PART THREE:
BODIES, SPIRIT(S) AND ILLNESS
This study deals with the concept of a ‘subtle life essence’, known in Tibetan as bla (usually pronounced ‘la’), which pervades Tibetan and Himalayan folk, literary, medical, astrological and religious practices. The author suggests that the diverse practices of bla appear with great variation among the enclaved populations across the Himalayas.¹ Their origins might even go back to a pre-Buddhist folk concept found throughout the region, since we know that in early sources the terms lha (‘deity’), and bla seem to be used synonymously, such as inSKU bla, which means ‘personal guardian deity’.²

Bla beliefs and practices are complex and ambiguous, and to date have not been researched well enough to define a clear overview. The 30 seats of bla in the body, known as bla gnas, appear only in classical Tibetan medical and some astrological texts, and are said to originate from the Indian Kālacakra Tantra.³ Bla gnas are unknown in the bla folk practices of the Yolmowa or Tamang mentioned in the ethnographic examples of this paper.

The Sherpa, Khumbo, Yolmowa and Dolpowa, among whom anthropologists have witnessed bla rituals, belong to the enclaved pop-

¹ The practices are also prevalent in Mongolia and Buryatia. A few years ago, I came across a Buryat manuscript describing the flow of bla in horses. Bla also corresponds to concepts of the Northeast Thai khwan discussed by Tambiah (1985), the notion of rewaay or ‘head soul’ studied by Roseman in Malaysia (1991), and the Mongolian siins elucidated by Bawden (1962).

² The cult of SKU bla in relation to royal religion was first analysed by Ariane Macdonald (1971) and further discussed by Karmay (1996) and points to the existence of a bla of a (royal) family, or even a whole nation. For a general overview on bla in relation to lha see Samuel (1993: 186–91).

³ There may be Indian parallels to the seats of passion in women, which partly correspond to the bla gnas. See Burton’s translation of the Ananga Ranga for details at http://www.sacred-texts.com/sex/ar/ar04.htm (accessed on 26.8.2004).