

***Ala* and *ngakpa* [sngags-pa] in Nyemo (Central Tibet):
reflections on some non-monastic religious specialists and
their designations**

Nicolas Sihlé

The aim of this talk is to achieve a more precise understanding of certain categories of Tibetan, non-monastic priests, and in particular to show that, in certain contexts, terms that seem to refer to a religious specialization may in fact operate at a different level. I will present some non-monastic priests of the Nyemo area in Central Tibet, and their ritual activity, and focus on the seemingly somewhat inconsistent terminology used locally to refer to them. Both the laity and the priests themselves use the very common term *ngakpa* [sngags-pa] (“tantrist”) and the less widespread designation **ala* to refer to very similar specialists (Buddhist or Bonpo in the first case, always Bonpo in the second); one particular lineage is actually called by both names. The people seem to be talking about two different *types* of religious specialists, or two different *functions*, and certain recurrent distinctions in the ritual specializations and other attributes associated with those priests in local discourse seem to confirm this impression. However, local definitions are far from being consistent, and the facts are that specialists of both names carry out globally the *same* ritual activities. It seems that (apart from the sociologically not very relevant question of religious affiliation) the two designations are to be distinguished essentially in terms of connotations (and their contextual relevance), not signification, and that, ultimately, searching for two distinct classes of non-monastic priests in Nyemo may be a mistaken enterprise.