

Translating Tibetan Lifeworld(s): An Ontological Bridge or Erasure

མོ་ཇི་བགྲ་ཤིས་བདེ་རྒྱུད། *Tashi Dekyid Monet*¹

Abstract: In this essay, I briefly discuss the possibilities, challenges, and implications of researching, writing, and translating Tibetan place-based relations and traditions in the space of academic research and in languages other than Tibetan. Indigeneity, defined as intergenerational systems of place-based relationships and responsibilities (Whyte, 2016), centrally concerns ethical relationships and moral responsibilities among people and places, and their communities of plants, animals, and spiritual entities in co-constituting distinct lifeworlds. I have argued that there is an ontological stake in how we research, translate, and write about place-based traditions and lifeways. Indigenous methodologies and research offer great examples of critical and ethical research practices that recenter the role of place and more-than-human relatives in our ways of knowing and being.

Keywords: Indigeneity, place-based relationship, lifeworld, research ethics, songs, translation

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In this essay, I briefly discuss the possibilities, challenges, and implications of researching, writing, and translating Tibetan place-based relations and traditions in the space of academic research and in languages other than Tibetan. These are methodological concerns (that I engage with in my dissertation project) about how Tibetan cosmologies and place-based traditions, relationships, and practices *inform* and *require* a distinct approach to education and research in Tibet and for Tibetans. A key focus of interest in my dissertation and in this essay is the centrality of place, Land or lifeworld in Tibetan educational thought. “Lifeworld” is a term commonly used in Indigenous Studies to describe the world in both physical and metaphysical forms. Aaron Mills (2016), an Anishinaabe scholar in Indigenous constitutionalism and philosophy, defines it as referring to “the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological framework through which the world appears to a people” (850). Other Indigenous scholars have argued that Land, places within it, and especially Indigenous homelands, are sentient, intellectual, and agential beings who can relate to us, and reciprocate when we relate to them (Tuck, McKenzie, McCoy 2014; Whyte 2017).

This idea that a people and their homelands are in mutually responsible and reciprocal relationships, *and* that these relationships are the foundations of how we know what we know, is a key aspect of Indigenous methodologies or theories of knowledge compared to non-indigenous traditions of knowledge. Language is both the medium and manifestation of this ontological, epistemological, and cosmological framework through which the world appears and relates to a people, and how a people communicate and relate to Land and place-based relations (Lama Jabb, 2015). Languages and their respective knowledge systems are thus the results of complex systems of intergenerational, cosmological, and genealogical relationships between a people and their homelands (Whyte 2016). Centering the richness of Tibetan language in (western) academic research should entail foregrounding Tibetan ways of knowing, including ways of knowing-in-relation-to-places.

I will now use a section of a song titled *Tshedi Rewa Jolsa* (ཚེ་འདི་འི་རེ་བ་
བརྩོལ་སྐྱེ། “The Place Where I Entrust My Hopes of This Life”) written, composed, and sung by Dubhe, date unknown, as an example to discuss the intricacies of translating and writing with and about the Tibetan lifeworld and place-based

relationships. Dubhe (བདུད་རྗེ) is one of the most influential Tibetan singers of Amdo. He began his singing career in the 1980s and passed away in 2016.² Robin Wall Kimmerer (2022), a Potawatomi scientist, teacher, and writer, says that it is primarily songs of plants and places (not via merely western scientific naming, classification, and description) through which one can learn their relationships and beauty, and our own ways of “entering into reciprocity with the living world” (Kimmerer 2022). Similarly, Lama Jabb (2015) has shown the centrality of songs as a space for and expressions of Tibetan thoughts and emotions. Dubhe sings,

ངའི་སྐྱེས་ལྷ་མ་ཆེན་རི་བོ།
ལྷོའི་རི་ཚེ་དགུང་ལ་ཟུག་ཡོད།
བསང་རླུང་ཉི་མཚོད་པ་འབྲུལ་ཞིང་།
སེམས་རེ་བས་ཀྱི་གསུམ་བཏབ་དུས།
བོད་ཁ་བའི་བསམ་དོན་ལྷོད་མཁྱེན།

To you, my natal deity, the great mountain Machen,
Your mountain peak reaching into the sky,
I offer juniper *sang* smoke and *lungta* prayer papers³,
And thrice call ‘Ki’ with hope in my heart,
Please remember the aspirations of snowy Tibet.

Dubhe calls to his *kye lha* (སྐྱེས་ལྷ)—that is the central place-based or territorial more-than-human being who rules and protects the place where one is born and raised—the great snow mountain, Amnye Machen. *Kye lha* is also known as *zhidak* (གཞི་བདག) or the territorial sovereign and *yu lha* (ཡུལ་ལྷ།) or local deity. He points out the grand scale of Amnye Machen (ཨ་མྱེས་མ་ཆེན།) and the deity’s connection to the sky via his mountain peak reaching into the sky. He then offers juniper *sang* smoke and *lungta* or wind horse prayer papers to the mountain and requests his reciprocal attention to, and protection of, the Tibetan

2 Please see Lama Jabb’s (2020) article on Dhube for more information.

3 *Lungta* (རླུང་ཀྱ།), literally, “wind horse”, are small square papers printed with prayers that are often offered to mountain deities and on mountain passes that Tibetans are traveling across.

Land. This song is a dialogue between the singer (and listeners of the song) and Amnye Machen, though we can't quite hear Amnye Machen's response in the written words on this page.

I can sense Amnye Machen's presence and a mutual connection and communication between the singer, the mountain in Dubhe's voice, and my own body as I listen to his singing. Perhaps such experience of connecting and communicating with places can only be articulated, felt, and shared in metaphors, just as Dubhe's songs abound with place-based metaphors. Perhaps when white clouds encircling the peak of Amnye Machen, a ray of morning sunlight, eagles or lucent white vultures (Thangkar Göpo), and the juniper smoke that we offer gather in the embrace of our grandfather mountain, Amnye Machen, words can hardly describe the resultant senses of beauty, power (and powerlessness), and joy other than to shout *ki hi hi* and feel them in our bodies and whole being (and becoming with the universe).

Nothing could replace such power and depth of connection with the mountain one can experience when visiting and paying homage to mountains in person. But the performance of this song in the beautiful voice, melody, and words of Dubhe can also activate the connection and renewal of Tibetan place-based relationships. Yet it seems that one must access a certain shared cultural sense of being and knowing in order to truly understand and feel the connection through metaphors, images, songs, and as well as a deep knowledge of the musicality of Tibetan language. I am afraid that I fail terribly at articulating this felt sense of knowing to foreign readers in the English language here.

This then brings me to ask, what goals and motivations do we as academic researchers engage when we research, translate, and write about (and hopefully *with* and *for*) Tibet, Tibetan culture, and lifeways? How might we engage similar goals and aspirations of contributing to the regeneration and strengthening of Tibetan place-based relationships as Dubhe demonstrates in creating and singing this song? Conversely, how can our scholarly works undermine such ways of knowing and being when we write about Tibetan culture, lifeways, and places

in non-Tibetan languages, with, for example, assumptions that such ways of being are merely “cultural” and “symbolic?”

When we discuss such Tibetan ways of relating to mountains and rivers as merely cultural, religious, and interpretive practices, I wonder what are the unstated assumptions with which we are working. Are we suggesting that the cultural and the physical realities of these mountains and rivers are radically different kinds of things (such as a *zhidak* mountain is a radically different reality from the physical mountain that is a *zhidak* in a Tibetan lifeworld)? Are we suggesting such place-based relationships and lifeways are created, interpreted, and sustained by human beings upon the surfaces of land, which is then rendered as inanimate objects strictly separated from cultural worlds of human communities?

Here is a simple example of the ontological reframing of a Tibetan *zhidak* mountain that may occur in a hypothetical academic writing: let’s say a Tibetan villager introduces a female *Zhidak* mountain to a researcher whose native language is English, saying “མ་འབྲུར་ལུའི་རྒྱལ་མོ་ནི་ང་ཚོ་ས་ཆའི་གཞི་བདག་ཞིག་རེད། (Majar Luyi Gyalmo is a *zhidak* of our place)⁴⁷”. The researcher then writes that the villager *regards* Mount Majar Luyi Gyelmo as the territorial deity of the region or the mountain is *regarded* as the territorial deity of the region. I say that such a translation and/or interpretation undermines the ontological nature of the mountain as a *zhidak* because it suggests that reality of a *zhidak* mountain is merely an abstract symbol to the Tibetan villager, while implying or even stating explicitly that in reality the mountain is just an inanimate object, such as a resource for development.

Yet, the Tibetan utterance above (and generally Tibetan articulations about *zhidak* and other place-based relations) strongly affirms the nature of the mountain as a *zhidak* and leaves no space to suggest otherwise. Therefore,

4 Majar Luyi Gyalmo is a female *zhidak* mountain in my hometown, though I am unsure about the correct Tibetan spelling of the mountain’s name, as I have not seen her name in written forms.

even interpretive and humanistic research approaches to Tibetan culture and society, which may do well in including Tibetan cultures and perspectives, can alter Tibetan place-based relations on ontological and material levels when they resort to anthropocentric epistemic theories of social construction and symbolic meaning (especially when humanity is conceptualized as a separate and superior entity from Land). Additionally, western academic systems and practices of categorizing and historicizing such lifeways as “religious,” “folklore,” “traditional,” or “pre-modern” decouple Tibetan ways of knowing-being from places, lifeworlds, notions of the interconnectedness of land and life as well as thinking and being, and present-future times. To what kind of futures are such unquestioned academic conventions committed? Or to what kind of futurities⁵ are our academic practices contributing? Do our scholarly works contribute to the erasure and “disappearance” of such Tibetan ways of relationships by imposing our unquestioned assumptions of progressive linear histories and rational/secular thinking?

It matters greatly how we write, research, and translate Tibetan lifeways, given the power and privilege of western academic research, which has long been established as more valid and truer than other forms of knowledge. Indigenous scholars in the US have long noted the incommensurable differences between the cultures and worlds of European settlers and the Indigenous communities in Turtle Island (North America), as well as how such differences were unsettled through European cultural and linguistic imperialism. For example, Robin Kimmerer in her 2017 speech at Yale University, says, “a single word that seems to me the most pernicious act of disrespect coupled to linguistic imperialism is the little word, it.” Kimmerer continues “In English, you are either human or you are an it, it imprisons us in this idea of objectification of nature.” Kimmerer contends that such objectification puts these beings outside of our moral responsibilities.

5 “Futurity” is different from “future”. It refers to how the future is rendered knowable through specific practices and how the anticipatory logics of those futures intervene in the present. Futurities can overdetermine certain futures over others, such as the dominant settler future over Indigenous futures. See more in Tuck and Gaztambide-Fernández’s work (2013).

Advocating for justice for plants and places, Kimmerer has called for changing English pronouns that are used for non-human beings and entities in order to recognize their legal rights and responsibilities. Kimmerer suggests using the terms “ki” and “kin” for pronouns of more-than-human relations; ki derives from aki, which refers to land in the Anishinaabe language, and kin refers to kinship and thus as a plural pronoun. Therefore, I think translating and researching lifeworld(s) is not only a matter of representation but is fundamentally an ontological practice that could change the world in literal and material senses. Research and translation could be a bridge to realities and worlds other than the privileged dominant world if it is done well and justly. Indigenous research, literature, and education from Turtle Island (North America) and Aotearoa (New Zealand), for example, offer great promise for more ethical research and cross-cultural/linguistic translation when research, writing, and translation practices are rooted in, informed by, and done to support the flourishing of Indigenous ways of being and knowing⁶.

Therefore, we must consider the real impact of our translation and research projects on the communities—human and more-than-human—with whom the projects are concerned. Traditions and lifeways of a community have their own logics and purposes of expression and performance, which may not be up for “transfer” or “displacement” to a different culture, language, and place, especially the power dynamic of dominant and non-dominant languages is considered. We must thus also discern and respect the original purposes and uses of knowledge and traditions imagined by the knowledge creators and keepers of the community.

In conclusion, I return to the power of Dubhe’s song in renewing and deepening Tibetan relationships in everyday mundane and cosmic life, knowing, being, and becoming all at the same time. In this song, Dubhe speaks directly to his ancestral mountain, Amnye Machen, and articulates the relational and reciprocal encounter of the singer (and listeners) with the mountain-relative.

6 Please see the works by McCoy, Tuck, & McKenzie 2017; Kimmerer, 2013; Vanessa, 2013; Hunt 2014; Silko 2006.

The mountain's action of reaching into the sky, the singer's action of offering a *sang*, juniper smoke, and shouting *ki hi hi* are states of being and doing, connected to relational remembering and thinking with Tibetan Land, to which the mountain himself and the singer are inseparable parts, and for interconnected becoming and possibilities.



Layered landscapes of Minyak Rabgang, the snowy peaks of Zhakdra Lhatse (བཞག་བླ་མེ) in the upper layer, the shaded rocky mountain or Drari, Zursum Nyingpo of a territorial deity in the middle layer, and the meadows of Goruma village in the lower layer. Photo by the author.

In similar spirit, I also conclude this essay with an invocation of my ancestral mountain, Zhakdra Lhatse of Minyak Rabgang (the great plateau of Minyak, Eastern Tibet; མི་ཉག་བཞག་བླ་མེ), who is also the son of Amnye Machen in Golok. I was inspired to write these concluding words by Dubhe's song, as well as by a special phenomenon of rainbow lights that appeared near Minyak Zhakdra Lhatse on the fourth day of the Lunar New Year (January 25, 2023). I address these words primarily to my natal Mountain (also to Tibetan-speaking/reading audiences) and thus it is left untranslated.

ངའི་སྐྱེས་ལུ་མི་ཉག་བཞག་བ་ལྟ་ཅེ།
ཁྱོད་ཀྱི་ཅེར་སྤྱོད་འཇའི་དར་ཐག་འཐེན་དུས།
ཡུལ་རི་ཚུར་འཕེང་བའི་བྲན་གདུང་སྐྱེ་བུང་།
དྲིན་ས་ཡུལ་སྤྱིད་པའི་རྟེན་འབྲེལ་ཡག་མོང་།
ཚོག་འབྲུ་འགའ་མ་སར་དམར་བཞེན་བྱིས་ནས།
སྤྱོད་ཡར་སྐྱོད་ཞིག་ལ་རེ་བས་སྐྱུར་དུས།
བོད་ཁ་བའི་སྣོད་བཅུད་བཟན་པར་སྐྱུང་ཞིང་།
མོ་ངའ་ལ་ལམ་སྟོན་སྟོང་གྲོགས་མཛོད་རོགས།

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