

Reworking the identity of the rnying ma school: a comparison of two seventeenth century ritual manuals

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As is well known, the Rnying ma school experienced unprecedented support during the seventeenth century. The fifth Dalai Lama's family had strong Rnying ma ties, and some of his closest teachers were Rnying ma pa. As the new Dalai Lama government rose to power, so did the fortunes of the Rnying ma school. During the second half of the seventeenth century huge new Rnying ma monasteries were founded throughout central and eastern Tibet. In fact, these years marked a shift in the identity of the Rnying ma school towards larger, monastic institutions. In central Tibet, the two monasteries of Rdo rje brag and Smin grol gling were particularly influential in this new trend. This paper will compare and contrast the impact of these two monasteries on the shape of the Rnying ma school.

More specifically, I will be looking at their respective ritual manuals for the performance of the "Sutra Empowerment" (*mdo dbang*), an elaborate ceremony based on the Anuyoga tantra entitled the *Compendium of the Intentions Sutra* (*Dgongs pa 'dus pa'i mdo*). Both Rdo rje brag and Smin grol gling produced extensive writings on this ceremony, including two new empowerment ritual manuals. An examination of these manuals reveals two very different approaches to the Sutra Empowerment tradition, approaches that reflect the wider strategies taken at each monastery towards the institutionalization of the Rnying ma school.

By the seventeenth century, the Sutra Empowerment tradition had become the ritual centerpiece of the Rnying ma school's Spoken Teachings (*bka' ma*). This class of teachings should be understood in juxtaposition to the Treasure Teachings (*gter ma*), with the Spoken Teachings based on supposed translations from Indic-language originals rather than on revelations native to Tibet. At the heart of these Spoken Teachings stands the triad of Sutra, Tantra, and Mind (*mdo rgyud sems gsum*), the three root tantras of Anuyoga, Mahayoga, and Atiyoga respectively. As mentioned above, the Sutra Empowerment draws upon the first element of this triad, namely the *Compendium Sutra*. Historically, the *Compendium Sutra* provided much of the mythological and doctrinal structure for the Spoken Teachings. As a result, by the seventeenth century the Sutra Empowerment had become a grand ceremony representing in many respects the entire Rnying ma school. Its performance took up to two weeks and required resources that only a large monastery could provide.

Thus as Padma 'phrin las and Gter bdag gling pa worked to legitimate their new institutions at Rdo rje brag and Smin grol gling, they both turned to the Sutra Empowerment. Their writings changed the face of the Sutra Empowerment tradition, but in di-

verse ways. At Rdo rje brag, Padma 'phrin las sought to create a completely new lineage to replace the one already in existence which was controlled by his enemies. In this way, he hoped to erase certain elements of the Rnying ma school from the history books.

This project represented a power shift within the Rnying ma school that paralleled the wider change to the new Dalai Lama government. Before, under the rule of the Gtsang kings, the main central Tibetan Rnying ma lineage enjoying royal patronage was that stemming from the Gter ston Zhig po Gling pa, passing through Sog bzlog pa and Gong ra lo chen amongst others. After the fifth Dalai Lama's takeover, this group fell out of favor while the new monasteries of Rdo rje brag and Smin grol gling were established. The new Rdo rje brag ritual manual embodied this change in royal patronage.

The Sutra Empowerment writings produced at Smin grol gling just a few decades later exhibit a completely different approach to the changing face of the Rnying ma school. The tone is not exclusive but inclusive, as Gter bdag gling pa sought to create a new tradition that would be acceptable to all elements within the Rnying ma school. In depicting his lineage, he tried to gather all the earlier strands within his own. In his new ritual manual, he "dumbed down" the empowerment ceremony, making it better suited for the general public and more manageable for a festival format. Thus he removed the most secret tantric elements from the ceremony and divided the unwieldy manual into smaller individual manuals that could be handed off to groups of ritual specialists within the monastery, thus streamlining both the preparations and the actual performance. Now the entire ceremony could be completed in just three days. The new system was backed up by a rigorous historical study that provided unprecedented detail on the ritual tradition. Gter bdag gling pa's project culminated in 1691 when he invited hundreds of the top Rnying ma masters from throughout Tibet to a grand unveiling of his new ritual system at Smin grol gling. The project was highly successful, and today Smin grol gling's ritual manuals are standard at all Rnying ma monasteries other than those affiliated with Rdo rje brag.