

Greece & Rome, Vol. xxxvi, No. 2, October 1989

NECHUNG: A MODERN PARALLEL
TO THE DELPHIC ORACLE?

By W. GEOFFREY ARNOTT

The definitive study of the Delphic Oracle by H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell published over thirty years ago¹ assembled all the information then known about it and discussed the various theories both ancient and modern about its operation where reliable information was lacking. In the presentation and evaluation of these theories, however, Parke and Wormell take no account of the methods and practices of state oracles in other cultures, even though such oracles may still be functioning today at the end of the twentieth century and so be able to provide contemporary and authenticated evidence of their workings, power and credibility. In Tibet, for instance, the State Oracle has a history going back over 800 years.² It was originally sited at the monastery of Nechung ('Small Place') some four miles west of Lhasa, operating there until the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the 1950's, when the monk who acted as the mouthpiece of the oracle followed the Dalai Lama in his flight to northern India. The Tibetan State Oracle now functions in exile at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh some 250 miles north of Delhi. Its operations show some striking similarities to those attested for Delphi, and although the distances in time and space (not to mention the differences in cultural and religious background) obviously preclude any links between Nechung and Delphi other than those of common human experience and psychology, the parallels may at times help to shed some illumination on a few darker or confused areas in our knowledge of Delphic practice. Analogy admittedly is not argument, and the individual reader must judge for himself the applicability of the evidence.

While Tibet maintained its precarious independence in the first half of this century under its largely hieratic, partly aristocratic government, the Nechung Oracle was regularly consulted on matters affecting the safety and welfare of the state and its institutions, both religious and secular. A few aristocratic families were permitted to ask private questions after the official business had been dealt with, if the oracle was still able to respond to them. The ceremonies of consultation were normally held in secret before a limited congregation of monks and state officials, although by now several non-Tibetans have been allowed to attend and record vivid, eye-witness accounts of the proceedings.³

1722 (p. 18)
Arnot, W. G.
1989

NECHUNG: A MODERN PARALLEL TO THE DELPHIC ORACLE?

By W. GEOFFREY ARNOTT

The definitive study of the Delphic Oracle by H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell published over thirty years ago¹ assembled all the information then known about it and discussed the various theories both ancient and modern about its operation where reliable information was lacking. In the presentation and evaluation of these theories, however, Parke and Wormell take no account of the methods and practices of state oracles in other cultures, even though such oracles may still be functioning today at the end of the twentieth century and so be able to provide contemporary and authenticated evidence of their workings, power and credibility. In Tibet, for instance, the State Oracle has a history going back over 800 years.² It was originally sited at the monastery of Nechung ('Small Place') some four miles west of Lhasa, operating there until the Chinese annexation of Tibet in the 1950's, when the monk who acted as the mouthpiece of the oracle followed the Dalai Lama in his flight to northern India. The Tibetan State Oracle now functions in exile at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh some 250 miles north of Delhi. Its operations show some striking similarities to those attested for Delphi, and although the distances in time and space (not to mention the differences in cultural and religious background) obviously preclude any links between Nechung and Delphi other than those of common human experience and psychology, the parallels may at times help to shed some illumination on a few darker or confused areas in our knowledge of Delphic practice. Analogy admittedly is not argument, and the individual reader must judge for himself the applicability of the evidence.

While Tibet maintained its precarious independence in the first half of this century under its largely hieratic, partly aristocratic government, the Nechung Oracle was regularly consulted on matters affecting the safety and welfare of the state and its institutions, both religious and secular. A few aristocratic families were permitted to ask private questions after the official business had been dealt with, if the oracle was still able to respond to them. The ceremonies of consultation were normally held in secret before a limited congregation of monks and state officials, although by now several non-Tibetans have been allowed to attend and record vivid, eye-witness accounts of the proceedings.³

The monk who acted as the mouthpiece or *kuden* ('receiving body') of the oracle was always male, as in most of Tibet's other oracles but unlike the Delphic Pythia. Avedon (pp. 248ff.) gives a full account of the life, background and training of Lobsang Jigme, the *kuden* of Nechung who followed the Dalai Lama on his flight into India. Typically he was identified as the oracle's mouthpiece in his mid teens, after showing signs of potential spirit possession for several years. Tibetan Buddhist belief, here founded on and amalgamated with the primitive Bon religion which preceded it, regards the *kuden* as the voice primarily of Dorje Drakden ('the Renowned Immutable one'), a counselling spirit who acted as the principal emissary of Peyar Gyalpo, Tibet's main spirit protector. Dorje Drakden was assumed to take possession of the *kuden*'s mind and body in a mediumistic trance when the oracular responses were given.

For two or more days before each consultation the *kuden* sought physical and mental purification by meditation, abstinence from unclean food (e.g. fish, pork, onions, garlic⁴), and ritual acts such as having consecrated saffron water poured over his head while mantras were chanted. For the consultation the *kuden* was dressed in an elaborate costume mimicking that of an epic Tibetan warrior.⁵ This included heavy robes and brocade trousers, a short cloak and knee-length boots. On top of this the *kuden* wore a coat of mail, was equipped with a pack supporting seven flags, a golden quiver and silver scabbard and sword, and bore on his breast a silver-gilt shield polished like a mirror. A helmet weighing some 60 lbs would later be placed on his head, adding to the 100 lbs weight of clothes and armour on his body. Despite this crippling weight the *kuden* was able in his trance to stand erect and dance vigorously.

On entering the room where the consultation was to take place – at Nechung a chapel to the rear of the monastery's main assembly hall – the *kuden* would go into trance. Stimuli such as the 'hollow, eerie music'⁶ of fifteen-foot-long horns, bells, cymbals and drums, the chanting of mantras and invocations by a choir of monks, and the clouds of incense from burning juniper twigs, which were wafted towards the *kuden*'s face, may have helped to initiate the trance, but the medical experts consulted by Nebesky-Woikewitz (p. 440 n.72) concluded from the evidence available that 'the trances of the oracle priests may be partly induced by tetany, the attack being initiated by controlled respiration'. At first a slight quivering and quick, loud breathing were observed; the eyes grew wild, the face distorted with puffed-out cheeks and protruding lips. At this point the *kuden* would sit on a great carved silver-plated throne in the centre of the room, and prayers were uttered summoning Dorje Drakden to enter the



monk's body. Signs of spirit possession now seemed clearly recognizable: hyperventilation, jerky movements of the head, a complete change in the facial features as if they belonged to a different person. The *kuden* appeared to grow in size. As he began to leap up and down, the helmet was now secured on his head, and he danced, totally oblivious of the weight he was carrying, with respectful bows and movements of arms and legs. The dance would become wilder and more frightening. After a while the *kuden* would return to his throne, drink some tea, and prepare to receive the questions posed to the oracle.

These questions might be recited aloud by the secretaries of high priests or of ministers of state, but (when secrecy was particularly required) they were written on small pieces of paper which the *kuden*

would place under his helmet. The oracular responses were then given without any prior reading of the written questions on the part of the *kuden*. Their enunciation seems to have varied on different occasions; Harrer (p. 182) called what he heard an unintelligible mumble,⁷ but Avedon (p. 244) refers to the crisp articulation of each word in 'an ethereal, halting, hollow tone suggesting immense age and distance.' The answers were repeated by monastic secretaries, one of whom wrote them down. The style of these responses seems to have been remarkably similar to that of the Delphic Oracle: poetic, imagistically cryptic, sometimes ambiguous. I cite two examples by way of illustration. In 1958, a year before the Dalai Lama fled into exile, the *kuden* produced a prophecy:⁸ 'In this great river where there is no ford, I, spirit, have the method to place a wooden boat.' The meaning was generally interpreted as a command that the Dalai Lama must escape under the spirit's guidance through an impassable 'river' of hostile Chinese troops, although a more literalist expositor could draw attention to the fact that the Dalai Lama at the beginning of his escape had two real rivers to cross by coracle, the Kyichu near his summer palace and after that Tibet's main river, the Tsangpo (= the Brahmaputra), into which the Kyichu flows. The second example⁹ of an oracular response most fitly needs a Herodotus to describe it, and may indeed be as apocryphal as some of that historian's best anecdotes. Aspirants to appointment as a *kuden* were often subjected to official tests. One such aspirant is said to have received in a letter a question from some government official which ran as follows: 'Somebody, who had been born in a sheep-year, is very sick. What should be done with him? Please give a clear answer.' The recipient was already an oracle priest of some standing, and in his next trance he produced an equally enigmatic reply: 'If possible, buy new ones. If not, have them repaired and you will still be able to use them for some time.' Here question and answer were both cryptic; the sick 'somebody, who had been born in a sheep-year' turned out to be a kenning for a pair of sheepskin bellows kept in a government office and recently torn.

At the end of his trance the *kuden* would collapse into unconsciousness; Dorje Drakden, it was believed, had left his mouthpiece's body. The *kuden* was carried out by his attendants into a recovery room; on regaining consciousness he would not remember anything that had happened during the trance. The session was now over.

In this account I have deliberately made minimal reference to Delphic practices, for reasons implied at the end of my opening paragraph. Despite this, it may be worth while to close my paper with two relational observations, however speculative and controversial.

(1) The method by which the Pythia was 'possessed' by the oracular god at Delphi is still uncertain. Modern scholarly opinion¹⁰ rejects the explanations advanced in antiquity that the priestess was intoxicated by vapours rising from the ground¹¹ or by chewing laurel leaves,¹² and holds that a more plausible explanation of her 'possession' is that the Pythia, by origin a simple peasant woman, fell into a trance after what Parke and Wormell call 'emotional stimulus and supernatural suggestions' (i.39); her conscious ego was submerged and a dissociated personality took over. The parallel between this explanation and the observed phenomena at Nechung and Dharamsala is abundantly clear, but here a word of caution may be advisable before we dismiss the ancient explanations totally out of hand. Although the most highly esteemed oracular priests in Tibet were able to fall into their trances and undergo the appropriate 'possession' without the use of drugs or material stimulants, some less effective performers there are alleged¹³ to have resorted to such external aids (e.g. by drinking milk-white wine or *chang*, Tibetan malted beer; by taking a mixture of *bhang* and Guinea pepper) in order to induce a fit. In view of such practices in Tibet, however isolated they may have been, is it wise to assume that the Delphic priestesses always induced their states of 'possession' in one and the same way?

(2) Descriptions of the Tibetan ceremonies draw attention to the irresistible numinous power with which the atmosphere of the Nechung chapel seemed to be charged throughout.¹⁴ A feeling of terror was induced by the transformation of the *kuden's* features and personality on 'possession' and by the spectacle of his dance,¹⁵ itself accentuated by the eeriness of the accompanying music.¹⁶ When such impressions are recorded in a congregation of Tibetan people who even today, a third of a century after their incorporation in a communist regime, retain to a remarkable degree a fervent, all-pervading Buddhist faith, it is easy to understand how the State Oracle of Nechung exercised its powerful sway over willing believers. Admittedly a few better-educated Tibetans may at times have regarded the oracular mouthpieces 'if not as impostors, at least as strange pathologic cases',¹⁷ and pointed to a few occasions when bribes were said to have secured favourable responses. Admittedly too not every *kuden* gave consistently wise answers, and any who was seen to provide a succession of poor or wrong ones was quickly replaced.¹⁸ Even so, the State Oracle could only have maintained its authority by a normally persuasive and successful series of performances, and here the religious fear induced by the spectacle, the faith of the participants and the general wisdom of the answers must have

played important roles. In these respects an analogy with Delphi, though hazardous, may be especially illuminating.

NOTES

1. *The Delphic Oracle, i: The History; ii: The Oracular Responses* (Oxford, 1956).
2. My interest in these Tibetan oracles resulted from a visit I paid in the summer of 1986 to Lhasa, where my eldest daughter was employed teaching English, and western Tibet. I append here a brief bibliography of accessible works, to which I owe much of the detailed information given in this article: J. F. Rock, *National Geographic Magazine* 68 (1935), 475ff.; F. S. Chapman, *Lhasa, the Holy City* (London, 1938), pp. 316ff.; E. Schäfer, *Fest der weissen Schleier* (Brunswick, 1949¹, 1952³), pp. 190ff.; H. Harrer, *Seven Years in Tibet* (translated by R. Graves, London, 1953), pp. 180ff.; R. de Nebesky-Woikewitz, *Oracles and Demons of Tibet* (London, 1956), pp. 409ff.; Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Cloud* (London, 1966¹, 1968²), pp. 179ff.; J. F. Avedon, *In Exile from the Land of Snows* (New York and London, 1984), pp. 238ff. These works are cited hereafter by author's name only.
3. Especially Chapman (pp. 316ff.), Schäfer (pp. 149ff.), Harrer (pp. 180ff.), Govinda (pp. 179ff.), describing the ceremonies at Nechung; Avedon (pp. 238ff.), describing one at Dharamsala as recently as 1981.
4. Avedon, p. 238. Cf. Rock, 478.
5. The fullest account appears in Nebesky-Woikewitz, pp. 410ff. For colour illustrations of a *kuden* in full dress, see especially Rock (plates I, II and IV, of a *kuden* outside Lhasa) and Avedon (plates Ib, II, IIIa and b). The photograph accompanying this paper is printed by kind permission of John F. Avedon (= his plate II).
6. Harrer, p. 180.
7. Cf. Rock, 475 ('animal-like grunts'); Chapman, p. 318.
8. Avedon, p. 267.
9. Nebesky-Woikewitz, p. 419.
10. Cf. Parke and Wormell, i.19ff.
11. E. g. Diod. Sic. 16.16; Plut. *Mor.* 433c ff. Other passages are cited by Parke and Wormell, i.41 nn. 6, 7, 17.
12. E.g. Oenomaus in Eusebius, *PE* 5.244a; Lucian, *Bis Acc.* 1, *Hes.* 8.
13. Nebesky-Woikewitz, p. 440; cf. Rock, 475, 478.
14. Govinda, p. 183.
15. Cf. Rock, 477; Govinda, pp. 182, 186.
16. Harrer, p. 180; cf. Rock, 476; Govinda, p. 185; Avedon, p. 240.
17. Nebesky-Woikewitz, p. 440.
18. Cf. Harrer, p. 182; Avedon, p. 264.