besides the Tale he wrote the *'khrungs-rabs* of Klong-rdol bla-ma Ngag-dbang blo-bzang (1719-1805) and his own *skyes-rabs* named *Phan bde'i ljon pa bskyed pa'i sa bon*.¹⁴ But these works have not been found yet. There was also his *gsung-'bum*, a part of which was devoted to *grub chen mi tra'i chos skor*.¹⁵

Klong-rdol bla-ma made a list of the successive incarnations of the sTag-phu-ba lineage which I will present here, following the original spellings of the names:¹⁶

1. During the life-time of Buddha it was the bodhisattva Chos-kyi blo-gros
2. The Nepalese pandita Nags-kyi rin-chen
3. Shes-rab rdo-rje of the bKa'-gdams-pa School
4. Siddha Se-va-na ras-pa
5. Kre-hor blo-bzang, a pupil of Ra-lo-tsa-ba
6. Chag-chos-rje dBal
7. Khro-phu-ba bSod-nams seng-ge
8. gTer-ston bZang-pa byang-chub
9. sPyan-snga Grags-pa byang-chub
10. sTag-phu gu-shri dPal-ldan don-grub
11. rJe Blo-gros bstan-pa
12. Shakya mChog-ldan
13. sTag-phu gu-shri Chos-rgyal bstan-'dzin
14. sTag-phu rje Ngag-dbang chos-grags bzang-po
15. sTag-phu sprul-sku Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan
16. Blo-bzang 'jam-dbyangs dpal-'byor, the incarnation of the latter.

The name of the 16th incarnation does not agree with that which is given to him in the title of his biography. It seems to me that Klong-rdol bla-ma put on his list the name which he received by birth. Changes of the names connected with new initiations are mentioned in his biography.¹⁷ Moreover, sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang chos-kyi dbang-phyug for a long time was in personal touch with Klong-rdol bla-ma and even wrote *Klong rdol bla ma'i 'khrungs rabs gsol 'debs kyi bka'rtson* for him.¹⁸

It is an interesting fact that sTag-phu-ba's incarnation as the Indian prince Chos-kyi dga'-ba, who later became the cuckoo named mGrin-sngon zla-ba, is not mentioned in Klong-rdol's list.

5. The individuality of the Tale

The Tale, according to its author, is the biography of the Indian prince who was one of his previous incarnations. But it was not written on the basis of historical records. According to Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, since the age of eleven he had been obsessed by visions and memories of his previous incarnations as well as the desire to speak about them (*dran snang dang smra 'dod*). At the request of his disciples he decided to record all the events revealed to him in this fashion, but in order to prevent the unfaithful and heretics from learning about his revelations, he sealed the narration with a secret seal.¹⁹ From this one can see that the author regarded the Tale as a kind of a secret visionary biography. Books like this were not destined for wide circulation. As it said in a rNing-ma-pa tantra *Ni ma dang zla ba kha sbyor ba chen po gsang ba'i rgyud*: "If the meaning of a life story is not explained, this could bring the evil of these very secret true words not being believed".²⁰ But it turned out otherwise with the Tale.

Its contents are, for the most part, an easy and illustrative exposition of Buddha's teaching which can be understood by people who have just an elementary knowledge of it. That is why lCang-skya Rol-pa'i rdo-rje ordered that it be translated into Mongolian "in an elegant, harmonious way" for the benefit of his contemporaries.²¹

On the other hand, the Tale did not lose its prophetic and historical (in a religious sense) value for the adepts of Tibetan Buddhism. There is a vivid example of this attitude. Caqar dge-bshes Blo-bzang tshul-khrims (1740-1810), a Mongolian learned lama and a prolific writer in Tibetan, wrote an exhaustive biography of Tsong-kha-pa entitled *rJe thams cad mkhyen pa tsong kha pa chen po'i mam thar go sla bar brjod pa bde legs kun gyi 'byung gnas*. As usual, it begins with the prophecies concerning the future birth of Tsong-kha-pa taken from the sutras and other ancient Buddhist works of authority. Among them there is a quotation from the Tale which is the "prophecy" concerning Tsong-kha-pa, Sa-skya pandita, and other great lamas of Tibet. As Blo-bzang tshul-khrims put it, the Tale "was seen by sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan [by force of his] special insight and then narrated" (*mngon shes kyis gzigs nas gsungs pa*).²² One of the five (or six) special insights is the "remembrance of one's former existences" (*sngon gyi gnas rjes su dran pa*).²³ Among the "qualities of those who possess the pure principles" (*tshul khrims rnam par dag pa'i yon tan*) there is the "quality of knowing one's former existences, deaths and births" (*sngon gyi gnas dang 'chi 'pho dang skye ba shes pa'i yon tan*).²⁴ As these qualities of sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan were not disputed, the "prophecies" concerning the events which had happened centuries before he wrote the Tale were regarded as having a value equal to that of the ancient books.

The next incarnation, sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang chos-kyi dbang-phyug was also an expert visionary. He is listed among those few people who transmitted the secret visionary biography of the Fifth Dalai Lama. He received the initiation from U-rgyan bsTan-pa'i ni-ma and later gave it to Rva-lo rdo-rje-'chang Blo-bzang dngos-sgrub.²⁵ When the chief incarnated lama of Mongolia, rJe-btsun dam-pa qutuytu, asked Blo-bzang chos-kyi dbang-phyug who he was in the days of Moon Cuckoo, the latter did not hesitate to answer that he was a friend of the prince whose name was gZhon-nu gtum-spyod (he is mentioned in the sixth chapter of the Tale).²⁶

My conclusion is that the Tale is a visionary biography in form and a

didactic work in content. That is why it served the needs not of a limited number of initiated disciples, but of the multitude of adepts.

NOTES

¹ sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan. *Byang chub kyi sems mnga' ba'i bya mgrin sngon zla ba'i rtogs pa brjod pa 'khor ba miha' dag la sning po med par mthong ba mams kyi ma rgyan* ('Bras-sprungs wood-block edition).

² For a more detailed exposition of the contents see: Heissig, W. 1954. *Die Pekinger lamaistischen Blockdrucke in mongolischer Sprache*, Weisbaden (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag), S. 133-134; Schuh, D. 1981. *Tibetische Handschriften und Blockdrucke. Teil 8*, Wiesbaden (Franz Steiner Verlag), S. 27-38; Dylykova, V.S. 1990. *Tibetskaya literatura*, Moscow (Nauka Publishing House), pp. 225-238.

³ Kanakura, Yensho et al. (Ed.) 1953. *A Catalogue of the Tohoku University Collection of Tibetan Books on Buddhism*, Sendai (Tohoku University), p. 524, No.7051; Schuh, D. 1981. *Op. cit.*, S. 23-38, No. 4.

⁴ sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan. *Op. cit.*, ff. 132v:2, 133r:1.

⁵ Gung-thang dKon-mchog bstan-pa'i sgron-me. *Rigs dang dkyil 'khor rgya mtsho' mnga' bdag rje btsun blo bzang chos kyi ni ma'i gsung gsum rmad du byung ba'i rtogs brjod pad dkar po* (Wood-block edition of his gsung-'bum, vol. 6), f. 60v:3.

⁶ Heissig, W. 1954. *Op. cit.*, S. 132-133; Sazykin, A.G. 1988. *Katalog mongol'skikh rukopisei i ksilografov Instituta vostokovedenia Akademii nauk SSSR*, Moscow (Nauka Publishing House), p. 75, No. 261. Its Mongolian title is: *Bodi sedkil tegüsügsen köke qoyolai saran kökege neretü sibayun-u tuyuji orcilang bükün-i jirüken ügei kemen medegcid-ün cikin-ü cimeg*.

⁷ Sazykin, A.G. 1988. *Op. cit.*, p. 75, No. 262.

⁸ *Köke qoyalai-tu saran kökegen-ü jalbaril jobalang-un qarangyui-yi arilyayci* (Buriat wood-block). St. Petersburg University Library, Mong. C 113.

⁹ Damdinsüreng, Ts. (Ed.) 1962. *Saran kökügen-ü namtar by Noyan qutuytu Rabjai*, Ulan Bator (Sinjilekü uqayan-u akademi-yin keblel).

¹⁰ sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, *Op. cit.*, f. 131v:5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, f. 74v:6.

¹² Ngag-dbang ye-shes thub-bstan. *Grub dbang stag phu sprul sku rin po che'i nam thar mdo tsam brjod pa skal bzang ma ba'i bcud len* (Wood-block edition of his gsung-'bum, vol. 1).

¹³ *Ibid.*, ff. 2r:3-2v:2.

¹⁴ Vostrikov, A.I. 1962. *Tibetskaya istoricheskaya literatura*, Moscow (Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury), pp. 75, 214.

¹⁵ Ngag-dbang ye-shes thub-bstan. *Op. cit.*, f. 3r:4-5.

¹⁶ Klong-rdol bla-ma Ngag-dbang blo-bzang. *bsTan 'dzin gyi skyes bu rgya bod du byon pa'i ming grangs* (Peking wood-block edition of his gsung-'bum), f. 20r:3-6.

¹⁷ Ngag-dbang ye-shes thub-bstan. *Op. cit.*, ff. 2v:6-3r:1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, f. 8v:6.

¹⁹ sTag-phu-ba Blo-bzang bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan. *Op. cit.*, f. 131v:1-6.

²⁰ Unfortunately, the Tibetan original is unavailable to me. So I have used the manuscript of the Mongolian translation kept in the St. Petersburg University Library under the number Mong. D 83: *Naran saran qabsuruysan yeke dandira*, f. 5r.

²¹ *Bodi sedkil tegüsügen köke qoyolai-tu saran kökege neretü sibayun-u tuyuji...*, ff. 165v-166r.

²² Kaschewsky, R. 1971. *Leben des lamaistischen Heiligen Tsongkhapa Blo-bzan-grags-pa (1357-1419) dargestellt und erläutert anhand seiner Vita "Quellort allen Glückes". 2. Teil: Faksimiles*, Wiesbaden (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag), S. 354-355.

²³ Ishihama, Yumiko and Fukuda, Yoichi. 1989. *A New Critical Edition of the Mahavyutpatti: Sanskrit-Tibetan-Mongolian Dictionary of Buddhist Terminology*, Tokyo (The Toyo Bunko), p. 12, No. 204.

²⁴ Las-chen Kun-dga' rgyal-mtshan. *bKa' gdams kyi mam par thar pa bka' gdams chos 'byung gsal ba'i sgron me* (Wood-block edition), f. 129v:6.

²⁵ *Kun gzigs rgyal dbang lnga pa'i dag snang rgya can gyi dbang lung yongs rdzogs thob pa'i rgyud rim baidura zhun ma'i them skas* (Manuscript), f. 4r:6. Kept in the Library of the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg Branch, under the number Tib. B 9517.

²⁶ Ngag-dbang ye-shes thub-bstan. *Op. cit.*, f. 11r:5-6.