

## **Blood, vows, and incarnations: identities and allegiances in the life of Yolmo Bstan-'dzin-nor-bu (1598–1644)**

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The Water-Horse year of 1642 occupies a place of paramount importance in the grand narratives of Tibetan history. A long struggle between the powers of Dbus and Gtsang and their respective allies in the Dge-lugs and Karma Bka'-brgyud sects culminated that year in the formal declaration of the Fifth Dalai Lama's rule over a unified Tibet in an elaborate ceremony performed in the Bsam-grub-rtse palace of his defeated enemy. Despite the importance afforded to this event, our understanding of the world of feuding kingdoms, religious reformation and social upheaval from which it arose remains regrettably simplistic. Most of the sources referred to in studies of this period are histories composed after the events of 1642 and often with the explicit intention of demonstrating the predestined nature of the Fifth Dalai Lama's victory. It is in this sense that the autobiography of the Third Yolmo Sprul-sku Bstan-'dzin-nor-bu, *The SâraŅgî with the Vajra Sound* (*Rdo rje sgra ma'i rgyud mangs*), stands apart as an original and fascinating description of these tumultuous times.

In contrast to the better-known retrospective accounts of the period, the Yolmo-ba's presentation was composed a decade before the dramatic resolution of 1642. His autobiographical writings cast light on a world of exceedingly complex social and political realities often obscured in the teleological narratives of later histories. Although the factions of Dbus and Gtsang are often depicted as two clearly defined and totally separate entities, Bstan-'dzin-nor-bu's own life demonstrates that in the early seventeenth century these lines were not so clearly marked and the two factions were closely connected on many levels. As a reincarnate lama of the Rnying-ma-pa Byang-gter, a tradition lacking its own monastic center, the Third Yolmo-ba spent his youth studying at the monasteries of the Karma Kam-tshang, under the guidance of the powerful Sixth Zhva dmar Rin-poche, Gar-dbang Chos-kyi-dbang-phyug. This placed him within the circle of Buddhist teachers connected with the court of the Gtsang-pa De-srid, who became one his most important patrons. In 1617, however, he returned to the lineage of his incarnational identity by becoming a disciple of Rig-'dzin Ngag-gi-dbang-po, an avowed enemy of the Gtsang court (which had banished his father from the realm) and a mentor to the Fifth Dalai Lama. These two stages of his religious education placed Yol-mo Bstan-'dzin-nor-bu in the precarious position of holding strong allegiances to both factions in the ongoing wars. This unique perspective makes him a compelling and important witness to the events of his day.

Perhaps even more illuminating than his connections with both of the powers remembered in the official histories is the fact that in Bstan-'dzin-nor-bu's comments, these factions are only two amongst dozens of other kingdoms and estates of the day that

would fade from history after 1642. His closest ties were with the royal family of Gungthang, but the autobiography also describes visits and communications with dozens of courts spread between Lhasa, Shigatse and Kathmandu. It is in the rich observations of the social and religious structures of the time that the Third Yolmo-ba's writings have the most to offer the historian of Tibet. In this paper, I will sketch an image of Central Tibet during the early seventeenth century based on these observations in which myriad small kingdoms, estates, and monasteries form a political landscape far more complicated than the bipartite model of the standard histories.

Finally, by examining the nature of the Third Yol-mo Sprul-sku's connections with the various forces in this landscape, I will reflect upon one individual's dynamic negotiations of diverse allegiances which were often in conflict. While the Third Yol-mo-ba's identity as the son of Lo-chen Spyian-ras-gzigs provided him with strong ties to leading masters of the Sa-skya and Jo-nang traditions, as a student of the Sixth Zhva-dmar he was bound to the monastic institutions of the Karma Kam-tshang. Furthermore, his identity as a reincarnate lama established his position as an upholder of the Rnying-ma-pa Byang-gter tradition and connected him with its young Dge-lugs champion, the Fifth Dalai Lama. The Yol-mo Sprul-sku displayed a creative agency in his skilful balancing of these various identities by proclaiming or diminishing their relative importance in different contexts. Despite the violent antipathy between these groups, Bstan-'dzin nor-bu maintained close ties with all of them throughout his life. By reflecting on this intermingling of ancestral, monastic, and incarnational identities, I hope to draw attention to the complex nature of allegiances which is often obscured by the tendency to depict Tibetan history in broad sectarian terms.