



Methodology in Research on the Rainbow Body: Anthropological and Psychological Reflections on Death and Dying

Francis V. Tiso^{1,2}

Published online: 15 November 2018

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2018

Abstract

The rainbow body research project, engaging claims of spiritual attainment and personal transformation, enables us to examine key features of anthropological research. Engagement with communities of discourse exposed aspects of the artificial emic–etic divide, allowing the anthropological study of religion to advance methods in religious studies. The study of paranormal phenomena cannot be isolated from societal contextualization. In this instance, a study of death and dying, contextualized in a traditional community, required unique features of engagement for the researcher who would be present to the social dynamics surrounding the death of a person of high repute.

Keywords Rainbow body · Death and dying · Religious studies · Cultural context · Etic/emic

1. For nearly 350 years, the view that there is an implacable conflict between science and religion has become a type of “dogma” in Western culture. As with any strongly defended position involving two opposing views drawn up for polemical purposes, this conflict has bequeathed a great deal of misunderstanding to our contemporary globalized culture. It is impossible to understand modern civilization without becoming aware of this conflict, but at the same time the conflict is not based on firm philosophical foundations, is not universal to human discourse, and arose historically from religious conflicts that are no longer generally relevant. As a result, the conflict continues as a gossamer myth. Unfortunately, this myth has catalyzed both the rise of various forms of religious integralism, based on the exclusive claim to truth of one or another purported divine revelation and a rather arrogant “scientism” that claims the only knowable truths to be those accessible to the senses, enhanced by instrumentation extending the field of empirical data to verify experimental

✉ Francis V. Tiso
ftiso1013@gmail.com

¹ Catholic Diocese of Isernia-Venafro, Contrada Colle Croce, 86, 86170 Isernia, IS, Italy

² Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy

results. Both extremes forbid the use of any method that does not conform to their exclusive parameters of truth.

In the field of religious studies, materialistic, historicist, and empiricist prejudices can, and do, appear in course syllabi. Such curricula are designed to deconstruct the object of research rather than to train students to think critically about religions as cultural systems. Whatever pretense of human value as an animating force in the study of the humanities is here fatally displaced by a determined effort to colonialize the personal convictions of at least a portion of the student population. Thus in some departments, the study of religion reduces the object of research to a linguistic construct, divorced from its existential rootedness in the human phenomenon. Obviously, persons and communities committed to a religious worldview are unable to recognize themselves in courses in “comparative religions” designed within these dogmatic parameters. The notion of religion advanced in such courses corresponds to nothing that has ever been believed or practiced by religious communities in human history. Students empowered by this approach, when they attempt fieldwork with real religious communities, will have to overcome numerous mistaken presuppositions and a profoundly distorted methodology.

In order to revise this approach to religious studies, a shift away from a typically post-Enlightenment Western model of the philosophy of religion and toward applied research in the social sciences has been urgently needed for some time. A new approach to “religious consciousness” as it is lived in real human communities would have to be elaborated along the lines of cultural anthropological (Tiso 2016, pp. 1–21, 290–337; Dupre 1972). Anthropology offers a dynamic approach that can effectively dismantle methodological reductionism as applied to religious studies. The academic study of religion thus reimagines itself as an offshoot of phenomenology and takes on a more credible and teachable configuration. What is more, research on phenomena such as death and dying or paranormal phenomena such as the rainbow body can be fruitfully located in their social matrices.

Ever since Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as a cultural system (Geertz [1966] 1973), scholars have had to develop an approach to the study of religions that relies on anthropological data, i.e., direct observation, supported by linguistic, historical, archeological, and textual research. Researchers have refined the traditional methods and definitions based on oral history and participant observer techniques in order to gain access to those aspects of human religious consciousness that a purely textual approach overlooks or undervalues. In the present paper, the author proposes to explore the methodological issues that emerge from the study of the phenomena associated with death. In particular, the essay addresses the special challenge of deaths that seem to defy the parameters rendered dogmatic by the still prevalent biases of empiricism and materialism.

My work is inspired in part by that of Gananath Obeyesekere, a Sri Lankan psychiatrist and anthropologist who has worked on healing and healers in South Asia (Obeyesekere 1981). He adopted a very free method of observation and interviews, liberating himself from the biases of psychiatry and comparative religions in order to enter the insider (“emic”) world of marginal persons in the religious landscape. He discovered that the dreadlock-endowed women who act as oracles and healers (channeling the power of various deities) have an unanticipated impact on the religious imagination present to Sri Lankan society. Another researcher who has advanced the parameters of anthropological study is Robert Desjarlais, by writing extensively on shamanism, healing, and death in central Nepal. Desjarlais makes skillful use of himself as a means of access to the world of Bonpo villagers and healers (Desjarlais 1992). In so doing, he sets up methodological criteria for the transformation of the etic–emic (outsider–insider) divide. Unlike a

“convert” participant observer, Desjarlais does not hesitate to use his own “emic” cultural roots in Western philosophy and the literature as a tool of interpretation for what he sees. Thus, the anthropologist is not only a scientist digesting a body of data in terms that can be later conveniently summarized in a scholarly journal. Desjarlais’ work is an ongoing attempt on the part of one human being with a particular cultural background to encounter another culture with integrity. Thanks to this approach, not only does the “etic” category undergo due relativizing, but the scientific endeavor seems healed of its tendency to invent explanations out of hypotheses, rather than on the basis of observation.

Another important scholar of Buddhist studies, Gregory Schopen, shows how the directions traced by Obeyesekere and Desjarlais have profound implications even for the study of ancient documents and the archeology of religions. He asserts, in complete contrast with the comparative religions syllabi cited above: “It is hardly revolutionary to suggest that, had the academic study of religions started quite literally on the ground, it would have been confronted with very different problems. It would have had to ask very different questions, and it would have produced very different solutions. It would, in short, have become not the history of religions—which was and is essentially text-bound—but the archeology of religions. It would have used texts, of course, but only those that could be shown to have been actually known or read at a given place at a given time, or to have governed or shaped the kind of religious behavior that had left traces on the ground. In fact, texts would have been judged significant only if they could be shown to be related to what religious people actually did. This archeology of religions ... would have been preoccupied with... what religious people of all segments of a given community actually did and how they lived” (Schopen 1997, p. 114).

The anthropology of religions may be usefully added to Schopen’s archeology in order to communicate accurately the religious beliefs and experiences of human societies. This method allows us to recognize that we are engaging in research that is a conversation about human knowing, a true sociology of cognition and implementation, based on the deep structures that underlie the behaviors we observe in fieldwork. Far from diminishing the academic value of research, this approach clarifies the very purpose of teaching and publication. It is of immense value to post-modern civilization that there be access to this wider sociology of knowledge in a university setting. To know by passing from the known to the unknown is an ongoing, never-to-be-completed project. Teaching and research in the human sciences is about training people to be aware of the dynamics of this project. Although the project of surveying the sociology of human knowing on the broadest scale possible is in fact quite different from the core concerns of traditional human societies, it is also true that what happens on the high end of the scale of power has an impact on local cultures almost everywhere. In the contemporary world, both “emic” communities of discourse (the scientific tribe and the primordial tribe) are frequently in contact, communication, and conflict. They visibly impact one another. We might think of the “Cargo Cult” phenomenon as an example of an external “power culture” reshaping an archaic worldview. Recently, we have also observed that the “rainbow body” phenomenon has had an impact on deracinated Western cosmopolitans, in continuity with the patterns studied by Donald Lopez in *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (Lopez 1998). We will try to be mindful of this exchange of imagery, and at times of illusions, as we explore human death, both ordinary and paranormal, in the following pages.

2. Science (and the “method” sustaining it) is most clearly recognized as a feature of “Western” civilization, a distinct community of discourse. The “method” is not the phenomenon. If so, science would be a form of reductionism designed to dissolve the spectrum of humanistic thought to a set of predictable explanations detached from cultural

context and human motivations. If the “method” were an exhaustive description of what we call “science,” it would have succeeded in achieving the cognitive victory over the humanities that some would claim for it. Science confined to its “method” provides the community of human discourse with information about structures and their functions, but cannot really “explain” anything. The method discloses causes, conditions, and material effects. It cannot “explain” the wider consequences of the human drive to seek out and disclose structures and functions, nor does it elucidate the meaning and purpose of things as they are. Science as a research method cannot explain why human beings “do” science, or any other form of research, creativity, or social interaction. Science as a human endeavor stands clearly exposed as an important feature of culture. It contributes decisively to a larger human conversation, but like the eye that cannot see itself, is unable to “explain” itself. This cannot be otherwise from a strictly phenomenological perspective.

The scientist is as dependent on accepted and acceptable ideas within the general climate of opinion of his or her times as much as anyone else; science is embedded in *larger tendencies of thought and their power* (cf. Lukacs 2002). As a consequence, science is not even automatically “self-correcting” and can indeed be led astray. Sociologists of science have sustained this point over the past 40 years, but in practice this insight is widely ignored. One of the ways by which science (i.e., the human activity of scientists) can be led astray is when a particular analogy becomes predominant, such that the theorists become alienated from the reasons why they were motivated to construct a new paradigm to begin with. Often the reasons are cultural and even “*ad hominem*,” i.e., based on the personalities of the individuals who formulated the paradigms. It is therefore deceptive to assert that science is free from subjective bias, human motivations, culturally constructed theories, literary analogies, and self-serving explanations. Science is thus a participant in a debate about explanations and interactions, but can never be the final word, nor even a “paradigm” of reality as such.

In his workshops on *neuropsychology*, philosopher Michel Bitbol is making use of mindfulness procedures to enhance self-awareness among scientists (Luisi 2009, pp. 30–32). In this way, researchers may become more conscious of *why they do what they do*, and how certain subjective motivations may distort their interpretations of the data they gather. Recent writing in cultural anthropology gives evidence that in inter-cultural research, the same risks are present, and the same level of critical attention needs to be directed toward motivations and subjective biases (Meneses et al. 2014). This means becoming more aware of the interaction between the “*emic*” perspective, which is that of an inside group, the views maintained by a particular culture, and the “*etic*” perspective, which is that of an outside observer attempting to gain a degree of understanding of the “*emic*” point of view (Pike 1967; Headlund et al. 1990). In dealing with the rainbow body phenomenon, one is constantly challenged to go back and forth between *emic* and *etic* perspectives. Even if we were to distinguish clearly between *emic* and *etic* perspectives at the start of our research, the spontaneous process by which methodologies are refined tends to place *etic* and *emic* on the same conceptual platform. In this way, *emic* and *etic* become a conversation between *emic*₁ and *emic*₂, the two tribes now engaged in a self-disclosing relationship. Our concern here is that scholars of religious studies review their use of the *emic-etic* dyad.

The inter-cultural relationship is particularly evident in the study of paranormal phenomena. The two *emic* communities of discourse, believers within a religious tradition (*emic*₁), and doubt-based scientists working within their cultural milieu (*emic*₂), begin to find common ground. Both groups are powerfully persuasive within their respective communities of discourse. In recent times, the technological “*noösphere*” in which we live

as a planet has brought about a considerable degree of hybridization between these two “emic” perspectives. It is no longer possible to be “precise” in our research on the paranormal because the rules of the game of inquiry are changing at a rapid rate, in part because of the simultaneous diffusion of diverse phases of social change among target groups and research communities. Our attention, therefore, is directed toward the various ways in which information is exchanged, with observable effects that alter the course of inquiry as we proceed to test hypotheses and theories.

3. David Germano points out in his magisterial study of the *dzogchen* approach to enlightenment (Germano 1992), that at some point in the evolution of tantric Buddhism, an attempt was made to express a grand design beyond the workings of karma. “The range of [*dzogchen* scriptural] texts is nothing short of stunning, and constitutes a radical revolution in the history of Buddhist thought that assumes everything that preceded it as a basis, and yet is primarily concerned to go beyond such lower order systems in its exploration of the final nature of the Universe itself, and how that nature bears upon our present state of existential despair, the possibility of spiritual liberation, and the nature of the Awakened One (i.e., a Buddha)” (Germano 1992, pp. 17–18).

Across the traces of a certain historical trajectory (Tiso 2016, p. 18) a group of great contemplative geniuses understood that the human presence has a purpose that can be inferred from the essentially dynamic nature of the ways phenomena manifest to the perceiving consciousness. In effect, that purpose is inseparable from the capacity of certain gifted human beings not only to break through to the original nature of the mind itself, but also to abide permanently in that state of primordial awareness. The entire structure of mind, consciousness, and the manifestation of phenomena, occasions the emergence of this primordial awareness. The universe explores itself in and through such awakened beings. The title of Lipman and Peterson’s book, *You Are the Eyes of the World* (Peterson and Lipman 2000) based on the teachings of Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche seems to summarize the whole point: “*you are the eyes of the world,*” an insight not very far from the insight of German idealism that humankind is the universe become conscious of itself. If the human provides the consciousness, the “eyes,” nevertheless the universe provides the indispensable matrix. Thus, there is no duality between phenomena and consciousness. Instead of dying in segregation from the universe of phenomena, the contemplative in the *dzogchen* system seems to become one with all phenomena. This oneness allows the tradition to claim the attainment of the dissolution of the material body into its energetic components. This dissolution, known as the rainbow body, is understood as a particularly dramatic sign of a degree of spiritual attainment that goes far beyond the material particulars of the phenomenon.

Any study of postmortem paranormal phenomena will require the researcher to enter into the world of contemplative practitioners in the relevant traditions. As a participant observer, the researcher is placed in the “emic” context of those who believe in the phenomenon and regulate their lives accordingly. At the same time, the researcher is answerable to an outsider voice, the “etic” approach of empirical science, into whose categories the results of research may be translated in order to communicate from one culture to another (emic1 to emic2). Human knowledge is enhanced when the encounter is perceived as a mutually beneficial exchange of cognitively meaningful communications. The alternative is inter-cultural violence, of which there has been a great deal.

Ironically, in view of the arid spiritual landscape of modernity, the rainbow body has become a seductive topic. Consider the precarious position of those researchers who might try to bring the miracle into the realm of scientific fact. Someone will show up with a video camera and tripod and capture the moment of dissolution on digital tape; they will feed it

into the Internet and everyone on earth with see that someone did not come to a bad end. Death in general, and someone's death in particular, seems to be much more interesting than we had previously thought.

The events surrounding the manifestation of rainbow body by the Bon po monk Rakshi Topden in 2001 suggest that we are indeed on risky ground. The monk's nephew tried to get journalists involved, tried to measure the corpse with a tape measure, tried to get attention. The Chinese authorities were alerted, he was arrested, and the body was cremated in secret. In spite of these sad events, Loppon Tenzin Namdak, head of the Bon po order, assured us that the rainbow body is a reality, not just a metaphor, not just a hagiographical trope (Tiso 2016, pp. 76–81). Some bodies show physical signs of spiritual realization soon after death. Loppon is, if anything, something of a rationalist. The monastery he founded not far from Swayambhu is rigorously committed to dialectical studies. The monks also perform the Bon po tantric yogas such as dark retreats; these philosophers intend to enact what they debate. It is instructive to hear Loppon speak of these and related matters with certitude and clarity, from experience. Yet in spite of all these expressions of assurance, are we still bounded by an emic1 indication of certitude, or are we at the edge of a communication accessible to observers on the side of emic2?

Not all the Tibetan traditions are convinced that the rainbow body literally occurs, although there is a clear idea that attainment of Buddhahood in the embodied state is an authentic sign of what tantrism is meant to disclose. Transcending the radical subjectivism that attends Buddhist realization, the practitioner of the tantric "body of light" and the *dzogchen* yogin's rainbow body can be seen as various ways in which primordial reality manifests itself to a set of faith communities. The relationship between the attaining yogin and his/her community brings about the possibility of a shared emic1 perspective on the phenomena of realization within the Vajrayāna worldview. The research reported here suggests that this emic1 viewpoint may have something to offer the emic2 community of discourse.

4. The author's fieldwork was focused on the manifestation of the rainbow body after death in the case of Khenpo A chö, a monk of the Kandzé Gompa in Eastern Tibet (Tiso 2016, pp. 76–81), who passed away in the summer of 1998. The research team gathered in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province of the PRC in early July of 2000. Researchers proceeded to Kandzé and Nyarong County to carry out fieldwork interviews to obtain eyewitness accounts of Khenpo A chö's bodily dissolution. The fieldwork reports from the research notebooks preserve the immediacy of the events and interviews described, in temporal order (Tiso 2016, pp. 38–80). To cross the emic1-2 divide, we needed to explore a wider field of human embodiment and spirituality.

The human body is inevitably the vehicle for spiritual practice, even when it is experienced as a weight, as an obstacle, a fortress vulnerable to temptation, a temporary dwelling, fragile and subject to old age, sickness, and death. Traditions of spiritual practice have reshaped the body to make it a more fitting vehicle for the sacred. Some instances of bodily modification seem to arise either spontaneously or in connection with ascetic practices. Some of these modifications may not be the result of an external intervention, and would seem to indicate that some spiritual practices either directly or indirectly produce bodily modifications on a very deep level: stigmata, spontaneous healing of diseases, incorruption of the body after death, symbolic objects formed of human tissue in the bones or organs, longevity or "immortality," bilocation, levitation, resurrection, spontaneous combustion, the body of light, and the rainbow body.

When we interview persons who were present at the death of a frail, elderly person in the summer months in eastern Tibet and we are told that the body did not deteriorate or

decompose for 7 days, we know that we are dealing either with a phenomenon out of the normal course of nature, or else a recounting of what “ought to be” according to a particular hagiographical script. In order to frame a response to the claims advanced about Khenpo A chö, we need to apply a self-aware form of critical analysis.

All the eyewitnesses reported a week-long process of shrinkage, visible beneath the yellow cloak that covered the body of the Khenpo. They affirm that, shortly after death, the flesh of the Lama turned white or pink, resembling that of a young child. They also attested that, on the eighth day, there was nothing left under the cloak, and no evidence of decay, stains or bad odors. They further attested to rainbow patterns in the sky, and of a fine drizzle of rain (Tiso 2016, pp. 55, 67). Anyone with experience of weather in the mountains knows that drizzle, haze, and light rain are often associated with rainbows. The body gave off a pleasant odor or perfume. We know that elderly persons who have been observing a vegetarian diet and rigorous spiritual discipline (physical chastity, meditation and prayer, light manual labor) will emanate a delicate odor after death.

It is possible that a person who has been particularly abstemious with regard to fluids might die in a moment in which the balance of salts in the body was particularly high, contributing to several days of resistance to decay. The bodies of high Tibetan lamas are preserved by packing the body in a box with salt and camphor, sometimes for as long as seven weeks. Only after this period is the body cremated. Some cases of the “shrinkage” of the body might be explained by the use of this procedure. However, we have had reports of the shrinkage not only of flesh, but also of bone (reported by eyewitnesses for Dilgo Khyentse in the 1980s). Moreover, it is the normal practice in eastern Tibet to dispose of the body of the deceased a short time after death (Duncan 1964; Ramble 1982). Usually, after an appropriate astrological calculation has been performed, the body may be dismembered and fed to the vultures, or else placed into a river where the flesh will be consumed. To return the body as quickly as possible to the component elements seems to be a key objective of Tibetan funerary customs. However, none of our informants spoke of the use of salt, camphor, or other embalming procedures in the case of Khenpo A chö, nor was there any hint of hastening the dismemberment of the body. On the contrary, once they saw the change in his facial color after death, they immediately assumed that a paranormal sequence of phenomena might begin to manifest. At this point, they consulted a Nyingma master, Lama A Khyung, a close friend of the Khenpo, about how to proceed (Tiso 2016, p. 67).

In his book on healing among the Bonpo of Nepal, Desjarlais (1992) points out the relationship among illness, suffering, healing and poetry, embodied in the Bon po shaman and in himself, the researcher. In interviewing the eyewitnesses to the Khenpo’s rainbow body death, the present author identified as a religious man from another culture, interested in the religious values represented by the events under examination. This approach sought to soften the tension between a “scientific” approach to the objective reality of a paranormal phenomenon, and a cultural or poetic approach to the same phenomenon. In our later interviews with Loppon Tenzin Namdak (2001, and again in 2003), the author was able to meet with a guide who is fluent in English and who trusted key members of our research team (Tiso 2016, pp. 77–80). He is also familiar with Western ways of thinking, both religious and academic. His unique blend of critical thinking and strong convictions about the literal veracity of the rainbow body phenomenon gave us an opportunity to build a credible bridge between emic 1 and 2. It can be said that something significant happened in the summer of 1998 in eastern Tibet. We know that this was not an isolated incident, and bears further investigation.

5. In the course of our research on the rainbow body, we have seen how the great and the little traditions converge in a figure such as Khenpo A chö. In fact, his ability to wear the yellow hat of the Gelugpa and the red hat of the Nyingmapa is the liturgical embodiment of his great skill in uniting two of the great streams of Tibetan spirituality. At the same time, thanks to his unique biography and “happy ending,” we catch a glimpse of the historical place of the Nyingma tradition in Khams. It is the voice of the village tradition, the charismatic world of local devotions. The impression that we have had in the West from fervent, emic Buddhist practitioners is that the tradition of *dzogchen*, especially of the *termas*, is a highly respected “great” tradition in Tibet. However, this is to dislocate the experience from its lived reality, as so often happens both in scholarship and in apologetics. The real beauty of the Nyingma tradition is precisely its closeness to the village tradition, to ordinary people, to marginalized yogi practitioners, to the married ngagpas with their dreadlocks and chöd drums wandering along the precipitous mountain trails alongside salt traders and brigands.

To understand the jargon of the ngagpas, however, one must enter their emic world, that of esoteric practitioners, which is *par excellence* a closed community of discourse. While translating Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro’s (Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro 2006, pp. 289–297) account of the dissolution of the body of Khenpo A chö, a Tibetan friend exclaimed: “This is the way practitioners speak, this is the way my elderly parents speak. It is a world unto itself; it is not in any way compatible with a scientific worldview. You *must* understand this.” We are reminded of Lama A Khyung’s (dharma brother of the Khenpo) aphorism repeated several times during our interview: “The rainbow body is a matter, not of the eyes, but of the heart-mind,” a view that mirrors Henry Corbin’s citations of Iranian Sufism (Corbin 1964, pp. 69–160). As students of South Asian languages and cultures have observed on both the “great and little” levels, the language of esoteric discourse relies heavily upon nuance, allusion, and citation. It is an aesthetic expression of what people in a particular culture believe to be more profoundly true than chronology. It is a religious perspective invests certain phenomena with a “saturation of being” in order to speak of the “really real,” i.e., of that which is of ultimate importance. What is seen by the eyes and timed with a wristwatch is not “saturated with being” the way contemplative experience is.

Nyingma Tibetan Buddhism, by representing the true voice of the village tradition, when allowed its own voice, unencumbered by the biases and expectations of those seeking “scientific” outcomes. May encounter a particular kind of emic2 anthropologist. Our emic2 researcher is aware of the aesthetic and spiritual access points of one’s own motivations. This researcher (best of all when it is a team effort) has some hope of not only observing, but also integrating the knowledge embodied in emic1. The research approach as such should tend to support the validity of the voice of each tradition in the exploratory conversation. Each tradition is appreciated for what it says and does with regard to the promotion of the spiritual and moral life among its adherents. The two categories, “scientific” and “saturated with being” are disclosed as complementary, though not coincident. The very tension between the two views may occasion a process by which both deepen their perspectives on a longer continuity than that of the time of research.

The cottage industry of finding the themes and insights of modern physics (Capra 1975; cf. Steindl-Rast et al. 1991) in the mystical teachings of China, Tibet and India, has contributed to the tendency to confuse categories of human thought and experience that should be kept distinct, leaving room for the non-coincident disclosures from which we all learn. For example, the entire set of categories that quantum mechanics uses as a basis for research has in fact nothing to do with the categories that sustain a life of contemplative practice. Neither science nor the spiritual disciplines can explain coherently how

meditating on spheres of light might have an effect on the protoplasm of the cells. A cause-and-effect connection between science and spirituality is invisible to the currently available methods of laboratory research, although bioluminescence may offer a way forward. Researchers at the “Mind and Life Institute” and the IONS (Institute of Noetic Science) have made some interesting suggestions (Luisi 2009), but they also have the advantage over many other researchers on the relationship between brain and consciousness in that at least some Mind and Life people are also trained philosophers. However, even with these comparatively open-minded scientists, there are moments in which there is a profound confusion of categories between natural science (studying phenomena by means of measurement in order to establish structures and their functions) and the spiritual quest per se. Taking up the challenge of rainbow body research has begun to open up the conditions for the possibility of adequate methodologies corresponding to the claims of the *dzogchen* traditions.

In many of the messages the author has received from readers over the years, it is obvious that people find the rainbow body phenomenon highly compelling. The reason people are curious is because the human mind seeks out the truth. There is in our human awareness a search for truth that goes beyond data accessible to the senses. The dramatic *dzogchen* claim to attain the rainbow body has proven to be extremely compelling to the general reader. To many, it seems that if one *does* the practices of *dzogchen* under the guidance of a living master of the lineage, after death one’s body should dissolve into manifestations of rainbow light. This sounds suspiciously like cookbook magic. There is a discontinuity between the aesthetic, contemplative culture of *dzogchen* and the materialistic cause-and-effect worldview of Western culture. What we have proposed is an “emic2” approach that relies on relatively rare insights still alive on the peripheries of Western culture. Through that perspective, we may be able to find a way to exchange the insights of emic1 with the wider Western emic perspective that dominates the empirical definition of what is “true.” There are some suggestive photographs (Klein 2009, plates at p. 167) and interviews that may also enable this exchange. There are shrunken bodies yet to be examined by forensic experts with experience in the study of natural and artificial mummification. A great deal of reflection still needs to be done in order to identify a “control group” for establishing the veracity of observers within the living tradition. Some comments in an essay of Matthew Kapstein may offer a way forward: “We have become accustomed in recent years to speaking of experiences as culturally constructed or, better, as mediated by the constructions of language and culture. Nothing that I have presented here would refute that view. But we should be wary, lest we come to speak of cultural constructions themselves as the rigid repetitions of culturally specific paradigms. What culture constructs can at best be described as a malleable field in which received tradition and the lived experiences of individuals enter into dialogue and through their dialogue form and reform one another. ... We have seen, for example, that even if we hold that the entire phenomenon of the rainbow body to be a Tibetan cultural construction, it was nevertheless one that could be in important respects contested in Tibet itself...The problem that we confront here, of course, is that, unlike many types of claimed religious experience, such as visions and more mystical experiences, that can be interpreted as events occurring within the subject’s consciousness alone, the rainbow body purports to describe a physical event. It belongs to the class of miracles. Who are we to say that it never occurs?” (Kapstein 2004, p. 151). Kapstein concludes with a suggestion that since “intensive visions and experiences of light are regularly associated with some types of yogic and contemplative practice,” something like the dissolution of the body into “spirit” may become plausible. The same may be said of the Syro-Oriental Christian mystics, of the

Daoist search for immortality, and of the light mysticism of the Tamil Siddha tradition. What remains to be demonstrated is whether the rainbow body as a physical manifestation is a “miracle” that cannot be studied scientifically, or a “result” of following a certain recipe of spiritual practices, which at least in theory could be repeated under observation. By the same token, the nature of the act of perception of an eyewitness to this phenomenon also needs to be scrutinized systematically, with respect for the religious consciousness and cultural integrity of the *dzogchen* community. Many of the *dzogchen* practitioners were undoubtedly very serious and even learned, but there is a significant tradition of those who attained the rainbow body who seem to have followed a regimen of extremely simple practices that would have been available to other Buddhist followers of other lineages who have never made claims of this particular attainment (Germano 2007). The pieces of the puzzle do not fit easily with the evidence from other Buddhist lineages.

In the case of Khenpo A chö, we have testimonies from his disciples and religious superiors that he was a man of consummate humility, altruism, probity, and commitment to practice. He followed the *dzogchen* teachings widely disseminated in Nyingma and Kagyu circles since at least the *ris-med* (non-sectarian) movement of the nineteenth century before and after his training at Lhasa as a Gelugpa scholar. He attained a high degree of spiritual realization, as testified in the spiritual qualities observable among his many disciples, male and female, lay and monastic. If his body did indeed dissolve as described by eyewitnesses, it was the fruit of a life of intense spiritual practice that might have taken any number of forms claimed both within and beyond the *dzogchen* lineages. The idea that this attainment is restricted only to a certain lineage, or that the rainbow body is not the same as the light body or the illusory body of the Six Yogas traditions, or that the Khenpo only attained a dissolution of the atoms of the body and not even the rainbow body as one commentator asserts (Tiso 2016, pp. 115ff), is indicative of sectarian speculation. In the early *dzogchen* accounts, these distinctions are not found. The rainbow body is not described in contrast to other yogic attainments. Only in sources from much later in Tibetan history (later than the sixteenth century) do we find the divisions into categories and degrees of attainment (Germano 2007). Similar observations could be made with regard to other lineages that make claims of bodily dissolution. To the extent that the rainbow body attainment is claimed for Bonpo and Nyingma *dzogchen* practitioners, but not for other Vajrayana Buddhist practitioners, suggests that what counts is *dzogchen* and not Buddhism. Or, to be fair, though the *style* is Vajrayāna, the insider view is that *dzogchen* is a unique and unsurpassable view that integrates all others precisely by being superior to them. Surely these literary accounts have the earmarks of hagiographical formulae devised for sectarian purposes. As such, the formula “rainbow body” contributes to a broad range of “nationalistic” tropes within Tibetan history, including the struggle between “red hats” and “yellow hats” for the sovereignty, as well as the endless struggles over center and periphery, “little tradition and great tradition” down through the centuries.

Khenpo A chö was a Gelugpa master, in touch with the highest and most traditional representatives of his order, but he was born and raised in a Nyingma milieu. That he could unite Nyingma and Gelug in his own person as he pursued the highest spiritual attainments is a message for the world far more noble, credible and universal than the paranormal dissolution of his corpse, and certainly more worthy of imitation. In the end, nature dissolves the body in any case, and the question of the enduring meaning of a person’s life devolves into a set of aesthetic reflections on faith, devotion, and holiness among those left behind. This was precisely what we experienced with the joyous, but nostalgic, nun disciples of Khenpo A chö at Kandzé (Tiso 2016, p. 43).

6. We are always translating; we are always describing an observed set of phenomena to a community of discourse that for various reasons understands reality in ways that are distinct from the ways by which another particular society understands reality. The task of the scholar is to translate without “betrayal” (as in the Italian proverb, *traduttore traditore*: the translator is a traitor), in other words, to translate in terms that are faithful to the data gathered in the act of observation. The fidelity can be restricted, however, by the set of assumptions that the scholar brings to the task of translation. Observation can be more or less accurate, depending on the extent to which the observer is thinking about how it might be possible to describe the experience of observation to an audience that has never had an experience of this kind. The committed participant observer attempts as full an immersion as possible in the experience to be described. Shortly afterward, assisted by the work of other observers, the accuracy of recordings and photography, and the precision of one’s own memory, the trained observer attempts to describe the experience. The process of research undergoes critical revision as it enters the community of anthropological discourse. Only later, upon further reflection, does the participant observer attempt to reformulate the description in the literary forms conventional to academic discourse, whose purpose is “delivery” to an “outsider” readership. The entire process of the transmission of knowledge does not stop here. There is still the deeper process of cultural transformation, catalyzed by encounters with challenging “others.” A great deal of growth is yet to be experienced. Science itself can and must mature, not by becoming more objective, but by becoming more richly human.

In the author’s experience as an observer, the method attempted to gain a *partially* emic perspective by presenting the researcher as a religious professional who is knowledgeable about various world religions, and who has studied some of the languages of South Asia. The author, much in common with Desjarlais and others, has struggled to maintain a self-aware perspective in interpreting the data, always checking with believers to avoid the consequences of one’s own biases. It is certainly impossible to avoid the desire to communicate one’s discoveries with a readership that is not restricted to Tibetan Buddhists or academic scholars, without at the same time restricting oneself to a readership that tends either to believe too much or too little of the “other.” In this he hopes to have begun to go beyond the limits of conventional academic literacy, without falling into credulity or skepticism. The basis for undertaking the research from the beginning has had its own emic parameters, and it is the author’s hope that those parameters have served as scaffolding for the construction of a methodological bridge of some value to those who will come after. Remaining committed to science at its best, these hypothetical future researchers may experience a cognitive maturity that enables the formulation of new curricula, and even new lives among those who seek the “good of the intellect.”

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest None.

Research Involving Human Participants and/or Animals None.

Informed Consent None.

References

Capra, F. (1975). *The Tao of physics*. Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications.

- Corbin, H. (1964). Divine epiphany and spiritual birth in Ismailism. In J. Campbell (Ed.), *Man and transformation: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks* (pp. 69–160). Princeton: Princeton University Press. (**Bollingen Series XXX, 5**).
- Desjarlais, R. R. (1992). *Body and emotion: The aesthetics of illness and healing in the Nepal Himalayas*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Duncan, M. (1964). *Customs and superstitions of Tibetans*. London: Mitre Press.
- Dupre, L. (1972). *The other dimension*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Geertz, C. ([1966] 1973). Religion as a cultural system. Reprinted in *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays* (pp. 87–125). New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Germano, D. F. (1992). *Poetic thought, the intelligent universe, and the mystery of self: The Tantric synthesis of rDzogs Chen in fourteenth century Tibet*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin.
- Germano, D. (2007). The shifting terrain of the Tantric bodies of Buddhas and Buddhists from an Atiyoga perspective. In R. Prats (Ed.), *The Pandita and the Siddha: Tibetan studies in honour of E. Gene Smith* (pp. 50–84). Dharamsala: Amnye Machen Institute.
- Headlund, T., Pike, K. L., & Harris, M. (1990). *Emics and etics: The insider–outsider debate*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Kapstein, M. T. (2004). The strange death of Pema the demon tamer. In M. T. Kapstein (Ed.), *The presence of light: Divine radiance and religious experience* (pp. 119–156). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro. (2006). *Gsung'bum. Deb dang po*. Lhasa: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang.
- Klein, A. (2009). *Heart essence of the vast expanse: A story of transmission*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Lopez, D. (1998). *Prisoners of Shangri-La*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Luisi, P. L. (2009). *Mind and life: Discussions with the Dalai Lama on the nature of reality*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Lukacs, J. (2002). *At the end of an age*. New Haven, CA: Yale University Press.
- Meneses, E., Backues, L., Bronkema, D., Flett, E., & Hartley, B. L. (2014). Engaging the religiously committed other: Anthropologists and theologians in dialogue. *Current Anthropology*, 5(1), 82–104. <https://doi.org/10.1086/674716>.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1981). *Medusa's hair*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Peterson, M., & Lipman, K. (Transl.). (2000). *Longchenpa: You are the eyes of the world*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.
- Pike, K. L. (1967). *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structures of human behavior* (2nd ed.). The Hague: Mouton.
- Ramble, C. (1982). Status and death: Mortuary rites and attitudes to the body in a Tibetan village. *Kailash*, 9, 333–359.
- Schopen, G. (1997). *Stones, bones and Buddhist monks*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Steindl-Rast, D., Matus, T., & Capra, F. (1991). *Belonging to the universe*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Tiso, F. V. (2016). *Rainbow body and resurrection*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.