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What Possessed You?: Sovereignties, Selves, and Spirits

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Self-Possessed, Self-Governed: Spirit Possession and Transcendental Action in Tibetan Buddhism

Among Highest Yoga Tantric practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, highly controlled and refined self-possession by meditational deities produces elaborate and powerful states of alternative conscious. Ideally or ultimately, the visualization and incorporation of a tantric world of mandala deities suffuses a full parallel world of ultimate reality against which daily waking reality is revealed as the impermanence, suffering, and 'cycling' of mere samsara. However, in contrast to many forms of spirit possession that have been ethnographically analyzed in different world areas, self-possession by tantric adepts is designed to ontologically fuse 'ultimate' and 'conventional' levels reality so that the dualism and division between these is neither embraced nor reduced into an ultimate reality of which conventional being is merely a reflection or epiphenomenon. For some 1,500 hundred years, tantric Mahayana Buddhism has attempted to both philosophically refine and practically cultivate such self-possession through meditation and analytic mind-training techniques. In practical terms, ethics of compassion or *Bodhichitta* mandate efficient reengagement with conventional world realities rather than mere escape from or transcendence of them. In the process, Vajrayana tantric practices aim to integrate and ultimately fuse an alternatively possessed and transcendent 'non-self' with the super conventional reality of a vivified and hyper-efficient 'normal' waking consciousness – with important implications for our understanding of spiritual power. Information in the paper derives from a combination of historical and philosophical reading, teachings by and practices with high contemporary Tibetan lamas, and a range of scholarly visits to rural and urban areas of northern India, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, and Mongolia during the last decade. In the context of Tibetan Buddhist devotionalism or "Lamaism," the present paper links the externalized sovereignty or governmentality of a spiritually possessed world with what Foucault explored in his later works as the power of ethical self-relationship in alternative technologies of subjectification.