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Gur-gyi Mgon Po

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Panjara, or "cage," Mahakala is a specific form of the angry manifestation of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. In Tibet he is commonly known as Gur-gyi Mgon Po, or "Lord of the Tent," and is popularly worshipped by members of the lay Buddhist community. Gur-gyi Mgon Po is said to reside in charnel fields, trampling over vanquished enemies who hinder religious attainment. He is usually black, or deep blue in color and is shown with three glaring eyes, fangs and hair that stands on end with a *vajra* in it. In his two hands he holds a *katrika*, or chopper and a *kapala*, or skull-cup, while his most distinguishing attribute, a staff called a *beng* (Skt. *gandi*), rests in the crooks of his arms (Wojkowitz, 50). Rhie and Thurman note that the *beng* was used as a gong in monasteries to get monks to assemble for meditations and discussions. As a result, Gur-gyi Mgon Po came to be considered the primary protector of Buddhist monasteries (Rhie & Thurman, 223). The deity's ornaments consist of a five-skulled crown, a garland of fifty severed heads, bone ornaments and a tiger-skin loin cloth (Wojkowitz, 50). Each of these ornaments symbolize his ability to overcome a specific hindrance which obstructs enlightenment (Rhie & Thurman, 223).

The SAMA collection has five paintings with Gur-gyi Mgon Po as the central deity. Although very different in style and execution, paintings [92.002a](#) and [94.006](#) are similar in composition and iconography. In both, the central Gur-gyi Mgon Po figure is engulfed in flames at the top of which appears a Garuda bird. In both paintings, Gur-gyi Mgon Po is flanked by Brahmanrupa Mahakala on the left and Palden Lhamo, riding her *khyang*, on the right.

Brahmanrupa is Mahakala in the form of a holy Hindu man. He is shown as a bearded figure, seated or standing on a prostrate human corpse. Brahmanrupa's most distinguishing attribute is the thigh bone trumpet which he holds, along with the chopper, in his right hand in [92.002a](#). In the second painting, the thigh bone trumpet is used to secure Brahmanrupa's hair-knot, while he holds only the *katrika*, or chopper, in his right hand. In his left hands, Brahmanrupa generally carries a skull-cup and a lance. In [94.006](#), Brahmanrupa holds a flaming sword and *katrika* in his right hands and also supports a vase with his left. A string of prayer beads made of human heads is placed around his left forearm. According to legend, Brahmanrupa Mahakala, appeared to the thirteenth century teacher, Sakya Lama Pakpa, and aided him in teaching the Hevajra Tantra to the Mongol emperor, Kubhlai Khan (Rhie & Thurman, 225).

Palden Lhamo, or Shri Devi in Sanskrit, seen on the right side of both paintings, is one of the eight Dharmapalas, or protectors of the Dharma, in Tibet. Her most characteristic feature is the feral, mule-like *khyang* she controls and rides on. She is usually depicted as a fierce hag, with flaming eyebrows, gaping, fanged mouth and drooping breasts. In each of her four hands she holds a sword, a skull-cup, a lance or staff and a trident.

The Adi Buddha, Vajradhara, appears in the top center of each of the SAMA paintings. He is blue in

color and holds a *vajra* in each of his crossed hands. Here, Vajradhara is the progenitor from whom all the figures in the painting emanate.

In [92.002a](#), two monks, one in a Nyingma red cap, are depicted on either side of Vajradhara. Five, two-armed forms of Mahakala are depicted below Gur-gyi Mgon Po. Each appears in a vigorous, dancing posture, wielding various attributes. They are probably Gur-gyi Mgon Po's attendants, or acolytes, who aid the deity in his function as protector.

The top row in [94.006](#) is occupied by eight figures flanking the central Vajradhara figure. Several of these figures are identified through inscriptions which have been read by John C. Huntington. On the far left is the Heruka paired-deity, Hevajra. Lineage teachers of the Nyingma order are depicted on either side of Vajradhara. Identified by inscriptions, Sakya kunga tashi and Sa chen are depicted immediately next to Hevajra. Long Chen Zanpo and Dorje chad lu ga Zangpo are represented on the top right side of the painting, next to Vajradhara. Although badly damaged, the white figure on the far right may be Sita, or White, Mahakala in his characteristically straight, frontal pose. Other figures, probably belonging to Gur-gyi Mgon Po's retinue, as well as habitants of the charnel fields are also included in the painting. Whether or not other figures were depicted along the lower edge of the painting is unclear as it has been cut.

[93.014](#) is a large painting in the SAMA collection with Gur-gyi Mgon Po, holding his regular attributes, in the center, accompanied by a host of other deities. Along the top are various deities of the Nyingma order. On the far left of the painting is the Buddha Sarvavid Vairochana of the *Sarvadurgati-parshodana-tantra*. He has six heads, instead of the customary four, and sits in the meditating posture. To Sarvavid Vairochana's left is Vajradhara with his characteristic pair of *vajras*. To his left is the paired-deity, Kalachakra, Vajrahumkara or Chakrasamvara who are all identical in form and can be specifically identified only through context. The male figure of the paired-deity holds a *vajra* in each of his crossed hands, while supporting his female counterpart. She holds a *katrika* in her raised right hand and a *kapala* in her left, which is placed behind the male figure. The next two figures are representations of the Buddha Akshobhya or, Shakyamuni, making the *bhumisparsha*, or earth-touching, gesture. The second Buddha figure is crowned and holds a *vajra* in his left hand placed on his lap. This identifies him as Akshobhya Kuleshvara, or the master of the house, in the jina, or victor, Buddha mandala. The figure to his left, seated making the *abhaya*, or fear not, gesture is probably one of the three Dharma kings of Tibet. To his left is probably the Nyingma teacher, Long Chen Jampa, identified by the manner in which he places his hands (John C. Huntington, unpublished Research Database on the Nyingma Iconography). The figure in the right corner is also another Nyingma teacher, probably Lodothaya, who sits making the *dharmachakra*, or teaching, gesture, with his hands (John C. Huntington, unpublished Research Database on the Nyingma Iconography). Two lotus stems, probably bearing attributes, are depicted on either side of the teacher.

Two fierce figures on either side and two monks in the center are depicted in the second row from the top. The figure on the far left holds a pair of *vajras* in each of his crossed arms and may be a specific form of Mahakala. To his left is probably the monk, De Sheg Zur Rinpoche, identified by the *vajra* and *ghanta* held in each of his crossed arms. The monk on the right side of the painting holds a lotus in his right hand and a book, resting on his lap, with his left. A bull-headed, angry deity occupies the far right position of this row, and holds a *katrika* and *kapala* in his hands.

The three figures depicted vertically on the left side of the painting are a four-armed Mahakala-type figure on the top, probably Sita, or "White," Mahakala in the middle and the guardian king, Vaishravana, or Jambhala below. The top figure cannot be identified precisely. The middle figure, although not white in color, may possibly be Sita Mahakala identified by his frontal posture. The lower figure is that of Vaishravana, the guardian king of the north. He rides on his snow lion holding a *dwaja*, or banner, in his right hand and a mongoose, in his left. The mongoose, who overcomes the snakes of avarice, also identifies Vaishravana as the god of wealth (Rhie & Thurman, 161). Vaishravana is also one of the eight Dharmapalas, or protectors of the Dharma, in Tibet.

The three corresponding figures on the right are Hayagriva at the top, the goddess, Ekajati in the middle, and probably a form of the four-armed Mahakala at the bottom. Hayagriva is shown with three heads and six arms. Three characteristic green neighing horse's heads are visible in Hayagriva's hair. The goddess, Ekajati in her characteristic blouse-like, shoulder garment and the tiger-skin skirt is depicted below Hayagriva. She displays the *abhaya*, or fear not, gesture with her right hand and holds a vase filled with ambrosia, against her breast, in her left hand. The lower figure, probably a form of Mahakala, holds a sword and *katrika* in his right hands and prayer beads and a *kapala* in his left.

Several figures, probably belonging to Gur-gyi Mgon Po's retinue, occupy the lower section of the painting. Identifiable among them are the goddess, Palden Lhamo, represented directly below the lower four-armed Mahakala on the right side of the painting. Yama and his sister Yamari, standing on the copulating bull and female figure, are depicted directly below Palden Lhamo. A two-armed Mahakala, holding the *katrika* and *kapala*, is seen directly below the central Gur-gyi Mgon Po. Below him are five dancing jina prajna dakinis depicted in the colors that correspond to the five jina, or victor, Buddhas. The dakinis hold a *katrika* in their raised right hands and a skull-cup and trident in their left.

Rahula, the personification of the eclipse is depicted in the lower left corner of the painting. Half human and half snake, his belly marked with a gaping mouth and his body covered with eyes, Rahula is particularly important to the Nyingma sect and thus strengthens the painting's Nyingma connection. Two dancing, skeletal figures are represented in the lower right corner of the painting. These figures, known as *chitipathi*, or "Lords of the Charnel Field" are reminders of the impermanence of worldly phenomena.

Such paintings, executed on black grounds, are generally placed in shrines known as a *gonkhang*, or "house of angry ones." The *gonkhang* is a dark shrine in which images of the powerful protectors and benefactors of the religion are worshipped. The dim lighting in a *gonkhang* as well as the black grounds of the paintings create an ethereal environment in which the deities manifest themselves. During esoteric rituals, a devotee visualizes the *gonkhang* deities as vast in size, filled with compassion, and vibrant with energy. The devotee also realizes that he or she is identical with the deity and recognizes the compassion and energy within oneself which motivates the performance of altruistic deeds for the benefit of others.

The last two paintings of Gur-gyi Mgon Po in the SAMA collection are two mandalas with the deity in the center. The two mandalas are almost identical in their iconography but vary greatly in presentation. [#92.060](#), the black mandala painting, communicates concepts through written

incantations known as *dharanis*. In the colored mandala, the concepts are illustrated as deities to be visualized during a ritual or meditation. The two mandalas are conceptually identical and the *dharanis* and the images of deities are interchangeable.

In the colored mandala, [# 92.064](#) in the SAMA collection, six emanations of Gur-gyi Mgon Po are depicted in each of the lotus petals around the central figure. Animal-headed deities serve as guardians of the rectangular gates on the four sides of the inner section of the diagram. The outer ring is divided into eight sections, each representing a charnel field. The charnel fields include specific trees, carrion eaters and great ascetics. Each field also has one of the protectors of the eight cardinal and intermediary directions riding on his specific animal mount. Charnel fields are places in which the mandalas are to be visualized. In the black mandala, the *dharinis* are invocations through which a devotee realizes the potential of the corresponding deity. The ten directional deities represented around the outer ring of this mandala include the guardians of the eight directions as well as the two that protect the zenith and nadir of the world system.

References:

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