True enough. A reflexive approach to Tibetan hagiography within an ambiguous domain

Suffisamment vrai. Approche réflexive des hagiographies tibétaines

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/2905>

DOI: 10.4000/emscat.2905

ISSN: 2101-0013

Publisher

Centre d'Etudes Mongoles & Sibériennes / École Pratique des Hautes Études

Electronic reference

Magdalena Maria Turek, "True enough. A reflexive approach to Tibetan hagiography within an ambiguous domain", *Études mongoles et sibériennes, centrasiatiques et tibétaines* [Online], 48 | 2017, Online since 05 December 2017, connection on 13 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/emscat/2905> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/emscat.2905>

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Introduction

- ¹ In the following paper, I would like to revisit one particular aspect of a case when informants lied to me during fieldwork. Ever since the revelation of the lie and during the entire ethnographic process, I attempted to transcend my own initial, post-positivist naivety about “truth”. As a result, the process has guided me, in terms of an inquiry into the field I was studying, to discover a number of truths that I would have never learned if it were not for the lies. Furthermore, and in terms of a more theoretical discussion, I have embarked on a reflexive examination of the ambiguities of self and other in this particular case as well as the entanglement of the ethnographic self in the social realities of the field.
- ² This contribution is based on events that occurred in the course of fieldwork in 2007 and 2008 in Kham (Kham, eastern Tibet), specifically in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, People’s Republic of China, where I was collecting material for a doctoral dissertation on Tibetan hermitism and its contemporary revival. Uncovering the tall tales I was told during some interviews made it possible for me to come closer to understanding the nature of, and strategies used in the current Tibetan Buddhist revival in Kham. In accordance with David Germano’s observation that Tibetan revivalists are “dynamic agents who construct as much as they are constructed” (Germano 1998, p. 86), I will argue for the informants’ negotiation of “ambiguous domains” (Barnes 1994, pp. 49-51) that arise as spaces for the selective recollection of past events – especially the re-imagination, manipulation and fabrication of facts in oral and scriptural biographies of living and recently deceased

Khampa¹ (Khams pa) saints. I would like to present these manipulations as additional assistance in the interpretation of ethnographic material as well as highly informative codes “that would enable me to look not at lies but away from them” (Nachman 1984, p. 537). For this reason, I will refer to some of my interlocutors as “(mis)informants”; this idiosyncratic orthography is meant both to reflect their deceptive role and to emphasize how their art of lying provided me with additional, valuable insights into the entire ethnographic situation. Finally, since my own entanglement in the processes of negotiation in the ambiguous domain opened the scene for the lies² in the first place, I will reflect on my position as ethnographer in the field and throughout the entire ethnographic process. Although hagiographic coding is a process, I will argue for a spatial analogy of the ambiguous domain to describe the negotiation of life stories that occurs within a deliberately created metaphoric location of ambiguity, and may involve the agency of keepers or custodians of the domain as main negotiators.

- 3 Everyday discourses of Tibetans, especially those involving respected religious figures, will occasionally employ embellishments, intentional omissions, idealizations, euphemisms, conflation of facts with myth or mythic borrowing as well as a range of related practices, which constitute an entire repertoire that may be geared towards the coining or preserving of a saint’s reputation, or otherwise keeping up appearances; they may all be performed totally beyond the idea of “truth” distortion and with a perfectly benign motivation. While some of those practices will also be discussed in this paper, in the examination of this ethnographic episode I will look at a practice that I will insistently designate to be straightforward “lying”, signposted with two different formalizations of this term, chosen to cover the broadest discursive spectrum relevant in this case. The first one is an emic exposition taken from The Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary (Zhang 1985, p. 141, v. *skyag rdzun*), described as “an utterance which is disconnected from the truth”. The other definition stems from social sciences and may thus be seen as interior to the discourse of the ethnographer whose entanglement in the politics of the field became a vital factor in eliciting the production of deceit. Accordingly, Aldert Vrij (Vrij 2000, p. 6) determines a lie to be “a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue”. Whilst I apply the above outline in the interpretation of what happened to me in the field on two occasions as a lie, I would like to discourage the potential extreme readings of my (mis)informants as either Machiavellian manipulators intent to deceive, or a type of Rousseauian natural (wo)men who tell the truth even when they lie. As a counterproposition to positioning them on an ethical scale of this or any kind, I will emphasize what can be gained in terms of the epistemology of the ethnographic process.

Lying in the name of the father and of the son: the (mis)information

- 4 When I first went to Kham in 2007 in search of a suitable fieldwork site for my dissertation on the revival of Tibetan hermitism, I encountered the meditation school of Lachi (La phyi) and its charismatic founder and leader Tsultrim Tarchin (Tshul khrims mthar phyin, b. 1947) in the historical centre of the Barom Kagyu (‘Ba’ rom bKa’ brgyud) school in Kyodrak (sKyo brag, Chin. Juela Xiang). The following year, I would learn how certain events in the life story of this master are negotiated within a domain

of ambiguity, i.e. consciously folded to fit what I learned later to be a mould of a life seen as ideal by my (mis)informants.

- 5 Since the lie I was told was biographical in nature, before I recount its telling during my first stay in Lachi in 2007 and its revelation when working there again in 2008, I will briefly recapitulate the most important events from the life story of Tsultrim Tarchin as it is known to me presently:

Tsultrim Tarchin was born in 1947 in a rural area of Yushu TAP, Qinghai. After the advent of the People's Republic and its expansion into Tibetan areas, he went to a state school, where he learned the Chinese script and was made to memorize Marxist doctrines. When he was eighteen, he married a local girl and had seven children, one of whom died in infancy. Having received some training in accounting at the township, sometime during the Cultural Revolution, Tsultrim Tarchin was elected the commune's accountant.

In the liberalization period, around 1980, he learned about a lama who had been hiding in a stable during the Cultural Revolution. This was the great ascetic and Tantric master Karma Norbu Zangpo (Karma Nor bu bzang po, 1906-1984). Tsultrim Tarchin was determined to meet him and was later granted the esoteric transmissions of Mahāmudrā and the Six Yogas of Nāropa.

In 1988, at the age of 41, Tsultrim Tarchin made up his mind to leave ordinary life behind. Following in the footsteps of his teacher, he became a renunciate yogin, resolving to meditate in solitude regardless of the hardships. His plan was to take ordination, and he suggested that his wife and six children all accompany him in his new life as meditators. However, his wife felt that the children were too young for her to take on an ascetic lifestyle in remote surroundings, so she decided that she and the family would remain in the village.

After his ordination, Tsultrim Tarchin joined one of the most prominent disciples of Karma Norbu, Saga Rinpoche (gSal dga' rin po che, b. 1955), the abbot of the nearby Barom Kagyu monastery of Kyodrak, for a pilgrimage to Central Tibet. The relationship that the two meditators developed at this time would become very important for Tsultrim Tarchin's religious career, recognition and activity.

In keeping with the biographical tradition of both his guru Karma Norbu and Tibet's most famous saint Milarepa (Mi la ras pa, 1052-1135), for six years Tsultrim Tarchin led a radically ascetic existence in the mountains above Kyodrak, wandering from cave to cave, living on alpine plants and cold spring water and wearing only one cotton robe.

Around 1999, Tsultrim Tarchin began his career as meditation instructor in the many reconstructed and new meditation retreat centres of Kyodrak. Notably, his skill in the Six Yogas was recognized beyond the locality and the religious school to which he belonged. In 2005, at the foot of Chabti (Chab sti) Mountain, the master founded the meditation school of Lachi. In 2008, this hermitage for group training housed a constantly fluctuating number of up to 150 meditators from the immediate vicinity and other areas, three of whom were Tsultrim Tarchin's own children, as well as his younger brother, Tsultrim Namgyal (Tshul khri rnam rgyal, b. 1953) and an elder sister Drolma (sGrol ma, b. 1943). The brother had settled at the hermitage in 2007 and took novice vows from Saga Rinpoche in early autumn a year later. Some of the master's other family members were also living at the hermitage: one unordained, older sister as well as their elderly mother.

Tsultrim Tarchin has many lay disciples and donors, some from as far away as Hong Kong. He has been invited to distant places such as Shanghai, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and even Japan, but has not accepted any of the requests. He is credited with possessing many supernatural powers. There is talk of several hand- and footprints he is supposed to have left in stone. Local people also believe Tsultrim Tarchin has the ability to fly like Milarepa and the Barom patriarchs³.

- 6 When I was first investigating the life story of Tsultrim Tarchin in 2007, I interviewed his disciples, family members and colleagues. I distinctly remember asking both Tsultrim Namgyal, the brother of the master and, on another occasion, their sister Drolma if, before becoming a monk, the lama had had a wife and a family. In their responses, they both expressed a clear no. That was a lie told in the direct presence of the proof that it was otherwise, which I did not realize at that time: two of the lama's daughters and a son, the (mis)informants' nieces and nephew were living next door in one of the Lachi's huts as renunciates; the son was additionally a locally important meditation instructor. During this first fieldwork period, I did not ask Tsultrim Tarchin's ordained disciples or colleagues about the master's personal life, since I had been warned by Sonam (bSod nams), one of my local fieldwork assistants, that in the monastic environment this question is best avoided. Sonam explained that my question could be perceived as an offensive accusation that a respected lama had broken vows of celibacy, which I thought relied on the creation of an undesired and embarrassingly personalized association between the religious sphere of celibate monasticism and the biological sphere of reproduction. Accordingly, I never asked monastics about Tsultrim Tarchin's personal history and relied on the lies that his brother and sister told me. Thus (mis)informed, I investigated many other details from the lama's biography, but took it for granted that he had never started a family.
- 7 This was my conviction until a year later. In 2008, I was again working in Lachi and staying in the hut kindly placed at my disposal by Tsultrim Tarchin himself, through the hands of the manager-monk of the hermitage. Here I studied the structure and functioning of the meditation school from the inside and was trying to understand its role in the community, in the local religious landscape and hierarchy, and in the lay social life around it. I was interested in how the Tibetans were reviving the traditional Tantric technologies and the ethos of the renunciate ascetic hermit on the periphery of post-Dengist China, one of the fastest-growing, modern economies in the world.
- 8 One October day I was in my hut when Tenzin, one of the children learning the alphabet and the Buddhist basics at the meditation school, came in and began a casual chat about his own daily schedule and tasks, but also commenting on the business and personal traits of others. Gossip has been described as "a fundamental moral force in every society as well as the primary medium for informal information" (Kjellgren 2006, p. 237); this was indeed my experience. At one point, the boy said something about "the master's son". In my naivety, I was dumbfounded. How could this be true? I was convinced that young Tenzin was lying or fantasizing. After all, the others I had talked to about Tsultrim Tarchin's family past were adults. I quickly set out to find out the facts. That same evening I invited some nuns for dinner and asked them directly: "Did the master ever have a wife and family?" After some whispering, I finally learned the truth: "Before he became a monk, he had both wife and seven children, though one of them died. And three of them, now adults, are committed to life-long meditation retreat and are living here at Lachi! But hush – let us not talk about it any longer".
- 9 I never approached Tsultrim Tarchin himself about it (and he always said his "worldly" history is of no importance anyway), but after that revelation I remembered my acquaintance the previous year with a young lama, presented as the second-in-charge in the hierarchy of religious instructors at Lachi. Tsultrim Dudul (Tshul khrims bdud 'dul, b. 1975), then in his thirties, already had much experience of meditation and a growing influence. I now learned he was the master's son that Tenzin had mentioned.

- 10 The reason for deceit was not apparent to me. After all, the master had not broken his vows of celibacy, since he had not yet been a monk at the time he married and had children. While abandoning one's monastic ordination and taking up a lay life is seen as embarrassing in many Tibetan societies (just as it is considered scandalous to openly break celibacy vows), the pre-monastic life of an ordained person is either perceived as irrelevant, or else the worldly engagements and transgressions are presented as a factor triggering religious vocation.

Restricted realities and fictional identities: ethnography and deceit in China

- 11 Aware of the deficit of research dealing with contemporary Tibetan societies in the context of subaltern studies, I would like to emphasize the methodological advantage of looking at acts of lying by Tibetans in the larger framework of the grand narrative of the Chinese state. The state has dominated and dispossessed non-Han groups by assigning them the inferior status of ethnic minorities, complete with stereotypes and fixed roles in terms of their relationship to the Han majority and the state itself. This monophonic narrative endures, as reflected in the post-earthquake monument recently erected by the provincial government in the town of Jyekundo (Yushu), not far from my fieldwork site. Its post-sociorealist style depicts brawny People's Liberation Army troopers and Han cadres guiding the disaster rescue mission of passive Tibetan victims, portrayed as a mixture of folklore dancers, elders, women and children, whose only voice is that of gratitude to the government and its enterprises: a Chinese inscription held by a Tibetan child depicted in the monument reads simply "Thank you!"
- 12 In the liberalization process following Mao's death, Tibetans have been restricted in their capacity to adopt a public voice that would enable them to express their own wishes or concerns. Paired with censorship and issues of political sensitivity, this situation has resulted in the development of sophisticated discursive techniques in both oral practices and literature. Generally, Tibetans have been re-creating and reshaping their own narratives in ways which can serve as a means of counterbalancing the power and identity crises that stem from the colonial practices of the Chinese state. I recently described how some of the literary strategies used by Tibetan authors assist in re-imagining and reimagining the past⁴, in order either to re-emphasize desired events, to compensate for their uncertainty, or to rewrite the initial encounters with the communist Chinese (Turek, in press a and b). In the present contribution, I would like to look at a manipulation of truth in oral interviews that I believe, besides serving other purposes for my disenfranchised (mis)informants, constitutes a source of power for the liar (compare with Bok in Nachman 1984, p. 538).
- 13 Obstructions to carrying out qualitative research in the People's Republic of China have been analysed in view of restrictions on all forms of public discourse (Kjellgren 2006, p. 230). It is not only that the state imposes limits on all forms of expression through various means, among which censorship is merely the instrument of a larger apparatus, but also that political repression of minority discourses and of dissident voices have created what Emily Yeh terms a discursive "politics of fear" (Yeh 2006, p. 97). The social mistrust in the form of "dimorphism of values" that may be present in certain societies under authoritarian rule has been discussed extensively in the context of Polish communism (Wnuk-Lipinski 1982; Kubik 2010, p. 4) of which I, the author of

this reflexive contribution, have first-hand experience in my childhood and early teens. Dimorphism of values has been brought up in the contemporary Tibetan setting by Goldstein (1998) and Yeh, whose informants described the dilemma this way: “What we know in our hearts/minds (*sems*), we don’t need to say with our mouths” (Yeh 2006, p. 98). On the same note, the famous Tibetan-Chinese dissident poet and publicist Tsering Woesser described the conundrums of Tibetans working as government employees: “They are divided inside. We call them people with two heads⁵”.

- 14 In some cases, lying can reflect this moral split. In my experiences of lies in the field, the involvement of the Chinese state or the Party may not have been the main polarizing agent in terms of provoking distrust; however, because of its colonial practice in ethnic Tibetan areas, its ever-presence and aspired omniscience, I believe that the state did open a certain arena of deceit, in which people may be more reluctant to tell the truth or tend to construct fiction about topics considered sensitive. In the next sections of this paper, I will discuss both lying and related practices performed in this context.
- 15 Moreover, as several researchers have noted, countless restrictions imposed on foreign and domestic scholars can unwillingly trigger the development of a repertoire of fictional identities on the side of the ethnographer working in China (Gros 2013; Hansen 2006; Yeh 2006). In my own case, during the two periods of fieldwork in 2007 and 2008 that form the basis of this discussion, I was caught between the ambiguities and fictionalities that arose as I sought access to the field and attempted to establish rapport with informants both on the official and on the local or informal level.
- 16 A three-month reconnaissance trip in 2007 was my first investigation carried out in China and the very first time I carried out fieldwork in general. I was to travel throughout Kham and look for a site suitable for an in-depth study of Tantric hermitism. Prior to leaving Germany, where I was enrolled in a doctoral programme, my academic advisers put me in touch with Tibet scholars based in China, but also warned me to avoid the term “religion” in my correspondence with China and in any official or formal context when describing my scholarly interests, since it could raise unnecessary concern as to the apolitical nature of my pursuits. Should I be questioned, I was always to reply that I wanted to learn about Tibetan “culture” or “customs”, since these were academic areas officially approved as non-problematic. I was also advised to undertake the journey as a private person. Although on my second trip to Kham in 2008 I was issued a “formal” letter of introduction from a professor I had befriended in Beijing, I never had the chance to present this to anyone. The only time the authorities became interested in my presence in ways which went beyond the usual enquiries about nationality, destination, etc., was when I was invited, together with a travel companion who was also Polish, to join a celebration for local Tibetan and Chinese police officers and other cadres: we were asked to entertain them by singing in our native language as an exotic addition to their function.
- 17 As my later experience showed, and contrary to what has been observed in other writings (Hansen 2006), in many Tibetan regions of Sichuan and Qinghai taking an “unofficial” position can open easy, low-profile access to sites such as monasteries or hermitages together with their surroundings. I was soon to find out that my “strictly private” profile became the very key that granted entry and to some extent, helped me establish rapport with informants in the hermitage I was studying.

- 18 One group of factors that positively influenced my study was the relatively relaxed political climate in the parts of eastern Tibet where I worked for the longest time: Dege (sDe dge) and Nangchen (Nang chen), situated respectively in sections of Sichuan and Qinghai provinces. This is partly due to the fact that the religious revival in these regions has managed to avoid explicit political symbolism, and that ties with the Tibetan government-in-exile are not very strong, for mainly historical reasons. Nangchen in particular is an area where the Gelugpa sect, with its nationalist sentiments, is in the minority. Due to the representation of Tibetans in the local government, the state may even actively support religious projects, as they did in the case of the hermitage which became my case study. That some regions of Kham enjoy a relatively liberal air in terms of state surveillance and restraint is striking, especially in comparison with other Tibetan areas, such as Lhasa or parts of Amdo, where restrictions can be much more pronounced, and consequently, a foreigner asking any kind of questions is frequently met with scepticism and anxiety. Contrary to this, even immediately after the crackdown on the post-Olympics uprisings which took place throughout ethnic Tibet in 2008, including Kham, I found that for foreigners in general, it was quite easy to make contact with and interact with local people. Indeed, I rarely experienced open mistrust on the side of my informants.
- 19 The ambiguity concerning my “official” identity as a foreigner in China soon gained a further layer of fictionality, which was the result of contact with the communities and individuals I was studying, simply because during my work in the field hardly anyone understood what I was really doing. Before my first trip, the friendly professor from Beijing advised me that I should introduce myself as someone aspiring to a Tibetan scholastic *rabjampa* (*rab 'byams pa*) title, which in his eyes represented a measure of learning comparable to a Western doctorate. The problem was that my informants could not relate to this designation in any way. What is more, there is no term in the local dialects that would convey the meaning of ethnographic research in pursuit of an academic degree. Kham area is largely rural and pastoral, and in 2007-2008 even basic education was very limited. Many of the people I was interviewing or interacting with were illiterate, and those who were not followed a traditionally Tibetan educational model which involves studying and memorizing religious texts, but certainly not conducting fieldwork and ethnography in the context of post-modern anthropology. Describing myself as “writing a book on Tibetan hermits for Western schools/universities” was an introduction strategy I developed on a trial-and-error basis and which was “true enough” to explain the purpose of my questions.
- 20 Communication was a complex issue, which further reflected my ambiguous status during the fieldwork. Especially for the purpose of a survey of hermitic communities in 2007, I had to move around the Kham area which abounds in local dialects that are sometimes mutually incomprehensible, so every once in a while, I had to change my assistant/interpreter for another local person. However, since my linguistic competence lies mostly in the area of Classical Tibetan, which has codified and maintained religious terminologies, my own involvement in the communication process was also necessary, especially when informants discussed ritual or philosophical matters. This was due to the fact that, generally, the interpreters were not familiar with the specialist terminology used specifically within the doctrinal-ritual tradition that formed the religious framework of the hermitage⁷.

- 21 Finally, one other ambiguity in my identity as the ethnographer should be taken into consideration. It was not my academic project nor my role as doctoral student, but my personal interest in and involvement with Tibetan Buddhism that ultimately granted me access to the elitist environment of the hermitage and helped to establish rapport with some of its leaders and members. At the same time, this personal involvement became the very cause of my entanglement and, paradoxically, it eventually produced an insurmountable obstacle to data collection. I would like to elaborate on this issue later in the self-reflexive section of this paper⁸.

Hagiography in the making of a saint

- 22 Ever since ethnic Tibetan regions of post-Mao and post-Dengist China became the scene of a vibrant religious revival, the presence of charismatic Tantric masters in the Kham area has proved vital for the efficacy and popularity of the movement. Especially interesting are the careers of lamas who climbed the ladder of the religious hierarchy and became famous as great masters without being able to rely on the status of a “reincarnate master” or *trülku* (*sprul sku*). The meditation master Tsultrim Tarchin, whose life and the lies I heard about it in the field will be discussed below, is one of these.
- 23 Tibetan hagiography is a rich tradition that has played an important role in literature, but most of all, in the practice of religion. The importance of the hagiographic code to Tibetan ritual and its elevation over other types of religious texts is best illustrated by its cultic use, its physical embedding in the landscape through the demarcation of sacred places, and its application in imparting Tantric instruction. In this discussion on lying in the Tibetan cultural context, it is also relevant to remark that there is a subgenre of hagiography which, for its engagement with the lives of the “revealers of spiritual treasures” *tertön* (*qter ston*), whereas “treasure” pertains to texts which can be considered apocryphal, has maintained an intense focus on the issue of authenticity versus fraud⁹.
- 24 While processes of saint-making¹⁰ in premodern Tibetan literature have been described by Roberts, Rheingans, Quintman and others (Roberts 2007; Rheingans 2010; Quintman 2013), in this paper, I will look at contemporary social negotiations of sainthood. These necessarily involve the codification of a life narrative as hagiography, which must communicate both an exemplary life, and perhaps more importantly, the faculty to influence the environment with “blessing power”, *chinlab* (*byin rlabs*). In addition to other media which likewise contain and convey blessing, such as relics, insignia or sacralised objects, the particular strength of narratives is that they are effective in codifying the ideal of a saintly life. Thus, today, in the process of delineating and expanding the boundaries of charismatic networks, biographies of modern Tibetan saints are circulated orally, through iconic depiction and in writing. Because they can express both a model for emulation and/or veneration and blessing power, their distribution constitutes one of the key transactions in the Tibetan economy of charisma.
- 25 A life of an unknown practitioner becomes a biography of a modern saint through coordinating a personal life trajectory against an arrangement of hagiographic topoi known from tradition and social experience of important masters. Herein, the primary issue lies in coining a paradigm of an ideal life, which, while reflecting its source, the

“mytho-biography” of the Buddha (Obeyesekere 2006, p. 16), would be relevant for identity construction in the contemporary situation. In order to achieve its paradigmatic purpose, a life narrative of a modern saint should, first and foremost, unfold in ways which pronounce cosmological elements. Furthermore, and what is more relevant for the present discussion: in the process of coordination of an individual life against a string of hagiographic events, concern for cold facts or historical truth has rarely been a priority. Instead, the negotiation of a life story opens an ambiguous domain in which, as are about to see, certain events can be remembered selectively, others are re-imagined and some may involve the practice of lying.

(Mis)informants as keepers of the ambiguous domain

- 26 The deceit engineered by my (mis)informants may be purposeful, but it must also be mentioned that according to Buddhist Mahāyāna ethics, any action can be positive (*kuśala*) if the motivation behind it is non-egoistic. Especially because my (mis)informants, or at least Drolma as nun, had taken vows of truthfulness, and were engaged in the reconstruction of hagiographic traditions, their deceit could have been justified as serving the purpose of “the public good”. Therefore, their lies remain ethically ambiguous in both Buddhist and Platonic terms (compare with Barnes 1994, p. 83). Along similar philosophical lines, Sikes claims that for the researcher, revelations of lies during fieldwork may bring up elementary questions about the essence of “truth” and knowledge and about the link between epistemology and methodology:

Acknowledging that we are involved in philosophical inquiry means acknowledging different possibilities concerning what knowledge is considered to be; how it is obtained, recognised and relates to “truth” [...]; and the extent to which “truth” reflects “reality”. In other words, it raises specific questions about whether qualitative interview data can reveal “truth” (Sikes 2000, p. 258).

- 27 Therefore, much more important than a philosophical or specifically ethical consideration of “truth” versus “lies”, which cannot be satisfactory since it steers the discussion away from the essentially political nature of truth, and consequently, also lies (Foucault 1980), is the extraction of the information contained in a lie. I will approach this on two levels: 1) I will explore the acts of deception in terms of the politics of the field that had not been accessible to me before I was deceived (compare with Davies [1999] 2002, p. 82), and 2) I will look at the lie as the paradoxical factor that made the ethnographic process more valid because it initiated me into the deeper dynamic of the field, including my own entanglement, and helped me to transcend superficial concepts about the ethnographic situation and the methodologies I was using. This is why I have to say that I remain grateful to everyone, including Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma, who (mis)informed me.
- 28 In order to examine the (mis)information I encountered in the field, I will first set the lama’s siblings’ tall tales against the relatively rich repertoire of practices which in the Tibetan cultural context, allow for a misrepresentation or distortion of facts without the intention of producing deceit. Especially in cases of life stories of saints, in which the traditional narrative template is employed, it may be acceptable or even expected that followers or disciples will embellish, self-censor, idealize, euphemize, and use the language of myth to relate their accounts. In interviews concerning life stories or local histories, I also realized that some of my informants’ statements tended to form a

synergy of “facts”, “embellishments” or “opinions”. Some of this dynamic has to do with the emic understanding of historical narratives and the role that myth traditionally plays in these accounts. In her study of oral history in Kham, Gillian Tan has rightly shown that categories of fictionality versus factuality as well as the distinction between myth and history tend to be less pronounced and both can be considered “valid modes of social consciousness” (Tan 2013, p. 205). Whichever voice the Lachi (mis)informants were using to produce the fictive version of their brother’s life story, whether it was their own personal voice or the expression of tradition, or both – how do I come to define what happened as lying?

29 Let us return to the two definitions of lying quoted in the introduction to this discussion. The validity of the emic explanation of the term which emphasizes a “disconnection from the truth” is plain to see, since the statements about Tsultrim Tarchin being childless were quite clearly biographically false. Moving on to Vrij’s psychological explication of a lie, the declarations I heard must have also been deliberate. That being said, Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma could have impossibly been the type of fabricators convinced by their own perfect fiction: living proof of things being other than they claimed – two of Tsultrim Tarchin’s daughters and the son – dwelled in the next hut and mingled with their aunt and uncle every day, the nephew as the hermitage’s instructor and the nieces most probably helping to care for Drolma as their aging aunt, which would be expected in a Tibetan environment. While the gain involved in the deliberate choice of false statements by Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma will be explained as follows, let us examine further elements of the situation that had me uncover a “lie” and not just another narrative enhancement. Vrij’s phrasing “without forewarning” points to the context of trust or veracity that I was convinced to be participating in with my naivety of a convert. The subsequent element of that same definition, “to create in another a belief which the communicator considers to be untrue” constitutes the key argument in my understanding of the situation. “To create in another” implies that a lie is an utterance (or non-utterance) which must necessarily involve a recipient. In contrast to a narrative flow through which a life story is related orally or in writing and which may include enhancements or omissions, the dialogue form I used in the collection of the (mis)information quite clearly separated both sides of the interaction and defined the receiver. The dialogical sequence: A) “Did the lama have children?” – B) “no”, is much more personalized from the sociolinguistic point of view than other whole accounts or narrative segments, in which the audience may not be determined at all. The specification of the recipient determines that fiction becomes a lie.

30 These are arguments that have prompted me to use “lying” as an instrument in my examination of the ambiguous domain of Tibetan hagiography. The next steps will hopefully assist us in coming closer to an understanding of why the lie was told and reveal the information condensed in it. First of all, let us now look at the specific constituents of the situation in which the deception was generated. Who were the (mis)informants? Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma were the yogin’s brother and sister, who lived on the Lachi premises and (especially the brother) managed the master’s affairs. This falls into a pattern I have observed several times in connection with saint-making processes in the contemporary Khampa revival. Typically, the expansion of a charismatic network around a saint-in-the-making goes along the lines of family loyalties, further encompassing the local community and beyond. At the heart of the charismatic network, in the physical proximity of the new saint are often family

members, ordained as monks and nuns and managing the master's affairs. They are also important negotiators and keepers of the new saint's hagiography, with a special focus on his or her behaviour in the Maoist era and the resulting reputation.

31 Thus, the siblings must have understood themselves as guardians of Tsultrim Tarchin's image. This is why both of them, independently from one another as I (again perhaps naively?) presume, specifically lied about Tsultrim Tarchin's premonastic engagement in a sexual relationship and progeny. But why would they be convinced that a monk can break his celibacy vows retrospectively, if this is clearly not what is taught in the Vinayavastu or in any other Buddhist scriptures?

32 A great part of the answer to that question is simply lack of knowledge. Both of my (mis)informants were elderly and had a lay background. Characteristically for such practitioners, neither of them had any religious education or training. To give an example, although Drolma was ordained at the time of my interview with her, she had only been a nun for a short time. When I asked her about the religious affiliation of a monastery she had belonged to before she moved to the Lachi meditation school, she could not answer that basic question. Her late ordination, together with the lack of fundamental information even about her own religious practice, is expressed by the emic concept of "old folks' dharma", *genchö* (*rgan chos*). According to Sherab Gyatso, the phrase describes:

those who in their twilight years (particularly after the death of a spouse) adopt monastic garb as a form of declaration that they are going to dedicate what remains of their lives to religious devotion (Gyatso 2003, p. 215).

33 In fact, Tsultrim Namgyal, who was around sixty at the time of our first conversation in which he (mis)informed me, also took ordination a year later. The label of a *genchö*, however neutral its connotation while designating ordinary, elderly practitioners, becomes a dishonouring term when relating to a religious authority, since *genchö* practice is generally associated with lack of religious training, skills and accomplishment¹¹. This is also linked with the fact that in many segments of Tibetan societies today, spiritual attainment and the social and religious status stemming from it are invariably connected to celibacy (compare with Germano 1998, pp. 69-70). Chastity was traditionally seen as an important vehicle for ritual power in premodern Tibetan societies. Because of their sexual inexperience, pre-pubescent children were ideal candidates for monastic novice vows; reincarnate lamas were commonly enthroned as toddlers and raised in a monastic environment without contact with females. Therefore, to my (mis)informants Drolma and Tsultrim Namgyal, who were not simply disciples of the master Tsultrim Tarchin, but additionally saw themselves responsible for the lama's reputation, admitting that their brother was a late renunciate like themselves would mean implying that he was not only deficient in value as a monk, but that his skills as a religious instructor were questionable. Owing to the siblings' lack of information, their concern about the power of gossip and their self-appointed function as keepers of the ambiguous domain, they were convinced that the truth would prove catastrophic to the high status Tsultrim Tarchin enjoyed in both the local religious hierarchy, the lay community and beyond.

Keep them secret as if they were stolen goods

- 34 Lying is not the only practice performed by agents of the Tibetan Buddhist revival in order to negotiate the past of contemporary masters within an ambiguous domain. Above I gave an example of how the *genchös* I worked with were engaged in oral negotiations that involved lying. However, negotiating a modern saint's life story is also a literary practice, performed by members of the religious elite who engage in a number of techniques that may be loosely affiliated with lying, such as remaining silent about whole decades of a saint's life, selective remembering or re-imagination of facts to compensate for their obscurity or even absence. As far as I could observe this practice, the techniques of concealment or compensation almost always concern the fate of the master in question during the Maoist era. It must be said, however, that in general very little is known about this period in ethnic Tibet, and secondly, the era when almost all Tibetans were abused in some way by the Chinese regime has understandably not become a favourite topic of conversation.
- 35 It seems that authors of hagiographies might conceal not only possible cooperation with the Chinese Communist regime, but also when a lama was subjected to violence, coerced to labour in a People's Commune, or when he had to abstain from religious practice due to restrictive government policies introduced in the course of the "democratic reforms". Being victimized not only compromises the image of an omnipotent saint but also, I as have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, questions the validity of the whole indigenous religious tradition in the face of an aggressive secular ideology (Turek, in press b). This is where lies can come into play as important tools in the negotiations of sainthood. For instance, in oral interviews with several monastic and *genchö*-monastic disciples of Tsultrim Tarchin's preceptor Karma Norbu, the (mis)informants did not reveal that the great adept was forcefully installed in the People's Commune. The written life narrative, however, does briefly account for this fact¹².
- 36 One of the ways in which biographers deal with problematic issues is leaving extensive gaps in the chronology of the narrative. Thus, the biography of Tsultrim Tarchin's important local colleague and teacher Saga Rinpoche features a hiatus of twenty years between 1960 and 1980 (sGa Karma don grub phun tshogs 1999, p. 301).
- 37 Another method of dealing with the victimization of Tibetan lamas is equipping the narrative with hidden transcripts (a term I adopt after Scott 1990), by which I mean a political critique in the face of the power-holder, performed so that the oppressed can speak freely but still remains undiscovered – a practice I discussed in a paper about Karma Norbu's ordeal in the People's Commune (Turek, in press b).
- 38 Discussing the fate of Tibetan clergy during the Maoist period is awkward for many Tibetans, who shun the topic mostly for social and religious reasons; it may also be difficult for the Chinese authorities for political reasons. However, I see additional plausible causes for omissions in hagiographic narratives. Possibly, for some Khampa Tibetan authors, the omissions or "white lies" are also political views expressed by way of a hidden transcript. For instance, telling a white lie can also be practised to counteract the recent, traumatic memories of the Maoist "speaking bitterness" campaigns, during which people were encouraged to denounce and destroy the reputation of traditional leaders.

- 39 Another possible hidden transcript underlying the silence around the past of contemporary Buddhist leaders might deal with resistance against the Chinese Communist Party's totalitarian style of governance that has the state delineate and then intrude into religious fields. This way, the state encroaches upon spheres traditionally maintained as clandestine, challenging the Tantric principles of concealment, an issue specifically relevant for this discussion of Tibetan hagiographies. The esoteric nature of the doctrines, rituals and mystic experiences cultivated by Tibetan hermits means that practitioners are advised to keep them "secret as if they were stolen goods" (Karma stobs rgyal 1999, p. 33) as we learn from the hagiography of Karma Norbu, Tsultrim Tarchin's guru and the yogin forced to labour in the 1960s. Today, as his disciples write down his life story and those of other masters, the state is more benign but ever-present, and it looks on as secret practices are performed, even putting the most clandestine texts on public sale so that they are accessible to the uninitiated and accidental buyer.

Some self-reflexive notes

- 40 At the beginning of this paper, I defined the ambiguous domain as a mode for the selective recollection of past events, including the re-imagination, manipulation and fabrication of facts in the oral or scriptural biographies of Khampa saints. In the subsequent sections of this contribution, I looked at the ambiguous domain of modern Tibetan hagiography, which is also where I presented my own entanglement in certain aspects of the ambiguity and fictionality. I now return to some facets of the ethnographic situation that positioned me within multiple spheres of ambiguity or even fictionality: the status of my research project as a private enterprise, the need to explain my project to informants in a way that was "true enough" for them to understand, and the issue of my own hybridity as both insider and outsider in the field. The following self-reflexive lines are meant to scrutinize the ambiguities on my side as well as reflect on the entanglement of the ethnographic self and other in a process of negotiation of an ethnography that allows for polyphony but is valid at the same time.
- 41 A theory of positionality according to England (1994) and Bourke (2014) postulates that ethnography represents "a shared space, shaped by both researcher and participants" (Bourke 2014, p. 1) and therefore may be influenced by multiple, overlapping identities on the side of the ethnographer and the informants. In the case of my fieldwork at Lachi, these identities developed on both sides in fictional or ambiguous ways. I have already commented on the fictional identities imposed on me by the larger political and social milieu in which the meditation school was situated (compare with Yeh 2006, p. 97). Moreover, a certain ambiguity of identity had accompanied me from the beginning. From the start, the choice of topic and scope of the dissertation pointed to how this project was also a personal venture: as a Buddhist practitioner, it was my wish to work with people who exemplified or focussed on what most interested me – meditation. When in the field, I often found myself stuck in the ambiguous position of a hybrid ethnographer, with all the politics of identity that this entails. The experience was simultaneously empowering and disempowering: while my co-religious affiliation gave me access to the elite hermitage which I knew explicitly forbade tourist visits, it was exactly this factor that subsequently became an impediment in collecting information. The main guru, Tsultrim Tarchin, voiced his concerns about my academic

project that, in his eyes, represented the very type of “worldly” or even “childish” engagement which must be renounced in the course of the ascetic eremitical path that he was teaching. Like several other high-profile Tibetan lamas who have cooperated with Western academia since the 1960s, he expected his role to be that of a religious teacher and not of an informant. He also clearly demanded that I conform to the role of the disciple in a more dedicated fashion, which was something I could only do at the cost of abandoning my entire research project.

42 Thus, throughout the entire ethnographic process, but especially during data collection in the field, I not only experienced the constant tension between two different identities that prompted different types of interactions with informants, but also an epistemological tension between the perspectives of outsider and insider. In order to draw attention to that latter experience, I chose to relate my own subjective reaction to the discovery of the lie in my dissertation: my astonishment reflected the naivety which, in turn, revealed my epistemological position as a post-positivist expectation to elicit “truth” from informants (compare with Chiseri-Strater 1996). Thanks to the lie, I could revisit and correct this position, moving on to the view which perceives interviews as “essentially reflexive and socially constructed” (Sikes 2000, p. 266).

43 In several Tibetan dialects, hybridity is sometimes referred to with the phrase “neither goat nor sheep”, *ra ma luk* (*rwa ma lug*). To critically address the problem of positionality of the hybrid anthropologist, I would like to cite the discussion of what Bourdieu saw as a paradox:

“When one is one of them”, he [Bourdieu] states, “one participates in the inherent belief in the belonging to a field whatever that field may be (religious, academic, etc.) and, when one is not one of them, one risks first forgetting to inscribe belief into the model..., and, second, being deprived of useful information”. The first barrier (i.e. belonging in one way or another to a religious institution), can lead to adopting a religious point of view on religion, to practicing a religious sociology rather than a sociology of religion. To avoid this (which is “difficult” but not “impossible” according to Bourdieu), it is necessary to practice “an objectification without complaisance... of all links, of all forms of participation, of subjective or objective belonging, even the most tenuous” (Dianteill 2003, pp. 544-545).

44 To help solve this contradiction, Kjellgren comments specifically on field research in China, where the simplistic dichotomy of self and other has been further reduced to the dichotomy of native versus non-native, which obscures the complexity of the ethnographic process (Kjellgren 2006, p. 225). Instead, the author proposes a nativeness founded on the “disciplinary and organisational belonging rather than in primordial terms of blood and culture” (Kjellgren 2003, 2006, p. 226). However, referring both to the Bourdieuan quote and my experience in the field, that same belonging can become a “barrier”, both for the risk of adopting a doctrinal viewpoint and, as very much in my case, for provoking the expectations of crucial informants that would contain me within the religious field and bar me from adopting the critical perspective and devoting myself to its methodologies such as data collection. To adopt Kamala Viswewaran’s way to describe the hybrid researcher as the “hyphenated ethnographer” (Kapchan & Strong 1999, pp. 245-246), I became stuck in the hyphen. In this conundrum, Kjellgren’s notion of “belonging” does not offer any solution. First, in my own position as the hybrid, I belonged to both fields, the academic and the religious. If they are seen as mutually exclusive, I belonged to none. On top of that, especially in the case of Tibetan Buddhism’s globalized and highly complex treatment of institutional

affiliation and ritual perimeters, the very category of belonging ultimately points to the ambiguities of the insider positionality itself.

- 45 That the tension between perspectives and identities within myself as ethnographer could not be readily resolved in the field is reflected by the genesis of the deception. Given the fact that my question – which prompted the lie – was considered inappropriate, I created a situation in which the outsider element of my identity became pronounced. Thus, the lie was a construct meant to represent something for the outside world, perhaps to others who did not know the master yet, but maybe also to an audience of Tibetan Buddhists located beyond China. The revivalists in ethnic Tibet are known to be especially conscious of the negative image of their movement as it is sometimes circulated within the Tibetan diaspora; the siblings could have expected that their testimony would reach those exterior audiences not only because of the conspicuous otherness of my appearance, but also because of the mentioned presence of the camera during our interviews. Apart from the performative aspect of the lies told by Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma, generating deceit in order to negotiate the existing power structures necessarily entails what Stéphane Gros terms “the politics of ethnography” (Gros 2013, p. 50).
- 46 Moving across the lying equation again to focus on the recipient of the lie, as someone who once lived under the “institutionalized lie” of Polish Communism (Havel quoted in Kubik 2010), for all my initial naivety, I am probably more prepared to encounter, and be excluded by the different “systems of trust” (Coleman 1982) which function in societies living under an authoritarian rule. As I tried to demonstrate above, the state encroaches upon the Tantric sphere of secrecy in various ways. This may in turn unleash a Foucauldian chain reaction where society becomes constantly engaged in a negotiation of power on many levels. At times, power can only be won by lying. Through my work in Lachi, I became witness to this negotiation and the main recipient of the deception.
- 47 It was easy to lie to me. My status at the Lachi meditation school was both privileged by inclusion and vulnerable through rejection. I was betwixt and between worlds. To begin with, nobody used my name, neither the Christian nor my Tibetan name. The master Tsultrim Tarchin kindly referred to me as “Tibetan girl”, *pökyi pumo* (*bod kyi bu mo*), but everyone else called me “the Western woman”, *jarmo* (*jar mo*). That name placed me in a faceless crowd of Western travellers who were sometimes spotted in larger Khampa towns. The master granted me many favours, but I never succeeded in “blending in” with the nuns. Absolutely no one understood my work or the concept of an academic dissertation. Tsultrim Tarchin’s siblings knew there was no way around talking to me (I was in their brother’s favour), but supposed they could weave their own version of the yogin’s life – I would not be able to find out the truth anyway.
- 48 In a fairly recent contribution discussing self-deception in ethnographic studies, Gary Alan Fine and David Shulman described a researcher active in the field as “a kindly trojan horse taking notes” (Fine & Shulman 2009, p. 179). I would like to adapt this phrase to express how my (mis)informants could have seen me – as a gullible horse taking notes. I find the analogy with the horse especially illuminating: like a horse, the ethnographer can be harnessed to serve the (mis)informant’s purpose. In this case, my project was used as a platform to express “facts” that really were a reflection of negotiation within an ambiguous domain. For several reasons Tsultrim Namgyal and Drolma did not have to consider their manipulation of truth unethical. Firstly, if the

main motive for their lies was to negotiate and maintain the reputation of their lama brother and perhaps with him, of the whole revivalist movement, within the framework of the Buddhist concept of *upāya*, as already mentioned, the moral value of any action is measured by the motivation behind it. Secondly, certain aspects of the hybridity of the ethnographer as recipient of the lies justified the means: as the “foreigner” (*jarmo*), I was positioned outside the local network of trust. At the same time, as an outsider I was privileged to pose the questions that Tibetans did not dare to ask. The combination of vulnerability and special advantage made me the perfect addressee of deceit and therefore, my (mis)informants could capitalize on both, in order to construct their ideal image of the perfect contemporary Tibetan saint. Finally, the reasons I had to give to explain my stay at the Lachi meditation school were “true enough”, which in a way was symmetrical to the ambiguity of the domain my informants were guarding, since the information I received from them about the life of their master and brother was also “true enough” for me.

Conclusions: towards a validity and polyphony of ethnographic texts

- 49 This contribution is meant to be open-ended, not least because the master Tsultrim Tarchin and his biographers are still active at the time of writing (compare with Sikes 2000, p. 268). Thus, the ambiguous domain of a life of a Khampa saint can still be negotiated before other recipients or audiences. Moreover, in order to critically address the issue of deception by informants, it is also important to acknowledge my role in generating the fiction in Tsultrim Tarchin’s life in terms of the fictionalities and ambiguities that my positionality entailed.
- 50 The experience of deceit in the field should help the researcher avoid creating a “superficial consistency” in interpreting data (Sikes 2000, p. 268; Davies [1999] 2002, p. 93). The risk of folding the informants’ voices to fit neatly-arranged moulds (and in that way imitate those of their practices in which representations substitute facts) is especially high when studying life narratives where, on the one hand, irregularities or contradictions may be readily discernible, but on the other, consistency may still be imposed as a result of employing certain theories or methodologies of ethnographic writing (Sikes 2000, p. 268).
- 51 However, a certain degree of validity can and should be attempted. Without such attempts, all production of knowledge would “sink into a relativistic hole” where no advancement is possible (Davies [1999] 2002, p. 90). At least since the restudy of Margaret Mead’s well-known work on Samoan sexuality (Mead [1928] 1954 and Freeman 1983), reflexivity, understood as the identification of the subjectivities and intersubjectivities of all participants in an ethnographic situation, surfaced as an important tool for the negotiation of validity of ethnographic narratives (compare with Davies [1999] 2002, pp. 87-88). The latter goal can be pursued through examining one’s epistemological position and questioning what can and cannot be learned or achieved from that viewpoint. In order to counteract both endless relativization of positions on the one hand and monophonic authority on the other, examining the ambiguous, fictional and hybrid elements of the ethnographic self and other as well as of the entanglement of the two can help achieve a polyphonic depth that enhances the validity of ethnography. In this contribution, reflexivity was additionally practiced as

an activity parallel to the Bourdieuan idea of “objectification”. Thus, the reflexive turn can be helpful in “recasting authority” of ethnographic narratives (Clifford & Marcus 1986, pp. 14-15).

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NOTES

1. The word "Khampa" can be an adjective, relating something to Kham or, as in this case, a proper noun, referring to Tibetans inhabiting the area.
2. As we are about to see, I was told the same lie on two occasions by two different informants. For these reasons, depending on the context, I will sometimes refer to the deception in the plural when addressing the fact that it was a reproduced fallacy, and sometimes in the singular to highlight the fact that it was the same fiction.
3. For an extensive biography see Turek 2013.
4. I understand the process or act of "re-imagination" to be different from "reimagination". Re-imagination describes a compensational approach to reconstructing a past, whether conscious or subliminal, while the latter term describes an interpretative recollection of the past in ways that emphasize knowing, recognizing, and appreciating, but most of all understanding this recollection to be the basis for contemporary action. See Turek in press a.

5. http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/25/world/asia/25woeser.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, accessed 10 November 2014.
 6. I thank Gregory Delaplace both for creating this phrase to describe my position in the field and for encouraging me to explore the self-reflexive side of this ethnographic project.
 7. Another circumstance which might have influenced the truthfulness of my interlocutors in interviews in 2007 was the presence of a camera: I was accompanied by two friends, one of whom was making a documentary film on the Buddhist revival in Kham (Rodizio 2010). However, since other studies have devoted much room to discussing the interdependence of ethnography and film (see Rouch 2003), and also because the film project was not a part of my own work, I will not discuss it further here.
 8. The complexity of the ethnographic process in this case study is described in the section of my dissertation where I describe the circumstances of fieldwork (Turek 2013).
 9. Tibetans have developed strategies and techniques to assess the credibility of *tertöns*. Parallel to this practice, but within the Western academic discourse, the work of Michael Aris discusses biographies from the *tertön* tradition, applying the categories of “genuineness” and “falsity” to evaluate the life of the treasure revealer Pema Lingpa (Padma gling pa), whom Aris pronounces “a charlatan” (Aris 1989). In connection with the number of unaddressed issues that this approach entails, I fully agree with Denzin and Lincoln who noted how “the positivist and postpositivist traditions linger like long shadows” (Sikes 2000, p. 268). I am grateful to Prof. Peter Schwieger for inspiring me to mention Aris’s work in this contribution (see also Gyatso 2001).
 10. I adopt the term “saint” with the awareness of its contextualization within Christianity and the consequent problematic of its application in a Buddhist environment. I believe, however, that dialogue with the rich body of studies of Christianity, especially the sociology and anthropology of Christianity, can only enhance our understanding of social phenomena within Tibetan Tantrism.
 11. I would like to give thanks to Nicolas Sihlé for pointing the *genchö* category out to me.
 12. This is why it seems to me that lying about the personal past of famous masters is more an oral than a scriptural practice, while working with text calls for other communication techniques.
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ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I will revisit a particular case when informants lied to me during fieldwork in Eastern Tibet. Ever since the revelation of the lie and during the entire ethnographic process, I attempted to transcend my own initial, post-positivist naivety about “truth”. As a result, concerning the field I was studying, the process has guided me to discover a number of truths that I would have never learned if not for the lies. In terms of a more theoretical discussion, I have embarked on a reflexive examination of the ambiguities, fictionalities and hybridity of self and other in this particular case and of the entanglement of the ethnographic self in the social realities of the field. The most important truth I learned from the lie was that biographies of Tibetan religious leaders can become objects of intentional construction as ambiguous domains that involve a highly selective recollection and manipulation of past events. These narrative-political strategies play an important role in economising the charisma of virtuoso-hermits and are aimed at self-definition of the Tibetan Buddhist revival, especially in the face of the colonial presence of the Chinese state and the encroachment of this state into the ritually sealed sphere

of the hermitage. The paper proposes an examination of the ambiguous, fictional and hybrid elements of the ethnographic self and other as well as of the entanglement of the two. This approach can help achieve a polyphonic depth that enhances the validity of not merely this account, but of ethnographic writing in general.

Dans cet article, je reviens sur une situation de terrain dans l'est du Tibet, situation dans laquelle l'un de mes informateurs me ment. Depuis la révélation de ce mensonge et pendant toute la durée du travail ethnographique, j'ai tenté de dépasser ma position initiale naïve et post-positiviste concernant la « vérité ». Ce processus m'a conduit à découvrir de nombreuses « vérités » que je n'aurais pas approchées si le mensonge n'avait pas été proféré au départ. Dans une perspective plus théorique, je réfléchis à l'ambiguïté, la fictionnalité et l'hybridité de la relation entre soi et l'autre à partir de ce cas particulier. L'article explore aussi l'imbrication de l'ethnographe dans la réalité du terrain.

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Mots-clés: mentir, Tibet, bouddhisme, vie religieuse, épistémologie, Kham, renouveau religieux

Keywords: lying, Tibet, Buddhism, religious life, epistemology, Kham, religious revival

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