

Abstract for the session

## What Possessed You: Sovereignties, Selves, and Spirits

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### **Self-Possessed or Self-Governed?**

### **Spirit Possession and Transcendental Politics in Tibetan Buddhism – and in Melanesian Shamanism**

For hundreds of years, the Nechung Oracle -- in full ritual costuming and in erratic bodily trance – has advised the Dalai Lamas of Tibet on important social and political matters, a tradition that continues to the present day. The incorporation and domestication of malevolent or wrathful spirits that can, could, or should be invoked to inhabit and merge with oneself has been focal in Tibetan Buddhism at a number of levels, including in contemporary tantric meditational practices of self-deification as well as in the historic ‘taming’ of pre-Buddhist Bon shamanic spirits, the elaboration of the alternately peaceful and wrathful incarnations of the Buddhist spiritual pantheon, and social and political use of spiritual “skillful means” from the Dalai Lama on down to local lamas, oracles, and diviners. In social and political terms, disputes concerning the veracity and authenticity of wrathful spirits associated with the protection (or denigration) of Tibetan Buddhism have continued to inform sectarian divides, as reflected in the schism between the Dalai Lama and practitioners of Dorje Shugden.

Against the “political extraversion” of Tibetan Buddhist spiritual possession and wrathful spirituality, including when viewed in world-comparative terms, the highly refined self-possession of Tibetan Buddhist tantric adepts by wrathful meditational deities is designed to produce possession as a highly controlled alternative consciousness – a deified self-transcendence leading to Enlightenment -- that does not replace but rather co-exists seamlessly with ‘normal’ waking consciousness and which is properly devoted to compassion for all sentient beings. The domestication of possessing and potentially harmful spirits -- and the visualization and skillful incorporation of beneficent ones -- has been common to spirit mediumship across many world areas. In vajrayana or tantric practice, however, the goal is to integrate the alternatively possessed and transcendent “non-self” with the conventional reality of ordinary selfhood; these divergent planes or dimensions of reality are intended to be completely fused “in one taste,” including in regular daily activity. A long, rich, and detailed history of Buddhist philosophical analysis for some two millennia -- from Nargajuna through Je Tsongkhapa to the present -- has refined and meditatively applied these practices of what might be called “self-possession.”

The willful calling or bringing of spirits into oneself -- and the self-domestication of wrathful or uncontrolled spiritual entities – have been common aspects of spirit possession and spirit mediumship in many world areas. In the present case, self-possession extends not just to the contextual inhabiting of an alternative personal or spiritual world but to the intended fusion of this state with an irrevocably transformed nirvanic conventional self. In Tibetan Buddhism, the relationship of priority that is commonly assumed between conventional selfhood and transcendental selflessness is overturned: normal self-functioning is itself seen as afflicted or “possessed” by the throes of attachment, aversion, and self-grasping in samsara.

The distinctiveness and also the limit points transcendent self-possession in Tibetan Buddhism are thrown into comparative relief by juxtaposing them with spirit mediumship that I have also had the occasion to study in long term fieldwork among the Gebusi of interior Papua New Guinea. Gebusi spirit mediums were self-initiated to a significant extent and were pledged to engage with beneficent spirits, to repel or domesticate wrathful ones, and to support the well-being of the community. Highly decentralized and with no hierarchical leadership structure – in stark contrast to the spiritual self-possession of Tibetan lamas and the Dalai Lama – Gebusi spirit mediums canalized and galvanized community sentiment, including in the attribution of sorcery accusations. These resulted in the homicidal (real-world) execution of large numbers of Gebusi as sorcery suspects, accounting for almost one-third of all adult deaths during the pre-colonial and early colonial period.

In terms of political impact and sovereignty, the social and political outcomes of nirvanic self-possession in a highly hierarchical Tibetan Buddhist context contrast somewhat ironically with the nuanced but ultimately violent projections of wrath in decentralized Gebusi spirit mediumship. The stark potentials and divergent political outcomes of spiritual self-possession are thus thrown into relief.