



FEMALE DEITIES IN MONGOLIAN BUDDHIST VOTIVE PAINTINGS¹

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ABSTRACT: The present article focuses on iconography of peaceful and wrathful female deities in Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia. The female deities in Tibetan Buddhism play various roles in everyday practice. Besides the bodhisattvas in female form, they represent personal deities, various protectors and local deities. The following examples depict various types of female deities. *Vajrayoginī* belongs among the *Dākinīs*, the female deities assisting in spiritual development, and worldly Dharma protectors. The most important among the protectors is *Palden Lhamo*. *Mo lha* belongs to protective spirits. *Sitātapatrā* with a parasol symbolizes the spiritual protection. *Uṣṇīṣavijaya* represents one of the popular Long-life Deities.

KEY WORDS: Tibetan Buddhism – Mongolia – female deities – Dharma protectors – iconography – *Vajrayoginī* – *Palden Lhamo* – *Dākinī*

This article is based on the previous study devoted to the origin of the collection in the Náprstek Museum and to the iconography of the goddess Green Tāra published in the *Annals* in 2014. The present article focuses on peaceful and wrathful female deities. A selection of six examples from a set with thirty small votive Mongolian paintings depicting the Buddhist female deities is provided. The pictures were chosen to represent the five types of female deities found in the collection. The assortment of the particular paintings was made to show the iconography of the deities.

The methodology is descriptive. The description focuses on the composition and visual elements that are important in terms of iconography. The descriptive approach is particularly needed because the small votive paintings under scrutiny come from the folk environment where there the traditionally strict iconographical rules became

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distorted and simplified. Especially the iconographies of lesser known deities were often mingled together, interchanged and altered. As the result the semantic fields of the deities gradually blurred. The careful description of paintings and comparison with other visual sources help the accurate identification of the depicted deities.

Generally, the paintings of women in Tibetan Buddhism depict the historical personages such as female teachers or consorts of famous religious leaders (not the subject of this study), bodhisattvas in female form such as the already mentioned Green Tāra, and various female deities – the topic of this essay.

The concept of female deities in Tibetan Buddhism is based upon traditional Indian imagery. Powerful female deities symbolize the energy imbuing the world. They represent the Wisdom (*prajñā* प्रज्ञा, the insight, knowledge, intuitive apprehension), while the male gods depict the Method (*upāya*, उपाय, skillful means) (Essen 1989: 174). Female deities play various roles in everyday Buddhist practice. Besides the bodhisattvas in female form, there represent personal deities, various protectors and local deities. The personal meditation deities *yidams* (*iṣṭadevatā* इष्टदेवता, *yi dam* ཡི་དམ་) are helpers during the meditation (Tibet 2006: 307), whose task is to transport “practitioner to the same state of enlightenment that they themselves symbolize” (Mullin 2003: 40). Yidams possess particular form (wrathful or peaceful) in accordance with the practitioner’s nature. The *Naro Dākini* discussed later represents the yidam.

Among the nomads, various helpers and protectors were widespread. These *Dharmapālas* (धर्मपाल, *chos skyong* མཚན་སྐྱོང་) represent the protectors of the Dharma teachings. There are either worldly protectors who are not enlightened and dwell in the realm of *Samsāra* (संसार) or fully enlightened protectors who are emanations of particular buddhas sent from the Real world of *Dharmakāya* (धर्मकाय) (Mullin 2003: 180). The *Dharmapālas* often serve as the guardian spirits. The example is the very popular goddess *Palden Lhamo*, also discussed later.

Buddhist female deities are present in the Tibetan Buddhist art that is spread all over a large geographical area influenced by its teachings, including Mongolia and part of China. The paintings presented below are selected to show various approaches to the subject, as well as changes in the proper iconography.

The Space Lady

The *Naro Dakini* belongs among the female *Dākinīs* डाकिनी (*Mkha’ ‘gro ma* མཁའ་འགྲོ་མ་), the Sky-Goers or Space-Travellers. The explanations for the *Dākinīs* may differ among various schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The living female teachers can be called *Dākinīs*, the female deities assisting in spiritual development are also *Dākinīs*, and worldly Dharma protectors can be *Dākinīs* as well.

The origin of the concept of *Dākinīs* is not clear. There is a probable connection to the notion of female spirits in the Central Asian shamanism, or to various local female deities. The term is Dravidian; in the Dravidian India the social structure was based upon matriarchy, and the female goddesses were worshiped. Later, with the arrival of the Indo-Aryans the former goddesses played the role of retinues to male gods. In Tantras, the female partners symbolized by the *Dākinīs* became an important part of the Tantric practice, whether the female partners were real persons or imaginary symbols. In the Hindu Tantra the female became the energy (*shakti* शक्ति), while in the Buddhist Tantra she developed into the Wisdom, the intuitive insight.

The Dākinī *Vajrayoginī* *वज्रयोगिनी* (*Rdo rje rnal 'byor ma* རྫོག་རྣམ་འབྱོར་མ་) is described as a consort of the male deity *Samvara* in the *Cakrasamvara* (*चक्रसंवर*, *Bde mchog* བདེ་མཚན་གྱི་) texts and is common in all schools of Tibetan Buddhism. She is known under different names and is depicted in many colours and forms, either wrathful or semi-wrathful.

Vajrayoginī depicted in the small votive painting under scrutiny is called the *Naro Dākinī* (*Na ro mkha' spyod ma* རྫོག་མཁའ་སྤྱོད་མ་). Her tradition comes from the Indian teacher *Nāropā* (956-1040), who allegedly received teaching from her. The *Naro Dākinī* is popular both in the Sakya and Gelug schools.

No. 1

Inventory No. A/12268

Pigments on canvas, 18.8 x 10.7 cm

Purchased in 1974, previous acquisition history not known

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

The example shows her precise iconographic form (*Tibet: 356*).

The background of the painting is simple; the landscape is represented by green colour in the bottom part of the painting, while the sky is deep blue with the Moon and Sun in both upper corners.

The figure stands on a lotus throne encircled by a mandorla of red flames symbolizing pristine awareness, standing on a “corpse seat” (*bam gdan* བམ་གདན་) and pressing down the backward bent head of the blue-coloured “Frightful” *Bhairava* *भैरव*, the manifestation of Shiva, and the breasts of his consort, the red *Kālarātrī* *कालरात्रि* (Meinert 2011: 419). She is shown turning to the right. She stands astride with her right leg bent. Her head is turned right, with her face painted in profile.

Her body is depicted in red colour. Her hair falls down in long tresses over her body. She has three eyes and a large mouth. She looks fierce.

Her body is adorned with a necklace of fifty dry skulls (in the Sakya tradition). She wears jewellery such as necklaces, earrings, bracelets and anklets, and a golden crown.

She carries a *khaṭvāṅga* staff (see later) on her right shoulder. In her right hand she holds a skull cup and drinks blood from it. In her left hand she holds a chopper.

The picture mostly in red and gold colour is simply painted, however, with details.

The painting shows the *Dākinīs'* attributes that consist of bone ornaments, chopper (*karttrkā* कर्तृका, *gri gug* གྲི་གུག་), skull cup (*kapāla* कपाल, *ka pa la* ཀ་པ་ལ་ or *thod* ཐོད་) and the *khaṭvāṅga* staff (*མཎྟ་བུ་རྩེ་གུ་*, *kha tvam ga* མ་ཏུ་མ་གུ་). They are derived from the tantric attributes of the ascetics, yogins and yoginis. The origin is with the *kapalikas* or skull-bearers of the Hindu caste system, originally the miscreants sentenced for killing a Brahmin. They were forced to live in forests, desolate places and charnel grounds where they begged for food, dressed in rags or animal skin. They bore the skulls of their victims on a wooden staff and used the top half of the human skull as an eating bowl. Smearred with ashes from the funeral pyres and intoxicated with marijuana, those outcasts lived in the twilight zone between the world of the living and the world of spirit. They performed rituals in charnel grounds, invoked spirits and venerated the mighty gods and goddesses (Beer 1999: 249). The Tantric iconography turned their attributes into the iconography of powerful deities.

The *khaṭvāṅga* staff symbolises the enlightenment-mind as a union of bliss and emptiness (Beer 1999: 253). It is also a symbol of male or female consort. Iconographically,

it is an elegant ritual implement with a rather sinister origin. It was a wooden club with a bulb on top used for breaking the human remains on charnel grounds (Beer 1999: 252). As an attribute of the Dākinīs, it bears the adamantine sceptres *vajras* (वज्र, *rdō rje* རྩེ་རྩེ་), the vessel with ambrosia (*amṛta* अमृत), the *damaru* drum (डमरु) and three human heads – a freshly severed head, a decaying head and a dry white skull (Beer 1999: 252).

The white human skull in the hand of a deity represents a libation vessel. The deity holds it in front of his or her chest, or drinks from it.

The *kartṭikā* or chopper is also a symbol of Dākinīs and Tantric deities. It symbolizes the discrimination based on erroneous and mistaken views which are responsible for the suffering. It chops up the egotistical self. The chopper has a hooked crescent-shape blade and a *vajra* handle.

The Dākinīs wear the bone ornaments. They consist of a skirt, tiara and jewellery made of human bones, and a garland of fifty-two human skulls as a necklace. They are painted strikingly white and detailed. In the Tantric iconography they represent the defeat of demonic forces by the deities, the defeat of obstacles and passions and their transformation into spiritual path.

References:

Meinert 2011, description p. 419, picture p. 420, yellow-haired p. 425: both Mongolian, 19th century. Mullin 2003, picture p. 155: Tibetan, 19th century. Elaborate, detailed and fine drawing and painting.

The Queen of Wrathful Rituals

The most important among the protector female Dharmapālas is *Palden Lhamo* (*Dpal ldan lha mo* དཔལ་ལྷན་ལྷ་མོ་, in Sanskrit Śrīdēvī श्रीदेवी). She is a wrathful emanation of the Green Tāra (*Sgrol ma* སྐྱོལ་མ་), *Sarasvatī* (सरस्वती or *Lakṣmī* (लक्ष्मी)).

There are many forms of her (Meinert: 528). However, three are the most common. In the Sakya tradition she has one face and four arms and carries a skull cup and weapons as protective symbols – a sword (*khadga* खड्ग, *ral gri* རལ་གྱི་), a trident (*triśūla* त्रिशूल, *rtse gsum* རྩེ་གུམ་), and a spear (*mdung* མདང་). In the Kagyu tradition she holds a sword, a trident, a skull cup, and a three-bladed *kīla* (कील, *phur ba* ཕུར་བ་), the ritual dagger for marking out a sacrificial space that creates a protective boundary against evil forces (Beer: 245). The third version belongs to the Gelug tradition. In her two hands she holds a vajra-tipped club *danda* (दण्ड, *dbyug pa* དབྱུག་པ་) and a skull cup (Linrothe 2004: 168, 171). This form is called *Magzor Gyalmo* (*Mag zor rgyal mo* མག་ཚོར་རྒྱལ་མོ་). She is invoked to establish peace through Tantric ritual (Mullin 2003: 182). She is very popular in both Tibet and Mongolia as the keeper of secrets of life and death. According to the Mongols, she is the wife of the Lord of the Death, Yama यम (Meinert 2011: 528). She is also linked to the institution of Dalai Lamas. The First (Dge 'dun grub དགེ་འདུན་གུབ་, 1391–1474) adopted her as his personal protective deity (Mullin 2003: 182).

No. 2

Inventory No. A/17458

Pigments on canvas, 8 x 6.2 cm

Purchased in 1987, previous acquisition history not known

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

She is extremely wrathful in appearance. Her half-naked body is dark blue. She is covered by a loose, open dress with flutter sleeves and wears a tiger skin around her lower part. Sometimes she appears with a speckled snake and a white lion lurking over her shoulders, but they are not present in this painting. Her face with three eyes and open mouth revealing fangs is adorned by a crown of human skulls. Red hair is flying around her head. On top of it there are peacock feathers.

She holds a club with a vajra on it and a skull cup filled with blood.

She sits on the flayed hide of her own son (Meinert 2011: 528), whose head is dangling beneath her saddle. She rides a white mule with an additional eye on its back over a river of blood. Beneath the mule's head she carries the black and white spotted dice (*sho rde'u dkar nag* མོ་རྗེ་འུ་དཀར་ནག་), a book covered in silk used for divination, and the bag of diseases (*nad kyi rkyal pa* ནད་ཀྱི་རྒྱལ་པ་). The rest of her magical weapons, such as the "demon cross stick" (*bdud kyi khram bam* བདུད་ཀྱི་མཚན་བཅ་), the "bundle of red curses" (*byad dmar gyi khres po* བྱད་དམར་གྱི་ཁྲོས་པོ་), and the "ball of thread weapon" (*mtshon kyi gru gu* མཚན་གྱི་གྲུ་གུ་) seem to be missing (Beer 1999: 305).

Two attendants accompany the deity. The blue bodied Makaramukha Dākinī (मकरमुख) with the face of a crocodile-like mythical creature (*makara* मकर, *chu srin* ལུ་སྲིན་) reins the mule and red Simhamukha Dākinī (सिंहमुख, *Seng ge dong chen kha dro ma* སེང་གེ་དོང་ཙེན་ཀམ་འ་བ་) with the face of a snow lion follows. Both are covered with human skin (Mullin 2003: 182).

On the bottom of the painting, there is an offering consisting of a skull cup mounted on a trivet, which contains parts of a human body representing the wrathful sense offering: the heart (*snying* སྲིལ་), eyes (*mig* མེག་), ears (*rna* རྩ་), nose (*sna* སྤྱ་) and tongue (*lce* ལྗེ་). They represent the sacramental meat consumed by the Tantrics (Meinert 2011: 532).

The background is simple, with a green stylized landscape and dark blue sky with pink shaded clouds and the Moon and the Sun above the dark violet flames surrounding the body of the deity.

References:

Meinert 2011, several fine examples from Mongolia, 19th to 20th century, pp. 528-543.
Mullin 2003, description p. 182, picture p. 183: Tibetan, 18th century. For pictures of other emanations, complex background with other deities, see Mullin 2003, pp. 185, 187.

The Protective Spirit

Mo lha (མོ་ལྷ་) is a female protective spirit governing health, wealth and good luck (Meinert 2011: 666). She is popular in Mongolia where she is one of the five protective spirits, who stay with an individual for his or her whole life. The concept of five protective deities combines both shamanism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Iconographically, *Mo lha* as one of the five protective spirits strikingly resembles one of the Five Sisters of Long Life, originally non-Buddhist spirits of mountains and waters (Berger 1995: 228).

No. 3

Inventory No. A/16337

Pigments on canvas, 19.8 x 14 cm

Purchased in 1985 from a private owner

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

Mo lha rides a wild ass in a white cloud on a white moon disc above the simple green landscape and blue sky. She is depicted as a beautiful young lady in an ornate red dress and colourful shawls. Her body is white, and she wears a five-pointed golden tiara on her black hair. Her attribute is an arrow with flying streamers and a mirror. Often, the arrow looks like a staff or a trident. Here it is only depicted as a few lines of golden colour.

She is depicted surrounded by other protective spirits, all male. They are *Yul lha* ཡུལ་ལྷ་ (upper left) with an arrow and bow, who protects the head of an individual, *Dra lha* དྲ་ལྷ་ (upper right) holding a spear, who protects the right shoulder, *Srog lha* སྲོག་ལྷ་ (lower right) wearing armour including a helmet and holding a spear, who protects the heart and the youthful *Po lha* ཕོ་ལྷ་ with a white body dressed in silk and holding precious wish-fulfilling gems, who protects the right armpit (Meinert 2011: 666). Above *Mo lha*, there is the blue wrathful *Vajrapāni* (वज्रपानि, *Phag na rdo rje* ཕུག་ན་རྡོ་རྗེ) – the picture of a Buddhist element among the shamanistic concept of protective spirits (Berger 1995: 228).

No. 4

Inventory No. A/26172

Pigments on canvas, 7.3 x 5.9 cm

Purchased in 1989 from a private owner

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

The simple painting depicts the single image of the deity. She appears in a pink cloud above the green landscape. Her dress is depicted in bold colours of orange, green and blue. Dots of golden colour emphasize the design of her clothes and the tiara and jewellery.

References:

Meinert 2011, p. 666, picture p. 667. Fine picture of the deity with her entourage, Buryatia (?), 19th century.

The Undefeatable

Sitātapatrā's iconography (सितातपत्रा, *Gdugs dkar* གདུག་པ་དཀར་) is one of the most complex in the Tibetan Buddhism. She is a powerful deity, the *Dākinī*, a yidam as well as the protective spirit against diseases, evil forces, and natural disasters (*Tibet* 2006: 363). Her name in Sanskrit and Tibetan means „A White Parasol“, which is her main attribute. The parasol symbolizes the spiritual protection (Meinert 2011: 398).

She is depicted in various forms, sitting or standing. In one of her forms she is presented with “thousands” of heads and arms. This is the form of *Tāra*, a female counterpart of *Avalokiteśvara* (अवलोकितेश्वर, *Spyan ras gzigs* སྤྱན་རས་གཟིགས་). She is depicted as either peaceful in appearance or slightly wrathful.

The following example shows her in a peaceful two-armed form.

No. 5

Inventory No. A/8906

Pigments on canvas, 7.9 x 6.1 cm

Purchased in 1971, previous acquisition history not known

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

The small votive painting depicts her seated in the vajra position upon a lotus throne on a moon disc. She is a beautiful young lady with bodhisattva jewellery. A gold tiara sits on her elaborate hairdress. She wears a red skirt with golden ornaments on it, and a yellow-green shawl over her shoulders. Her three-eyed face is smiling. She holds a white and red parasol.

A white, orange, and blue mandorla of protective light emanates from her body. A green halo adorns her head. Pink flowers and green foliage are partly hidden behind the mandorla.

There are two small figures of Green and White Tāras in front of her, with three gems at the bottom of the painting.

References:

For her “thousands heads and arms” form, see Mullin 2003: 112-114.

Meinert 2011, picture p. 399: Mongolian, 19th century.

The Victorious Crown Ornament

Uṣṇīṣavijaya (ऊष्णीषविजय, Gtsug tor rnam par rgyal ma གཙུག་ཏོར་རྣམ་པར་རྒྱལ་མ་) represents one of the popular Three Long-life Deities, together with White Tāra and *Amitāyus* (अमितायूस, *Tshe dpag med* ཅེ་དཔག་མེད་) (Mullin 2003: 95). There are two main iconographic forms of her: the first with one face and two arms, and the second with three faces and eight arms. Her attribute is the crown protrusion (*uṣṇīṣa* उष्णीष) depicted as resembling a knot of hair tied on top of her head (Mullin 2003: 112).

No. 6

Inventory No. A/8953

Pigments on canvas, 8.5 x 6.2 cm

Purchased in 1972, previous acquisition history not known

Mongolia, 19th century–20th century

The deity sits on a lotus throne in the royal ease posture on a simple background of green landscape with dark blue sky. Her white body is dressed in a red skirt and shawls dotted with gold.

Each of her three faces in white, yellow and dark green (or blue) colours has three eyes. The dark face is fierce, while the white and yellow ones are peaceful and smiling. Her neck bears three delicate lines – the sign of female beauty. She has eight arms. The main pair of hands turns the wheel of Dharma. In her arms on the right side she holds the red and golden statue of Amitayus, and an arrow. Her right lower hand makes the boon-granting gesture of generosity. Her left upper hand makes a gesture of protection, and in her left lower hand she holds a bow and a vessel containing ambrosia (Meinert 2011: 204). Her body emanates the protective light painted in red and pink colour with golden lines.

References:

Meinert, p.400, picture p. 401: Mongolian, 19th century.

Female deities are spread all over a large geographical area that is influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, including Mongolia. Female deities play important roles in everyday

Buddhist practice. For a meditation practitioner, they represent personal deities. The guardians of the Dharma teaching are depicted in the form of female deities. Among the nomads, goddesses as helpers and protectors are widespread. The worship of female deities is an integral part of daily religious practice.



No. 1





No. 3







No. 6

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