

## **An Examination of the Poetics of Tibetan Secular Oratory: An Amdo Tibetan Wedding Speech<sup>1</sup>**

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On an auspicious day, two families from Ne'u na Village, a small village along the Yellow River in Western China's Qinghai Province, gather to celebrate a wedding. The day has been chosen specifically for this purpose. Midway through the wedding banquet, a man stands before the crowd already so drunk that his words are almost unintelligible, and he speaks. He begins with an invocation to several deities, and then a statement about how auspicious this day is and how it has been chosen specifically for this purpose. After describing the beautiful dress of the bride down to the smallest hair ornament, he begins to describe Tibet and its geographic and historical relations with Nepal and China. Next, with exquisite imagery, he tells of the unique physical environment of the Tibetan plateau, and finally he discusses the beauty and auspiciousness of the very village in which the wedding is being held. At every turn this area and its people are described with detailed references to the religious and natural worlds in which Tibetans live. The speech is the highlight of the wedding in Ne'u na. Following the speech, guests offer gifts to the new couple—first from the groom's side, then from the bride's—and people from both sides begin antiphonal singing until late into the night.

### **Introduction**

Tibetan oral practices have long stood on the periphery of western Tibetology. Indeed, Anne Klein has noted that, “despite the widely recognized significance of oral traditions in Tibet, relatively little has been written about them” (2003:99 n. 1). Although her work focuses almost exclusively on the oral practices within Tibet's religious traditions, this statement may also be advanced to include more secular oral traditions as well, where there are a number of translations but relatively little scholarly exegesis when compared with the much more extensive corpus of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr. Tshe dbang rdo rje, Prof. Mark Bender, Dr. Gerald Roche, Nyi ma rgyal mtshan, Tsering Samdrup, Dr. C. K. Stuart, Prof. Per K. Sørensen, and Franz Xaver Erhard for their kind comments on earlier drafts of this paper. My thanks also to the editors of *Oral Tradition* and two anonymous reviewers, whose comments have greatly improved the paper. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.

literature on Buddhism in Tibet.<sup>2</sup> This essay introduces a speech genre that is both emblematic of the great richness of the Tibetan oral tradition, and the relative paucity of western research on the topic: the *ston bshad* (“wedding speech”).<sup>3</sup>

This article attempts to further understand the unique poetic idiom and structure of Tibetan wedding speeches using an example taken from Ne’u na Village (Chinese: Ne na 尼那村). The wedding speech translated below is taken directly from the speech notebook of a noted orator, and it is a unique oral traditional text that is considered one of the best wedding speeches of Ne’u na Village. Tshe dbang rdo rje’s published version includes colloquial Tibetan and modern literary Tibetan versions, as well as a transcription in the International Phonetic Alphabet in Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. (2006). This speech has been translated in full elsewhere (Thurston and Caixiangduojie 2016) and any references to the speech, the numbering of lines, and the English translations correspond to that publication. The editors of both publications have graciously allowed for some overlap between the two articles. Although I refer specifically to, and draw a majority of the examples from, this single speech, I cite interviews from other areas of A mdo to underscore the broader applicability of these examples to wedding speeches in A mdo and to the Tibetan speech genre more broadly.

Bauman and Briggs (1990:61) argue that “an adequate analysis of a single performance . . . requires sensitive ethnographic study of how its form and meaning index a broad range of discourse types.” In light of this, the essay begins with an introduction to Ne’u na Village, and continues with a brief textual history of this specific wedding speech. Next, I introduce the speech’s contents and structure before proceeding to examine the densely referential language of the speech in general, and unpacking the ways in which the speaker metaphorically indexes the auspiciousness of both the wedding occasion and the participants through references to deities, historical figures, religious practices, and, most importantly, the Tibetan landscape. In the Tibetan context, I show that this traditional referentiality (Foley 1995) does more than simply create powerful and aesthetically pleasing content; it also literally creates auspicious circumstances for the wedding.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Some important contributions to the literature on Tibetan oral traditions include work on satirical street songs in Lhasa (Goldstein 1982), folksongs (Sangs rgyas bkra shis et al. 2015, Ramble 1995, and Anton-Luca 2002), mountain deity stories (Xie 2001 and Punzi 2013), tongue twisters (Blo brtan rdo rje et al. 2009) and proverbs (see Pirie 2009 and Sørensen and Erhard 2013a and 2013b). On the Gesar epic, meanwhile, see FitzHerbert 2015 and 2010, Yang 2001, Li 2001, and Zhambei Gyaltsho 2001. Collections of traditional orature translated into Western languages include Tournadre and Robin 2006, Lhamo Pemba 1996, and Jamgon Mipham 2015. This is not to mention the much more extensive Gesar- and intangible cultural heritage-related publications in Chinese.

<sup>3</sup> Some notable exceptions would be Aziz’s (1985) paper on wedding poetry, Jixiancairang 2012, Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart 2008, Nyangchakja 2016, and Bkra shis bzang po 2012.

<sup>4</sup> In general, this paper uses the Wylie transliteration system for Tibetan terms, and Pinyin followed by characters for Chinese terms. Where terms have obtained some currency in English, the author has elected to use these terms as they are most commonly known and spelled.

### About Ne'u na Village<sup>5</sup>

Ne'u na Village is located along the Yellow River (T: *rma chu*) in Guide 贵德 (T: *khri ka*) county, Hainan 海南 (T: *mtsho lho*) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, in western China's Qinghai 青海 (T: *mtsho sngon*) Province. The town is located approximately 130 kilometers to the southwest of Qinghai's capital, Xining 西宁 (T: *zi ling*), and sits at the confluence of the Yellow River and a winding stream: the Mang ra. The name Ne'u na means "head of a small meadow" and takes its name from this geographical feature relating to the winding stream (Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010:2 n. 3). As the village is located along the river and at an elevation of approximately 2200 meters above sea level, the majority of Ne'u na residents traditionally engaged in agricultural work, while many also raised some livestock as well.

In recent years, two hydroelectric dams have been constructed on the Yellow River to supply electricity to Xining and beyond. The dams are located just above the village's traditional location. This radically changed the fabric of life in Ne'u na Village. The influx of migrant workers changed the area's demographics, and drastically altered traditional lifestyles. Families were forced to relocate to government-constructed houses and lost most of the land on which they had traditionally earned their living. At present, many Ne'u na residents have also abandoned their semi-pastoral existence in favor of construction work. Many have sold their sheep and only have a few pigs to support their family. Many villagers have intermarried with these migrant workers, and, in many cases, their children no longer speak Tibetan, but Qinghai dialect.

Ne'u na Village's population was traditionally composed primarily of Tibetans although there have been increasing numbers of migrant Han workers who have come to the area to help in the construction of the dams. There are also several Hui Muslim families. Religiously, the Tibetan and Han residents of Ne'u na are primarily Buddhist, and the area's largest summer festival (in Tibetan, *drug pa'i lha rtsed*)—held during the sixth month of their lunar calendar—is a multi-ethnic affair with Tibetan and Han residents of Khrika and the surrounding area coming to offer money to two Buddhist idols (Khir ka'i yul lha and Ri lang, from the Chinese *er lang* 二郎) in hopes of obtaining good fortune in the coming year.<sup>6</sup> While this is the easiest description, the wedding speech discussed below also clearly expresses the heavy influence of the animistic Bon religion, which maintains a strong presence in the area.<sup>7</sup>

Culturally, the Tibetans in this area are part of the A mdo sub-group. They speak the A mdo dialect, and several Hui residents have traditionally been able to communicate in both Tibetan and Chinese. Now, however, an increasing number of children, regardless of ethnic group, are growing up without speaking Tibetan, despite having traditionally Tibetan names, and many traditions are slowly evaporating. The wedding speech is just one such tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> This sketch of Ne'u na Village provides only a brief introduction to its demographic, economic, and cultural situation. A more extensive ethnography of Ne'u na may be found in Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010.

<sup>6</sup> For more on Khri ka'i yul lha, see Buffetrille 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The Bon religion is "the indigenous religion of Tibet" (Tucci 1980:213). The nearby Bonpo village, known as Mdzo sna, was originally located near Ne'u na Village, although their relative locations have changed due to recent relocations associated with the construction of hydroelectric power stations.

### Weddings as Contexts for Verbal Art in A mdo

In A mdo, the wedding is the context for a variety of traditional verbal art forms that vary regionally within A mdo and across the Tibetan Plateau more generally. In Mang ra (Chinese: Guinan 贵南) County, for example, people sing love songs between the host village's women and the male escorts of the bride or groom (depending on the kind of marriage). In Ne'u na Village, when the honored guests come to the home where the wedding is to be held, they are greeted with alcohol and sung toasts (Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010:44-65). In other instances, the wedding planner gives a speech, wedding songs and folk songs are sung, *artsed* ("paired folk dances"), *rdung len* ("songs with accompaniment on the mandolin"), and *glu shags* ("competitive antiphonal singing").

The constellation of folk performances is also regionally specific. In Mang ra County, for example, it is customary for the eloquent representatives to hold a "conversation" at the beginning, and for uncles of the visiting side and the women in the host village to sing love songs together outside the house (Thurston and Tsering Samdrup 2012), while weddings in nearby farming areas like Reb gong feature village women pulling the ears of the groom and matchmaker (37-38), and I have heard anecdotally of similar practices in neighboring Xunhua County as well. Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart (2007) meanwhile begin their examination of the wedding day earlier, pointing out that songs are sung to awaken the bride, songs that are followed by her mother's lamentations and the bride's response, as well as by separate tea speeches, liquor speeches, and bread speeches. The same holds for traditional weddings outside of A mdo. In Khams, for example, Bkra shis bzang po (2012) notices wedding speeches, wedding dance songs, and wedding songs all as integral parts of a multi-day traditional wedding. Tenzin (2008), meanwhile, documents sending-off ceremonies, greetings, and a number of short speeches and songs. Weddings also seem to be key contexts for oral performance in Ladakh (see, for example, De Rossi Filibeck 2016) and Nepal (Aziz 1985).

Despite the wedding's traditional role as a context for the performance of oral traditions, it is also important to recognize that not every wedding has a wedding speech. According to one informant, whom I will call Klu rgyal, *ston bshad zer go no 'di spyir stang gi bshad yod na/ de ring ston mo byed ni ra ston mo btsa'ya gzig yin no 'di bshad go gi/ da ston mo gzig ga ston mo rtsa mo gzig yin na da bshad rgyu ma red/ 'bring ba gzig yin na ra bshad rgyu ma red/* ("This thing called a wedding speech, generally speaking, if you're going to have a wedding today, then you have to have one. Well, if a wedding, if it's a simple wedding, then you won't give one, nor will you give one at a middling [wedding]") (personal communication, August 19, 2010). For weddings, then, the speech holds pride of place.

### Tibetan Wedding Speeches in A mdo

The term *ston bshad*, which I translate here simply as "wedding speech," combines two separate terms: *ston mo* ("wedding/party") and *bshad pa* ("speech"). A *ston bshad* literally refers

to any speech made for any festive occasion, though in A mdo it refers primarily to wedding speeches. Indeed, although the opening syllable may refer to any type of party, it is most often used specifically for wedding occasions. The latter syllable *bshad*, meanwhile, is applied to a variety of forms of oratory.

Wedding speeches, for the purposes of this article, are long verse compositions often reaching hundreds of lines in length, somewhat bound to the context of the wedding event, and devoted to the creation of auspiciousness at the wedding. The economy of language required in such verse performances, and the staccato delivery expected of the tradition's competent performers, ensures that orators frequently rely on particular, culturally bound lexical items that fit the rhythmic and topical requirements of the wedding speech. Moreover, the wedding speech is formally and lexically similar to a number of other performance genres on the Tibetan plateau. They praise the bride and groom, the guests, the religious practitioners who divined the perfect day for the wedding, and the ideal location of the village, all of which create an auspicious wedding event.

Wedding speeches are, perhaps unsurprisingly, meant to be performed at weddings. In general, however, wedding speeches are not so context-dependent as to preclude performance for a foreign researcher *without* an actual party. In the summer of 2010, while working in the Reb gong region,<sup>8</sup> I recorded wedding speeches from Hor nag and Chu ma villages. One orator performed in his place of business in the prefectural seat, while the other performed his own wedding speech in his home for me and a friend (also from the village). Nevertheless, the atmosphere is quite important to the performer's experience, as this orator excused his own performance, saying it would have been better with liquor (which he said would make any speech performance better) and a better atmosphere. This makes wedding speeches distinct from some other folk genres like *bsang mchod* ("purification offerings") which may only be uttered in the context of making an offering of *bsang* (see Thurston 2012), or of *gtam dpe* ("proverbs") for which there are no restrictions.<sup>9</sup> In addition to being only partly bound to the wedding as its appropriate performance context, wedding speeches are also not bound by the same textual rigidity as some other genres. For example, while both *gtam dpe* and *bsang mchod* require relatively exact reproduction, the wedding speech appears to have no such requirements.

Orators of A mdo's wedding speeches are exclusively male, and can gain great prestige in their local communities for this ability. In many areas, the degree of difficulty associated with performing secular oratory is such that the orator's eloquence was traditionally valued more

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<sup>8</sup> Reb gong is a region that "may roughly be seen as identical with today's Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture including the counties of Tongren, Jainca [Gcan tsha], Zekog [Rtse khog] and Henan [Rma lho]" (Gruschke 2001:51). It also may refer to communities in the Dgu chu river valley and its tributaries, or people who go to the valley's main monastery, Rong bo monastery. By this definition, contemporary Henan Mongolian Autonomous County, which is administratively part of the Huangnan prefecture to which Tongren, Gcan tsha, and Rtse khog also belong, may not be a part of "Reb gong" as culturally defined, as the county's inhabitants are more commonly aligned with Bla brang monastery in neighboring Gansu Province. For more discussions of the traditional definitions of Reb gong, see Mkharrtse rgyal 2009 and Yangdon Dhondup 2011. For more on the cultural practices of Reb gong, see Makley 2013a and 2013b, Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008, and Yangdon Dhondup et al. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Tibetan *gtam dpe*, see Cüppers and Sørensen 1998, Pirie 2009, Sørensen and Erhard 2013a and 2013b, and Tournadre and Robin 2006.

highly than folksinging (which is considered a more common skill). Indeed, Ekvall notes that Tibetan secular oratory (1964:143):

is extremely stylized, has a prestige rating high above the less artificial form of speech-making, and is very frequently used by acknowledged orators—whether ecclesiastics, chiefs, or men of recognized eloquence. It is quite difficult to acquire and practice, and, on first hearing, is hard to understand . . . [it is] characterized by a steady, uninterrupted flow of words uttered at a uniform rate, with no pauses to function as natural punctuation.

Meanwhile, when asked about the qualities of a good orator, Klu rgyal (himself an experienced performer of wedding speeches) argued: *khi dge'i bshad pa kha lce bde dgos gi/ gnyis ba spobs pa yod dgos gi/ gzhan gi bshad rgyu'o de dga' ba yang na spro ba dgos gi*<sup>10</sup> (“His speech must be eloquent, secondly he must have confidence, and he must enjoy or have interest in the speech of others,” personal communication, August 19, 2010). Ekvall’s and Klu rgyal’s twin invocation of “eloquence” suggests the importance of this term. Eloquence here is the idea that the speaker can speak quickly, think on his feet, and ensure that his voice rises and falls at appropriate moments. Moreover, eloquence relies on the speaker’s ability to employ the proper culturally bound idioms and multiforms, and participate in the creation of an auspicious wedding event. Bravery, meanwhile, speaks to the type of courage one must have to get up in front of many people and take responsibility for a display of verbal art. Eloquence, however, is not necessarily the same as intelligibility. Some interlocutors have even suggested to me that this intelligibility or understanding is not necessarily easy for all audiences. Many Tibetans with whom I have spoken confess that they are unfamiliar with a number of the references made.

## Textual History

The wedding speech that forms the primary textual source for this study was originally published in 2005 as part of a book describing weddings in an A mdo Tibetan village (Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010). This work provides three versions of the speech itself: “Oral A mdo Tibetan,” IPA, and Modern Literary Tibetan transcriptions. The Oral version presents the text as it was written in the performer’s own speech book. The IPA version then transcribes the Tibetan script into the International Phonetic Alphabet. Finally, the Modern Literary Tibetan version attempts to make the Oral A mdo version conform to more traditional Tibetan spelling and grammar in hopes that it will be more intelligible to a Tibetan audience.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Though this article primarily uses the Wylie Romanization system to transcribe Tibetan terms, some colloquial terms have no standard written form. In these cases, I use a romanization based on the orthography sometimes employed in the literature of A mdo authors. *Khi dge* for example, is used to transcribe the A mdo Tibetan version of the third person singular masculine pronoun.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth pointing out that while there have been recent moves toward more vernacular literature (*phal skad*), Tibetans largely resist alternative spellings, writing in dialect, or writing that does not use received “literary language” (*yig skad*).

Prior to 2003, we are told, this wedding speech was often performed at weddings. When Tshe dbang rdo rje first recorded it the speaker was too inebriated to give the speech clearly; however, the orator did provide the collector with the textual versions on which the orator had based his performances. The speech translated here is taken from a locally renowned orator named Bstan 'dzin (b. 1963) from Rdzong 'go Village, which is located nearby Ne'u na, and some say that the two were once a single village (Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010:20 n. 57). It was copied directly from his speech notebook on February 27, 2003.

The text Tshe dbang rdo rje copied on that day is what we may consider a “voiced text” (Foley 2002:40-45): a text that is meant to be performed. And yet the performer’s libretto is now silent. Although we can recreate some of the paralinguistic features associated with the genre, this speech will likely never be performed again. It is part of a growing number of silenced traditional voices on the Tibetan Plateau. Nonetheless, we can learn much about the nature of the poetic rules of Tibetan secular oratory from this text, as well as some of the larger cultural expectations that frequently accompany such a project.

### **Theoretically Approaching Speechmaking**

In order to understand the many insights that this text has to offer, one must first understand the language and structure of the text as the structure of the text helps to inform the content. The first question, then, is to determine the best framework from which to adequately approach the speech on its own terms. Since there is no longer an available audio-visual recording of a performance of this particular speech, and because the tradition itself as practiced in Ne'u na Village is rapidly dying out, a true performance-centered approach cannot be applied to understand this work. It may, however, be possible to examine the speech’s poetics to examine issues of parallelism, style, and formula that are common to this wedding speech and to better understand the poetics of secular oratory in A mdo more generally and how they operate not simply to entertain, but to actually create the ideal cosmogonic circumstances for a good wedding.

As this is a silent performance text, I follow Foley in accepting that “the continuity of reception of a work that stems from oral tradition but which survives only as a text will depend on the reader’s ability to recognize the rhetorical signals that are the bequest of performance and tradition, and then to credit these signals with the institutionalized meanings they carry as a dedicated register of verbal communication” (1995:81). Through examining these “rhetorical signals,” it is possible to recognize how both the structure and the content of the Tibetan wedding speech engage with evenemental forces to create auspicious circumstances for the wedding event.

Furthermore, when embarking on a genre-based study, it is important to recognize that form is also inherently related to meaning (Hymes 1981, cf. Briggs 1988). Bauman’s (1977) concept of the keys of performance acting as framing devices for the speech act and indicating to the audience that a performance is occurring, provide an excellent starting point for this analysis. In the ensuing discussion, I look specifically to three keys to Tibetan oratory performance that we can see preserved in this wedding speech. Each of these “keys” serves a double purpose. It

centripetally directs us towards a keener definition of the *ston bshad* (“wedding speech”) genre, while centrifugally pointing towards much broader cultural themes that underlie the speech’s intended function and reception of the speech within the context of a wedding.

It is then helpful for the reader to keep in mind the fact that the discussion given here is very limited. Due to restrictions of time and space, this is, at best, only an introduction. It draws out some aspects that can help the reader understand both elements specific to the *ston bshad* genre, and others that further our understanding of Tibetan speaking styles more generally.

### Structure of the Speech

The Ne’u na wedding speech may be etically divided into several basic parts. The first thirty-six lines comprise an invocation, in which the speaker praises several Buddhist deities and mythical figures, ranging from Buddhist meditational deities and Padmasambhava, who, according to legend, converted a number of local deities to Buddhism thereby allowing Buddhism to flourish in Tibet (Tucci 1980:106), to the epic hero King Gesar, to more personal tutelary and protective deities. Immediately following this invocation of Buddhist deities is an extra invocation of Bon deities. This section praising the Bon deities focuses on personal protector deities as well as worship of the sky and earth. Additionally, the structure in this section changes from couplets to three-line iterations.

The second section continues with a discussion of the events of the wedding up to that point in time. This includes the *A khu dpon*’s<sup>12</sup> divination, which set this particular day as the most auspicious day for this couple to wed, as well as the clothing of the bride, groom, and their guests. Following that, the orator provides a brief disclaimer in which he states that he is not a capable speaker.

Next, the speaker launches into a description of the place they are in, the beauty of the perfect bride and the actions of a good groom, a description of the different kinds of marriages, the uncles, and more.<sup>13</sup> The tripartite structure in which things are described in sequences of three from highest or best to lowest or worst, typical of Tibetan folksongs, is employed frequently in describing the different kinds of marriages, and then later also in briefer forms referring to the types of wedding speeches, listeners, praises, and gatherings. The speaker then praises the uncles who play an important role in the wedding itself. He again discusses the tantric practitioners who are responsible for divining the most auspicious day possible for the wedding, and how the day itself is auspicious. He ends his speech with a discussion of the brilliance of the feast, which takes place as soon as he finishes.

With this basic introduction to the speech’s structure, it becomes possible to examine the use of some of these special formulae in order to understand some of the formal standards of Tibetan oratory. Additionally, in examining these keys, it is possible to see how they are part of a

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<sup>12</sup> The *A khu dpon* (also commonly known as a *sngags pa*), is a local term for a tantric practitioner, who is also skilled in arts of divination.

<sup>13</sup> The *A zhang* “maternal uncle” plays a very important role in Tibetan weddings in much of the A mdo cultural region (see Tshe dbang rdo rje et al. 2010, and Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart 2008).



whole nexus of auspiciousness that permeates this speech. Such an examination naturally begins with the first line, an opening formula that helps to clue the audience both into the act of performance, but also serves to distinguish the speech in a religious fashion as well.

### **Keys to Performance: Special Formulae and Colloquial Speech Styles, The Case of Ye**

One of the most obvious ways to signal the beginning of a performance is through the use of special formulae. These formulae may be used to meet metrical requirements, to serve as mnemonic devices, or for any number of other purposes; but despite these differences, they signal to the audience that the performer has shifted to a different register and interpretive frame. In Tibetan secular oratory, the particle *ye* is one such special formula. It appears at the beginning of each new section of the performance, signaling a shift from other parts of the wedding event to the wedding speech performance frame. In addition to beginning each section with *ye*, the orator concludes sections with a loud *zer rgyu red* (“one should say that . . .”), and the audience is expected to respond with a loud and long *ye* of their own. This section examines the uses of *ye* in Tibetan oratory and how the lines introduced with this particle help to further audience interpretation of different sections of the performance.

The particle *ye* does not serve a grammatical function, and despite the fact that it can sometimes be translated into English as the verb “to begin,” it does not seem to carry such a literal meaning here. In deviating from its common lexical meaning, the particle’s use in oratory suggests a change in register. At first usage, it immediately alerts the audience to a new style of speech occurring. But the particle also appears frequently within the text. Almost always beginning or ending sections of the text, introducing new content or structures, it appears in 28 of the speech’s 546 lines and serves a similar function in every instance.

This formula can also be seen outside of the wedding speech tradition, as it also appears in speeches associated with hair changing rituals elsewhere in Khri ka County as well.<sup>14</sup> There is also a variant of the *ye* opening, *ya legs so* (see Tshe dpal rdo rje et al. 2009). In nearby Gcan tsha County, meanwhile, wedding speeches often begin with an elongated *ya* sound. These speeches tend to be much shorter in length and drastically different in terms of content (Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart 2008).

*Ye*, however, is not simply an opening formula in the sense that it begins the text. Rather it is more an indication that a new section of the speech has begun, which includes a new topic and a new set of formulas with it. In this way, it represents a special code that allows the audience to recognize that a speech is being given. What immediately follows the initial *ye* often tells the audience about the content of the corresponding section. The first line of the speech is an excellent example of how the phrase immediately following *ye* introduces the entire section following it. The first line reads, “*Ye mchod oM a hUM*” and is repeated three times. The last three syllables, *oM*, *a*, and *hUM*, are “seed syllables” that, taken together, can elevate regular speech to sacred oration (Ekvall 1964:115-118). These frame both the beginning and the end of

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<sup>14</sup> Hair changing ceremonies are rites of passage for girls aged 13, 15, and 17 to announce their womanhood, and their readiness to begin having suitors and engaging in sexual relations. For more information see Tshe dpal rdo rje et al. 2009; see also Blo bzang tshe ring et al. 2012.

the speech as a whole, but they also frame the sections concerned with invoking the deities. In doing so, the whole speech, and these sections in particular, are immediately understood to be sacred words that activate a whole matrix of ideas about sacred speech, the natural world, purity, and auspiciousness.<sup>15</sup>

The ability to discursively transform ordinary situations is an important part of Tibetan religious thought, as Ekvall points out when writing that “[t]he ascription of powers to the spoken and written word and the use of appropriate thaumaturgic gestures and formulas—written, spoken, mechanically repeated, or represented visually—to achieve religious ends, coerce gods and demons, and control the elements are both intrinsic parts of the Tantric importation” (1964:26).<sup>16</sup> In this way, the use of the seed syllables suggests that the wedding speech, beginning with the very first line, is not merely praising or entertaining, but is actually *doing* something in the context of the wedding event.

Although somewhat different in its intentions, it is useful to examine these special formulas and the speech as a whole with this important cultural construct in mind. Rarely explicitly mentioned, this concept is an underlying precept for the rest of the speech. The ensuing sections will show how, through the repetition of these auspicious phrases, auspicious place names, people, deities, and religious concepts, the words of the speaker further create the auspicious circumstances of the wedding.

### **Keys to Performance: Parallelism, Linking the Genre to the Larger Folk Tradition**

In addition to the special formulas mentioned above, the text makes extensive use of certain kinds of parallelism, generally in terms of three- or four-line groups that repeat certain grammatical structures. Moreover, the text shows several examples of what Yang (2001) would call cross-reiterative locutions, a Tibetan poetic practice in the Gesar epic that repeats a similar grammatical structure. This speech, too, features several such cross-reiterative locutions, including the following, taken from lines 2 through 7 of the speech:

<sup>2</sup> *Gnas chos dbyings dag pa'i zhing khams nas//*

<sup>3</sup> *yab chos sku kun tu bzang po mchod//*

<sup>4</sup> *lho dpal dang ldan pa'i zhing khams nas//*

<sup>5</sup> *lha longs sku thugs rje chen po mchod//*

<sup>6</sup> *gnas bya rgod phung bo'i ri bo nas//*

<sup>7</sup> *lha bcom ldan rgyal ba shAkya thub mchod//*

<sup>2</sup> From the pureland Dharmadhātu,

<sup>3</sup> Worship the father Dharmakāya Samantabhadra.

<sup>4</sup> From the the Southern pureland Shrimat,

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these issues in Tibetan speechmaking, see Thurston 2012.

<sup>16</sup> For more on sympathetic magic and the “magical power of words” in other cultural contexts, see Tambiah 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Worship Sambhogakāya, the Great Compassionate One [Avalokiteśvara].

<sup>6</sup> From Vulture Peak Mountain,

<sup>7</sup> Worship the victorious Bhagavan Shākyamuni.

These sorts of “complex prayers” (Yang 2001:304) appear primarily in the early sections of the Ne’u na wedding speech, in which the orator invokes a host of deities. Later in the text, these instances of multi-line formulaic repetition occur less frequently, yet they nevertheless play an important part throughout the speech, particularly in those sections that might be designated as prayer or invocation.

Formulas, however, also come in larger motifs and themes, for example, the three-part formula, which is an important part of Tibetan oral tradition. This works in two different fashions. First, the speaker can explicitly declare that there will be three of something. Lines 351-354 provide a brief example of this sort of cross-reiterative locution:

<sup>351</sup> *Ye da gtam gyi 'dus pa rnam gsum cig bshad na//*

<sup>352</sup> *Stag 'dus gzig 'dus nags la 'dus gi/*

<sup>353</sup> *Nya 'dus sram 'dus mtsho la 'dus gi/*

<sup>354</sup> *Pha 'dus bu 'dus gral la 'dus gi/*

<sup>351</sup> *Ye!* Now if I speak of the three assemblies of speeches:

<sup>352</sup> The tiger assembly and the leopard assembly gather in the forest.

<sup>353</sup> The fish assembly and the otter assembly gather in the lake.

<sup>354</sup> The father assembly and the son assembly gather in rows.

Additionally, there are situations in which the tripartite structure takes on a middling length. These forms go into much greater detail and range from 7 to 15 lines. The longest of these is given below.

<sup>328</sup> *Ye gtam gyi bstod pa rnam gsum cig bshad na//*

<sup>329</sup> *mthon pos mthon po bstod gi/*

<sup>330</sup> *dgung a sngon kha ya sprin gyis bstod gi/*

<sup>331</sup> *mgyogs pos mgyogs po bstod gi/*

<sup>332</sup> *rta 'do ba'i gom pa rlung gis bstod gi/*

<sup>333</sup> *'phyor bas phyor ba bstod gi/*

<sup>334</sup> *gos tsha ru'i 'dab ma sram gyis bstod gi/*

<sup>335</sup> *ser pos ser po bstod gi/*

<sup>336</sup> *ban de ser pos dbus bstod gi/*

<sup>337</sup> *ngang ba ser pos mtsho bstod gi/*

<sup>338</sup> *smyug ma ser pos mda' bstod gi/*

<sup>339</sup> *sngon pos sngon po bstod gi/*

<sup>340</sup> *khrung khrung sngon mos dgung bstod gi/*

<sup>341</sup> *khu byug sngon mos lo bstod gi/*

<sup>342</sup> *rma bya sngon mos sgro bstod gi/*

- 328 Ye! If I speak of the three praises of speeches:  
 329 The exalted praise the exalted;  
 330 The azure blue sky is praised by its companion, the clouds;  
 331 The swift praise the swift;  
 332 The steps of the excellent horse are praised by the wind;  
 333 The rich praise the rich;  
 334 The lambskin robe's hem is praised by the otter.  
 335 The yellow praise the yellow;  
 336 The yellow monk praises Dbus [Central Tibet];  
 337 The yellow duck praises the lake;  
 338 The yellow bamboo praises the arrow.  
 339 The blue praise the blue;  
 340 The blue crane praises the sky;  
 341 The blue cuckoo praises the year;  
 342 The blue peacock praises its feathers.

The final form of the tripartite structure is much longer than the two forms above and occurs over the course of three different stanzas. A good example is in the three kinds of weddings, in which the first stanza talks about the highest form of wedding, the second discusses the middle wedding (T: *gnyen gyi bar ma*), while the third stanza discusses the last kind of wedding (T: *gnyen gyi gzhug ma*). Here, the speaker describes a descending hierarchy of weddings, the highest or first being a wedding between deities. The second is a historical wedding between the Tibetan king and a Nepalese princess, and the final kind of wedding is between the same Tibetan king and a Chinese princess (more on these historical figures below).

These groups of three might best be considered “themes,” defined as “the groups of ideas regularly used in telling a tale in the formulaic style of traditional song” (Lord 1960:68). These are an important element of the rhetorical strategies available to the orator and in the Tibetan folk tradition more generally. The audience, hearing about the first kind of wedding, can reasonably expect to hear about a middle and last form of wedding in a descending order. When hearing about the *rab* (“best”) of a kind of thing, they can expect two more. These themes vary considerably in length and detail. Some of the themes in this wedding speech include the three kinds of weddings (lines 200-265) and three kinds of audiences (lines 272-281). In addition, there are structures that also include *rnam gsum* (“three kinds of”) constructions at the head of sections. Examples include the three praises of speeches (T: *gtam gyi bstod pa rnam gsum*, lines 329-343), the three great things of the speech (T: *gtam gyi che ba rnam gsum*, lines 344-347), the three kinds of gatherings (*gtam gyi tshogs pa rnam gsum*, lines 348-351), the three types of meetings (*gtam gyi 'dus pa rnam gsum*, lines 352-355), and three kinds of happiness (*gtam gyi dga' ba rnam gsum*, lines 363-367).

This parallelism gains further support from the orator's sporadic use of metered lines in the speech. Sujata (2005) shows the importance of meter in traditional Tibetan folk songs, and their influence on the works of the famed seventeenth-century Tibetan Siddha and composer of spiritual songs, Skäl Idan rgya mtsho. In a 2012 publication on another genre of Tibetan speech, I

noted the similarities between the meter employed in Tibetan speeches and in folksong lyrics (Thurston 2012:59). And those held true for the speech in question at the time, though it does not for this wedding speech. Lines in this wedding speech stretch from six to over a dozen syllables in length. Nevertheless, those sections exhibiting greater use of parallel structure—particularly those engaged in the act of praise—employ a meter similar to that used in *sa bstod* oratory and folksong. In this way, poetic features like meter, parallelism, and special formulas are important keys to speech performance in Ne’u na Village.

### **Keys to Performance: Figurative Language, Metaphorically Indexing Auspiciousness**

As a text created to support the transmission of a Tibetan oral tradition, it is important to recognize that this speech adheres to many of the rules and definitions of performance, particularly that “there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, ‘interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey’” (Bauman 1977:7). Thus, as Foley points out while discussing the formulaic expressions of ancient Greek narrative poetry in the form of the Homeric hymns, “noun-epithet formulas, and to an extent all such components of the traditional performance register, promote a continuity of reception by indexing extrasituational ideas and realities according to a predetermined code” (1995:158). This section introduces some of the elements of the “traditional performance register” for this genre of Tibetan oratory. It first examines traditional ideas of purity and auspiciousness in A mdo culture, before examining how these concepts manifest themselves throughout the speech. I examine four major themes for how they interact with concepts of purity in speech: deities, historical figures, the natural world, and religious concepts.

#### *Ideas of Purity in A mdo*

Ideas of purity in Tibetan culture have rarely been explicitly discussed in scholarly literature, and yet they are pervasive in Tibetan everyday life and important to how Tibetans interact with the world around them.<sup>17</sup> Auspiciousness and purity are marked in the Tibetan landscape, and in many elements of the daily, monthly, and annual calendar. Concepts of purity are indexed in the wearing of amulets, the daily burning of incense and juniper (T: *bsang*), pilgrimage to holy places (see Huber 1994), and frequent requests for spiritual aid and purification through communal and individual religious practices.

The wedding and other ritual and festival occasions, moreover, require a level of auspiciousness that extends far beyond the purity and good luck of everyday life. As in other life-cycle rituals, a ritual specialist—in A mdo (and particularly the region’s more remote areas) this is often a tantric practitioner (often referred to locally as *a khu dpon*)—is consulted specifically to divine the most auspicious day for the wedding. It is this extra level of auspiciousness that is

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<sup>17</sup> One of the few works on concepts of purity in Tibetan culture deals with another important lifecycle moment: childbirth (see Klu mo tshé ring and Roche 2011).

being consistently referenced and even created in the wedding speech. Indeed, the text only occasionally mentions auspiciousness explicitly, but accesses notions of auspiciousness through figurative language that references deities, historical figures, locations and religious concepts. Each mention metonymically refers the Tibetan audience to a much larger set of notions, practices, mythology, and historical background.

### *Deities*

In addition to the first 64 lines, which explicitly offer praise to several gods in turn, ranging from tutelary and hearth deities to major deities within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon like Samantabhadra, the text makes several references to deities in the course of describing the various kinds of marriage. The surface-level implications of this are obvious: it connects the wedding with religious activity. Additionally, the auspiciousness of this event crosses traditional religious boundaries as seen with the inclusion of Hindu, Buddhist, and Bon deities. Although sometimes there are questions as to whether all the references would be understood by every member of the audience, these cross-religious moments are significant. For example, in describing the wedding of the heaven realm (lines 199-216), the highest wedding, the Buddhist cosmology, with famous deities and Bodhisattvas, is given primacy. In describing the middle wedding (lines 229-249), on the other hand, all the places in which Buddhist deities had been described before are now given to famous Bon practitioners. If nothing else, this makes historical sense, as Buddhism was only introduced to Tibet during the imperial period.

Later in the speech, deities are used in an entirely different fashion. In the description of the highest form of wedding, the deities are used to show which roles at the wedding are the most important. In this section, different deities are given different positions and responsibilities in the wedding. These positions, associated with the first wedding, a wedding between gods, correspond to the most highly regarded positions in the wedding: the *ja dpon* (“tea manager”), *phyi dpon* (“outer manager”), *bar ba* (“matchmaker”), *bag rogs* (“bridesmaids”), and so forth. The Ne’u na wedding would also have people fulfilling each of these roles. Linking the present wedding with a divine wedding with deities in all these important roles helps to index the extremely auspicious nature of the wedding ceremony more generally, and the Ne’u na wedding more specifically. As a custom directly related to and emanating from the heavenly realm, marriage is placed as an auspicious thing. This is made further evident by the deities that are accorded certain positions. Leading roles are accorded not to just any religious figure, but to some of the most important deities and Bodhisattvas in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition: Padma Sambhava, Manjusri, and Vajrapani. We also see the importance of certain phases of the wedding: the traditions of gifts for the matchmaker and of bride-wealth are clearly important parts of the wedding as formulated in this speech. Glaring in their absence, however, are the *bdud* (demons) and *'dre* (ghosts) with the exception of a single reference to *btsan* demons (line 514). Even in this instance, however, the reference is used to show the power of the people of the four clans of Sgo me. Thus, these classes, which serve as the antitheses of the gods (T: *lha*) and are associated with inauspiciousness, have little to no place either in the speech or in the wedding.

### *Historical Figures*

Beyond the mentions of various deities, historical figures are used to show important traditions related to the wedding. The personages vary from the great Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po—whose fame spreads across the Tibetan plateau and who is also well known in Chinese traditions as well—to Bon adepts and more. This next section examines the presence and implication of these varied figures in the text of this wedding speech.

Most important among the historical figures are the brides and groom of the middle and lower forms of wedding. The groom in both cases is the great Tibetan king Srong btsan sgam po. In the middle wedding, the bride is his Nepalese wife Khri lcam, while the lower wedding involves the Chinese princess Wencheng (T: *kong jo*). These two princesses are credited, in Tibetan lore, with bringing Buddhism to Tibet (see Sørensen 1994), and their marriages constitute Tibet's most famous weddings. The presence of these three important historical figures is not without its historical resonance for listeners. In addition to evoking the arrival of Buddhism, the text also reminds readers of the fact that the Chinese princess and the Tibetan king are said to have been emanations of two great deities: Avalokiteshvara (T: *spyān ras gzigs*)—the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the protector of Tibet—in the case of Song btsan sgam po, and Tārā (T: *rje btsun sgrol ma*) in the case of Princess Wencheng.

Interestingly, juxtaposed with these heroes of the Buddhist religion are Bon adepts given important roles in the wedding process: Bon scholars like Dran pa nam mkha' and Dpyad bu khri shes (a possible misspelling of Dpyad bu khri shing, one of Bon po gshen rab's spiritual sons). While it makes historical sense that there would be Bon adepts prior to the introduction of Buddhism, and while these references may also be related to the presence of Bon communities elsewhere in Khri ka County, the exact resonance that these have for an audience of mostly Buddhist Tibetans in Ne'u na village is hard to discern. In fact, at least some Ne'u na residents were unable to identify these characters. More importantly for present purposes, however, is that these are all excellent people. Through aligning the wedding with heavenly and historical weddings of great importance, the speaker not only connects the wedding event with a greater tradition of weddings, but also further indexes the great auspiciousness of such events.

### *The Natural World*

Beyond the historical figures and unchanging deities, however, the Tibetan natural landscape is prominent in the speech and infused with meaning. The mountains, rivers, and sky are all simultaneously the land on which the Tibetan people earn their living and religious sites, some of them worthy of pilgrimage. The Ne'u na wedding speech begins discussing place within the first few lines. It mentions different pure lands and heavens in relation with the deities who inhabit them; the speech continues to describe first the spiritual world, then the Tibetan region, and then the very town in which the wedding took place. Each toponym carries with it cultural references. In this case, the references are both implicitly and explicitly couched in local concepts of auspiciousness. Thus, the next important vantage from which to explore the speech's figurative language is that of place.

Studies of place in the Tibetan context have traditionally focused more on religious geographical and travel texts (Wylie 1965, Ramble 1995) than on orally performed speech text. Moreover, where Tibetologists have studied nature imagery (for example, Blondeau 1998, Virtanen 2007, Virtanen 2014, and Quintman 2008), nature imagery in oral traditions has featured less prominently (with the exception of Ramble 1995). Nevertheless, metaphors and references to place simultaneously provide significant insight into traditional Tibetan poetics and play an important role in Tibetan secular oratory and other oral traditions as well.

Within the metaphors of auspiciousness, references to environment, creatures, and specific locations—in short, references to the most auspicious places of the Tibetan religious and secular world—locate marriage in general, as well as the particular wedding in which the orator is performing, in a place that is perfect for that purpose. Like the specially divined day itself, everything is in perfect arrangement for this one specific task. In this examination of place, it is important to remember that (Basso 1996:76-77):

Because of their inseparable localities, place-names may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations—associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life. . . . In their compact power to consolidate and muster so much of what a landscape may be taken to represent in both personal and cultural terms, place-names acquire a functional value that easily matches their utility as instruments of reference.

In recognizing the incredible range of referential meanings that place-names can take in a given cultural context, we accept that it is important to attend to how local communities discursively construct their environments within larger cultural frameworks.

Each of the places mentioned in this speech is the purest and most auspicious of places in the Tibetan world. First the speaker locates the continent, Jambudvīpa (T: *'dzam bu gling*), next he locates certain places within this continent, including Bodhgaya—the place where every Buddha has attained enlightenment—and after naming other places, mentions that Tibet is in the center. Finally, he works the location all the way to Gsang sngags bde chen, a monastery near Ne'u na, and also to the village itself and its location along the banks of the yellow river, and bisected by a smaller tributary river. The village is the first place mentioned that is not an inherently holy place, and yet it too is turned into an auspicious place when the speaker describes the village's shape as a *g.yung drung*, a Buddhist swastika.

Animals, both real and mythical, also play an important role in indexing the auspiciousness of the participants. This can be seen quite clearly in lines 142 through 148. In each line, the guests are equated with a different animal, each animal thought to be auspicious and bringing good luck. This is beneficial in understanding the places of certain creatures within the Tibetan consciousness.

<sup>142</sup> *bya rgyal khyung chen gshog ru rkyang 'dra can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>143</sup> *rgya khra hor ba rgod kyi ding ru babs 'dra can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>144</sup> *seng ge dkar mos g.yu ral phrag la 'phags 'dra can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>145</sup> *rgya stag dmar bor mtshal gyi thigs le babs 'dra can gyi mi tshogs gi/*



<sup>146</sup> *g.yu 'brug sngon mor dung gi gsus pa can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>147</sup> *khu byug sngon mo'i gsung snyan gang yag can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>148</sup> *rma bya sngon mo'i rna sgro gang bkra can gyi mi tshogs gi/*

<sup>142</sup> [At this wedding] people who are like the spread wings of the Garuda are gathered.

<sup>143</sup> People who are like the hawks with a vulture's humerus bones are gathered.

<sup>144</sup> People who are like white snow lions tossing their turquoise manes on their shoulders are gathered.

<sup>145</sup> People who are like the vermilion-striped Bengal tigers are gathered.

<sup>146</sup> People who are like the turquoise dragons with conch-white bellies are gathered.

<sup>147</sup> People who are like the blue cuckoo's sweet considerate call are gathered.

<sup>148</sup> People who are like the blue peacock's splendid feathers are gathered.

In each instance, the guests are likened not only to auspicious animals, but in some cases to the very best parts of those animals. As an important element of Tibetan imagery, these references continue to appear in literary and oral works throughout the greater Tibetan cultural area. Ekvall (1964:39) notes that animals, birds and tigers among them, are ascribed certain supernatural powers, "thus making them objects of veneration and accessories in the practice of magic." Some animals may, however, have negative connotations in terms of auspiciousness. Thus it is important to recognize that "[a]mong the beasts of prey, brown bears, black bears, lynx, jackals, fox, and badgers are evil omens, whereas tigers, leopards, snow leopards, and wolves are good" (270). Looking at this brief list, none of the animals considered to be evil omens appears even once in the speech. Conversely, tigers, leopards, and snow leopards are evoked frequently in order to elicit these very positive images of strength, purity, and auspiciousness.

Lines 181-194 show a different use of nature and space, but one that is still meant to align each place with auspiciousness and power. In these lines, different terrains and kinds of places are viewed as lived space. They are the types of locales inhabited by each of the most highly powerful creatures. This section, like many others, begins at the center, the most important of the places. The section begins with the sky, and then continues to describe the snow-covered mountain (and not just any mountain, but the sacred Mt. Tise) and then to forested mountains and downwards in a descending order to the places inhabited by humans. Each place is inhabited by a different kind of creature, and each type of creature is of the type that is commonly an object of veneration in the pre-Buddhist Tibetan religious worldview. Ramble (1995:87) notes the presence of this theme, and the vertical character of the terrain in folk songs, but never extends it to oratory, while it is also worth noting that hierarchical positioning is a formulaic introduction to any sort of historical or biographical narration as well.<sup>18</sup>

### *Religious Concepts*

The invocation of deities, historical figures, and the natural world described above is intimately related to Tibetan concepts of everyday religion. And yet, religion also works its way into the

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<sup>18</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this facet of the vertical hierarchy.

speech in more explicit fashions as well. This section examines two additional ways in which the speech indexes auspiciousness, not least through reference to religiously important numbers that introduce and evoke important auspicious concepts and images.

The speech itself is replete with numbers and important Tibetan religious terms and concepts. The numbers three, four, five, eight, nine, one hundred eight, and eighty-four thousand, all relating to various religious concepts in the Bon and Buddhist traditions, all occur within the speech. The number three is most often used, appearing twenty-one times in the text, and it is used primarily in two kinds of situations: stanzas about the “three kinds” of different things, and in discussing different seasons, which in the Tibetan calendar are divided into three-month increments of the lunar calendar beginning with spring.

Number	Number of Occurrences
3	21
4	6
5	1
8	12
108	1
84,000	2

If the number three is used in ways that seem almost secular, the number eight appears in the speech in almost exclusively religious fashion. It appears twelve times within the speech, many of them in the introductory praise of deities. In each instance, it is accompanied by a strictly religious reference including the eight classes of gods and demons (T: *lha srin sde brgyad*), the eight-spoked dharma wheel (T: *gnam 'khor lo rtsibs brgyad*), the eight Auspicious Symbols (T: *bkra shis btags brgyad*), and the eight-petal lotus flower (T: *sa pad+ma 'dab brgyad*). These groupings very economically reference a particularly auspicious part of the Tibetan culture. For example, the eight Auspicious Symbols are the golden fish (*gser nya*), vase (*bum pa*), lotus flower (*pad+ma*), the endless knot (*dpal be'u*), the dharma-wheel (*chos 'khor*), victory banner (*rgyal mtshan*), conch shell (*dung g.yas 'khyil*), and precious umbrella (*rin chen gdugs*). Some of these in turn appear in other parts of the speech. The number eight also refers to the eight-spoked dharma wheel, in which each spoke represents part of the Shakyamuni Buddha's precepts on the eight-fold path.

Related to this, but not entirely similar, is the important presence of the eight trigrams (Ch: *ba gua* 八卦, T: *spar kha*), an important Chinese divinatory practice. It references just one of the divination practices mentioned in the speech to emphasize just how many measures have been taken to ensure that this is a good day. It is placed in the context of, and immediately next to, a more indigenous Tibetan divinatory practice of the nine astrological squares (T: *sme ba lo skor*). These references to a variety of divinatory practices further underscore the indisputable auspiciousness of the wedding day, but they also suggest the cultural complexity of the Sino-Tibetan cultural frontier.

*Discursively Creating Auspiciousness*

In closing the discussion of figurative language and auspiciousness, I wish to draw attention to a concept discussed elsewhere (see Thurston 2012), namely, that Tibetan secular oratory not only discusses the auspiciousness of the place or event, but also helps to discursively create the auspicious circumstances the speakers describe through performing the speech and engaging in the act of praise. This works because of the interacting network of human agents and evenemental forces Da col (2007) has dubbed “economies of fortune.” These evenemental forces include (but are not necessarily limited to) virtue (*dge ba*), blessing (*byin rlabs*), luck (*rlung rta*), and interdependent origination/omens (*rten 'brel*).<sup>19</sup>

From the portents on display when setting out on a journey, or the actions of hosts and guests, human agents in A mdo interpret a variety of actions and natural signs to evaluate the creation or loss of auspicious circumstances (Sa mtsho skyid and Roche 2011). Tibetan economies of fortune are also woven into the verbal fabric of Tibetan secular oratory in A mdo. The contexts in which they were traditionally spoken were events that required auspiciousness. The dates on which they were held were chosen for their auspiciousness, and the language of the speeches underscores this. But in the Ne'u na wedding speech the density of auspicious statements suggests that the speech is doing more than reminding listeners of the auspiciousness of the occasion, but instead plays an important role in the discursive *creation* of these auspicious circumstances in Tibetan secular oratory.<sup>20</sup> This discursive creation of auspiciousness relies on the sort of sympathetic magic operating on Tibetan economies of fortune, which “consists of asserting that a certain wished-for event is taking place, and by the power of the word it is supposed that, if every detail is properly performed, the event does take place” (Thomas 1933:189; cf. Frazer 2009 [1922]). In properly performing the traditional wedding speech, then, the orator ups the proverbial ante, piling on ever-increasing amounts of auspiciousness.

Orators highlight the inseparability of oratory and *rten 'brel* in their statements on the functions and purposes of Tibetan speechmaking. Dbyangs skyabs, from Hor nag, for example, preferred that (Dbyangs skyabs, personal communication, August 18, 2010):

*Ston mo gzig byas na/ da de khige yin rgyu na thog mar yin rgyu na/ rten 'brel 'bod rgyu'o ra  
brtag rgyu'o/ gnyis ba 'di bdag po 'di khidge yin rgyu na da ston mo gi khidge rgyud rim gi la gal  
u, gsum pa yin rgyu na khidge bkra shis kha g.yang gi la ga...*

When holding a wedding, well, first of all, it's calling and examining *rten 'brel*, the second thing, well, it's about the wedding's, well, order, uh, thirdly, it's about auspiciousness and fortune.

For Klu rgyal, an orator from a village in Reb gong, *rten 'brel* is the very purpose of the wedding speech. Unbidden, he too brought the term forward. In the context of the wedding speech, Klu

<sup>19</sup> For more on the first three terms, see Clarke 1990. See also Thurston 2012, Sa mstho skyid and Roche 2011, and Da Col 2007.

<sup>20</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this discursive creation of the auspicious circumstances described in the *sa bstod* “praise of place” genre of Tibetan secular oratory, see Thurston 2012.

rgyal suggested that *rten 'brel* is most prominently indexed by the combination of *bstod pa* (“praise”) and *bkra shis pa'i tshig* (“auspicious words”): *rma gzhi khidge gtso bo da 'jig rten mgon po gyi rten 'brel gzig byed/ khidge rten 'brel rag las yod zer rgyu red/ gnyen gi bshad pa 'di rten 'brel la hra zer no/* (“Fundamentally, it’s mainly making worldly *rten 'brel*. You should say that it depends upon *rten 'brel*, the wedding speech says that the *rten 'brel* is good,” personal communication, August 19, 2010).

Auspiciousness and economies of fortune are, then, the most basic and essential frame for understanding Tibetan secular oratory. In fact, it is not too much to say that the creation of auspiciousness and *rten 'brel* is an essential part of generic convention and actively directs audience understanding of the speech itself. Though it is, on occasion, possible to step outside of the frame of fortune, a vast majority of Tibetan verbal art works within this framework. From praying for fortune in Lhasa’s dice games (Murakami 2014) to praises of place (Thurston 2012), Tibetan verbal art is frequently not simply about entertainment, but is tied directly to attempts to manipulate the conditions of the world around us through the discursive creation of fortune.<sup>21</sup>

In further understanding this concept of auspiciousness, it may be useful to take some of the meditational concepts of Buddhism into account, especially that of the mandala. References to religiously significant places are made not simply for the sake of traditional resonances, but their location and use in the speech can be viewed as discursively creating a mandala.<sup>22</sup> Like the Buddhist mandala practice, this speech begins importantly with the placement of the deities on the edges, and works progressively toward the center, which in this case is the local community. Tibetan oral traditions can thus participate in a process of “mandalization,” in which a secular space is transformed into sacred space through “intersentient communication between . . . Buddha Dharma, place, gods, and people” (Yü 2014:495). Through the power of its words, the Ne’u na wedding speech discursively places this village both at the center of the Tibetan world, and temporarily, for the time of the wedding, at one of the most auspicious places in the world.

### **Conclusion: A mdo Wedding Speeches in the Twenty-First Century**

The wedding speech is no longer *de rigueur* for traditional weddings. In Mang ra (Ch: Guinan) County, for example, the wedding speech was—as of 2009—entirely optional (briefly described in Thurston and Tsering Samdrup 2012). At the time, this was ascribed to a lack of gifted orators rather than a change in Tibetan ideas of fortune. By the time of my second period of fieldwork in A mdo (2011-15), I noticed that Tibetan families frequently prefer holding weddings in restaurants, paying an outside emcee, and paying money (the entirety of which can effectively be earned back in the form of monetary gifts) for food rather than spending the inordinate amount of personal time and familial capital required to host a wedding out of one’s

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that certain frames of modern performance do not seem to be subject, in the minds of performers and audiences, to fortune. Tibetan *kha shags*—comedic dialogues—in A mdo, for example, seem to be exempt from the issues of fortune (see Thurston 2015). In addition, modern songs about love seem also to be exempt from the taboos prohibiting the singing of love songs in the presence of relatives.

<sup>22</sup> See Tucci 2001 [1961] for more on the practice of mandala in Tibet.

own home (see also Tshe dpal rdo rje et al. 2009). This is often competitive, and the extravagance of a wedding as well as the number (and importance) of guests in attendance may later become the topic of gossip and discussion.<sup>23</sup> Families can accrue significant social as well as monetary capital in this way. In these “modern” or “urban” weddings, the presence or absence of the wedding speech depends on a combination of the speaker’s competence, and the host family’s own preferences. In general, there is a feeling that competence in traditional speech genres is disappearing.

The traditional wedding speech has, in these more urban contexts, been replaced by the hiring of a *mdo ’dzin pa* (“emcee”). Emcees usually have a deep voice and can speak very quickly, clearly, and poetically. They possess many of the same skills required for an orator of Tibetan wedding speeches, but their duties are frequently more limited to introducing the bride and groom, and the entertainment. Some emcees also perform wedding speeches, but they employ a slightly different register and performance style, clearly differentiating themselves from their traditional counterparts.

At the same time, many traditional Tibetan speeches continue to live a textualized life in compilations and in archives. Though not as popular as love songs or folk songs,<sup>24</sup> a burgeoning cultural preservation movement has led to the creation of several documentaries focusing on the Tibetan wedding practices in various weddings. VCDs of these documentaries are widely sold in Tibetan countryside stalls, and although they are not top sellers, vendors do manage to do a steady business stocking them. In 2010, I witnessed an elder watching these VCDs in hopes of learning new proverbs and honing his own oral competence. For most, however, the wedding speech is, like Ne’u na Village before the building of the dams forced its removal from the riverside and like so many other traditional genres, consigned more to the (possibly preserved, but largely irreversibly vanished) past.

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<sup>23</sup> Such competition in terms of conspicuous communal consumption is not limited to the wedding. For a discussion of such discussions in a girl’s hair-changing ceremony in Bsang chu (Ch: Xiahe) County, see Blo bzang tshe ring et al. 2012.

<sup>24</sup> See Anton-Luca 2002.

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