PART TWO:
TRANSMISSION, PROFESSIONALISATION,
AND ISSUES OF IDENTITY
BON LINEAGE DOCTORS AND THE LOCAL TRANSMISSION OF KNOWING MEDICAL PRACTICE IN NAGCHU

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The physician without medical lineage,  
Like the fox who seized the royal throne,  
Is not able to gain everyone’s respect,  
And even if respected, cannot hold the kingdom down.¹

INTRODUCTION

This saying from the standard Tibetan medical text, the *Rgyud bzhi*, was cited repeatedly to me by several senior lineage doctors in Nagchu (TAR) when asked about the particularities of medical knowledge through the transmission by lineage. It may also indicate the social importance of respect and trust invested by patients in the status of a ‘lineage doctor’ (*sman pa rgyud pa*).² Furthermore, the fact that the lineage doctors interviewed were senior and Bon po, and were practicing mostly inside their communities, might play a considerable role in the way they perceive themselves and were perceived by their patients in terms of transmission of, and trust in local medical knowledge and practice.³ As Dondrup Lhagyal has pointed out, in the Bon religion “the family lineage, rather than spiritual succession from master to disciple, was considered important”.⁴ In this chapter, however, lineage is under-

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¹ Plate 1, see overleaf. Source: Gyurme Dorje et al. 1992: 90. *Sman pa de’i rgyal sa bzung ba bzhin / kun gyis spyi bor bkur mi nus / bkur kyang rgyal sa non mi’gyur*. This saying is written down in the *Explanatory Tantra (Bshad rgyud)* of the Four Tantras (*Rgyud bzhi*), in the 31st chapter which deals with the qualities of a doctor (*sman pa’i le’u*).

² *Sman pa* was the colloquial term for Tibetan ‘doctor’ used by all my informants throughout Nagchu. *Sman pa* is also customarily used in Amdo dialects, whereas ‘amchi’ is common in Lhasa and Southwestern Tibet, as well as in the Himalayas (India, Nepal) and in Tibetan exile.

³ My informants repeatedly stressed that their religious affiliation would play no role whatsoever in their practice or their patients’ choice to be treated by them.

⁴ Dondrup Lhagyal 2000: 429. This author demonstrates that from the 10th century onwards, five Bon family lineages from Central Tibet became crucially important as lama lineages, in the establishment of monasteries, and thereby laid the foundations in different areas for the continuation of their socio-political influence and Bon monasticism.