



The Visual Text and the Map of the Supine Demoness

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Abstract: This paper explores the Tibetan Buddhist world of map making as a site of

INTRODUCTION

Tibetan cartography has been extensively studied and analyzed by a great number of eminent scholars in recent times. This paper is dependent on earlier source materials but with an intention to come to certain conclusions /assumptions that would bring us closer to understanding the Tibetan world of map-making.

Much of what falls under the large umbrella of Tibetan culture is highly religious in content and therefore, forms the combined heritage and histories of diverse communities and multi-linguistic groups scattered across the Himalayan range who identify themselves as Tibetan Buddhists. Thus, it is the indigenous cartographic tradition of Tibetan Buddhism expressed through religious art, architecture, and narratives (oral/visual) that will be looked at in this paper.

TIBETAN BUDDHIST COSMOGRAPHY

Central to Buddhist philosophy, is the belief that humans are caught in a world of pain, suffering and impermanence, subjected to the cyclic chain of re-birth, where the path to liberation lies in an individual's aspiration to gradually evolve into a higher spiritual being by earning merit. *Mandalas* are visual representations of such cosmic worlds and paradises that guide us through the metaphysical landscape of our soul's endless journey to its ultimate destination enlightenment. Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa Bhasya* (5th C) is the source of most descriptions of the Buddhist *Mahayana* cosmography.

These diagrams represent which is the sacred Mount *Meru/Sumeru* surrounded by seven mountains and oceans. In the four cardinal directions lie four oceans with four island-continent and semi-island-continent. Each of these oceans and continents is assigned a colour, red for *Lupagpo (Purva Videha)* in the East, white for *Balangcho (Godaniya)* in the West, yellow for *Dramiyan (Uttarakuru)* in the North and blue for *Zambuling (Jambudvipa)* in the South. *Zambuling* or *Jambudvipa* is the land inhabited by humans. It is believed that the reason why one cannot see Mount *Meru* (center of the universe) on *Zambuling* is because the sky and ocean reflect the colour blue thereby hiding the mythical mountain from our view.

Buddhist philosophy is centered upon the notion that people are trapped in a world of misery, suffering, and impermanence, subjected to the periodic cycle of rebirth, and that the route to liberation resides in an individual's goal to gradually evolve into a higher spiritual being by accruing merit, is central to Buddhist thought. *Mandalas* are pictorial depictions of celestial worlds and paradises that lead us through the metaphysical terrain of our soul's never-ending journey to enlightenment. Most accounts of Buddhist *Mahayana* cosmography come from Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosa Bhasya* (5th C).

Tibetan cartography has been extensively studied and analyzed by a great number of eminent scholars in recent times. This paper is dependent on earlier source materials but with an intention to come to certain conclusions /assumptions that would bring us closer to understanding the Tibetan world of map-making through an investigation of the Map of the Supine Demoness.

Much of what falls under the large umbrella of Tibetan culture is highly religious in content and therefore, forms the combined heritage and histories of diverse communities and multi-linguistic groups scattered across the Himalayan range who identify themselves as Tibetan Buddhists. This paper investigates the representation of these peripheral communities on the Map of the Supine Demoness by those located at the center of this Tibetan world while also commenting on the body of the demoness itself.

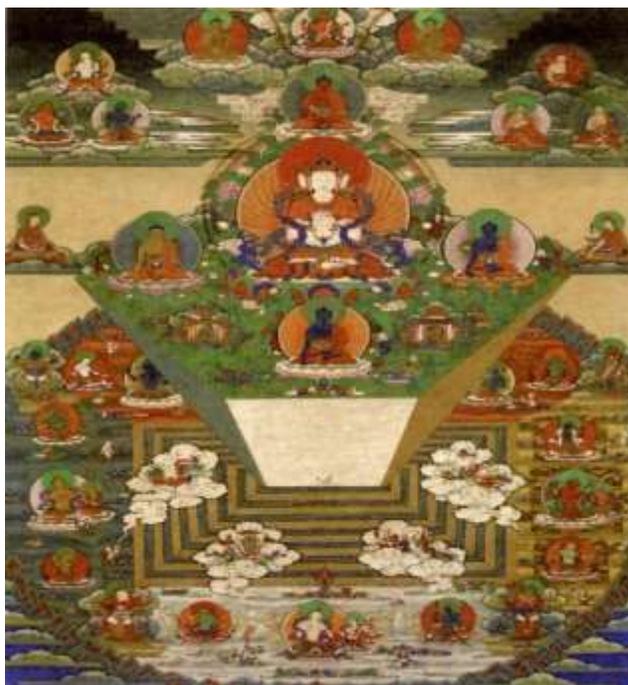


Fig 1. 19th Century Thangka, Trongsa Dzong, Bhutan Source: Wikipedia Commons

Similarities can be drawn between Hindu-Jain and Buddhist cosmological models after all all three of these religions have lived side by side for centuries. Places like Jambudvipa, Mount Meru, Indra loka, Uttarakuru are common to all three religions. Mount Meru is at the center of madhyaloka or the middle world in Jain cosmology and is surrounded by Jambudvipa depicted as a circle. The Bhagavata Purana states that the universe is divided into spheres, the earth or bhu-mandal is made up of small islands one of which is the circular island continent of Jambudvipa with Mount Meru at its center. The presence of a common understanding of the universe in these religions shows that knowledge systems of ancient and medieval India was pluralistic in nature and could be interpreted in many ways.

MAP OF THE SUPINE DEMONESS

Prior to Buddhism, Bon was the religion practiced by the people of Tibet. The belief in supernatural beings and black magic was central to this religion. It was during King Songtsen Gampo's reign that Buddhism was adopted as the new state religion. His marriage to two Buddhist princesses- Weng Chen Kongjo of China and Bhrikuti of Nepal furthered the cause of Buddhism in this region. The two princesses believed that monasteries and temples should be built for worship but as the legend unfolds, each time a building was constructed, it was brought down by evil spirits.

Princess Weng Chen, through the Chinese method of divination or geomancy saw that the Tibetan landscape resembled the body of a supine demoness. The decision was made to first pin the body of this demoness on strategic points and subdue the 'evil' landscape before the main temple could be built on her heart.

The capital of the kingdom was shifted from the earlier Yarlung to Ra-sa, where a lake called Wothang was pointed out as the location of the heart of the demoness. Water was emptied out of this lake and the Jokhang temple was constructed. The earlier name *Ra-sa* (place of goats) was changed to Lhasa (place of gods). It has been noted by many scholars that this act of Subjugation is symbolic of the defeat of the *anima loci* or soul of the landscape (mother- nature, mother goddess) at the hands of an organized religion (culture)².

As far as the cartographic accuracy of this map is concerned, some of the temples do fall in the same places on a map as well. This has been demonstrated on the image of the supine demoness in our exhibition by super-imposing a handmade outline of Tibet on to the image of the demoness. The temples of Katsel, Traduk, Khomting and Drumpa Gyang are situated more or less at the location drawn on the demoness map.

Research Through Innovation



Fig 2. Map of the supine demoness Source: balkhandshambhala.blogspot.com

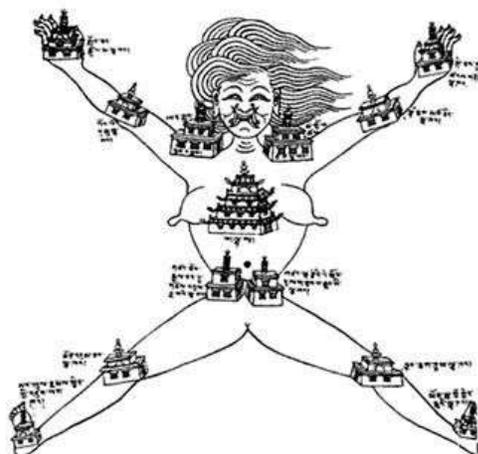


Fig 3. Diagram depicting the pinning of the demoness Source: Digital Tibetan Buddhist Altar

One of the reasons why this map is not very accurate may be because some diagrams of the demoness show her arms and legs stretched out, while the posture of the demoness of the painting is different. We can therefore imply that the lines drawn to connect each temple to form perfect squares just makes us assume that the distance between each point would be the same on the actual landscape as well, but this is not so.

Although the image of the demoness does not exactly correspond to the geometric diagram, the shrines are geographically located in the right directions thereby acting as a map that could be used to reach these destinations. Furthermore, some religious texts like *A Guidebook to the hidden land of Pemako* by Khamtrul Rinpoche narrate the myth of the supine demoness differently

“Our legends tell us that Tibet, the Land of Snows is analogous to a supine ogress outstretched on her back. In the upper torso of her body lay the heart of Ngari, and Tsang. In her lower torso are the legs of Do Kham, China and Mongolia. In her secret place is Er Lang Ri and her head arises as the immaculately pure glacial snows of Mount Kailash.”

This description depicts the demoness lying on the opposite direction in Western Tibet where Mount Kailash is her head and moves towards East in the sequence of Ngari, Tsang, Kham, China and Mongolia which is also an accurate understanding of the geographical landscape.

It is my belief that multiple accounts of the supine demoness exist within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and what they

demonstrate is that whether the demoness depicts the temples of king Songtsen Gampo or just the territories that were once a part of Tibet, the geographical location of at least two such accounts are accurate. The Beyul of Pemako

The *beyul* (*bas yul*) tradition of Tibetan Buddhism dates back to the 8th C to Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) who hailed from the kingdom of *Uddiyana* and is said to have travelled the entire length of the Himalayan region contesting demons and evil spirits and converting them into protectors of the Buddhist faith.

Guru Padmasambhava is believed to have locked the entrances to various hidden valleys and sacred landscapes that would be unlocked by the spiritually worthy when the time was right. The keys or maps to such hidden paradises were then concealed by Guru Padmasambhava to be discovered by later generations. Sikkim (Demchog) is believed to be one such paradise but the beyul that has sparked much interest from scholars and devotees alike for centuries is Pemako.

This beyul is believed to be located on the South-Eastern edge of Tibet extending into the Upper Tsang region of Arunachal Pradesh, India.

Pemako in Tibetan means ‘an array of lotus petals’ alluding to the pure blossoming of spiritual bliss. Beyul texts or *terma* describe this land as being located on the body of the tantric Goddess Vajra Varahi or Dorjee Phagmo. The door or portal to this paradise is hidden somewhere within this landscape.

A physical map depicting the region of Pemako has not been found but an image similar to that of the sleeping demoness has been used by some pilgrims and scholars to locate this beyul. *Tertons* (treasure: meaning spiritual treasure seekers) rely on textual descriptions to travel through the body of Dojee Phagmo to find Pemako.

A concise guidebook written by Khamtrul Rinpoche (originally revealed by the *Terton* Orgyan Chogyur Lingpa) reads thus:

If one wishes to travel south to the hidden land of Pema-ko, one must continue for nine nights through the land of Badong in India.

On route, we found the tributaries of the upper Tsangpo River flowing downstream and beheld a large boulder known as “honey rock”. It was from here that we made our first entry into the Beyul, walking for 22 kilometers until we arrived at Pema Dzongchen.

‘Badong’ here may refer to a small village by the Yarlung-Tsangpo gorge in Tibet, China which may have been a part of India as the inhabitants of this village to this day are similar to the *Adis* of Arunachal Pradesh. *Pema Dzongchen* refers to a tiny retreat believed to be located at the neck of the goddess Dorjee Phagmo.

Many pilgrims have said to follow high lamas into this region in search of Pemako and some also narrate stories of people disappearing as well. During the Chinese invasion of 1959 many Tibetans fled to the upper regions of Arunachal Pradesh in search of the *beyul* of Pemako as it was predicted that the doors to such paradises would open during critical times.

The entrance to Pemako’s spiritual paradise however may only be found by the worthy. What we have to keep in mind is that journeying to hidden sacred places is in itself a pilgrimage where the distinction between the real/unreal or physical/ metaphysical may overlap. After all, Pemako may just exist in the minds of spiritual practitioners and the pilgrimage to such places only helps to heighten one’s spiritual progress.

The absence of physical maps depicting rivers, mountains, lakes or even kingdoms in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition may be mistaken for a lack of either geographical knowledge but as I have tried to demonstrate, the case is otherwise. The sheer abundance of religious maps in the form of complex cosmographies and oral/textual narratives clears the fact that unlike other cartographic traditions the focus of Tibetan Buddhist cartography seems to be the inner quest for the ultimate truth.

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