

What's in a Name? The Nature of Nyingma (rnying ma) Identity

Description:

Through both its name and its self-understanding, the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) or “Ancient” school signals its continuity with and loyalty to the Buddhist patrimony of Tibet’s ancient emperors and the South Asian saints and scholars they patronized in the late 8th and early 9th centuries. The very name Nyingma, however, suggests a conscious attempt to construct an identity around the notion of ancient/antiquity in contrast to “the new” (*gsar ma*) schools that began to flourish in the 11th century. Hence, those who first called themselves “the Ancients” (*rnying ma pa*) did so at some temporal distance from the very ancients whose authority they invoked.

“Treasure” (*gter*) discovery, which became central to the religious lives of nearly all Nyingma communities from the late 12th and 13th centuries on, became the most successful strategy of casting the new as old. Nevertheless, the undeniable continuities with the texts, practices, and individual masters of the early diffusion (*snga dar*) and the period of fragmentation make the Nyingma genuinely ancient, as well. To be blunt, what, then, is old, and what is new? This panel seeks to tackle this conundrum at the very heart of Nyingma studies by means of papers that address directly and in detail what is possibly the oldest, and yet newest, of the Tibetan sects/schools, thereby addressing longstanding questions in the field of Tibetan Buddhist Studies.

Given both the nature of this panel’s topic and the volume of interest in the panel itself, I propose a day-long session of multiple sub-panels organized thematically and/or chronologically. What follows is a list with (1) the names of scholars who have *already confirmed* their interest in participating in this panel (as of September 30), and (2) *either* a very brief description of the topic of their proposed paper *or* the tentative title of their proposed paper:

Orna Almogi, University of Hamburg: Issues in the study of the rNying ma rGyud ‘bum

Dorji Wangchuk, University of Hamburg: Philosophical/doctrinal issues and the Guhyagarbha Tantra

Joel Gruber, University of California, Santa Barbara: “The Many Voices of Bimala: An Overview of the Mahāyoga Commentaries attributed to Vimalamitra”

Kammie Takahashi, Muhlenberg College: “Surpassing the Unsurpassed and Delineating the Indivisible in Sangs rgyas gSang ba’s *Lam rnam par bkod pa*”

Cathy Cantwell, Oxford University: Issues of “authorship” and the development of gTer ma in relation to bKa’ ma

Robert Mayer, Oxford University: Textual development in gTer traditions as illustrated by the bDud ‘joms gTer gsar

Daniel Hirshberg, Harvard University/University of California, Santa Barbara: Myang ral Nyi ma 'od zer (12th century) and early methods of gTer recovery

Katarina Turpeinen, University of Virginia: The dGongs pa zang thal of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem (1337-1408)

Eran Laish, Hebrew University of Jerusalem: Meanings of ye shes ("gnosis") in kLong chen pa's *Seven Treasures (mdzod bdun)*

Jann Ronis, University of California, Berkeley: "Contestation over Nyingma Identity in the Compilation of the Kama (bka' ma): An Investigation of the dKar chags to the Earliest Printed Editions"

Nathaniel D. Rich, University of California, Santa Barbara: "rGyal sras gZhan phan mtha' yas (1800-1855) and the Beginnings of Nyingma Scholasticism"

Anne Klein, Rice University: "Reality Speaks: Jigme Lingpa and the Great Completeness"

Antonio Terrone, Northwestern University: "Shaping the Modern Self in 21st Century Tibetan Treasure Revealers' Biographical Writing"

Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern University: "The Wish-fulfilling Jewel: Hymns, Advice, and Dialogues about the Guru from the Treasure cycles of Sera Khandro Dewé Dorjé (1892-1940)"

Each of these papers, and any others accepted, will not only illuminate the particular topics or issues within Nyingma Studies on which they are focused; they will also shed light on the larger question of Nyingma identity that is this panel's point of departure. They will do this by drawing our attention to the relationships between their particular objects of focus and the larger Nyingma tradition. Thus, I expect synergy both between the individual papers organized as thematic/chronological sub-panels and between all the papers across the several sub-panels. I also expect that, should this panel (or multi-panel session) be accepted, there will be at least several other scholars interested in participating. (I have already heard from two others; unfortunately, it was not in time for inclusion in this proposal.) As should be clear, then, there is already interest enough for at least three sub-panels, and perhaps a fourth, within the frame of Nyingma identity.

I respectfully request that, should this panel be accepted, it be scheduled so as *not* to conflict with the panel on early Dzokchen (rdzogs chen) proposed by David Germano of the University of Virginia.