

## Signs of transition: on interpreting some predictors of tulku rebirth

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Accounts of the imminent birth, the birth, or the early childhood of a tulku often highlight portents which may assume key roles in identifying individuals as reincarnate lamas within the popular, if not the official, Tibetan purview. Such portents include unusual meteorological phenomena, extraordinary geological phenomena, parents' or relatives' dreams of interactions with exalted religious persons or objects, prescient behavior on the part of young children, crop and/or animal infertility in the vicinity of the tulku's birthplace, recent deaths among the tulku's close kin, and other occurrences of *bar-chad* affecting the tulku's natal family. Attention to such extraordinary signs constitutes a critical aspect of the telling and reception of narratives of tulku legitimation, whether inscribed or oral, that are offered by a tulku's relatives, neighbors, disciples, teachers, attendants or hagiographers. But what do these portents signify and how do they assist in establishing certainty? Furthermore, since such portents are, for the most part, initially identified by non-religious specialists living in close proximity to a prospective tulku, wider acceptance of these portents may effectively incorporate a prospective tulku's immediate family and/or local community into the rank of divinatory agents resorted to in a tulku search process. Thus, another question concerns how portents may serve as potential strategies of "local" agency in the legitimation of tulku. This paper, based on fieldwork conducted in India and Nepal from 1991 to 1994, addresses these questions by examining the social and symbolic construction of portents in the authentication of tulku.