Heaven's Eye on Earth: Celestial Semantics and Funerary Practices in the Imperial Period

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To Guntram, for his own art of not being governed

The concepts of SKY and HEAVEN have occupied a salient position in Tibetan culture, foremost in cosmological models, as reflected in the multiplicity of terms related to these semantic domains and their inclusion in proper names of culturally important figures, historical or mythical. Old Literary Tibetan (OLT), the oldest documented Tibetic language, abounds in terms for SKY and HEAVEN – two concepts frequently colexified in this language group, while English, conversely, distinguishes lexically between *sky* and *heaven*. The lexical diversity and richness manifests already in Old Tibetan literature with words such as *gnam*, *dguṅ*, *nam ka*, *mkhaɣ*, *mtho ris*, *bar snaṅ*, or *lha yul*, to mention only the most popular ones. Some of them have complementary distribution: they occur in non-Buddhist or Buddhist texts but not in both; others appear to be honorific forms, but the exact scope of denotation and connotations of the terms have never been studied. Moreover, considerable differences in their semantics are observed depending on whether a term is used in native Tibetan compositions, in texts translated from other languages, or expresses a concept borrowed from another culture. The article fills the gap in our understanding of this subset of Old Tibetan vocabulary by examining the semantics of the terms derived from the primary root *nam, reconstructing their etymologies, sketching their connotations and semantic prosody, and tracing their distribution in texts. As we will see, OLT *nam* 'sky' has only marginal distribution restricted to the conservative language of some ritual texts, for in the early imperial period, its derivative *gnam* has already become the main word housing this meaning. Needless to say, all lexemes derived from *nam* or *gnam* are later and secondary in terms of their individual history, but they may still help us clarify how Tibetans conceptualised sky and heaven in early historical times. By using this word family as an example, the

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article takes up the challenge of studying general tendencies of diachronic changes in the Old Tibetan lexicon.

As a secondary objective, this article pays special attention to the term *nam ka* attested in the corpus with rather diverging meanings such as 'sky', 'airspace', and 'thread cross'. A detailed lexicological analysis will shed light on the term's history, for the peculiar morphological form of *nam ka* suggests that we are dealing with one polysemic lexeme, but the meanings are hardly reconcilable. The term appears to have been central to beliefs of non-Buddhists, as it was explicitly targeted by Buddhists in their re-interpretations and criticism, for instance, of non-Buddhist ideas about the afterlife.

For the purpose of this study, I have traced and evaluated all occurrences of the syllables *nam* and *gnam* found in the indexed collections of Old Tibetan texts currently available, including the OTDO (282 texts as of April 9, 2025), TLTD, Taube (1980), Takeuchi (1995), Takeuchi (1998), Dalton and van Schaik (2006), and Iwao et al. (2012). The corpus is highly diverse, comprising native compositions and translations or paraphrases of foreign works. This inclusive approach allowed for preliminary observations concerning the sources of particular terms or semantic changes, which remained unnoticed in previous studies. By targeting complete words in intelligible contexts, the survey yielded over 600 tokens, not all of which were of equal value, for many concerned proper names, by definition, excluded from the study. Likewise, the occurrences of *nam* and *gnam* in semantically transparent compounds were factored out. I made an exception for *nam mkhaɣ* due to its impact on the semantic fabric of the whole word family.

1. Up and above. The many skies of Tibet

Although the study focuses on *nam* and *gnam*, to fully appreciate and elucidate the celestial semantics, it is indispensable to at least briefly mention other terms that contributed to collective conceptualisations of sky and heaven. Although the list provided below is intended as exhaustive, it might be that a few terms of marginal or highly specialised usage have escaped my eye. Besides the forms and their actual meanings attested in texts, I have supplied etymologies for the words to enhance their historical understanding whenever possible.

- *guṅ* 'sky' < *gu* *'broad space' + locative suffix *-ṅ*[1]

[1] Although *guṅ* is not attested as an independent word with the meaning 'sky' in OLT, this meaning is preserved in proper names of the Tibetan legendary rulers

- *dguṅ* HON '[1]sky; [2]night'[2] < nominal prefix *g-* + *guṅ* 'the middle'
- *mu* *'sky' < PTH *mu[3]
- *dmu* *'sky' < nominal prefix *g-* + PTH *mu 'sky'[4]
- *mkhaɣ* 'space' < ?
- *mtho ris* 'lofty realm' < **mtho baɣi ris* 'realm that is high'
- *lha yul* 'deities' land' < **lhaɣi yul* 'id.'
- *lha gnas* 'deities' place' < *lhaɣi gnas* 'id.'
- *bar snaṅ* 'air, atmospheric space' < **bar gyi snaṅ ba* 'the visible of the middle'[5]
- *dbyiṅs* 'celestial region'[6] < ?
- *skyid dgaɣ yul* 'land of rejoicing and happiness' < *dgaɣ daṅ skyid paɣi yul* 'id.'
- *skyid yul* 'land of happiness' < *skyid paɣi yul* 'id.'[7]
- *mthiṅ* 'sky' < *'azure-blue one'[8]

Figure 1 groups cognates, illustrating mutual relationships between simple and complex lexemes. The grey ellipse in the middle encompasses two words whose roots were inherited from an ancestor language and may be traced back to PTH (a hyphen indicates that a syllable is not attested as an unbound morpheme any more). It is unclear whether the root *gu* *'broad space' was likewise inherited or is a lexical innovation of Proto-Tibetic (PT). These roots were extended in PT by the nominalising prefix *g-* (red), forming new meaningful

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Ɣo-lde Guṅ-rgyal and Spu-de Guṅ-rgyal, Khri Sroṅ-rcan's son Guṅ-sroṅ Guṅ-rgyal, as well as the protective deity Lde-bla Guṅ-rgyal.

2 *dguṅ* underwent semantic changes parallel to *nam*, with which word it is frequently combined in poetic passages.

3 In OLT, *mu* is a bound-word attested only in *mu sman*, a synonym of *gnam sman* in PT 1051 and ITJ 739; cf. also Macdonald (1971: 296) and Coblin (1987: 167). The root *mu goes back to Proto-Trans-Himalayan (PTH) as its descendants are widely attested across the whole language family (Coblin 1987; for a list of potential cognates, see STEDT # 2473).

4 In OLT, *dmu* is no longer documented as a simple word with the meaning 'sky'. The latter has been preserved only in compounds such as **dmu thag* (spelt *dmu tag/dag*) 'sky-rope'. As a simple word, *dmu* only denotes a class of beings that, we may assume, were originally thought to dwell in the *dmu*-sky. The word survived in the written language as *rmu* 'fog', with its spelling influenced by *rmugs* 'fog'.

5 This is a loan translation of Skr. *antarīkṣa* analysed as consisting of *antar-* 'between' and √īkṣ 'to see, to view'. More frequently, OLT *bar snaṅ* forms part of personal names of Indian provenance.

6 In OLT, *dbyiṅs* in this meaning does not occur as an independent word; it forms appositional phrases with *nam ka* 'sky'.

7 The last two terms connote a pleasant place where a deceased should depart following funeral ceremonies.

8 For this etymology, see Bialek (2018: 2.161).

lexical units. The remaining words can be clustered into two groups: (i) simple lexemes that owe their affiliation with the semantic field of SKY/HEAVEN to metaphorisation of their original meanings (*mkhaɣ*, *mthiṅ*, *dbyiṅs*), and (ii) complex lexemes derived either by a syllabic suffix (*nam ka*, *gnam ka*) or in compounding (*nam mkhaɣ*, *lha gnas*, *lha yul*, *skyid dgaɣ yul*, *skyid yul*, *bar snaṅ*, *mtho ris*).

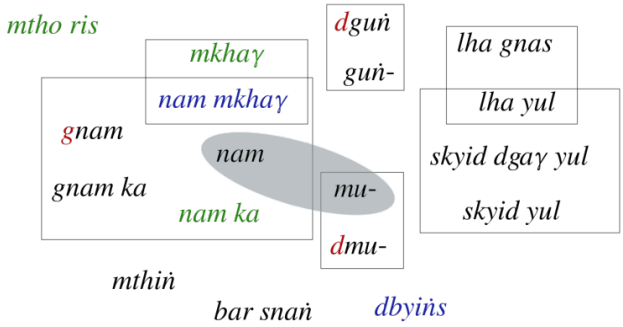


Figure 1 — OLT words from the semantic field SKY/HEAVEN.

Furthermore, the analysis of the terms' distribution in the corpus has revealed that *nam mkhaɣ* and *dbyiṅs* (blue) are found exclusively in Buddhist texts, whereas *mtho ris*, *mkhaɣ* and *nam ka* (green) are restricted to compositions that were either translated from a foreign language or evince foreign (including Buddhist) influences. Interestingly, *bar snaṅ*, although ostensibly modelled after Skr. *antarīkṣa*, is encountered in what appears to be native Tibetan texts: ITJ 739 and the Khra-ɣbrug bell inscription, indicating that its incorporation in the standard lexicon was already accomplished.

Last but not least, from the semantic perspective, we notice the scarcity of lexemes designating only the sky in its physical form; among the unbound morphemes, only *mthiṅ* refers to the sky by calling it metaphorically 'the blue one'. Three other terms (*nam mkhaɣ*, *mkhaɣ*, *bar snaṅ*) are semantically restricted to denoting the atmospheric space above earth, whereas most terms are either limited to the meanings approximating 'heaven' or combine both 'sky' and 'heaven'.

2. nam

OLT *nam* belongs to the old strata of vocabulary inherited from PTH. Its reflexes are attested in several major branches of the TH language

family[9] but with varying senses oscillating around the meanings 'sun', 'sunlight', 'dawn', 'cloud', or 'rain'. The STEDT dataset also includes the meaning 'sky' found in Tshangla, Tshona Mama, Tshona Wenlang, Motuo Menba, Cuona Menba, and Newar. Except for Newar, the remaining languages might have been influenced by Tibetic. Since Tamangic languages have *nam* in the meaning 'rain', it seems probable that Proto-Bodic inherited *nam in the meaning *'sky' or innovated the latter that was subsequently creatively developed in single language groups. Be that as it may, we can reconstruct *nam 'sky' to PT.

The word is attested as a noun and adverb in OLT with the following meanings: N '[1]sky; [2]nocturnal sky; [3]night; [4]time' and Adv 'when'.[10] As I will argue in the following sections, this ordering of meanings mirrors the word's semantic evolution from the inherited and most concrete 'sky' via temporal 'night' and generalised 'time' to its abstract meaning in the temporal adverb 'when'. Diachronic semantic changes in *nam* become even more evident if we consider the distribution of its various meanings in texts, as presented in Appendix A. The distribution of the senses 'sky' and 'nocturnal sky' is almost perfectly complementary to 'night' and 'time'. Whether this reflects the texts' chronology and can be employed for their relative dating is uncertain, for we notice that the documents with the primary meanings 'sky' and 'nocturnal sky' can all be classified as ritual texts, displaying a strong tendency towards conservative language.

Owing to their shared textual contexts, I will discuss the meanings in two groups: (i) 'sky', 'nocturnal sky', 'night'; and (ii) 'time', 'when'. Other than in OLT, lexicographical sources on CT provide only two meanings for *nam*: 'I. sbst. 1. night; 2. for *nam mkhaɣ*; II. adv. of time 1. when? 2. nam (*-du*) *yaṅ* with a negative, never; without a negative in B[ooks] rarely, col. frq.: always' (J: 303a–b); '[1]Nacht; [2]wenn, immer wenn, solange, als' (WtS: 6.67b–68a).

In the next sections, I will first concentrate on the simple word *nam* as it surfaces in the OLT corpus, and then I will devote some space to its two derivatives, *nam mkhaɣ* and *nam ka*, trying to find out whether these are mere spelling variants of one lexeme or were instead coined independently from each other.

2.1. nam *'[1]sky; [2]nocturnal sky; [3]night'*

The three meanings, 'sky', 'nocturnal sky', and 'night' often share their

[9] For potential cognates, see STEDT #2484.

[10] In OLT, the syllable *nam* is homonymous with other morphemes such as: (i) *nam* in *so nam* (see Bialek 2018: 2.586ff., s.v. *so nam*), (ii) the allomorph *nam* of the interrogative clitic *yam*, (iii) the ethnonym (?) *nam* in *nam yi skad*, and (iv) the second syllable of *bsod nams* sometimes misspelled as *nam*.

textual contexts, occurring in similar collocations. This fact allows us to account for the observed semantic changes.

1. The passages that illustrate the meaning 'sky' come from ritual texts characterised by language conservatism. To this fact, we owe the preservation of what seems to be the original meaning of *nam* in Tibetic, which is not found in post-imperial literature. In OLT, *nam* is repeatedly juxtaposed with *dguṅ*; the same parallelism we observe between *gnam* and *dguṅ* in (58) and (75). Example (1) is especially noteworthy due to its mention of sunrays (*tho ras*) in connection with *nam*; this confirms the semantic reconstruction *'sky'. In (2), *nam* occurs first as 'sky' and then once again in the specialised meaning 'nocturnal sky'. As the subject of *sros* 'to darken', *nam* is used in its original meaning. We also encounter the verb phrase *nam sros* in (3), where it is juxtaposed with **dguṅ rmoṅs*; thus, we again see the parallelism *nam* ~ *dguṅ*.[11] The parallelism is repeated in (4) and (5), although the passages are not entirely intelligible to me. (6) provides another near-synonym of *nam*: *mtho* 'heights'. The image of the sky as high recurs with *gnam* in (62).

(1) *bya naṅ nam gi tho ras dguṅ gi slaṅ ras la gśegsu ɣdi lta ɣdabs cag sprugs*/ (PT 1285: v63–4)
To come on the sunrays of the sky, on *slaṅ ras* of the welkin, a rising bird raised [its] wings up.[12]

(2) *thog mar nam sros de nas skar ma śor de nas zla ba śar de nas nam naṅs de nas ñi ma śar* [*te*] (Or.8210/S.155: v107; trslr. *apud* Iwao et al. 2012: 19)
At the beginning, the sky darkened.[13] Then, the stars disappeared, [and] the moon rose. Then, the nocturnal sky rose, [and] the sun appeared.

(3) *do mod nam sros* (121) *dguṅ rmo{ṅ}s na*// *se ɣbrum* (r: *gru*) *bźi ni bgrod* (PT 1068: 120–1)
This day, when the sky darkened [and] the welkin became obscured, [they] crossed the grave.

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[11] The attested *rmos* must be a near-synonym of *sros*; therefore, I amend *rmos* to *rmoṅs*. Just as *nam sros*/*srod* lexicalised as 'darkness of night' (J: 303b, s.v. *nam*), I think we find reflexes of **dguṅ rmoṅs* lexicalised as 'evening' in *dguṅ mo* (cf. Jäschke's annotation: "perh[aps] a corruption of *dgoṅ mo*", J: 84b).

[12] I tentatively relate *cag* to *chag pa*: Kargil, Tshangra, Leh 'up to' (CDTD: 6736).

[13] For *sros*, compare: Kyirong 'with *nam* to get dark', Dingri 'with *nāmɐø̀* to fall (of dusk)', Dzongkha 'with *nām* to fall (of the night)' (CDTD.V: 1312); cf. also CT *nam srod* 'darkness of night' (J: 303b, s.v. *nam*). The high tone in Dingri and Dzongkha indicates that the underlying form was *gnam*, but the Kyirong reflex necessitates the reconstruction of **nam*.

(4) *nam gi rlad bčhado/ dguṅ gi śo dral do/ /* (PT 1285: v68)
[They] cut off the vault of the sky. [They] pulled down the *śo* of the welkin.[14]

(5) *dguṅ gi rlad bčhado nam gi śo dralo/ /* (PT 1285: v75)
[They] cut off the vault of the welkin. [They] pulled down the *śo* of the sky.

(6) *ɣo se nam nas mtho nas naṅs* [---] (PT 1285: v82)
ɣo se rose from the sky, from the heights.

2. The contrastive use of *ñi ma* 'sun' with *nam* 'sky' might have triggered the semantic shift 'sky' > 'nocturnal sky' in *nam*; sun connoted daylight, and therefore, by extension, the juxtaposition of *ñi ma* with *nam* brought about the association of *nam* with darkness. In (7), *nam* already denotes the nocturnal sky, which is conceptualised as a physical phenomenon rising up (*naṅs*) as opposed to the sun that goes down (*nub*). (8) presents an intermediate case between the first and the second meaning where *nam* is the subject of the verb *naṅs*, but it is still paralleled by *dguṅ*. The common occurrence of *nam* with the verb *naṅs* (22 instances on OTDO) has led to their lexicalisation in a nominal compound *nam naṅs* explained in a Tibetan-Chinese glossary as 'then meṅ' (Or.8210/S.2736: 2; *apud* Thomas and Giles 1948: 755); the latter can be identified with Chinese *tiān míng* 天明 'dawn, daybreak'.[15] The verb phrase *nam naṅs* underwent a semantic narrowing from the original *'(daylight) sky rises' to 'nocturnal sky rises' because both described the same phenomenon of daybreak; it is a matter of the perspective or emphasis put on the one or the other facet of a particular celestial phenomenon. The same event is referred to in (9), where the vanishing of the nocturnal sky announces the dawn (cf. *nam naṅs/ mtho nas naṅs* in the next clause, PT 1285: v52). Likewise, the use of *nam* in (10) points to the meaning of 'nocturnal sky' that becomes unstable (*chab chub*) with the daybreak. The shift from '(daylight) sky' to 'nocturnal sky' might have additionally been facilitated by the coinage of a new term – *gnam* – to house the meaning '(daylight) sky'.

[14] On *rlad* and its possible cognates, see Bialek (2018: 2.151f.) The meaning of *śo* is unknown, but the word could be identical with the root of *śog* and *śos*, on which see Bialek (2018: 2.287f.) Maybe *śo* in *śo re* 'damaged, spoiled; a defect, flaw, notch, gap, also hare-lip' (J: 563a; cf. *śo re* '= *śo ral* harelip, cleft lip' in Gs: 1104b) is the same word; the parallelism between *śo dral* and *śo ral* is conspicuous.

[15] Cf. also *nam laṅs* 'day-break' (J: 303b, s.v. *nam*) and *nam mnaṅs* 'auch *nam naṅs* Tag werden' (WtS: 6.77b). In OLT, the only attested spelling variant is *nam naṅs*, whereas modern Tibetan dialects have reflexes of *nam laṅs* only (see CDTD: 4545).

(7) *phyugs ni ñi ma myi nub par sdud / / myi ni nam myi naṅs par laṅs / /* (PT 992: 6r1)
Regarding cattle, [they] gather [it] so that the sun has not set [yet] (i.e. before the sunset). Regarding men, [they] got up so that the nocturnal sky has not risen [yet] (i.e. before the dawn).

(8) *saṅ gi nam naṅs dguṅ saṅs nay /* (PT 1285: r14)
When the nocturnal sky of tomorrow has risen, [when] the welkin has become clear […].

(9) *nam rgya nam čhed po mthay nas yal yal* (PT 1285: v51)
The spacious nocturnal sky, the great nocturnal sky, vanishes from [its] end.

(10) *de nas nam chab chub na / / sñun bon po / smag bon po / ɣyol bon po rnams kyaṅ / sa* (r: *se*) *sar / gyer la mčhi / /* (PT 1042: 58–9)
Then, when the nocturnal sky was confused, *sñun bon po*, *smag bon po*, [and] *ɣyol bon po* were going to the tomb-ground for dancing.

Apart from its independent occurrences, *nam* as 'nocturnal sky' forms two compounds: *saṅ nam* 'tomorrow' (< *saṅ gi nam* *'nocturnal sky of tomorrow', see ex. (8)) and *nam stoṅ* 'new moon' (Takeuchi 1998: 2.1). The etymological meaning of the latter seems to have been *'empty nocturnal sky'; it has the variant spelling *gnam stoṅ* (PT 1104: E1, E4; Or.15000/490: 1).[16]

The reconstruction of this intermediate stage in the semantic development of *nam* is required by the third meaning, 'night', since the direct shift 'sky' > 'night' is less probable.

3. The meaning 'night', i.e. 'the period of darkness between two days', can be detected whenever *nam* is juxtaposed with *ñin* 'day' as in (11)–(12). This is additionally confirmed by the parallel compounds *ston nam* 'autumn night' and *dpyid ñi* 'spring day' in (11). The passage in (13) provides a temporal frame for a ritual action. We learn that *nam* had its end (*mthay*); TIME *la bab* is a popular phrase meaning '[it] happened in/at TIME'. In addition, the compound *nam gaṅ* 'new moon' in (14) confirms the proposed sense for its etymological meaning can be reconstructed as *'full (i.e. complete) night'. Notably, the compound has a variant spelling *gnam gaṅ* in PT 1194: 24, which must be

[16] Cf. CT *gnam stoṅ* 'the thirtieth day of the lunar month, the day of new moon' (J: 309b, s.v. *gnam*).

secondary because its meaning cannot be explained based on the attested senses of *gnam*.[17]

(11) *nu nu nam myī naṅs / ston nam phru bo nam myi naṅs / cu cu ñin myi nub / dpyid ñī duṅ yug / khu grags / g.yaṅ bśos ñin myi nub /* (PT 1285: r37–8)
nu nu, the night could not rise. The autumn night, the *phru bo* night, could not rise. *cu cu*, the day could not go down. On a spring day, a white cuckoo crowed *khu*. [It] generated prosperity. The day could not go down.

(12) *nu nu nam myī naṅs / cu cu ñīn myi nub /* (PT 1285: r136)
nu nu, the night could not rise. *cu cu*, the day could not go down.

(13) *nam gyi mthaɣ la bab ste / mdad* [*śid*] *btaṅ na / ɣdaɣs pa la yaṅ myi sman / /* (PT 1042: 86)
If [one] prepares the funeral at the end of the night, it will not be beneficial for the deceased.

(14) *da do mod / naṃ gaṅ la / btams / pa ṅag chig / sum / ni rka ñon čhig /* (PT 1134: 137–8)
Obey the words spoken now, this day, on the new moon.[18]

The semantic change 'nocturnal sky' > 'night' was related to the replacement of physical referents 'sun' ~ 'nocturnal sky' by temporal ones 'day' ~ 'night'; cf. the analogous change *ñi ma* 'sun' > *ñin* 'day', possibly mediated via *ñin* *'sunny' derived through the adjectival suffix *-n* (Bialek 2026: 418ff.).

2.2 nam *'[1]time; [2]when'*

The preceding section has shown the semantic development of *nam* from 'sky' to 'night', i.e., from a noun denoting a physical phenomenon to a noun with temporal meaning. The latter sense underwent further evolution that ultimately transferred the noun *nam* into the temporal adverb 'when'. In the following, I sketch the single steps in this semantic change as far as they can be reconstructed from our OLT corpus.

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[17] It is legitimate to ask why Tibetans needed two terms for 'new moon': *nam gaṅ* and *nam stoṅ*? I think the latter might have been coined by analogy with Ch. *yuèquē* 月缺.

[18] I read *bkaɣ* for the transmitted *rka*; the phrase *bkaɣ ñan* 'to obey, to yield' (J: 185a, s.v. *ñan pa*) is attested in PT 126: 164, PT 986: 111 & 133, and ITJ 737-1: 189 (*apud* OTDO).

The nominal provenance of *nam* can be seen in its capability of taking the case marker *du* (15)–(16) and the indefinite determiner *čig* (17)–(18). In OLT, *nam du* was already lexicalised, for it occurs mainly with negated verbs (16); the sole exceptions are (15) and Rkoṅ 10. The adverbial adjuncts *nam du* and *nam źig* suggest the meaning *'time' for *nam*. It is conspicuous that in these phrases, *nam* always has future connotations and could be more accurately translated as '(future) time'.

(15) *čhab srīd če baɣi chul/ nam du yaṅ/ myi yoṅs kyis śes par//mdo cam źīg rdo riṅs la brīs paɣo//* (Khri 10–12; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
[They] wrote a mere summary on [this] stone pillar so that all the people know forever the way in which the realm is great.

(16) *saṅs rgyas gyi čhos mjad pa ɣgī nam du yaṅ myī gtaṅ maɣ źig par bgyīɣo/* (Bsam 4–7; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
The practice of Buddha's religion will never be abandoned or led to ruin.

(17) *nam źīg na//źaṅ ña sto la/ bu cha rgyud yoṅ myed pa źīg du gyur na//* (Lčaṅ 35–6; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
If one day (lit. time) Źaṅ-ña-sto should have no descendants […].

(18) *gcīgs kyi mkhar bu ɣdī/ nam źig dbye dgos na yaṅ//* (Źwa W 58–9; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Should it be necessary one day for this chest [containing] the edict to be opened […].

The nominal character of *nam* is confirmed in the popular compound *nam źa*. Since temporal adverbs do not form nominal compounds in OLT, *nam* in *nam źa* has to be a noun, and the compound itself has to be a noun, too; it can modify another noun (19) or take the terminative marker *-r* (20) and the indefinite determiner *čig* (21). In (19), *nam źa* renders Chinese *yǒng* 永 'eternal' (Coblin 1991: 529a), again displaying future connotations. The same we observe in (20) and (21) – *nam źa* directs the attention towards future times. (21) poses an interesting case with *nam źa* paired with *saṅ nam*, a noun with an evident temporal frame, indicating that the original meaning of *nam źa* was not 'eternity, perpetuity' but rather more specific, perhaps *'future'. *źa* is most certainly the same root as in OLT *gźaɣ pyi*, *gźaɣ ma*, and *gźaɣ gsaṅ*,[19] and in CT *gźaɣ gnaɣ* 'gnaɣ sṅa mo' (DSM: 777b) and *gźar yaṅ* '= *nam yaṅ*' (J: 480a; cf. Bialek 2018: 2.442f.) CT *nam źag* (see J:

[19] *gsaṅ* here is related to *saṅ* as in *saṅ nam*.

303b, s.v. *nam*) is a later folk etymology for OLT *nam źa*. Still, the etymology of *źa* and its semantic contribution to the overall meaning of *nam źa* remain a mystery. A hint might be contained in the idiosyncratic patterns of reduplication *nam źa* undergoes in OLT: *nam nam źa źa* (passim) or even *nam nam nam nam źa źa źa źa* (PT 1287: 279 & 287) instead of the expected ¦*nam źa nam źa* or ¦*nam nam źa*.[20] This could indicate that the second constituent *źa* represents a verb. When the reduplications were first introduced, *nam źa* was still perceived as a verbal phrase. An educated guess would suggest a meaning like *'to come' for *źa*, yielding *'coming time' that lexicalised to *'future'.[21] However, for now, these are only rough speculations.

(19) *don čhen por grub na/ nam źaɣī srid brtan bar ɣgyur ro//* (PT 986: 28; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
When the goal is greatly accomplished, eternity's dominion will be everlasting.

(20) *nam źar dbon sras rgyud kyi čhab srīd brtan źiṅ/ ɣbaṅs skyīd par byaɣo* (Khri 18–19; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
It shall be acted so that the subjects are happy while the realm of generations of grandsons and sons remains firm in perpetuity.

(21) *saṅ nam nam źa čhig na// rta khyod ni khar srab gyis srabste kha druṅ śu bab ɣkhor čhig* (ITJ 731: r88–9)
Morrow, in the future, you horse, being bridled with a bridle in [your] mouth, may [you] go in circles [with] sores [all] around [your] mouth!

The use of *nam źig* without any case marker as in (18) (cf. *nam źig na* in (17)) indicates the first step towards the grammaticalisation of *nam*. Its meaning must have become more general, so no specification through a case marker was indispensable anymore; to use a paraphrase, 'one time' became 'once'. The shift has led to the re-interpretation of *nam* as a temporal adverb 'when' equated with Chinese *jì* 旣 in *nam ɣgre la* 'cheɣu ban khe' (Or.8210/S.1000: 3; cf. Thomas and Giles 1948: 762) and *nam ɣoṅ cha* 'ce[ɣu] ban le' (Or.8210/S.1000: 9; cf. Thomas and Giles 1948: 763). The identification

[20] For the attested patterns of reduplication in CT, see Uray (1954).

[21] OLT *źa* [za] *'to come' could be related to a set of TH verbs with the forms [lja], [la] or [ja] glossed as 'to come' and subsumed under the etymon *la-y/*ra COME on STEDT (#3569). *[lʲ] > [z] is a regular sound change in Tibetic dubbed 'Benedict's law' (Hill 2019: 14ff.) OLT *gźaɣ* was derived through the nominal prefix *g-* (see Bialek 2026: 376ff.).

of *nam* with *jì* is interesting, for the latter was used with completed actions in MC (Kroll et al. 2017: 188a). This means that by the time the Tibetan-Chinese glossary was composed, *nam* had undergone a complete grammaticalisation to the temporal adverb 'when', losing its original future connotations. As far as I was able to ascertain, the OLT corpus contains only one textual example of this use of *nam*:

(22) *gcuṅ lag khaṅ ɣdī yaṅ nam ñī ma daṅ/ zla ba yod kyī bar du yun du brtan ba daṅ/* (ITJ 751: 38r1; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
This temple will be everlasting in time as long as the sun and the moon exist.

The literal translation of *nam ñī ma daṅ/ zla ba yod kyī bar du* would be 'in the interval when the sun and the moon exist'. Since *brtan* receives a separate temporal modifier in *yun du*, *nam* must specify the temporal frame of *yod*.

2.3 nam mkhaɣ *'(celestial) space'*

For CT, *nam mkhaɣ* is glossed as 'the space or region above us, heaven, sky; the ether; the principle of expansion and enlargement' (J: 303b), '[1]Himmel, Luftraum, Raum, Luftweg; [2]symbolishes Zahlwort für die Zahl 10' (WtS: 6.68b–70a). However, in OLT the word is attested only in texts with evident Indic influences, such as the Buddhist *Ɣphags pa sa luɣi lǰaṅ pa źes bya ba theg pa čhen poɣi mdo* (23) or an empowerment ritual that mentions non-Buddhist Indic deities (24).[22] In the first text, it actually forms part of the determinative phrase *nam mkhaɣi khams*, an equivalent of Skr. *ākāśadhātu* (Mvy: 369).[23] (24) leaves no doubt as to the interpretation of *nam mkhaɣ* as 'space'. Since *mkhaɣ* is separately attested in the meaning 'space', I assume that *nam mkhaɣ* (< **nam gyi mkhaɣ*), lit. *'sky space', was coined independently from *nam ka* (see next section), but soon the two started to be confused.

(23) *nam mkhaɣi khams daṅ* (52) *mñam*[24] *bar gyurd čig//* (Or.8210/S.421: 51–2)
[They] must become like the *ākāśadhātu*.

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[22] For this text, see Iwao et al. (2012: 26).

[23] In PT 1261, *nam mkhaɣi khams* translates Ch. *kōngjiè* 空界 (Li 1962: 309, 113–5), itself an equivalent of Skr. *ākāśa-dhātu*, *kha-dhātu*, *antar-īkṣa*, *ākāśa*, or *vihāyas* (Akira 1997: 907b–8a).

[24] There is a very faint line above *ñ* that could be interpreted as a *ɣgreṅ bu* (see Iwao et al. 2012: 29), but when compared with other *ɣgreṅ bu* in the same text, this reading must be dismissed in favour of *mñam*.

(24) *gzugs daṅ/ snaṅ ba/ nam mkhaɣ* (Or.8212/168: 5; trslr. *apud* Takeuchi 1998: 2.240)
shape, appearance, and space

2.4 nam ka *'sky; airspace'*

It is conspicuous that, with one exception (see *infra*), all the works containing the word *nam ka* 'sky, airspace' are either of foreign provenance or influenced by foreign concepts. We find the term in Buddhist compositions (PT 16, PT 149, PT 239, Or.8210/S.95, Or.15000/379), translations from Indic literature (PT 981, PT 983, ITJ 737-1, Or.8210/S.421), a paraphrase of Chinese classics (PT 986), a letter from the Guī yìjūn 歸義軍 period (PT 1120), and in a translation from a Turkic language (PT 1283). In the sole native Tibetan work, *nam ka* is unambiguous and denotes the region of the atmosphere above earth, i.e. 'sky':

(25) *bya pug ron khyu gčhig nam ka la ɣphɤur ba yaṅ/* (PT 1287: 97–8)
a flock of pigeons flying in the sky

Because of its isolated occurrence in a native Tibetan composition, I reconstruct **gnam ka*. The etymological *g-* was elided after the final *-g* of the preceding syllable (*gčhig*) due to a scribal error: *g-* > Ø/ *-g*$_{\#}$_C-.

The same meaning 'sky' can be ascribed to *nam ka* in passages that apply the term in juxtaposition with physical elements of the landscape (26) or relate some atmospheric phenomena (27)–(29). The sky is likewise meant when speaking of the celestial phenomena preceding the sunrise in (30). In addition, *nam ka* can be rendered with 'airspace' when something happens above the ground and concerns a supernatural event, as in (31), where a demon kidnaps a human and leads her up towards the sky, or in (32) when a *vajra* miraculously occurs in the sky. As demonstrated by (33), it is difficult to tell apart the two meanings. On the one hand, *nam ka* is here juxtaposed with *sa gźi*, indicating that physical space is meant, but, on the other hand, a human intends to fly through *nam ka*, i.e. through the air.

(26) *rī rab cam ɣam/ rgya mcho sñed dam/ nam ka gaṅ ba ɣam/ ɣǐīg rten rgyas paɣam/* (PT 16: 24r1–2; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
either a mere Meru, or many oceans, or a complete sky, or the vast world

(27) *nam kaɣ las gźaɣ chon las bsogs pa byuṅ nas*/ (PT 149: v3; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
A rainbow, etc., appeared from the sky.

(28) *nam ka la lčags gyī ser ba drag po ɣbab pas*/ / (PT 239: v9-1–2)
In the sky, a heavy hail of iron was falling.

(29) *phyogs bźi ɣi ɣbaṅs*/ / *nam kaɣi skar ma la*/ [---] (PT 1120: v3; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Subjects of the four directions [---] towards the stars of the sky.

(30) *śiṅ po byī baɣī nam ka phan phun na*/ (PT 986: 71, 141; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
When the sky on the Male Wood-Rat [day] was unsteady […].[25]

(31) *nam ka la khyer te soṅ ṅo*/ (ITJ 737-1: 187; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
[He] went carrying [her] through the air.[26]

(32) *nam ka las nī rdo rǰe byuṅ* (v13) *na*/ (Or.8210/S.421; trslr. *apud* Iwao et al. 2012: 27)
When a *vajra* occurred from the sky […].

(33) *nam ka la ɣpur te ɣgro bar bgyis na*/ *sras la ba daṅ ku śa gñis kyis*/ / *nam ka daṅ sa gźi thams śad rdo rǰer byin kyis brlabste*/ *nam ka la ma thar nas*/ / (ITJ 737-1: 401–3; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
When [the queen Sita] was made to go away flying through the airspace, [her] two sons La-ba and Ku-śa, by means of [their] splendour, transformed the entire sky and earth into a diamond. [She] could pass through the sky.

Apart from being used as an independent lexeme, *nam ka* forms part of two determinative phrases that are loan translations from Sanskrit: *nam kaɣi sñiṅ po* = *ākāśagarbha* and *nam kaɣi dbyiṅs* = *ākāśadhātu*. In CT, they are spelt with *nam mkhaɣ* and included with this spelling already in the Mvy (647 & 6408), where *nam mkhaɣi dbyiṅs* is used interchangeably with *nam mkhaɣi khams*, depending on the edition of the canon (Ishihama and Fukuda 1989: 305a). In these OLT formations, *nam ka* translates Skr. *ākāśa*, which we have already encountered in *nam mkhaɣ* '(celestial) space' (see (23)).

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[25] *nam ka phan phun* translates here Ch. *shuǎngmèi* 味爽 (Coblin 1991: 529a).
[26] We find an analogous use of *nam ka* in PT 981: r191, PT 983: v4–5, and ITJ 737-1: 401 – all are Tibetan versions of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

3. gnam

The word *gnam* (PT *gnam) was derived from *nam* through the nominal prefix *g-*. It is impossible to ascertain at which stage in the history of the Bodish group this derivation took place since the prefix has thus far been documented for Tibetic languages only.[27] Should this derivation pattern be specific to Tibetic, the coinage of *gnam* might have accompanied the semantic narrowing of *nam* from 'sky' to 'nocturnal sky', which resulted in a gap in the lexicon. Besides its use as a simple lexeme, we encounter *gnam* also in the synonymic compound *gnam dguṅ* < **gnam daṅ dguṅ*.

3.1 gnam *'sky'*

The clearest contexts, in which *gnam* can be unanimously identified as denoting the observable expanse above earth, i.e. the sky, come from passages with recourse to various atmospheric phenomena (exx. (34)–(39); see also (60) *infra*) such as snow (*kha ba*), rain (*čhar*), sleet (*skyin daṅ*), thunderbolt (*lče*), clouds (*sprin*), air (*ṅad*) etc. As an extension, in several examples, *gnam* is related to astronomical bodies (40)–(41) that can be observed only during the night, such as stars (*skar ma*) or planets (*gza*).

(34) *kha ba mtho dgu nī gnam nas babste /* (ITJ 732: 18; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Snow nine spans [deep] fell from the sky.

(35) *ɣdi gnam sṅo na* (r: *sṅon*) *ga la ǰi čhar źig ɣbab čig* (PT 1040: 55; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
In this blue sky, let rain fall for whomever!

(36) *gnam la sprīn kha bo smra śes ste sprīn / kaɣ / dkar na / / sa la rta spu dkar / /*
gnam / la sprīn kha gnag naɣ / sa la rta spu gnag / /
gnam la sprīn kha smug na / sa la rta spu smug /
gnam la sprīn sṅo na / sa / la rta spu sṅo / /
gnam la sprīn kha ser naɣ / sa la rta spu ser / / / (PT 1060: 19–21)
When in the sky – the cloud colour being able to speak – the cloud colour is white, then on the ground the horse coat [is] white.
When in the sky the cloud colour is black, then on the ground the horse coat is black.

[27] Zhuang (2022) reconstructed agentive prefix *g- to Proto-Bodish. This seems to be a prefix historically distinct from the nominal *g- (see Bialek 2026: 375ff.).

When in the sky the cloud colour is dark brown, then on the ground the horse coat is dark brown.
When in the sky the cloud colour is grey, then on the ground the horse coat is grey.
When in the sky the cloud colour is yellow, then on the ground the horse coat is yellow.

(37) *skyīn ɣdaṅ čhed po gnam las myī ɣbab graṅ/* […] *skyīn daṅ gnam las ɣbabs/* (PT 1285: v32–3)
Does not great sleet come down from the sky? […] Sleet came down from the sky.[28]

(38) *gnam gyi ṅad/ saɣi* [-]*ṅs sprīn gī rla{ṅ}s*[29]*/ gaṅs kyi ɣod* (PT 1285: v121)
The air of the sky, [-] of earth, the vapour of clouds, the light of glaciers.

(39) *mcho čhed po ɣi naṅ na/ čhu srīn rgyal baɣ ɣdug na/ gnam las čhe* (r: *lče*) *phab ste//čhu srīn rgyal ba čhu ɣī naṅ du bsad do//* (PT 1287: 517–8)
If there were a victorious water-demon in a great ocean, having thrown a thunderbolt from the sky, [they] killed the water-demon in water.

(40) *skar ma gnam gaṅ yod pa yaṅ ñi ma gčhīg gi ɣod la myed do//* (PT 1287: 504)
In the light of a single sun, there are no stars (to be seen) that are [in] the whole sky.

(41) *gnam la gza skar bdun ɣbum bdun khrī ɣīs//* […] *źes bgyis* (ITJ 731: r22–4)
In the sky, the planets [and] the stars, seven hundred thousand [and] seven myriads [thereof] spoke thus.

In the last example, planets and stars are ascribed anthropomorphic features and can speak, whereas (42) contains a metaphoric extension of 'atmospheric sky' for it involves gods as causers of rain. A similar image is delivered by (43), where the sky is described as possessed of an opening (*mthoṅs*), visible when clouds have divided. Otherwise, *mthoṅs* denotes a smoke opening in a tent.

[28] On *skyin ɣdaṅ* and its unstable orthography, see Bialek (2026: 731, fn. 27).
[29] The syllable looks more like *rlabs*, but the letter *b* could have been written over *ṅ*.

(42) *gnam gi lhas čhar phab nas*/ (ITJ 738: 3v76; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Gods of the sky threw down rain.

(43) *gnam gyī mthoṅs bye sprin gyī go bsal*/ (ITJ 740: 27; trslr. *apud* OTDO)[30]
The oculus of the sky opened; the place of the clouds cleared.[31]

The sky is also presented as a location in space; other objects can be located within or relative to it. The referent of *gnam* is located high above earth (44), but it must also encompass the space more directly above earth for thread crosses (45) and tree tops (46) spread over there, smoke rises to the sky (47), while other objects (i.e. wings) can be depicted as reaching from earth to the sky (48). In one instance, human bodies are said to rise up to the sky (49). The sky is also a container within which animals can move (50)–(52) and inanimate objects can be thrown or blown into (53)–(55) – in (56), a human is pulled up to the sky – so its denotation approximates that of English *airspace*.

(44) *gnam gyi ya bla dguṅ gi ya steṅs na* (PT 1134: 11)
in the heights of the sky, atop the welkin

(45) *rgya bon brim taṅ gis*/
rgyal tag brgyad/ *ni*/ *gnam las*/ *bre*[*s*]
se gru bźi ni/ *sa la*/ *bčhas*/ (PT 1134: 119–20)
Brim-taṅ, the Bon [priest responsible for the eight-threaded] net,
Spread the eight-threaded net in the sky [and]
Prepared the grave on the ground.

(46) *śiṅ kun kyaṅ rca ba ni gnam du bstan*/ *rce mo ni sa la bcugs* (ITJ 737-1: 258–9; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
As for the trees, [he] turned [their] roots towards the sky [and] planted [their] tops in the ground.

(47) *dud pa ɣal ɣol gnam du soṅ na yab la bdag*/ *drug bgyon*// *mdag gram grum sa du soṅ*/ *sa bla mgon ɣbum bgyon*/ (PT 1040: 95–7; trslr. *apud* OTDO)

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[30] Cf. *gnam gyi ni mthoṅs phye bas* (ITJ 739: 10v5; *apud* OTDO) and *gnam mthoṅs ɣgye sprin gyi go seld to*// (PT 1194: 49–50).

[31] I have borrowed the translation 'oculus' for *mthoṅs* from Dan Martin's blog post *The Firmament, Its Opening, & the Milky Way* (30-Jun-2022; https://tibeto-logic.blogspot.com/2022/06/the-firmament-its-opening-milky-way.html; accessed 8-Oct-2023). The word comes from Latin *oculus* 'eye' (OED: 991a), whereas the Tibetan word is derived from *mthoṅ* 'to see' through the deverbal suffix *-d* (allomorph: *-s*; see Bialek 2026: 424).

When hazy smoke rose to the sky, Yab-la Bdag-drug chided.[32] When swampy[33] mud went to the soil, Sa-bla Mgon-ɣbum chided.

(48) *bdagi phas ɣdab ma ya čhig/ gnam la gthugs/ ɣdab ma ya gčhig sa la gthugs nas/* (ITJ 737-1: 234–5; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
My father leaned one wing on the sky [and] another wing on the ground.

(49) *rgya ɣi ro gčhig gnam du ɣgreṅ* (PT 1287: 522)
One body of a Chinese rises up to the sky.

(50) *ru rnon gnam la sñogs* (PT 37: 22v5–6; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Sharp horns rise to the sky.

(51) *lha bya gnam la ɣphur* (PT 981: r6; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Divine birds are flying in the sky.[34]

(52) *dog srin nī sbur bu ɣīs//*
bya ltar nī bčos bčos ste/
gnam du nī ɣphur ɣdod kyaṅ/
ɣphur du ni ɣdab ma mčhīs/ (PT 1287: 459–60)
An earthworm, a little buzz,
Having pretended [to be like] a bird,
Although [it] wanted to fly to the sky,
[It] had no wings to fly.

(53) *źugs čha čig gnam du bus śig//* (PT 1068: 36)
Blow embers in the sky![35]

(54) *dbu skra gnam du yer/* (PT 1068 *passim*)
Skyi-nam Ñag-čig's head-hair waved (?) in the sky.

(55) *gnam* (168) *pyir mdaɣ/ paṅ ɣcolo/* (PT 1134: 167–8)
[They] are looking to shoot an arrow off to the sky.

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[32] I amend *bgyon* to *bkyon*, for they occur in parallel contexts in the OLT corpus (see OTDO). The translation is only tentative; it seems that the verb denoted a reaction of a divine being when annoyed by human behaviour.

[33] The translation of *gram grum* is only tentative. I relate it to CT *gram pa* 'swamp, march, fen' (J: 76b).

[34] Cf. also the compound *gnam bya* 'celestial birds' in PT 1285: v60, v61.

[35] For *źugs čha*, see Bialek (2018.2: 467f.)

(56) *bcan po dri gum lde bla guṅ rgyal gyis gnam du draṅs* (PT 1287: 17–8)
Lde-bla Guṅ-rgyal drew *bcan po* Dri-gum [up] to the sky.

As a container, the sky has its architecture. It possesses an oculus (*mthoṅs*) through which the light shines when the clouds have divided (43), but it also has a middle (*dbus* in (57)) and confines (*pha mthaɣ* in (58) and *gnam mthaɣ* in (59)) that are the borders of the known. (60) specifies the number of the confines as four (*gnam mthaɣ bźi*), indicating that (i) they are synonymous with four cardinal directions (61), and (ii) the sky's bottom surface is imagined as a quadrilateral. In addition, the sky is adorned with a *pruɣu k*(*h*)*a* 'pinnacle' which Stein described as "un ornament au sommet du casque, une sorte de panache; mais ce mot sert aussi à désigner l'ornament, souvent en or, du sommet du *stūpa* (*mčhod rten*) ou d'un dôme de temple ou de château. On sait que, sur ces monuments, cet ornament consiste généralement en un ensemble de soleil, lune et flamme, tel qu'il est censé exister sur le chapeau du barde" (1959: 346).[36] According to (63)–(64), *pruɣu k*(*h*)*a* is a place where birds of prey are soaring and to which one can leap. Its meaning receives figurative extension in (65), where *pruɣu kha* is also imagined as the abode of celestial beings called *phywa* and *lha*. Attributes such as 'high, lofty' (*mtho*) in (62) or 'blue' (*sṅon*) in (35) add to the description of the physical features of the sky's edifice.

(57) *gnam gyī ni dbus/ sa yī ni dkyil/ glīṅ gi ni sñiṅ po* […] [*ɣi*] *gnasu/* […] *gśegso/* (PT 1286: 35–7)
[Khri Ñag-khri Bcan-po] came [to] the place in the middle of the sky, in the centre of earth, in the heart of the continent.

(58) *gnam gyi pa mtaɣ/ dguṅ gi pa ɣbrum/ na/ pa daṅ yab gyi mchan/ diṅ diṅ diṅs gyi rǰe/* (PT 1134: 23–4)
In the confines of the sky, [in] the *pha ɣbrum* of the welkin, the name of the father and the patron [is] lord of Diṅ-diṅ-diṅgs.[37]

[36] Cf. also *phru* 'phye maɣam phub ma daṅ rṅog ma sogs la ɣǰug ste' (DSM: 509b); further details are provided by Macdonald (1971: 279, fn. 339) and Stein (1985: 108–9). The word is found in OLT only in conjunction with *gnam*.

[37] *pha mthaɣ* and *pha ɣbrum* are near-synonyms with the first constituent *pha* *'what is beyond' (cf. *pha mthaɣ* 'the other end, the other boundary', J: 338b, s.v. *pha*[II]). The meaning of *ɣbrum* is unknown, but it must be a near-synonym of *mthaɣ*. Another pair of OLT compounds confirm this intuition: *sgo pyi* and *sgo ɣbrum* (PT 1068: 73) in which *ɣbrum* echoes *pyi* = *phyi* *'what is outside'. Thomas (1957: 38) understood *ɣbrum* as a scribal error for *ɣgram*, but this is improbable since the spelling *ɣbrum* is used in this context in several independent texts.

(59) *rǰe ɣis nī ɣbaṅs btaṅ na/ gnam mthaɣī ni sruṅ du ruṅ//* (PT 1287: 438–9)
If a lord abandoned [his] subjects, [he] would be right to breast the confines of the sky.

(60) *ɣbrug daṅ klog lte bu lče graṅs ñuṅ mod kyaṅ// gnam mthaɣ bźir grags la brcan źīṅ če ɣo//* (PT 1287: 509)
Although thunderbolts (little tongues similar to thunder and lightning) are small in number, [they] are tremendous while roaring and being violent in four directions of the sky.

(61) *gnam čhen po phyogs bźīɣi mṅaɣ bdag//* (ITJ 751: 36r1; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
the great sky, the master of four directions

(62) *čhab srid gnam bas mtho//* (PT 1287: 188)
The realm was loftier than the sky.

(63) *bya rgod gnam gyi pruɣu ka nas ldiṅs te* (PT 1047: 354; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Birds of prey were soaring from the pinnacle of the sky.

(64) *gnam gyi// pru ɣu khar yard paɣī ṅo//* (PT 1047: 355–6; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
the sign that [one] leapt to the pinnacle of the sky

(65) *gnam gyī pruɣu kha nas/ phywa daṅ lha myī laṅ* (PT 1047: 35–6; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
From the pinnacle of the sky, *phywa* and *lha* do not rise.

Finally, in the OLT corpus, *gnam* is readily juxtaposed with *sa* (66)–(67), often formed into the compound *gnam sa* 'sky and earth' (68) that may also be understood figuratively as denoting the whole known world as in (69).[38]

(66) *khyod* (22) *kyaṅ gnam la ni lo zad// sa la nī źag zad//* (PT 1051: 21–2; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
For you, the years in the sky are consumed, [and] the days on earth are consumed.

[38] van der Kuijp (1995: 289f.) speculated that *gnam sa* in the title *gnam sa dpaɣ/spags śi* might have been a calque of Chinese *tiāndì* 天地. Since we do not see the compound in connection with titles in OLT, foreign models cannot be excluded for this particular usage, although the term is an old Tibetan coinage.

(67) *spo ma čho/ čhed po nī gnam las glag*
ɣbraṅ ma po nī saɣ las brcī ɣo/ / (PT 1060: 36–7)
The great lineage [accounts] of *spo ma* are read from the sky.
[Its great] breeds are counted from the ground.

(68) *gnam sa gñīs kyi bar yul du brnam źiṅ/ /* (PT 1287: 366–7)
The space between the sky and earth was seized as [his] land.

(69) *gnam sa la mṅaɣ mjad čiṅ/ /* (PT 1120: v3; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
[He] yielded power over the world.

3.2 gnam *'heaven'*

gnam 'heaven' shares with the meaning 'sky' its conceptualisation as an edifice. Although the details differ, heaven is also imagined as possessing physical features that make up its architecture. It is multi-storeyed with either nine or thirteen levels (*rim pa*), the details of which are never provided. The top-level (*steṅ*) of the nine-storeyed heaven is the abode of various deities (70), foremost those called *mgon chun* (71). Even though the latter passage is hardly intelligible, it seems to describe how *mgon chun* descend to earth. The thirteen-storeyed heaven in (72) is the abode of Khri-bar-la-bdun-chig, lit. 'the fourth in the middle of Khri', the first ruler who descended to earth to yield power over Tibetans. In addition, heaven is located above earth and can be accessed only in a vertical movement via a heavenly ladder (cf. *gnam gyi skas* in ITJ 733: 23, although the passage remains unintelligible to me). As mentioned in the previous section, *pruɣa kha*, the 'pinnacle' of the sky, received a figurative interpretation as a place where *phywa* and *lha* dwell (see (65)), becoming part and parcel of the heavenly abode. That heaven was imagined as equipped with a peak is confirmed by the compound *gnam rce* 'summit of heaven', populated by *mgon chun* according to PT 1043: 24. As opposed to the high sky (*gnam mtho*), heaven receives a less physical attribute of being vast (*gnam lhab*; see (73)).

(70) *gnam/ rim pha dguɣi/ steṅ du bcan bchun lhaɣ/ dkos/ na/ bźugs* (PT 1134: 132)
[Lheɣu Yaṅ-kha-rǰe, Pu-daṅ-mgyogs, and Nu-yid-mgyogs] abide above, in the nine-storeyed sky, in the place [of] Bcan-bchun's deities.

(71) *gnam rim pa dgu steṅ du mgon chun/ gdiṅs na re/*
la mto rgal gyaṅ/ myi pyugs mñam du rgal/

dam rab ɣbog gyaṅ/ myi pyugs mñam du rgal/
rchi dbyar sṅo dgun du sṅo yaṅ/
myi pyugs mñam du sṅo/
sṅo mo/ ṅar ɣgam yaṅ
myi pyugs/ mñam du ɣgam/
se mo bgrod legso/
gnam rim pa dgu/ ɣi
steṅ nas/ par gśegs na
se mo bgrod noṅste/
gru bźi bgrod noṅste/ (PT 1134: 19–23)
Above, [in] the nine-storeyed heaven, Mgon-chun-gdiṅs said:
"Crossing a high pass, men cross [it] together with cattle.
Wading a ford of the depths, men cross [it] together with cattle.
Grass is green in the summer; [it] is green in the winter.
Men [and] cattle bless (?) [it] together.
The greens, [their] stalks [they] consume.
Men consume together with cattle.
Crossing the grave is good."
From the nine-storeyed heaven
If [they] went over there (*par = phar*),
Crossing the grave is committing a fault.
Crossing the quadrangle is committing a fault.

(72) *gnam rīm pa bču gsum gyī steṅ/ khrī bar la bdun chīg/ śes bgyī//*
gnam gī lha las/ sa ga dog drug du// ɣgreṅ ɣgo nag gī rǰe myed gi rǰe// dud rṅog čhag bla myed kyī blar/ […] *yul bod ka g.yag* (r: *g.yaṅ*) *drug du byon źes mčhī//* (PT 1038: 12–7; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
From the top of the thirteen-storeyed heaven, from among the deities of heaven, Khri-bar-la-bdun-chig came to the six valleys, to the country Bod-ka, [the land] of six valleys, as the ruler of black-headed upright ones, that had had no ruler, as the superior of maned animals, that had had no superior.

(73) *gnam lhab kyi bla na// yab lha bdag drug bźugs pa ɣi sras* (PT 1286: 30)
The sons of Yab-lha Bdag-drug who dwells above the vast heaven

As already signalled in the above examples, heaven is the abode or place of origin of various groups of beings: (i) legendary progenitors of Tibetans (cf. Khri-bar-la-bdun-chig in (72) or Yab-lha Bdag-drug in (73)) or the likewise legendary founder of the Yar-luṅs dynasty Ɣo-lde Spu-rgyal (74), (ii) horses (75), and (iii) several classes of celestial

beings: *lha* in (70),[39] *phywa* in (76), and *bdud* in (77). The compound *gnam srin* (ITJ 739: 8v8) '*srin* of heaven' adds to the repository of virtual beings related to *gnam*.

(74) *ɣo lde spu rgyal// gnam gyī lha las myīɣi rǰer gśegs//* (Khri 1–2; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Ɣo-lde Spu-rgyal came from the gods of heaven as a ruler of men.

(75) *rta bźugs ni gnam la bźug{s}*
rmaṅ bźugs ni dguṅ la bźu[gs] naɣ […]
rta bab ni gnam nas bab
rmaṅ bab/ dguṅ nas bab/ / (ITJ 731: r41–3)
The horses dwelled; [they] dwelled in the heaven.
The steeds dwelled; [they] dwelled in the welkin.
The horses descended; [they] descended from the heaven.
The steeds descended; [they] descended from the welkin.

(76) *khyed čag gnam nas ɣoṅs* (PT 126: 127; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
You (i.e. *phywa*) came from heaven.

(77) *gnam nas ni bdud/* (8v9) *čhad* (ITJ 739: 8v8–9; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
bdud descended from heaven.

By extension, other phenomena can also take their origin in heaven, foremost catastrophes and diseases:

(78) *gnam gyī nad ka čho dgu/ skin ka* (r35) *lde brgyad gñī byuṅ zer las gtaṅ/* (PT 1285: r34)
Of heaven, nine families of diseases [and] eight classes of swellings were sent down.

Finally, heaven displays some anthropomorphic traits: it can show emotions (79), it has its way of acting and its laws (80)–(81), and it has the power of appointing elements of topography (82).

(79) *gnam myī dgaɣ bas/ / rluṅ dmar pos yul bkaɣb bo/ / gnam grum mo/ /* (ITJ 735: 20; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Because heaven was not happy, [it] covered the country with red wind. The sky fell to pieces (?).

(80) *broṅ zī leg paɣī sr[i]d bzaṅ po daṅ čhos bzaṅ po ni gnam du soṅ nas/ /* (ITJ 735: 7; trslr. *apud* OTDO)

[39] Cf. also *gnam lha* '*lha* of heaven' in ITJ 740: 74 and Źwa Rock 5 (*apud* OTDO).

Good government and fair laws of Broṅ-zi Leg-pa went to heaven.

(81) *gnam gyī čhos daṅ mchuṅs par ni/ bkaɣ brcan te* (Khri 8; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
[Khri Lde-sroṅ-brcan's] orders were mighty, similar to heaven's laws.

(82) *gnam gyis bskos paɣī/ / rī mthon po* [*daṅ*]*/ brag mthon po ni/ sa la myī lči ɣo/ /* (ITJ 735: 22; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
High mountains and high rocks heaven appointed are not heavy on earth.

3.3 Foreign influences

A somehow different image of *gnam* emerges from texts translated from foreign languages. I concentrate on PT 986, a translation of the Chinese *Shūjīng* 書經 'Book of Documents', and PT 1283, the original of which, it is assumed, was composed in a Turkic language. In the former text, *gnam* regularly translates Chinese *tiān* 天 (Coblin 1991: 529b). In accordance with the Chinese conceptualisations of *tiān*, *gnam* is presented as an active agent that issues orders,[40] appoints,[41] brings to life,[42] helps,[43] and expresses emotions.[44] This *gnam* has eyes and ears[45] and is capable of thinking.[46] Worshipping heaven is a form of paying it respect,[47] while its laws must be observed and guarded.[48] We have seen similar expressions about heaven's emotions and laws in previous examples, especially those from ITJ 735. It is, therefore, legitimate to ask about the sources of the image in this text: Did

[40] *gnam gyis čīɣu la bkaɣs scald* (PT 986: 12; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven commanded Čiɣu.'

[41] *gnam gyis* […] *bskos* (PT 986: 16–7; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven appointed [me].'

[42] *srid pa thams čhad gnam gyīs yod par byas pa ydi* (PT 986: 21; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'all these forms of existence that Heaven caused to be'.

[43] *gnam gyis bstaṅso/ /* (PT 986: 137; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven helped.'

[44] *gnam gis kyaṅ čīɣu gī legs pa ɣgrub par dgyes/* (PT 986: 136; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven rejoiced in the accomplishment of Zhou's good acts.'

[45] *gnam gyi spyan daṅ sñan* (PT 986: 22; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven's eyes and ears'; it is worth noting that the honorific *spyan* and *sñan* are used here.

[46] *gnam gyi dgoṅs pa* (PT 986: 52–3; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Heaven's thoughts/intentions'.

[47] *gnam daṅ sku bla daṅ źal bu la scogs pa ma gsol na* (PT 986: 15; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'If [they] do not worship Heaven, tutelary deities, and ancestors […].'

[48] *gnam gyi čhos gus par bsruṅ ba yin na/ /* (PT 986: 11; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'If laws of Heaven are respectfully protected […]'; *gnam la ñes ma byas* (PT 986: 65; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'Committed no crimes against Heaven'; *bdag gnam gyī luṅ gus par ñan te/ /* (PT 986: 84; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'I have respectfully heeded Heaven's command.'

Tibetans share it with the Chinese, or does Old Tibetan literature owe this motif to Chinese influences?

In an 'ethnographic' report of PT 1283, we find *gnam* in what seems to be a Turkic myth of origin interpolated into the main plot of the text (Venturi 2008: 9). The myth identifies *gnam* as the place of origin of the first dog that descended on earth.[49] No other Old Tibetan composition speaks of dogs or animals other than horses as having descended from heaven.

Another context in which we can see foreign traits are Old Tibetan divination texts that, despite being largely Tibetan compositions, display strong Chinese influences. Here, we shall mention isolated references to *gnam* with four corners that do not move in ITJ 742.[50] This text is concerned with coin divinations and frequently uses the Chinese borrowing *doṅ ce* 'coin' (< *tóngzǐ* 銅子 'copper coin').[51] According to Nishida (2011: 324ff.), *gnam gru bźi pa sde brgyad* and *gnam myi g.yo pa* refer to Buddhist deities which she identified with Ch. *sìtiānwáng bābùzhòng* 四天王八部衆 and *bùdòng míngwáng* 不動明王 (Skr. *acalanāta*). For grammatical reasons, it is difficult to see *sìtiānwáng* 四天王 behind *gnam gru bźi pa* for, firstly, Ch. *wáng* 王 would have to be translated with *gru* – an impossible rendition – and, secondly, the Chinese version is a simple noun phrase 'four deities', whereas Tibetan contains a possessive attribute 'having four corners'. Likewise, the second term is not a good translation, for the equivalent of Ch. *míngwáng* 明王, lit. 'bright ruler', would be *gnam* 'sky; heaven'. Nishida (ibid., p. 325) argued that Tibetans automatically translated Ch. *tiān* 天 with *gnam* also when the former was used in the meaning 'deity, god', but in ITJ 742, it is difficult to see how a deity could receive the attribute *gru bźi pa*. Moreover, *mi g.yo* is listed as a synonym of *nam mkhaŋ* by Das (2000: 737a). Whatever the direct model for ITJ 742, the text introduces two idiosyncratic images related to *gnam* as having four corners and being immovable.[52] These attributes better fit the

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[49] *khyi daṅ po gnam las bab* (PT 1283: 609; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'The first dog descended from heaven.'

[50] *doṅ che bźī gan na/ gnam gru bźī pa sde brgyad gī ṅo la bab ste/* (ITJ 742: 15; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'If four coins are obverse, [the divination] comes down to the prognostic of *gnam gru bźi pa sde brgyad* (lit. Eight Classes of Four-Cornered Heaven)'; *gnam myi g.yo pa myi ldag//* (ITJ 742: 32; trslr. *apud* OTDO) 'The sky that does not move, does not turn away'. I follow Nishida (2011: 324, n. 32) in reading *ldog* for the attested *ldag*. In the given context, the verb 'to lick' makes no sense. The syllable could also be read as *ltag*; the comparison with *gnod* in l. 30 proves that the scribe had difficulties distinguishing between *t* and *d*.

[51] For the text's translation and discusssion, see Nishida (2011).

[52] I agree with Nishida (ibid., p. 323) that *gnam daṅ po* (ITJ 742: 1; trslr. *apud* OTDO) should be amended to **gnaŋ daṅ po*.

Tibetan conceptualisations of the sky than heaven, as presented in the preceding sections. It is worth noting that *gnam* remained a technical term for an element in later Tibetan divination calculations where it is connected with the northwest (*nub byaṅ*).[53]

3.4 gnam ka *'heaven'*

A query of the OLT corpus has yielded one non-compounded derivation from *gnam*:

(83) *pha hi de čhen po gnam ka loṅ sum na bźugs*/ […] *ma pra dag bcun mo sa ga gdiṅ drug na bźugs* (ITJ 734: 6r246–7; trslr. *apud* OTDO)
Father Hi-de Čhen-po dwelled in the heaven Loṅ-sum; mother Pra-dag Bcun-mo dwelled on the earth Gdiṅ-drug.

The two clauses display a parallel structure with the following correspondences:

gnam ka ~ sa ga
loṅ sum ~ gdiṅ drug

I interpret *loṅ sum* and *gdiṅ drug* as proper names with the literal meanings 'three times' and 'six sweeps', respectively.[54] Syllables *-ka* and *-ga* in *gnam ka* and *sa ga* are pleonastic morphemes used here to meet the stylistic requirements of the genre by providing bisyllabic words (Bialek 2018: 2.570f.) Thus, *gnam ka* can be equated with *gnam* in the meaning 'heaven' as a place of origin of archetypical humans.

4. Heaven's Eye on Earth: nam ka *'thread cross'*

As an unexpected offshoot of the celestial semantics discussion, another word based on the root *nam* but seemingly devoid of any relation with 'sky' or 'heaven' has been uncovered: *nam ka*. In two OLT texts concerned with funerary rituals, *nam ka* denotes a physical object that is displayed in a funerary procession (84) and can be held in hand (85). Whereas the reading *nam ka* is well attested in PT 1042 (occurring

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[53] Schuh (2012: 4.1445). In the same genre, we also find the term *nam gru* as the name of the last twenty-seventh lunar mansion (*rgyu skar*). It remains to be clarified whether *gnam gru bźi pa* is related to this *nam gru*.

[54] I understand *gdiṅ* as a conversion from v3 *gdiṅ* of *ɣdiṅ* 'to spread on the ground'. The translation of *gdiṅ* is contextual; its etymological meaning was *'sth. spread on the ground', from which later 'carpet' etc. developed. Thomas interpreted *loṅ sum* as an abbreviated form of **loṅs spyod gsum* (1957: 90, fn. 11).

thrice in the text), in PT 1194 only the first syllable is legible. The last syllable in l. 32, right after *nam*, is not preserved due to paper damage. A comparison with other lines of the text suggests that the line lacks no more than one letter slot. Since the phrase right before the first *khyer* is in absolutive, I reconstruct **ka* after *nam*. Although not fully intelligible, the passage speaks of objects that can be held in hand (*lag na khyer*), and *nam ka* is the only word in OLT formed with *nam*, which may denote a physical object.

(84) *deɣi ɣog du/ zo rig/ deɣi ɣog du nam kaɣ/ deɣi ɣog du smra źal//*
deɣi ɣog du źal daṅ sku rten/ g.yas g.yos su mnabs sgye// (PT 1042: 30–1)
Thereafter, an image [of the deceased], thereafter a thread cross, thereafter a gold mask, thereafter effigies and armaments; to the right and left [were] bags of edibles.[55]

(85) *maɣi lag na thag zaṅs gzaṅs riṅs khyer te pu rkaṅ pa gčhago zer ro*
bu maɣi lag na mthiṅ gi nam [*ka*] *khyer te buɣi dmyig bru ɣis zer ro/* (PT 1194: 31–2)
"In mother's hand, having carried a long fine[56] rope, child's leg was broken." [They] say.
"Child, in mother's hand, having carried a thread cross of the sky,[57] child's eye was gouged out." [They] say.

This *nam ka*, distinct from *nam ka* discussed *supra*, appears to be historically identical with the CT word spelt *nam mkhaɣ* (sometimes abbreviated to *nam*). This low-frequency word is glossed as: '(*or just* nam) = *"sky-symbol", viz. thread-cross' (Snellgrove 1967: 301); 'verschiedenfarbige Fäden des *mdos*' (Tucci and Heissig 1970: 201); '[i]n ritual texts this item is made of wooden sticks in the form of a cross with multicolour strings drawn over it. It is often mistakenly described as a 'trap for demons'. This meaning is not found in any Tibetan ritual texts. Two interpretations of its significance are so far attested: 1. It symbolises the dwelling place of the spirits; 2. It also symbolises the mind (*sems*), because the *sems* is intangible like the sky' (Karmay 1998–2005: 329, fn. 75); 'thread-crosses; elaborate cross-shaped object made from thread, but it could also be made in other shapes, such as that of a *khyuṅ*' (Bellezza 2008: 234 & 407, fn. 162); '[e]in

[55] The same list is repeated almost verbatim in PT 1042: 49–51 and 124–5.
[56] I read *zaṅ zaṅ* for the attested *zaṅs gzaṅs*; cf. Bialek (2018: 2.487ff., s.v. *zaṅ yag*).
[57] For this meaning of *mthiṅ*, see Bialek (2018: 2.161). *mthiṅ* cannot be here a colour term, because these must follow the noun to which they apply; cf. the recurring phrase *gnam sṅon* 'blue sky'.

bestimmtes Fadenkreuz. Häufig auch als Geisterfalle bezeichnet' (Schuh 2012: 4.1442); 'Kurzf[orm] *nam* ein Fadenkreuz, um Geister einzufangen' (WtS: 6.70a); 'mdos' (Che-riṅ 2019: 220b, s.v. *nam kaɣ*); 'one or more small bamboo crosses strung with yarn to form a brightly colored web' (Ramble 2023: 449). Colour photographs of thread cross in modern ritual usage are reproduced in Ramble (2023); for black-and-white photographs, the reader may look up the classical publication of Hoffmann (1950, Tafel 3–6).

4.1 How many nam ka*?*

We have treated four lexemes of strikingly similar morphology: *nam mkhaɣ* '(celestial) space', *nam ka* 'sky', *nam ka* 'thread cross', and *gnam ka* 'heaven'. The question that begs to be answered is: Are these all historically distinct lexemes, or can some be variant spellings of one word?

By all appearances, the words *nam mkhaɣ* and *nam ka* were homophones in historical times; they were pronounced as [namka] due to the deaspiration rule in the second syllables of compounds (Bialek 2018: 1.212ff.) Conversely, the syllables *nam* and *gnam* had distinct pronunciations. I have also argued that *gnam ka* was a stylistic variant of *gnam*, so the former can be omitted from the present discussion. Since *nam mkhaɣ* '(celestial) space' and *nam ka* 'sky, airspace' surface preponderantly in non-indigenous texts, I think they represent one historical word: **nam mkhaɣ* '(celestial) space' that was coined to provide a new form for concepts introduced from another culture.

Among Sanskrit equivalents of *nam mkhaɣ* provided by Lokesh Chandra (2001: 448a–b) and Negi (1993: 2830a–1a), there is not even one formation that might have served as the model for the Tibetan compound *nam mkhaɣ*.[58] The Mvy knows of four terms: *ākāśa*, *gagana*, *vihāyasa*, and *kha*. Considering that *nam mkhaɣ* '(celestial) space' and *nam ka* 'sky' surface in literature which was copied, maybe even composed, in Tibetan colonies on the Silk Roads, I think that *nam mkhaɣ* was coined as a loan translation of Chinese *tiānkōng* 天空.[59] The latter word is not listed among Chinese Buddhist terms,[60] but it is

[58] The only compounded form is *khagapatha*, lit. 'way for going through the air' (Chandra 1959–61: 448a).

[59] Cf. *tiān* 天 '[1]the sky, the heavens; celestial (as physical quality); [2]heaven; [3]heaven-endowed; [4]natural; [5]tr[a]ns[lation] of Skr. *deva*, god, divinity, celestial being; divine' (Kroll et al. 2017: 450a–b); *kōng* 空 '[1]empty, void; vacant, unoccupied; [2]space; the sky, the air' (ibid., p. 241b).

[60] Soothill and Hodous (1937); Akira (1997).

attested in classical Chinese literature, at least from the time of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE).[61] Despite earlier statements that *nam mkhaɣ* could be a synonymic compound composed of OLT *nam* and Skr. *kha* (Pathak 1958: 168), thus far identified bilingual compounds display the opposite structure in OLT, namely 'loanword+Tibetan synonym', i.e. the loanword is their *first* constituent (Bialek 2018: 1.188 & 2.258).

In conclusion, the native Tibetan lexicon included two words: *nam ka* 'thread cross' and *gnam ka* 'heaven'; the latter was a stylistically marked variant of *gnam*. In order to represent concepts previously not known in Tibetan culture and to meet the requirements of translations, a new term, *nam mkhaɣ*, was introduced modelled on Ch. *tiānkōng* 天空. Since *nam mkhaɣ* and *nam ka* had the same pronunciation and the latter possessed high cultural value, the two terms tended to be confused in written language. The result was the homonymy of *nam ka* 'thread cross' and *nam ka* (< *nam mkhaɣ*) 'sky, airspace'. Later, when *nam mkhaɣ* became well established in the language due to Buddhist literature, the original *nam ka* 'thread cross' received a new spelling: *nam mkhaɣ*, and the spelling *nam ka* fell into disuse.

4.2 The anatomy of thread cross

Despite their diverging origins, along with *nam ka* 'sky, airspace', OLT had a homophone denoting a ritual object popularly called 'thread cross'. However, is there any historical relationship between *nam ka* 'thread cross' and *nam* 'sky'? Before answering this question, we shall look at the Tibetan terms hitherto identified as names for thread crosses or comparable ritual paraphernalia. The survey has yielded seven relevant lexemes, provided below with their etymological meanings and sample passages to demonstrate their use in text. The high number of terms with seemingly identical denotation suggests either underlying functional differences in the ritual use of the respective objects or the terms' distinct origins as being coined in varying socio-religious circumstances bound to a particular temporal setting and location of the practitioners. A comprehensive philological study enhanced by an ethnographic survey would significantly improve our understanding of those terms' semantic nuances encoded lexically. However, we should be aware that their meanings in much later texts or modern rituals might be fruits of long-lasting processes of folk etymologisation or historical accommodation and do not

[61] Source: CTEXT (https://ctext.org/dictionary.pl?if=gb&remap=gb&char=%E5%A4%A9%E7%A9%BA; accessed 29.10.2023).

necessarily contribute to elucidating terms' etymologies or objects' primary functions.

- OLT *rgyal thag brgyad* < **rgya thag brgyad* 'eight threaded net'[62]
- CT *dra chugs čan* *'lattice-shaped one' < **dra chugs* 'lattice shape'
- CT *mdos* *'threads' < *mdo* 'skud pa' (BDSN *apud* Mimaki 1992: 482)[63]
- CT *thags* 'web' < √tag 'to weave'
- CT *yas thags* < **yas paɣi thags* 'web that spreads'[64]
- CT *yas* < **yas thags*[65]
- *mdos ris* = synonym of *nam mkhaɣ* < 'part of a *mdos*'[66]

(86) *rgya bon brim taṅ gis*/
rgyal tag brgyad/ *ni*/ *gnam laṣ*/ *bre*[*s*]
se gru bži ni/ *sa la*/ *bčhas*/ (PT 1134: 119–20)
Brim-taṅ, the Bon [priest responsible for the eight-threaded] net,
Spread the eight-threaded net in the sky [and]
Prepared the grave on the ground.

(87) *groṅs pa bdur* (3) *dus su*/
duṅ sbreɣu dkar po la
mthiṅ yi dra (4) *chugs čan les* (r: *lhas*) *bźiṅso* (r: *bźeṅso*)/ / (*Steɣu* 4r4: 2–4)
When [they] buried the dead one,

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62 For this etymology, see Bialek (2018: 1.464ff.)

63 Cf.: "*mdos* is apparently derived by means of the collective suffix *-s* from *mdo* '[1]the lower part of a valley; [2]aphorism, short sentence or rule, axiom; [3]Skr. *sūtra*' (J: 273b; < *'thread; that which runs through everything like a thread')" (Bialek 2018: 1.467, fn. 1). In their later usage, as documented by ethnographers, *mdos* are more complex ritual structures that include thread crosses (Ramble 2023: 450). Blondeau (2022) criticised the confusion of the terms *nam mkhaɣ* and *mdos* in Western works. However, her conclusions concerning the nature of the respective objects are based on relatively late literature and should not be automatically projected back to the deep past.

64 An alternative spelling is *yas stags*, cf. (88) *infra*. The verb *yas* is glossed as 'to blossom, to flourish, to spread; to prosper' (CDTD.V: 1153). I assume that *mas stags* was coined later by analogy with *yas stags* after the original meaning of *yas* had faded into oblivion; compare hereto Blondeau's statement: "[W]hile *yas stags* (and its variants) are frequently found in rituals, the occurrence of *mas stags* is rare if not doubtful" (2022: 23).

65 As far as I was able to ascertain, *yas* denoting a ritual object is attested in OLT only in the compound *yas ɣdod* (see (90) *infra*), which leaves the question open as to whether the underlying word was *yas* or *yas thags*. In later literary usage, *mdos* and *yas* seem to have coalesced (Blondeau 2022: 4f.)

66 Blondeau (2022: 22, n. 12) gives a personal communication of Dwags-po Rinpoche as the source for this term, which I have not encountered yet in literary works.

Over a small white conch-tent
[They] raised a plait, a lattice-shaped one of the sky.[67]

(88) *mdos daṅ yas stags rɲas rnams bsag/ /* (*Gzi brǰid*; trslr. *apud* Snellgrove 1967: 36.7)
Ritual objects [such as] *mdos* and **yas thags* were collected.

(89) *ya rabs źaṅ blon gyi rkyen du čhos daṅ yig chaṅ bskos*
ma rabs g.yuṅ poɣi rkyen du thags daṅ bon bskos/ (Mkhas-pa-ldeɣu, *Rgya bod kyi čhos ɣbyuṅ rgyas pa*; trslr. *apud* Dotson 2007: 304; for parallel clauses from Dpaɣ-bo Gcug-lag and Ldeɣu J̌o-sras, see Dotson 2007: 304f.)
As a support for the upper-class aristocrats, [one] destined the law and insignia.
As a support for the lower-class weaklings (i.e. non-warriors), [one] destined *thags* and *bon*.

(90) *myī nag po ɣi gźuṅ/ /*
śīd nag po ɣi lugs/ /
bon yas ɣdod {kyi} smraṅ/ /
ɣdre gsur ɣdod gyī rabs las/ /
myī bas nī lug ɣjaṅs la/ /
myī bas kyaṅ lug mthu čhe bar
ɣbyuṅ ba yaṅ/ / (PT 239 : r7.4–r8.1)
From the tradition of unrighteous (lit. black) men,
Customs of unrighteous funerals,
Narratives of origin of *bon* specialists, who wish *yas*,[68]
Accounts of a succession of fiends who wish burnt offerings,
[It] occurs that
A sheep is wiser than a man [and that]
A sheep is more powerful than a man.

The most conspicuous property of all the terms is their reliance on words connoting nets, especially those obtained by connecting threads. The terms are descriptive, alluding to the most apparent physical feature of the ritual objects, namely their net-like composition.

In this regard, *nam ka* overtly diverges from the pattern, for its underlying structure is reconstructible as **nam gyi kha*, lit. 'opening of

[67] For *mthiṅ yi dra chugs čan* compare *mthiṅ gi nam ka* in (86).
[68] In an analogous passage, ITJ 504: r1.2 reads *bon dpags ɣdod*, lit. 'profit-wishing *bon* specialists'.

the sky'.[69] Its derivation from the root *nam* in the primary meaning 'sky' proves the term's considerable age that certainly pre-dates the coinage of *gnam* from the same root. As shown *supra*, in imperial Tibet, the sky was conceptualised as possessing an opening, for which the unmarked term *mthoṅs* 'oculus' was customarily used. The same opening may be alluded to in (85), where holding a *nam ka* results in losing one's sight; notice also the co-occurrence of *nam ka* with *mthiṅ* 'sky' in the same passage. Moreover, OLT texts repeatedly state that a thread cross was raised in the sky, so in (86). However, our sources remain very enigmatic on the ritual functions of the objects.

An interesting aspect of *nam ka* and *rgyal thag brgyad* in OLT is their exclusive occurrence in texts related to funerary rituals. This context is also shared by the term *dra chugs čan*, found thus far only in the so-called *Steɣu* text.[70] Two other contemporary examples are ethnographically documented and concern the funeral use of thread crosses or *mdos* in Mustang (Nepal) and among the Pronmi people, a Tibetan-speaking group of Sichuan (Ramble 2022: 4). Otherwise, thread crosses are not reported as part of funeral rituals in ethnographic literature[71] on Tibetan societies, but they are well documented among other groups of TH speakers.[72] Back to OLT, even though *nam ka* 'sky's opening' is sparsely attested, we notice its functional complementarity to **rgya thag brgyad*; the former is held in hand and carried at the head of a funerary procession, whereas the latter is said to be spread (*ɣbres*, *gčhor*) or constructed (*bčhas*) on purlieus (*bas*) in preparation for a funeral. The impression arises that *nam ka* was kept close to ritual participants. Thus, one possible explanation would see *nam ka* as representing the sky's opening, but the term was intended as a euphemism to conceal the object's ritual function, which consisted in simulating the oculus to hinder the unwanted and potentially dangerous guests from the other world.[73] According to this interpretation, *nam ka* would have had a protective function. A fishing

[69] The loss of aspiration in the second syllable of a compound is a common phenomenon in OLT (Bialek 2018: 1.212ff.)

[70] On the *Steɣu* text, see Huber (2018).

[71] Regarding the modern use of *mdos*, Hoffmann wrote: "Die Verwendung der Fadenkreuze gestaltet sich recht verschiedenartig. Besonders häufig findet man sie an den Eingängen des Hauses, wo sie zum Schutze gegen die Geister der Erde und des Himmels angebracht werden. Man glaubt durch sie eine Versperrung der 'Erdtür' (*sa-sgo*) und der 'Himmelstür' (*gnam-sgo*) zu bewirken, durch die sich die Geister sonst an die Menschen heranmachen könnten" (1950: 182).

[72] See Bialek (2018: 1.468f.)

[73] In the early post-imperial *Skyid paɣi g.yuṅ ruṅ du gdugs brdal ma* ("Canopy of Everlasting Joy"), the protective deity (*skuɣi lha*) of Spu-rgyal Bcan-po comes from the sky through *mthoṅs* 'oculus' (4.5–5.1), attesting to the latter's conceptualisation as a gate between the celestial and mundane domains.

net fulfils a comparable function when spread over an afflicted family in a ritual documented among Kham Magar (Nepal): "The protective fishing net is prescribed in all cases of unnatural accidents, as in the event of the untimely death of a child, which will subsequently haunt the mother's other children" (Oppitz 2021: 184). The net is supposed to confuse demons by providing too many 'openings' to enter.[74] Royal funeral ceremonies in imperial Tibet might have supplied the ritual context from which thread crosses spread to other domains of human life, whenever protection from evil forces was sought.

5. Conclusions

The concepts of SKY and HEAVEN are frequently colexified in the world's languages. It is, therefore, unsurprising to see that, according to CLICS^3, 'heaven' is the meaning most commonly expressed by the same word as 'sky'; this colexification occurs in 120 language varieties.[75] In this regard, Old Literary Tibetan conforms to the tendencies observed elsewhere, although curiously, no Tibetic language surfaces in the dataset.

Figure 2 outlines the most important developments involving the root *nam* and its closest derivatives, which I have discussed in this article. Five distinct senses disclosed for *nam*, as against one or two of the other words, imply the word's deeper history in the language confirmed by its inherited status. Besides true derivatives such as *nam ka* 'thread cross' and *nam mkhaɣ* 'celestial space', the survey has revealed spurious words in the lexicon (grey colour in Fig. 2) either formed to meet stylistic requirements (*gnam ka*) or introduced by confusion of two homophones, *nam ka* 'thread cross' and *nam mkhaɣ* 'celestial space', from whose union *nam ka* 'sky, airspace' emerged. The last-mentioned word owes its morphological form to the identical pronunciation of *nam mkhaɣ* and *nam ka* in the spoken language, but its semantics was shaped by *nam mkhaɣ* and the identification of its root *nam* with *nam* 'sky'.

[74] I wish to thank Charles Ramble for this reference and explanation.
[75] See Database of Cross-Linguistic Colexifications, CLICS^3; accessed 11.04.2025.

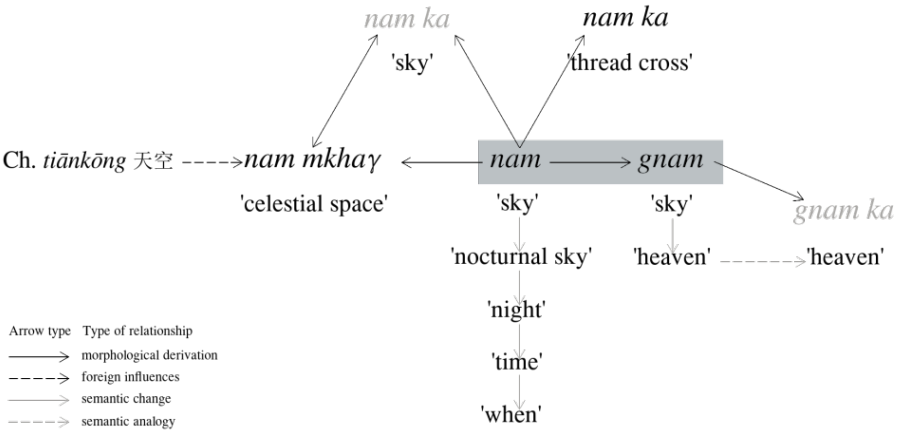


Figure 2 — Word family of nam.

The significant changes in the internal semantic composition of this word family were triggered by the introduction of the loan translation *nam mkhaɣ* modelled on Chinese *tiānkōng* 天空. This case illustrates not only that *nam mkhaɣ* was recognised as part and parcel of the Old Tibetan lexicon but also that loan translations may receive core status being treated on par with native vocabulary.

Counter to our intuition, however, three words attested with the meaning 'sky', i.e. *nam*, *nam ka*, and *gnam*, display diverging patterns in their semantic prosody. Despite their seemingly identical meanings, the three occur in our corpus for the most part in distinct collocations (see Appendix B). Their almost complementary distribution may be a surface consequence of historical shifts in the SKY concept itself sparked by the new system of thought introduced with Buddhism and fuelled by socio-historical changes experienced in the expanding empire. This analysis brings out deeper semantic distinctions into the open, revealing that (i) the words were not perfect synonyms and (ii) a more nuanced treatment of lexical units is a necessary precondition for elucidating diachronic semantic change, patterns of colexification, or synchronic internal structure of the lexicon.

Last but not least, the article has delivered another argument that concerted implementation of philological, lexicological, and etymological analyses can enhance our understanding of the culture behind a language system. To wit, *nam ka* 'thread cross' was not only a word, a unit of a lexicon, but it also designated a culturally important object whose ritual function was hitherto barely – if at all – sensed. With the new etymology proposed above, **nam gyi kha* 'sky's opening', we can sensibly connect the object's application in funerary rituals to the cosmological system adhered to by the elites of the Tibetan Empire.

'Heaven's eye on earth', or the oculus, was a defence shield for Tibetans to protect the vulnerables from malicious intruders and, for us, a window to the intricacies of their conceptual world.

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Symbols and Abbreviations

*	reconstructed form or meaning
Adv	adverb
Brag	Brag-lha-mo inscription
Bsam	Bsam-yas inscription
Ch.	Chinese
CT	Classical Tibetan
GEN	genitive
HON	honorific
ITJ	IOL Tib J
ITN	IOL Tib N
Khri	inscription at Khri Lde-sroṅ-brcan's tomb
Khrom	Khrom-čhen inscription
Lčaṅ	Lčaṅ-bu inscription
Lho	Lho-brag inscription
LT	Literary Tibetan
MC	Middle Chinese
N	noun
OLT	Old Literary Tibetan
Or.	Oriental Collections of the British Library
PT	[1]Pelliot tibétain; [2]Proto-Tibetic
PTH	Proto-Trans-Himalayan
r	read
Rkoṅ	Rkoṅ-po inscription
Skar	Skar-čuṅ inscription
Skr.	Sanskrit
TERM	terminative
TH	Trans-Himalayan
trslr.	transliteration
Tu	Turfan
W	west-facing inscription
Źwa	Źwaɣi-lha-khaṅ inscription

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Database of Cross-Linguistic Colexifications; https://clics.clld.org/

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Appendix A. Distribution of nam *in distinct meanings*

	sky	nocturnal sky	night	time	when
PT 1285	13	15			
Or.8210/S.155	2	3			
ITJ 731	2	1			
PT 1134	1	1			
PT 1068	1				
PT 126		1		2	
PT 1047		1		1	
PT 1136		1			
ITJ 730		1			
ITJ 732		1			
Or.8210/S.2736		1			
PT 1042			2		
PT 1283				3	
ITJ 737-1				3	
ITJ 737-2				2	
Or.8210/S.1000				2	
Lho				2	
Skar				2	
ITJ 751				1	1
PT 981				1	
ITJ 738				1	
ITJ 1374				1	
Or.15000/436				1	
Tu 18				1	
ITN 1282				1	
Brag_A				1	
Bsam				1	
Khri				1	
Khrom				1	
Lčaṅ				1	

Rkoṅ	1
Źwa_W	1

Appendix B. Collocations of words with the meaning 'sky'

	nam 'sky'	*nam ka* 'sky'	*gnam* 'sky'
X+GEN *rlad*	6		
X+GEN *tho ras*	5		
X *sros*	5		
X+*nas*	1		
X+GEN *ɣon*	1		
X+GEN *śo*	1		
X(+GEN) *dbyiṅs*		4	
X *gaṅ ba*		3	1
X+*las* Y *byuṅ*		3	
X+*la khyer*		3	
X+*la ɣphur*		2	1
X *bźin*		2	
X *phan phun*		2	
X+*daṅ mchuṅs*		2	
X(+*daṅ*) *ɣdra*		1	1
X *ltar*		1	
X *daṅ sa gźi*		1	
X+GEN *mthaɣ*		1	
X+GEN *mye*		1	
X+GEN *raṅ bźin*		1	
X+GEN *skar ma*		1	
X+*la ɣbab*		1	
X+*la* (*ma*) *thar*		1	
X *mthaɣ ɣog*			9
X+TERM *yer*			9
X+GEN *pha mthaɣ*			8

	nam ʻsky'	*nam ka* ʻsky'	*gnam* ʻsky'
X+GEN *pruɣu kha*			4
X+GEN *ya bla*			4
X(+GEN) *mthaɣ bźi*			4
X+GEN *mthoṅs*			3
X *daṅ sa*			2
X *grum*			2
X+*las bab*			2
X+TERM *bus*			2
X+TERM *phur*			2
X+TERM			1
X *sṅo*			1
X *čhed*/*čhen po*			1
X *daṅ gaṅs*			1
X *daṅ brag*			1
X *daṅ g.yaɣ*			1
X+GEN *ṅad*			1
X+GEN *dbus*			1
X+GEN *źiṅ*			1
X+GEN *ɣog*			1
X+GEN *g.yen dgu*			1
X *dgyes*			1
X *rdib*			1
X (*myi*) *g.yo*			1
X+*la gtugs*			1
X+*las phab*			1
X+*la bźugs*			1
X+*la sñogs*			1
X+*nas bab*			1
X+TERM *ɣgreṅ*			1
X+TERM *rgal*			1
X+TERM *mčhis*			1
X+TERM *mñen*			1

	nam 'sky'	*nam ka* 'sky'	*gnam* 'sky'
X+TERM *bstan*			1
X+TERM *draṅs*			1
X+TERM *brdabs*			1

