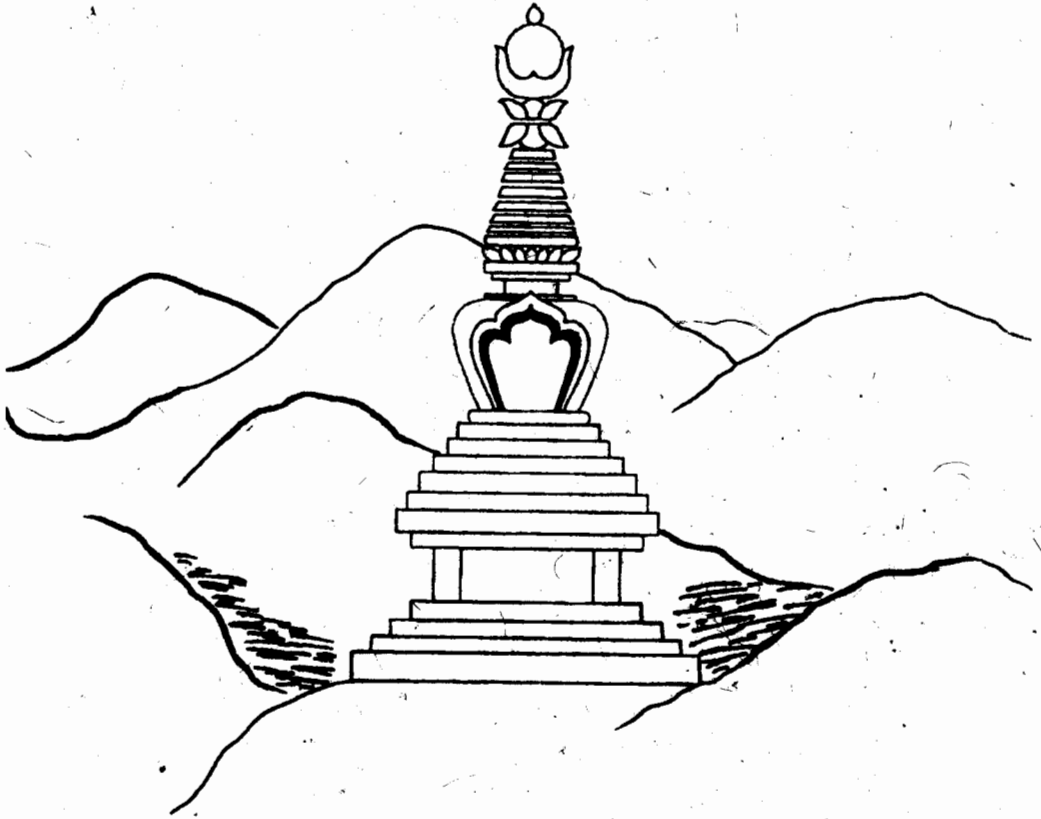


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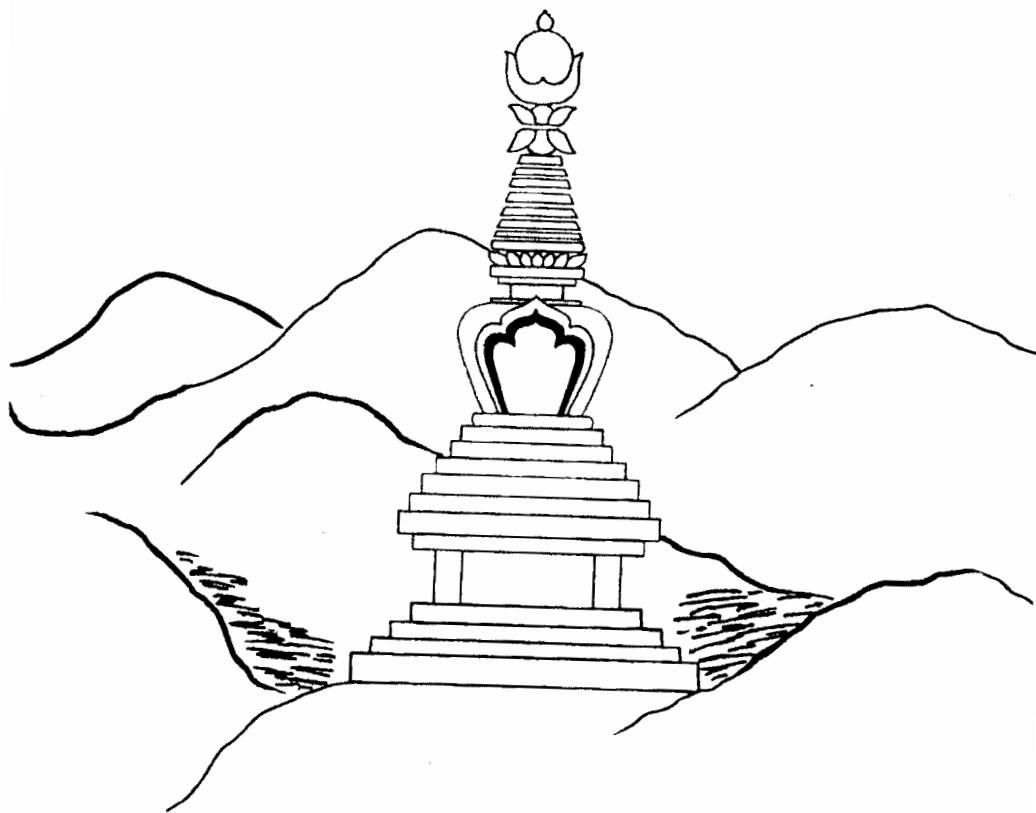
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GANGTOK, SIKKIM

The Bulletin of Tibetology seeks to serve the specialist as well as the general reader with an interest in the field of study. The motif portraying the Stupa on the mountains suggests the dimensions of the field.

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BULLETIN OF TIBETOLOGY

Volume 40 Number 1 2004

**CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF
SIKKIM AND THE EASTERN HIMALAYAS**

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PILGRIMAGE AND INCEST:
THE CASE OF CHORTEN NYIMA (MCHOD RTEN NYI MA)
ON THE TIBETO-SIKKIMESE BORDER

KATIA BUFFETRILLE
*EPHE Paris*¹

“La société n'interdit que ce qu'elle suscite”²

Among the many benefits said to accrue from pilgrimage to a sacred site is the purification of misdeeds, defilements and sins. Pilgrimage may also allow a person to regain his or her former standing in society after having committed a misdeed or indiscretion that disrupted the community. The case of mChod rten nyi ma is a particularly striking one of the power of such a pilgrimage.

I. MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

I first heard of a sacred place called mChod rten nyi ma in 1989. I had asked an old woman, a native of the village of Chiplung,³ in gTsang, what, in her view, were the most important pilgrimages. The first one she mentioned was that to mChod rten nyi ma, adding that it was particularly efficacious in three cases:

- When “somebody sleeps with a relative,” *spun zla nyal po byed pa* (i.e., in cases of incest);
- Following parricide or matricide;

¹ This article was first published in French in “Tibetan Mountain Deities. Their Cults and Representations.” *Proceedings of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*, Graz, 18-24 June 1995. Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie des Wissenschaften. Wien 1998: 19-42. I am grateful to A.M. Blondeau, R. Hamayon, and D. Lopez for their comments, suggestions and corrections. Last but not least, I want to thank P. Pierce of the Nepal Research Centre (Kathmandu) who assisted me with the English translation.

² C. Lévi-Strauss ([1947] 1967: 22).

³ Tibetan spelling not restored.

- If one has a close relationship with a person of low status (*rigs ngan*).

She immediately made it clear that, although she had made this pilgrimage herself, she did not do so for any of these three reasons, and that pilgrims came in great numbers not only from Central Tibet but also from Khams.

The sacred place included, she said, a spring that Padmasambhava created with his stick; a mountain in the form of the shoulders of a lama wearing a cape; a sacred lake which gave rise to visions (usually that of a monastery which appeared in the lake to those who were successfully purified). She added that for the unsuccessful this same image was still perceptible, but upside down. She also mentioned the presence of a *stūpa* and a monastery.

I eventually discovered that this sacred place was very well known to many Tibetans. I had only to mention mChod rten nyi ma in the presence of people from gTsang or dBus, or to many Sherpas as well, and as soon, the notion of incest was invoked. Parricide and matricide were often mentioned as well. People would sometimes recite the reasons to go to mChod rten nyi ma like a litany, as had my first informant. Each informant also denied having gone there for one of these purposes; all considered this sacred place to be particularly potent and said that they had gone there for this reason alone. The A mdo ba and the Khams pa whom I questioned, however seemed not to even know its name, and there were many among them for whom the idea of a pilgrimage to purify the defilement of incest seemed almost unimaginable; if some would admit that this transgression might exist in Central Tibet, they denied completely the practice in the eastern provinces.

The literature contains occasional reference to this place, particularly the pass bearing the same name. The latter is located on the frontier between Sikkim and Tibet, and has been negotiated by various explorers including Captain J. Noel (see Lhalungpa 1983: 151); pandits such as Rinzin Namgyal⁴ (see Das [1902] 1970); climbers (see Freshfield [1903] 1979); and political officers (see White [1909] 1984: 92).

⁴ Rinchen Namgyal traveled around the Gangs chen mdzod lnga (the Kanchenjunga of the alpinists) in 1885. Letter from H.E. Richardson: 11-1-1991.

1. *mChod rten nyi ma* in Western literature

mChod rten nyi ma, also called *rDo rje nyi ma*, is a sacred place to the south of *Sa skya*, on the border with Sikkim but still in Tibetan territory (see map). Located in a wide valley, it is dominated by high cliffs and snowy peaks. The *mChod rten nyi ma* Range consists of fourteen such peaks, with an average height of 6,700 meters; the highest, called *mChod rten nyi ma*, rises to 6,927 metres (Chan 1994: 806). D. Freshfield went there at the beginning of the 20th century, and he describes the place as having a lake (from which a river issues), a *stūpa*, some monastic cells and carved stone walls. He adds that every year pilgrims from all parts of Tibet, as well as from Mongolia and China, make their way there. A. David-Neel arrived in 1912. She was struck by the beauty of the landscape and the aridity caused by the high altitude. At that time the monastery lay in ruins, she writes, though this does not appear clearly in her photographs (1979: 28). She speaks of one hundred and eight springs, some cold, others hot, the majority of which can be seen only by “those who have a particularly pure mind”⁵ ([1929] 1977: 73-77) and notes that she rode on horseback for four days from *mChod rten nyi ma* before the golden roofs of the monastery of *bKra shis lhun po*, at *Shigatse*, came into view (quoted by Miller 1984: 156). Lama Anagarika Govinda ([1969] 1976: 24) describes “a large and open place with, here and there, snowy peaks which pierce the sky, which is of the dark blue typical of these high altitudes.”⁶ V. Chan (1994: 808) locates the site within a one-day walk from Sikkim: a newly built road leads there from the bridge at *Sa skya*; the pilgrims from Central Tibet now come by truck, their numbers often reaching one hundred a day during the season (which is not specified). In the past, this monastery accommodated a community of monks and nuns. When A. David-Neel passed through, there were four nuns in residence. V. Chan (1994: 806) places the number at “12 nuns and some monks.” According to an informant from *rTsa skor*, a village located to the south of the sacred mountain of *rTsib ri*, on the road leading from Nepal to Lhasa, the religious community resides there only in summer, conditions being too harsh during the winter because of the high altitude. V. Chan indicates (1994: 801-10) a line of *stūpas* at the entrance of the monastic complex, the presence of three other

⁵ My translation.

⁶ My translation.

stūpas and a monastery, the most important chapel of which, on the western side, is dedicated to Hayagrīva.

2. Oral testimonies

All the informants agree on the presence of a lake, a spring, a mountain, a monastery and a *stūpa*, but the number of the latter varies from person to person: sometimes they speak of one, other times three, occasionally four (one big and three small), and once thirteen (which may correspond to the set V. Chan mentions). According to information A.M. Blondeau obtained in 1991,⁷ one finds there the Gu ru mchod rten, the history of which is as follows: when Padmasambhava came to this place, there were three demons (*bdud*) one of which was called Srin po. In order to defeat them, the Indian saint drove his stick into the earth. One black *stūpa* was built there, and the demon is confined beneath it. This *stūpa* stands alone and is located in a deserted place (*sa cha stong pa*).

Two of my Sherpa informants localized the source of the spring as being under a *stūpa* (they did not specify which one). The lake that gives rise to visions is commonly noted not only for its purifying role but also for its function as a mirror: young single women can see in it the village into which they will marry (informant from Walungchu Gola, eastern Nepal). Also, not only one lake may be mentioned but two, one white ('O ma mtsho) and one black (Nag po mtsho).⁸

There is general unanimity on the motives that lead people to go on pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma, the most striking being purification from incest.

During an interview I conducted in 1989, in Nepal, with an inhabitant of the village of bKong rtsa, located to the north of rTsig ri (southern Tibet), I learned that there was a case of incest among his kin. The daughter of one of his "aunts" had a relationship with the son of a relative (he could not specify the degree of kinship). The couple considered leaving but eventually decided to stay. Once the facts were known, they were beaten by the villagers and sent to mChod rten nyi ma. There they were compelled to bathe in the lake and then in the

⁷ Her informant came from gTsang and was about forty years old.

⁸ The theme of a malevolent black lake inhabited by a demon and located close to a beneficial lake is common. For other examples of malevolent counterparts, see K. Buffetrille (1993: 106).

spring. After the bath, they went to the monastery to obtain a letter affixed with a seal certifying their compliance with the rite. (To have gone back to bKong rtsa without this paper would have been equivalent, in the eyes of the community, to not having gone on the pilgrimage, and would have led the villagers to send them back to mChod rten nyi ma once more.) When they returned, they re-entered their respective families and regained their former position in the community. One child was born from this union but died almost immediately, which obviated the determination of its status.

In this story, it is stated clearly that the *couple* was sent to mChod rten nyi ma; but the villager from Walungchu Gola provided another scenario: if, in the guilty couple, the man belongs to a superior social class, his mother accompanies him, but if it is the woman who enjoys a superior status, her father accompanies her. Thus far, I have no other testimony corroborating this assertion. Other versions were not as detailed but did contain another contradiction: it is not always the couple who is sent to mChod rten nyi ma but sometimes only the man.

One Sherpa informant who had lived in Lhasa for a long time maintained that the offenders were sent to mChod rten nyi ma on a bullock and were accompanied by a man on a horse. On the way back, the pair had to walk. This information, although isolated, seems important. The expulsion of criminals by means of a brown bullock is, as we will see, a punishment already noted in the literature (Karmay 1991: 362).

My informants never mentioned any stigma being attached to incestuous persons who returned to their village with the certificate.

3. *The stories*

The information provided by Prince Peter of Greece (1963: 455) corroborates in part the preceding. In 1952, he met the abbot of the monastery of mChod rten snying (?) ma in Kalimpong (Bengal), and inquired into his past:

It appeared that he was the abbot of the monastery at Chöten Nyingma, and that the latter was a very special one in Tibet, because the waters of the lake had the property of being able to wash away the sin of incest. Anyone having had sexual relations with somebody within the prohibited degree of consanguinity could be purified of the pollution by making a pilgrimage to Chöten Nyingma Tso (lake) where, after having

plunged in its waters, he or she would make an offering to the monastery. The abbot whom I met would, in exchange, deliver a certificate that the person was now absolved of all sin, and the petitioner could go home satisfied and appeased. It appeared that the principal source of revenue of this particular monastery came from this trade in certificates, and that this was the reason for the prosperous appearance of the Incarnation whom I just met.

One of the nuns at the monastery when A. David-Neel visited ([1929] 1977: 92) asserted that the lama of the place resided in Grang lung,⁹ a one-day walk away, and was a very rich Tantrist, able to perform many wonders such as making rain or hail fall or stop. It is well-known in the Tibetan world that devotees make donations to the monastic community in proportion to their wealth or to their requests, which is a sufficient background to explain putative cases of affluence among the priesthood.

II. QUESTIONS RAISED BY MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

1. *Incest in the Tibetan world*

Incest is a subject people only discuss reluctantly. People will often say that they have never heard of actual cases but recognize that the practice may occur. Most of my Sherpa informants maintain, however, that it does not exist in their homeland. Here, I will survey references to Tibetan incest in Western literature, references that are often at odds with the information I obtained from numerous interviews with Tibetan refugees in Nepal.

One may note that one term exists for incest in Tibetan (*nal*), unlike in Turco-Mongolian languages.¹⁰ The term *nal*¹¹ is unknown to the

⁹ According to a Tibetan refugee in Paris who visited mChod rten nyi ma, the name Grang lung ("Cold Wind") is justified by the icy wind that often blows there.

¹⁰ Oral communication of R. Hamayon (Paris 1995).

¹¹ A Dunhuang manuscript that R.A. Stein studied (1971: 528 *passim*), which he called "Le conte des trois sœurs," speaks of a demon who kills his father, eats him, puts on his clothes and returns home to sleep with his mother (*brnal*). Stein (*ibid.*: 529, n. 112) refers to "*rnal/mnal*: sleep? or *mnol*: defilement and *nal*: incest?"

majority of contemporary Tibetans, and S. G. Karmay suspects that it is a word encountered only in ritual texts, and which has been retained there to the present.

The Penal Code of Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1373), the *Zhal lce hco lnga* (1989-3: 74), includes cases of adultery and (a rather limited range) of incest under the single expression *byi byas pa* (?), defined as: “to have [sexual] relations with the wife of someone else or one’s [own] mother or sister.”¹² The punishment consists in exiling the offenders after one of their limbs has been amputated.¹³ These two misdeeds are thus dealt with identically on a penal level. The modern dictionary *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (p. 1523) describes *nal* as a household of the “same bone” (*rus gcig pa’i khyim thab*). To be of the same bone means, in Tibet, to belong to the same patrilineal descent group (*rus rgyud*).¹⁴ If one follows the definition provided by this dictionary, it appears that the possibility of incest on the maternal side, on the side of “flesh” (*sha*), is not considered. One can immediately see the contradiction between this definition and that of *Byang chub rgyal mtshan*: mother and son are of the same “flesh”, not of the same “bone.” Theories about conception explain why bone figures in patrilineal filiation: “The father’s semen generates bones, the brain, and the spinal cord. The mother’s menstrual blood generates flesh, and the solid and hollow organs”¹⁵ (Meyer 1981: 111). Such ideas are very widespread in India (Jaggi 1973: 97-101) as well as in the rest of Asia: “from Tibet to Assam, and on through all of China”¹⁶ (Lévi-Strauss [1947] 1967: 454), and also in Siberia (Hamayon 1990: 103).

How can we define incest in the Tibetan world? The exogamic rules differ in Tibet and in the Tibetan populations of northern Nepal. In Tibet itself, one needs to be cautious: we know now that it is rarely possible to assume the existence across Tibet of facts or rules observed in a particular area. In Central Tibet, there is at present no clear matrimonial prescription, or even preference. Marriage is prohibited between those with a kinship status traceable over seven generations on the paternal side and between five and seven generations on the

¹² *gzhan gyi chung ma dang ma’am sring mo dang brel ba’i phyogs la byi byas pa.*

¹³ *yan lag gi phran bcad nas yul gzhan du spyugs par bshad kyang.*

¹⁴ Concerning the concept *rus*, and its meaning among the Nyin ba, a population of Tibetan culture in the northwest of Nepal, see N. Levine (1984).

¹⁵ My translation.

¹⁶ My translation.

maternal side, according to the region (Guigo 1986: 109). It is likely that marriage with a cross-cousin was widely practiced in the past. Father Desideri ([1937] 1995: 192), a Jesuit who lived in Tibet from 1715 to 1721 and who had a keen eye for detail, asserts that intimate relations with somebody of the same “bone” (*rus*) is regarded as incest, regardless of the degree of proximity; on the other hand, while it is prohibited to have such relations on the side of “flesh” with a person of first degree kinship (an uncle cannot marry his niece), wedding a maternal cousin (the matrilateral cross-cousin) is allowed and is not rare. Marriage with a matrilineal cross-cousin is even preferred in some Tibetan-speaking communities, including Dolpo (Jest 1975: 252); the Nyin ba community of western Nepal, where marriage occurs with cousins on both sides of the family (Levine 1988: 59); and Baragaon, where marriage with a patrilateral cross-cousin is accepted and marriage with a matrilateral cross-cousin is preferred (Schuler 1983: 183; Ramble 1984: 138).

Is it possible to know one’s ancestors back to seven generations? There is no clear consensus. D. Guigo maintains that “Tibetans do not always have a very precise idea about the definition of exogamic kinship. At the first degree, it is obvious that all unions with first cousins are prohibited, but from the second degree the picture sometimes becomes blurred.”¹⁷

This would mean that exogamic rules belong to the realm of norms and that the gap between them and actual practice can be great. According to S.G. Karmay, most of the families of his native area (Shar khog in A mdo) possessed a kind of written “genealogy” (*rus yig*), such that it was possible to trace roots back to seven generations.¹⁸ During funerals, there was a ceremony for transferring merit to all dead ancestors (men and women alike), whose names were written on a paper called a “dedication support” (*bsngo rten*). The name of the most recent deceased was added at his or her death.

In the mGo log vocabulary, an incestuous relation with a close relative is compared to murder (Guigo 1986: 113), which may explain why the three major crimes that lead people to mChod rten nyi ma are parricide, matricide and incest.

¹⁷ My translation.

¹⁸ Genealogies may be oral: G. Condominas ([1957] 1974: 106) shows that some Mngong Gar of Central Vietnam are able to recite long genealogical poems that go back to the fifteenth generation.

How was incest understood in the Tibetan world? Here, too, information gleaned from the scholarly literature is contradictory.

G. Patterson (quoted by Prince Peter of Greece 1963: 455) asserted that he knew the case of a father and daughter living together openly and publicly which, he claimed, aroused some reprobation but more commonly no more than a feeling of curiosity.¹⁹ Again, Prince Peter of Greece (1963: 455) reports that an unnamed British commercial agent told him in 1939 that Tibetans do not attach “moral stigmata” to such a practice, considering it only harmful to the health of the couple and detrimental to the offspring of such a union. Nevertheless, the statements Prince Peter of Greece quotes relating to incest contradict this affirmation: “Kill the issue of incestuous relations” (*pha spun mnol zhing nal bu gsod*); “incest between brother and sister must be confessed”²⁰ (*bu sring rus nal pyas [byas?] pa mthol lo bshags*); also “brother and sister [who sleep together commit] black incest” (*ming sring nal nag*); “incestuous brothers and sisters must be separated” (*ming spun gyis shag nal*), “divine incest by the teacher” (*slob dpon gyis lha nal*). In the end, most of the Western authors (for example B. Aziz 1978b: 58) and all Tibetans interviewed agree that incest is regarded as a particularly horrible crime in the Tibetan world, and the difficulty in obtaining information is a further indication of the taboos surrounding the subject.

In the Himalayan and Tibetan world, the offence weights most heavily, of course, on those who have committed it. But incest is regarded also as an anti-social act, in that it invites calamities to befall the community as a whole.²¹ It is natural, therefore, that the whole group should be troubled by such an act. Incest disturbs the order of nature. All my informants said that if there was an incestuous couple in the village, storms, hail and avalanches would occur, the members of the offenders’ families would die at an early age and all their undertakings would be doomed to failure. In the Limbu heartland of

¹⁹ G. Patterson is perhaps extrapolating. In Tibet it is possible for a step-father to have relations with his step-daughter.

²⁰ This pronouncement and the following ones were provided to him by R.A. Stein in January 1955. The expression *slob dpon lha nal* occurs in “a very widely practised confession of sins containing a list of sexual relations regarded as “incestuous” or “prohibited” (my translation). This text called *Sa bdag bshags 'bum* is a xylograph of seventeen pages, without the author’s name (R.A. Stein [1962] 1981: 129 and 132).

²¹ C. Jest (1975: 259), G. Gorer [(1938] 1984: 151), P. Sagant (1982), S. Mumford ([1989] 1990: 238).

Nepal, “the village closes in on itself, being itself affected by the defilement”²² (Sagant 1982: 167). Other supernatural sanctions may occur. The old woman from Walungchu Gola who went on a pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma added that grass turned yellow under the footsteps of offenders. In the Nyin ba population of West Nepal (Levine 1984: 57), those who violate this prohibition will develop cracks in their bones, verified after their death—a punishment that fits the crime, incest being unlawful relations between two people of the same “bone.” Among the Rai, incest is actually called *hadphora*, “breaking the bones.”²³ In Ding ri (southern Tibet), the guilty are condemned to a state of perpetual pollution (Aziz 1978: 58), as are the Khumbo of eastern Nepal (Schicklgruber 1992: 733). The function of mChod rten nyi ma is all the more striking in this light.

Traditionally, incest could be punished by death, as was the case in Dol po (Jest 1975: 259), where offenders were sewn into a yak-skin and thrown in the river, the same punishment for the murder of one’s father or mother in Sikkim (Waddell [1899] 1978: 107), and which in general was reserved for major criminals. Often the incestuous couple was expelled from the community and exiled far away,²⁴ “beyond seven passes and seven rivers.”²⁵ In the Tibetan community of Gyasumdo²⁶ (Central Nepal), carnal relations between a celibate lama and one of his nun disciples are regarded as “the worst kind of incest” (Mumford [1989] 1990: 238). There is no consanguinity in this case, but the relation between a religious man and his close disciples is regarded as a filiation, as the terms *sras* (“son”) and *thugs sras* (“spiritual son”) which refer to close disciples suggest, recalling the phrase quoted by Prince Peter of Greece, “divine incest by the teacher” (*slob dpon gyis lha nal*). One can qualify this relation as “second-degree incest” in the words of F. Héritier (1979) for whom “the symbolic aspect of incest, resting as it does on the solid pillars of identity and difference, does not necessarily have any connection with real consanguinity, properly genealogical; on the contrary, it presupposes a logical, syntagmatic relationship that unites diverse orders of representation with each other:

²² My translation.

²³ Oral communication of C. Ramble (Paris 2001).

²⁴ G. Gorer ([1938] 1984: 152), S. Mumford ([1989] 1990: 238), P. Sagant (1982).

²⁵ *la bdun dang chu bdun rgyab nas*.

²⁶ The Tibetan spelling is uncertain: it may be rGya gsum mdo.

representations of the individual and his parts, genetic representations of vertical and horizontal transferences operating between individuals by way of filiation or contagion, representations of the relationship between the sexes and of the world of kinship, as well as representations of the natural world and the social order in their intimate relationship with biological man" (1979: 239).²⁷ The village of Tshap (Central Nepal) experienced such a case in the recent past. The accused was the lama of the village. He had actively taken part in the propagation of Buddhist doctrine and in the abolition of the blood sacrifices practised by the neighbouring Gurungs; the nun was the daughter of the chief of the village. The whole community was shattered. The father of the young woman confessed that his honour had been stained: "They have cut my nose," he exclaimed, an expression which recalls the punishment sometimes inflicted on an adulterous woman (Duncan 1964: 69; Tucci 1969: 260).

The mythology of numerous populations of Tibetan culture or of speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages contains stories relating to incest and the consequences which ensue. Among them are myths with a cosmogonic framework; these are frequent in Tibetan literature and form the mythical background of various rituals.²⁸

Myths often have a social purpose: in the Eastern Tamang community, the first human marriage was one of primordial incest between a brother and a sister of the same clan (Steinmann 1987: 188, 195-97), just as it was in the Gurung community of Gyasumdo (Mumford [1989] 1990: 143) or among the Khumbo of eastern Nepal (Diemberger 1991: 145, Schicklgruber 1992: 724). The latter have a myth of the origin of defilement (*grib*) among human beings. This myth relates the incest between a human son and his mother, an "emanation of Earth-Foundation-Mother" (*sa gzhi a ma'i sprul ba*). This first incest resulted in the curse which leads all human beings to return to where they came from: to the womb of Earth-Mother. The

²⁷ "La symbolique de l'inceste qui repose sur les piliers solides de l'identique et du différent n'a pas nécessairement de lien avec la consanguinité réelle, proprement généalogique: elle suppose par contre un rapport logique, syntaxique, qui unit entre eux divers ordres de représentations: les représentations de la personne et de ses parties, les représentations génétiques des transferts verticaux et horizontaux qui s'opèrent entre individus par voie de filiation ou de contagion, les représentations du rapport des sexes et du monde de la parenté, mais aussi les représentations du monde naturel et de l'ordre social dans leurs rapports intimes avec l'homme biologique." (My translation.)

²⁸ Oral information received from A.M. Blondeau (Paris 1995).

myth further explains that since that time, birth, death and conflicts are the defilements which must be purified if one wants to belong to the social order ruled over by clan organization (Schicklgruber 1992: 723-734).

C. Lévi-Stauss ([1947] 1977: 29, 35) explained that the prohibition of incest “constitutes the fundamental step on the basis of which, by means of which, and more particularly during which the passage from nature to culture is accomplished [...], and it expresses the passage from the natural fact of consanguinity to the cultural fact of marriage alliances.”²⁹ These myths delineate a cycle, from a state of social disorder that comes to a head with an act of incest, to order being restored by marriage rules, the transgression of which again plunges society into chaos.

2. Fate of offspring born from an incestuous union

All my informants agree on at least one point: a child born from an incestuous union has no place in society. It is generally described as afflicted with physical defects, it will be blind according to the Shar wa of A mdo (Guigo 1986: 109), or else paralysed, dumb, or facially deformed; Lepchas and Nyin bas believe that such a child will be retarded and short-lived (Gorer [1938] 1984: 151, Levine 1984: 57). Some add that the birth of a child excludes all possibility of purification and leads to the permanent expulsion of the couple and the child.

3. Ordeal or simple trial

From the various interviews I conducted, it seems clear that the pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma has something of the nature of a trial, and perhaps even of an ordeal (in which there is a divine intervention). To be purified, one must bathe, but the water is so cold, people said, that even the bones are affected; some informants added that if one dips one’s finger into the lake, circulation stops, and that if boiled tea or boiled soup is not drunk immediately, death ensues. At the village of gNas 'og, to the north of rTsib ri (southern Tibet), I was told that one

²⁹ “La prohibition de l'inceste constitue la démarche fondamentale grâce à laquelle, par laquelle, mais surtout en laquelle, s'accomplit le passage de la nature à la culture [...] et qu'elle exprime le passage du fait naturel de la consanguinité au fait culturel de l'alliance”. (My translation.)

must dip one's arm in the lake: if it comes out stiff and frozen, one is condemned, and death will follow shortly; escaping unscathed is the sign that the misdeed has been purified. Information that A.M. Blondeau obtained indicated that common people guilty of incest had to bathe in the frozen water of the Black Lake and that most of them died from this. An informant of hers related that if a Sa skya pa hierarch takes a woman from an inferior social stratum, he breaks the lineage of the lamas (*bla ma'i brgyud*). To atone, he must bathe several times in the White Lake, or Milk Lake, which only lamas, regardless of their school, are allowed to enter. When the defilement is purified, the *stūpa* emanates light ('*od*). I never was able to determine whether a lama also has to obtain a paper testifying to his sojourn.

Ordeals are not unknown in the Tibetan world. One law code stipulates that in order to ascertain the guilt of a thief, two stones, one white and the other black, be placed in a tub full of boiling oil. The defendant has to dip his hand into the oil and draw out one of the two stones; if he takes out the white one, he is judged innocent; if the other, he is guilty.³⁰ Tibetological literature provides other examples. Some centuries ago, a quarrel arose between two hamlets in northwest Nepal, one inhabited by Nyin ba people. The argument was settled, according to the traditional custom, by an ordeal which consisted of inserting a red-hot iron into the mouth of a representative of each group. The one who was unscathed was recognized as innocent (Levine 1984: 65).

There existed at least one other type of trial in the Sharwa area (A mdo), namely the ritual hunt, which in some respects, is comparable to the case of mChod rten nyi ma. The wildlife in the surrounding mountains and forests belong to the territorial god (*yul lha*), master of the soil, and as such, cannot be hunted. Nevertheless, every year a great hunt of herbivores was organized; to participate in this hunt could lead to death, and the hunters who survived were the "elect" of the territorial god (Karmay-Sagant 1998). The risk they incurred was real; the outcome, whether good or bad, was regarded as a "sanction," which may be compared with the "sanction" of mChod rten nyi ma; we will return to this in the conclusion.

The example of mChod rten nyi ma shows that the defilement produced by incest can be "washed" away by going to this particular place, provided one survives a fearsome physical test. As far as I know, this kind of rite during a pilgrimage is very rare. Moreover, one should

³⁰ Oral communication of S.G. Karmay, who refers to a text of laws he is unable to identify at present (Paris, May 1995).

note that the possibility of being purified by circumambulating one of the *stūpa*, the lake or the sacred place, while reciting *mantra*, performing prostrations and making offerings (usual pilgrimage practices), was never raised; the unique nature of the trial is a mark of the serious and specificity of the misdeed.

Is mChod rten nyi ma the only case, or are there other places of pilgrimage known for their ability to expunge the defilement resulting from such crimes? I know of the following examples:

- An informant from Baragaon, in Nepal, confided to C. Ramble that a one-week walk from Muktinath there exists a place where pilgrims go in cases of incest. He said he knew a myth on that topic but refused to give more details because it was necessary that the name of the site remain unknown so that those who go there may do so anonymously. This confirms the difficulty of obtaining information on so sensitive and taboo a subject.
- The upper cave of Halase-Maratika in south-eastern Nepal contains four “paths to hell” (*dmyal lam*).³¹ When one enters such a narrow crevice, one is unsure whether one will be judged innocent or guilty. The notion of ordeal is present, and with it that of supernatural sanction. The Sherpa lama of the place, Maratika Lama, assigns to one of these “paths” the ability to purify the defilement generated by incest or by carnal relations between a monk and a woman. Pilgrims seem to be unaware of the specific nature of the path, or do not devote any particular attention to it; it is only the pilgrimage guide written by the lama³² that indicates its properties.
- The Tibetans who settled about one hundred years ago in the area of Gyasumdo, east of Manang, in Nepal, also make pilgrimages in order to be purified of serious defilements. In the 1980s, a Tibetan from a high family ran away with a woman of low birth. When he

³¹ These “paths to hell” are one of the constant features of pilgrimage places. They often take the form of narrow cavities burrowed in the rock or narrow paths between two rocks that the pilgrims cross to purify themselves and to overcome fear of the intermediary state between death and rebirth (*bar do*) at the time of death.

³² The translation of this guide is in K. Buffetrille (2000: 326-31, in particular p. 329).

came back, he was compelled to undertake a pilgrimage to Muktinath (western Nepal)³³ and wash his mouth out with the water of the springs in order to be purified before being able to partake of food and drink with his peers (Mumford [1989] 1990: 46). One should note in this case that only the man (not the couple) was sent on the pilgrimage, and that no stigma seems to have been attached to him upon his return.

However, an essential difference exists between the two sacred sites cited above (Halase and Muktinath) and mChod rten nyi ma: the great fame of the latter in matters of incest. To this day mChod rten nyi ma appears to be a most uncommon, if not unique, case.

III. THE PILGRIMAGE GUIDES

The unanimity of pilgrim informants on the impulse that drove them to mChod rten nyi ma was striking. All of them said that their knowledge came from pilgrimage guides. I have found two such guides.³⁴

The first one bears the title “Pilgrimage Guide of rDo rje nyi ma, Secret Register” (*rDo rje nyi ma'i gnas yig gsang ba'i dkar chag*).³⁵ Its subtitle is: “A Pilgrim's Guide to the Hidden Land in Sikkim Revealed from Its Place of Concealment by Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem 'phru can (1337-1408).” It was published in Delhi in 1983. Written in block capitals (*dbu can*), it is composed of twenty-four leaves each with five lines (with the exception of the first three, which have one, two and three lines.)

The main theme is the story of the construction of the various *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma (not called mChod rten nyi ma but in actuality the same place). The father Rig 'dzin mthong mchog, of Hūm ra lineage, had a son called rDzi bu (shepherd) on account of his primary occupation. In fact, he was Nam mkha'i snying po, one of the twenty-

³³ On Muktinath, called in Tibetan *Chu mig brgya rtsa* “Hundred Springs,” see D.L. Snellgrove 1979: 73-170 and [1961] 1981: 199-202; and D. Messerschmidt (1982 and 1992).

³⁴ F.K. Ehrhard provided me with the first text; I found a second copy, not long after, in the library of 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche, in the monastery of Thub bstan chos gling (Sherpa country, eastern Nepal); A. Chayet brought the second one to my attention. I wish to thank both of them. The translation of these two guides is in K. Buffetrille (2000: 201-26).

³⁵ Henceforward: *Dorje 1*.

five disciples of Padmasambhava. Mahākaruna was his tutelary deity, and his faith was so deep that various miraculous signs appeared. One day, the Red Hayagrīva issued from the heart of Mahākaruna. The shepherd asked him to be allowed to build a *stūpa* to “clear away the defilements of the living beings in these degenerate times.” He was granted his wish [1-7]. On the tenth day of the fourth month a yak appeared on the Gangs chen mdzod lnga (Kanchenjunga), and the shepherd followed him with his flock of yaks and sheep. He eventually arrived in Tibet and, in a vision, saw Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal. He questioned the Indian saint about the corrupt conditions and the signs of the times. Making a spring of nectar miraculously gush from the base of the throne, Padmasambhava answered:

From the base of the throne of the Buddhas of the three times, a hundred springs of nectar have appeared. If one bathes in them, sicknesses will disappear [and] demons, [the creators of] obstacles will be pacified. If one drinks from them, karma and defilements will be purified. In particular, [a time will come during which] one will commit the ten non-virtues³⁶ and the five deeds of immediate retribution³⁷. During the degenerate times there will appear a sign, which is incest between brother and sister.³⁸ At that time the essence of the earth, having been weakened, will be swept along by the wind, and it is certain that people will go to the hell of *vajra*. Because people will have had [sexual] relations with [someone] from a low social stratum or because they will have carried a corpse, their intelligence will be blocked and the ducts of sperm will be dried up. [11] This will be clear as [in] a mirror of polished [copper]. Nevertheless, all misdeeds, such as the five

³⁶ See Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, II: 166).

³⁷ The *mtshams med lnga* are: patricide, matricide, murdering an Arhat, maliciously causing blood to flow from a Buddha, and causing dissension in the monastic community.

³⁸ *snyigs dus spun zla mi(ng) sring 'dzol ba'i ltas*. The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (2349) gives for 'dzol ba: *nor ba'am 'khrul ba dang 'gal ba*: to make a mistake or to breach the norm (i.e. to do something beyond the acceptable), to disturb the harmony.

forgivable sins,³⁹ will be purified. [...] The central mountain is the sacred mountain (*gnas ri*), seat of the planet Rāhula. Behind [it] there are three lakes, one of gold, [another] of turquoise and [a third] of conch. The next descendants of the shepherd are designated by prophecies to open this place.

A short description of the sacred site follows; it mentions a lake in which one's own karma appears as everything that will happen in the next life, and a mountain with images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Ye shes mtsho rgyal then questioned the Master on the degenerate times. Before answering, Padmasambhava stuck his stick into the ground, and in that place "a nectar, medicinal water with the eight qualities," started to flow; then he explained the beneficial qualities of this water.

Next comes the story of the construction of the three *stūpa*, one by the shepherd (that is, Nam mkha' snying po), the other one by Ye shes mtsho rgyal and the third built by the two of them together, according to the instructions of the Master. One day, while the sun (*nyi ma*) rose, the shepherd saw in a vision a *vajra* (*rdo rje*) with five points appear in space, hence the name of the place, rDo rje nyi ma, "[19] As for the names [of these *stūpa*], they are called, on account of the omens described above, the *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma (*Vajra*-sun), and their fame echoes like the sound of the summer-drum [= the thunder]."

The benefits obtained by doing prostrations and circumambulations and by making offerings to these *stūpa* are numerous, including, among others, obtaining children in the case of women [19]. In a short description of this sacred place, rDo rje nyi ma is described as "the northern door which gives access to the hidden land of Sikkim" [22-23]. The text ends with the history of this treasure-text, the pilgrimage guide, its having been written and hidden by Ye shes mtsho rgyal and then discovered by one of the descendants of the shepherd, "the second Rig 'dzin tshe dbang, scion and emanation of the word of the shepherd," and in the end printed by an heir to the Hūm ra lineage.

The second text, "a Short Summary of the Pilgrimage Guide of the *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma" (*rDo rje nyi ma'i mchod rten gyi gnas yig nyung bsdus*)⁴⁰ is, as the title indicates much less detailed than the previous one. It was narrated by the Lord of Oddiāyina

³⁹ The *nye ba lnga* are: raping a female Arhat, killing a Bodhisattva, killing a monk, taking property belonging to the monastic community, destroying a *stūpa*.

⁴⁰ Henceforward *Dorje 2*.

(Padmasambhava) to Ye shes mtsho rgyal and recorded by her. It is attributed to the treasure-discover (*gter ston*) rDo rje rgyal mtshan.⁴¹ The version I have is written in block capitals (*dbu can*) and is composed of five folios with an irregular number of lines (from four to six). The spelling mistakes are numerous, and were corrected for me by religious scholars living in Nepal.

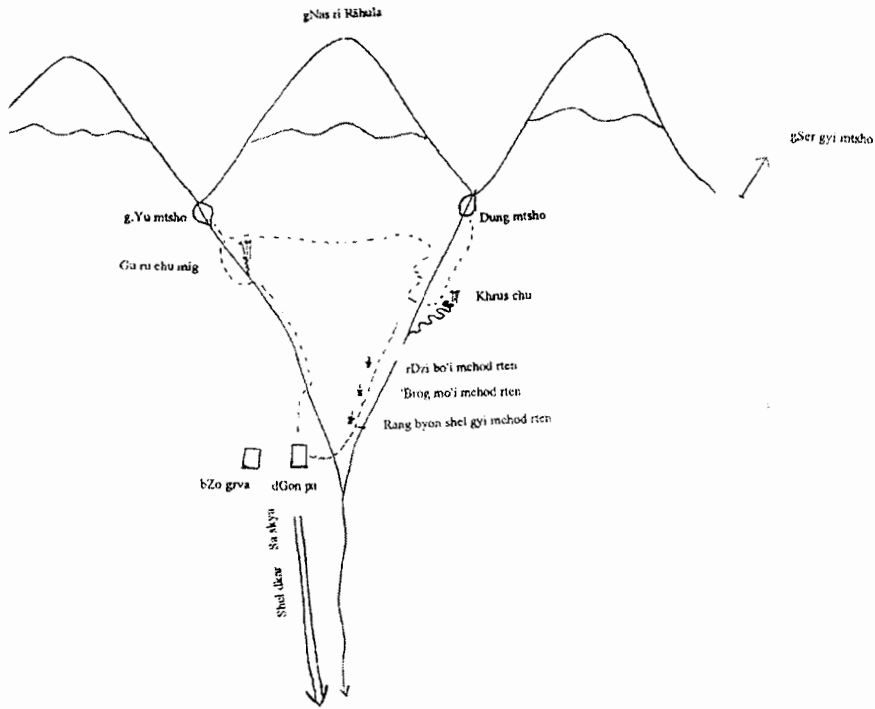
The text begins with an encomium to Avalokiteṣvara, rDo rje nyi ma being the meditational place devoted to him. The site is composed of “a high snowy peak, and a river of nectar with the eight qualities flows through it” [1b]. Ye shes mtsho rgyal wants to know “the marvellous signs [manifested] in this place excellent above all.” In response, the Master sets forth the various qualities of rDo rje nyi ma, then the specific benefits that the site confers:

[4b] If one makes prostrations and circumambulations in this place, the five sins without remission, the five deeds of immediate retribution, the five forgivable sins [and] the ten non virtues will be purified. All wishes will be spontaneously fulfilled, and one will obtain *siddhi*, the common as well as the supreme. In particular, [it is] an excellent [place] for a woman who wishes for a child. The fruits obtained by merely hearing the name [of these *stūpa*] [will lead one to be reborn] as god or as human.

The sacred place is described as containing self-arisen *stūpa*, a lake that produces visions to living beings who, untainted by the defilements of bad karma, possess good fortune.

⁴¹ Unidentified. May be another name of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem.

MCHOD RTEN NYI MA



IV. TWO TRADITIONS, TWO DISCOURSES?

1. *The oral tradition*

According to oral and written traditions, mChod rten nyi ma was created, or rather, “opened”, by Padmasambhava. It is a perfect sacred place, featuring a lake and a mountain and also a spring, three characteristics of the landscape informants never fail to cite; it is only as an afterthought that they add to their description what must be regarded as the main element of the site, if toponymy is any indication: the one or more *stūpa*. In fact, in none of the collected stories does the *stūpa* play a role except when the guilty lamas bathe in the Milk Lake and light is emitted from the *stūpa*, the sign of the purification of these religious dignitaries. According to two Sherpa informants, the only function of the *stūpa* seems to be to shelter the spring. Although all the

people I questioned knew the name rDo rje nyi ma, “*Vajra-Sun*”, they only used its other name, mChod rten nyi ma, “*Stūpa-Sun*,” thus recalling the presence of the one or more *stūpa*, of which the stories hardly speak. A. David-Neel ([1929] 1977: 73-74) explains the name mChod rten nyi ma by reference to a *stūpa* “containing precious relics [which] miraculously transported itself through space, from India to this place.”⁴² This story of a flying *stūpa* was never confirmed to me.

If one follows the oral tradition, the *stūpa* of mChod rten nyi ma have no particular value for pilgrimage, which leads one to think that they are later constructions (both literary and physical), an interpretation put forward by Buddhists to divert attention from its original significance. The light which is said to emanate when a monk or lama purifies himself merely confirms this hypothesis. The importance of the monastery is more pronounced in the stories: it is there that offenders obtain the letter testifying to their presence and to the fact that they have been purified, and thus to the success of their undertaking. Unfortunately, I have yet to learn when the monastery was built.

The main role, however, is played by the waters, those of the lake or of the spring that Padmasambhava tapped. The stories are not always very clear on this point. The oral tradition takes no note of a benefit clearly mentioned in the two guides, which commonly leads Tibetans to go on the pilgrimage, i.e., obtaining a child. Only two informants seemed to be aware of this, the most detailed information on the subject having been collected by A.M. Blondeau. If a childless couple performs a circumambulation (of the lake?/of the *stūpa*) and has sexual relations that evening, they will be blessed with a child, to whom they will be expected to give a name that includes the term Gu ru; for example, Gu ru sGrol ma if it is a girl or Gu ru Tshe ring if it is a boy, in recognition that the child was born following a wish made at mChod rten nyi ma, the sacred place of Padmasambhava.

2. *The written tradition*

The written tradition highlights the construction and the existence of the one or more *stūpa* from which the sacred place takes its name. The presence of a sacred mountain is cited in the two guides (*Dorje* 1: 11 and *Dorje* 2: 1b). The one discovered by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem recalls the

⁴² My translation.

rise of incest as the true sign of degenerate times, as are sexual relations with someone from a low social stratum or the act of carrying a corpse. It specifies in effect that these defilements (like those resulting from the five deeds of immediate retribution, the five forgivable sins and the ten non-virtues) will be purified if one goes on a pilgrimage to rDo rje nyi ma, the northern door of the hidden land of Sikkim.⁴³

The second text contains nothing to suggest that there is any connection between this sacred place and the purification of defilement incurred from incest or sexual relations with someone from a low social stratum, unless a statement by the author in citing the benefits obtained at this site can be so interpreted: "What is there to say about the main pollution owing to the impurities?" [3a]. Is this a discreet evocation of the major pollution of incest? On the other hand, patricide and matricide are among the five deeds of immediate retribution (*mtshams med lnga*) which are explicitly purified at the site.

Incest is obviously not the main theme of these guides. There is thus a striking gap between the discourse of the laypeople and that of the texts [and therefore of the religious figures]. mChod rten nyi ma demonstrates that even if the priesthood proposes a scenario, laypeople provide their own emphasis. They are not two parallel lines of discourses; they are intertwined. One of the pilgrimage guides prophesies that during degenerate times the phenomenon of incest will appear, and the oral tradition transmits the idea that the defilement of such an offence can be purified by going to mChod rten nyi ma.

Unfortunately no source provides any reason why this particular place is able to cleanse such misdeeds. Both of the pilgrimage guides and the informants are silent on this point. Only the place itself may hold the clue, but its location on the Tibeto-Sikkimese border makes access difficult.

V. AN ATTEMPT TO INTERPRET THE PILGRIMAGE OF MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

The pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma appears to be a means of responding to the transgression of a forbidden act, a crime which

⁴³ The guide points out, fols. 18-19, that "the benefits [obtained] by doing prostrations and circumambulations and by making offerings to these *stūpa* [19] are equal to the benefits [obtained] at these springs (Chu mig brgya rtsa), that is Muktinath." It would be interesting to know if the people with whom S. Mumford worked knew this text.

rebounds against the community as a whole, unleashing various calamities. It allows reintegration into the group for those offenders who survive the trial of freezing water, proof that they have been purified. The presentation of a myth may help to understand the relationship between pilgrimage, incest and trial.

1. *From myth to reality*

One finds the following amazing passage in the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* (1989: 305-06), "The Testimony [of Srong btsan sgam po] Hidden in a Pillar", a treasure-text discovered, according to tradition, by Atiḡa (982-1054).⁴⁴

At the time 'Bum thang monastery was being built, King Srong btsan sgam po left for 'Phan yul to look for craftsmen:

[305] There were there a father and a mother who did not have a clan-name and who had two daughters and two sons as beautiful as gods. Because they loved each other, [the girls] refused to leave [for somewhere else] as brides, [and the boys] did not agree to bring women [from outside]; but because they were ashamed [to do so], they did not dare to settle down as [married] couples [with each other]. They were craftsmen.

The king said to them: "You must come and become my craftsmen."

The craftsmen answered: "[There are four conditions]: 1. not to be compelled to follow the rules of decency; 2. not to have to seek another occupation; 3. to have a hot meal before [work]; [306] 4. to wear a cape. King, if you accept [these conditions], we will go."

The great king accepted and, having invited them, they worked as craftsmen in, among other places, 'Bum thang, Ra mo che, mKhar brag, Them bu kog pa, and Mig mangs tshal. They were

⁴⁴ I am grateful to S.G. Karmay for drawing my attention to this part of the work. It is necessary to point out that the version of the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* published in *Literary Arts in Ladakh*, Vol. 1, Darjeeling 1972, in 14 chapters, and the one of the *Ma 'ongs lung bstan gsal ba'i sgron me* (sMan rtsis shes rig spendzod, Vol. 33, Leh 1973) in 12 chapters do not include the above extract.

happy. The four, brothers and sisters, were living as couples, and their children grew in number happily. It is said that there were seven large villages called the Seven Households of the Happy People.⁴⁵

Ong Cong [the Chinese wife of the king] said: “These people are shamelessly increasing happily beyond bounds. [So] they received as clan-name that of Happiness ([s]kyi[d]).”

A Bon po from Sum pa⁴⁶ [called] Kakari said: “Your craftsmen having committed the impurity of incest, the king's *pho lha* has been struck by the impurity, [and the monarch] will fall sick and die. Do not let them act in this way. If they do not obey, I will perform black magic.” He made an evil spell of lice (*linga*) and cast it. In no time the lice became as large as pigeons. They filled the inside and the outside of the Seven Households of the Happy People; but whatever was done [the craftsmen] did not agree to leave and so it was said, their number continued increasing.

Then, the Seven Households of the Happy people took fright; the sister-wives were sent away as daughters-in-law, and the brother-husbands asked spouses to come [from outside]. Thus they multiplied even more than before and filled the whole of dBu ru [Central Tibet].

Because they said: “The center (*dkyil shod*) of this country is [the homeland] of the tribe of [s]Kyi[d],” the name dBu ru [s]Kyi[d] shod was given to it; and because they said: “We drink from this turquoise-blue river,” the name Kyi [=sKyi[d] chu sngon po was given to the river.

This story that the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* relates in providing the etymology of toponyms can be interpreted as a legend of the origin of a primal clan. From it one can see that incest and lack of shame existed before the organization of the clans, otherwise, the attitude of the king and the craftsmen would not be understandable. The former accepts

⁴⁵ According to F.K. Ehrhard. (personal communication, December 1999), “The Seven Households of the Happy People ([s]kyi[d] mi) appears in the context of the first settlement in s[Kyi[d] [g]rong.”

⁴⁶ A place in north-eastern Tibet.

the conditions set by the craftsmen, which suggests that he is not aware of the possible consequences; the others insist not only on being allowed to continue in their incestuous relationship but also feel unashamed. This text explains that the *pho lha* of the king, affected by the defilement of incest, is responsible for the potentially fatal illness of the monarch. The legend of Gri gum recalls the seriousness of deserting the *pho lha*, *dgra lha* or *mgur lha* of a king.⁴⁷ The *pho lha*, god of the male lineage, belongs to the group of five gods born with men (*'go ba'i lha*), which reside on various places on the body. The list of these gods varies,⁴⁸ and authors do not even agree on the parts of the body the gods occupy.

S.G. Karmay (1995: 166) relates a legend taken from the *gZi brjid*⁴⁹ in which it is said that one day the demon Khyab pa lag ring threw a thunderbolt containing the nine impurities at the head of gShen rab mi bo with the aim of killing or at least polluting him, but without success. A list of these nine impurities is given: “Homicide/fratricide (*dme*)⁵⁰, the birth of a child just after its father dies (*mug*), incest (*nal*),⁵¹ shamelessness (*btsog*), imprecatory signs (*than*), bad omens (*Itas ngan*), something possessed by the mind (*hyu*), impurity owing to the death of a husband or wife (*yug*), pollution of the hearth (*thab mkhon*).

Another myth may help to understand better the implications and consequences of the offence of incest for Tibetans. While Bon

⁴⁷ G. Tucci ([1949] 1980: 733), A. Macdonald (1971: 302), R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz ([1956] 1975: 318), R.A. Stein ([1962] 1981: 195).

⁴⁸ See among others A. Macdonald (1971: 301, n. 407) and S.G. Karmay (1975: 193).

⁴⁹ This is the longest biography of gShen rab mi bo, the founder of Bon, according to tradition. See S.G. Karmay (1975).

⁵⁰ C. Ramble (1998: 130, n. 14) notes that in Baragaon (southern Mustang) where people speak a form of Western Tibetan called locally the Dzardzong dialect, “*nal* is never used in the Dzardzong dialect, and *dme* unquestionably signifies incest. The expression *dme sre ba* means ‘to commit incest’ (*sre ba*: ‘to mix’), and *dme phug* denotes a child born from an incestuous union. The apparent difference in meaning is perhaps resolved by the notion, common to both interpretations, of a prohibitively close degree of kinship within which an otherwise legitimate (or at least non-polluting) activity takes place. This suggestion is borne out by one of the definitions of *dme grib* given in the *Bod rGya tshig mdzod chen mo: snga dus kyi shod srol du rigs rus gcig pa'am/gnyen phyogs nang khul phan tshun gsod res byas pa dang pho mo bsdebs pa'i grib/* In popular usage in the past, impurity from reciprocal killing or sexual relations between members of the same clan or close relations.”

⁵¹ My emphasis. The translation is also mine.

declined in Tibet, King Khri Srong lde btsan, following his order that Buddhism to be practiced by his subjects, fell ill and numerous scourges befell the country (Karmay 1972: 83-84 and 1991: 365). The monarch called a soothsayer to learn the reasons for this and to determine the most effective rituals. The soothsayer explained:

“O Lord, it is because of the pollution of a child born from an incestuous union and from the magic of the demon Nal mi zan snying dmar (Anthropophagous Incest, Red Heart) [...]. There are misfortunes in this country because the thirteen pure deities of this world are unhappy about the existence of this child.” Everyone was worried about [...]. The ministers said to him: “O clear-sighted soothsayer, we ask you to find this child and to tell us the ritual whose execution will be beneficial.” The soothsayer said: “[...] The eighteen Bonpos belonging to the various clans must perform the rite *Glang nag thur sel*.⁵² For this rite, it is necessary to have a brown ox loaded with objects of offering and ransom for the man and the woman with, on top of these, the incestuously produced child. The expulsion must be in the southwest direction; this will be beneficial.”⁵³

Several themes of this mythical story can be found repeated in the pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma, namely that of incest, the various calamities which befall the community, and the child which is the fruit of the incestuous union and which, if it survives, has “monstrous” characteristics.⁵⁴

3. *Mountain-deities and incest*

S.G. Karmay explains in a footnote (1991: 365, n.157) that the thirteen pure deities are all mountain-deities. When angry, they send various calamities. By the ritual and the expulsion of the child on an ox loaded

⁵² This is the title of a ritual the text which has yet to be found. S.G. Karmay advised against attempting to translate the title under these circumstances.

⁵³ This part, translated by S.G. Karmay (1991: 365), is extracted from the *Srid rgyud* of Khod po Blo gros thog med (13th century), a text which deals with the expansion and decline of Bon during the royal epoch. (My translation from French to English.)

⁵⁴ The theme of the ransom (evoked by the expulsion of the incestuous couple on an ox) will not be touched on in this article for lack of space.

with ransom, the defilement of incest is eliminated and the mountain-deities are pacified.

The concept of mountain-deities being responsible for the order of nature and for prosperity is well-known in the Tibetan tradition. Dunhuang documents point out that “the prestige of the royal person and his health, the stability of the kingdom and that of the government, the absence of sickness among men and cattle, [and] the abundance of food”⁵⁵ depend upon the appeasement of the *sku bla*, “mountain-deities, ancestors and the support of the vital principle of kings” (*ibid.*: 309). We have already emphasized that all informants and the Tibetological literature recognize that in cases of incest, calamities (such as storms and hail) are bound to occur. When hail falls, say S.G. Karmay and P. Sagant (1987: 251), it is the *yul lha* who is called upon because “the attitude of all the other gods over whom he exercises his empire depends upon his good-will as the master of the soil (*gzhi bdag*).”⁵⁶ The *yul lha* (territorial-god and mountain-deity) is generally regarded as the ancestor of the population that lives around.⁵⁷ It is not surprising that the territorial-god, ancestor of the community, reacts in a violent way to incest, patricide, matricide, and even to sexual relations with someone of low birth. In a manner of speaking, one can say that it is a “family affair.” Becoming angry if he notices transgressions, he turns away, and the territory along with the population living in it no longer enjoy the protection of the god and are abandoned to all manner of malevolent forces.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE EXPUNGING OF THE “CRIME”

The nature of the rite performed at mChod rten nyi ma is difficult to determine with certainty. Let us be cautious and say that it is a trial which has characteristics of an ordeal. The judgment would be not of the guilt or innocence of the couple but on whether they are forgiven or not. Thus the transgression of the taboo on incest would not be entirely irremediable.

⁵⁵ A. Macdonald (1971: 303). My translation.

⁵⁶ My translation.

⁵⁷ It seems that this concept is unknown in Bhutan (Pommaret 1996: 39-56), and in Zanskar (1996: 23-38).

The connection between incest and the calamities launched against the community by the *yul lha* leads to a possible interpretation of the purificatory rite at mChod rten nyi ma. For the community, would it not be the territorial god (*yul lha*) who is expressing his displeasure? (the written and oral traditions mention the presence of a mountain).⁵⁸

This hypothesis is supported by the usual treatment reserved for the incestuous. By expelling them, the community hopes to escape from the supernatural retribution sent by the territorial-god. This expulsion must allow it to recover its lost honour. (Recall the father of the young nun in the village of Gyasumdo.)

But it is here that Buddhism intervenes at mChod rten nyi ma. The society requires certification of the trial that incestuous persons have undergone; this they will obtain in the monastery. Anyone who goes on a pilgrimage without having committed any serious misdeed does not need this certificate. Buddhist religious authority intervenes at the time the letter is delivered; it contents itself with ratifying an irrefutable fact decided by the trial. Thus Buddhism gives its seal of approval, recognizing that the pilgrimage has the capacity to purify the defilement produced by, among other things, incest. Without this certificate, the pilgrimage is null and void in the eyes of the community. It is proof that the man (the couple?) really has been to mChod rten nyi ma, that he has submitted to the trial and that he has been purified. His survival proves to the community that henceforth it will not be stricken by supernatural sanctions.

The case of mChod rten nyi ma shows that, in some parts of Tibet and in some populations of the Himalayan regions, the death penalty or definitive expulsion is not the only way to deal with members of the group who transgress the prohibition regarding incest.

We have already singled out the story of Lama Dorje. Although all the villagers agreed that his misdeed was a very serious one, and although some of them confessed that they no longer trusted the monk, most of them wanted him to stay on and were ready to forgive him and to see him return to the monastery, this time as a married lama. An old lama intervened and gave two possible reasons to explain the "crime" of Lama Dorje: the first was that, in a past life, he had committed a very serious sin, the retribution for which was the cause of the present tragedy; the second was that his qualities must have aroused calumny (*mi kha*), which brought about his fall, even though he was close to

⁵⁸ If this is the case, it would mean that the jurisdiction of the *yul lha* extended over people not dependent upon his territory. The question is still open.

realization. As thus there was no truly malevolent intent on his part; the community was able to reinstate harmony without resorting to expulsion (Mumford [1989] 1990: 238-239). The villagers as well as the monastic community needed such an active religious figure, which explains the lama's intervention. Thus it is easier to understand the arrangement made to reintegrate him, as a lama married to his young disciple.

"To put things in order in the realm is essential for preparing the return to civilization and for allowing people to find again the purity necessary for their vitality, for their prosperity"⁵⁹ writes P. Sagant (1982: 167), and he shows how the same ideas exist not only in China but also in Southeast Asia, for example among the Mnong Gar of Central Vietnam (Condominas [1957] 1974: 97-134).

Buddhist authorities could not accept that the "crime" of incest was purified by a simple physical trial based, if my hypothesis is correct, on the traditional cult to the *yul lha*. They therefore transformed this site into a sacred place opened by Padmasambhava. Pilgrimage guides tell us, and travellers confirm, that a *stūpa* and a monastery were built. In this way, the monastery succeeded in controlling a socio-cultural unity with no previous link to Buddhism.

POSTSCRIPT: An article published in the journal *China's Tibet* (Vol. 6, No. 5, 1995: 22) sheds new light on mChod rten nyi ma. We learn that during the last millennium, Indians, Bhutanese, Sikkimese, Nepalese and Tibetan pilgrims came to immerse themselves in the waters of mChod rten nyi ma. Every day some eight hundred and twenty tons of water flow by. Numerous devotees go back home loaded with bottles filled with this water, which they offer to the members of their family and their friends. At the beginning of the 1980s, the inhabitants of the place realized the value of these sacred waters, and in 1989, they sent water samples for scientific testing. In 1990, the Tibet Autonomous Regional mChod rten nyi ma Holy Water Committee certified that it was, in fact, mineral water. In August 1992, the Chinese Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources announced that this water contains rare elements beneficial to health that enhance the appetite, favour bone development, improve blood circulation, strengthen the heart and have curative effects on goitres. In 1993, the Tibet mChod rten nyi ma Development Company was established and a bottling factory began operation soon after. The first bottles were offered to the late Tenth Panchen Lama's funeral *stūpa*. The article does not mention the purification of incest

⁵⁹ My translation.

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YUL AND *YUL LHA*:
THE TERRITORY AND ITS DEITY IN BHUTAN

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This paper was written in December 1999 for the Franco-Austrian Seminar on "Myth, territoriality and ritual in Tibetan areas" which took place in Vienna (Austria). Today, it is published as it was at that time without any amendments or updates. It is a reflection on the *yul lha*, the "deity of the territory" in Bhutan, from material which I have collected over the years, but more precisely during fieldwork from 1996 to 1999. Some of it has already been published elsewhere,¹ but the focus was then on the categories of local deities and their function. Therefore, this paper does not dwell on the different categories of local deities, or the classification of the *yul lha*, as these issues have already been addressed, if not satisfactorily.²

While adding new material, this paper aims at giving an overall view of the deity of the territory in relation to his or her space and people that inhabit it. I will first examine the connotations of the word *yul* (Dzongkha: *g.yul/g.yus*)³ and try to place it in the Bhutanese context; in the second part, I will present the close links between the *yul lha* and the territory from four perspectives: kinship, area of control, power and rituals.

1. THE TERM *YUL*

In the West, it is the standard practice to translate *yul* as "territory". In Bhutan, while this translation certainly applies, *yul* also means "village" and "home".⁴ It is explained as meaning "native place" (*skyes*

I would like to thank Kunzang Choden for her information and comments.

¹ Pommaret 1994; 1996; 1998; and 2004.

² Pommaret 1996: 39-56.

³ The spelling of the words is given in classical Tibetan. When the Dzongkha spelling is used, the word will be preceded by Dz. The words in other non-written languages of Bhutan will be preceded by *.

⁴ This meaning is also found elsewhere in Tibet and the Himalayas, for instance in the Shar khog region of A mdo. Personal communication from Samten Karmay, August 1999.

sa ; hon. 'khrung yul).⁵ The word *lung pa*, whose Dzongkha form is *lunm* and which is widely used, at least in Central Tibet, is seldom used here, and is replaced by the term *yul*. Sometimes the word used in Dzongkha is *g.yul kha* (new Dzongkha spelling).⁶ One would therefore ask: "Where do you come from?", "What is your birth place?" (*Chö yu kati le mo?* or *Chö yuka kati le mo?*) The word with the new Dzongkha spelling of *g.yul*, translated as "village", is also found in the *Dzongkha-English Dictionary Topic-based Approach* (Rinchhen Khandu 1998: 287).

This equation territory/village can be explained by the fact that a village as we understand it in the West is relatively rare in Bhutan. For example, the title and function of *rgap* (Dz.) (Tib. *rgad po*), translated into English as "village headman", refers in fact to the headman looking after a group of several clusters of houses which is now referred to by the administrative term *rged 'og* (Dz.).

The classical term *grong*, which means village, is used in Bhutanese texts written in classical Tibetan, such as the Code of Laws, *bKa' khrims*, dating from 1729 (Aris 1986: 111b-154, 113b-158), and is noted in one of the Dzongkha dictionaries (*Dzongkha Dictionary*, Department of Education 1993: 54), but *grong* is not used in the colloquial language. It is a written administrative word. However, to designate a cluster of houses coming under one name and being part of a *yul*, the Dzongkha word *g.yul tshan* is prevalent all over the country while the word *grong gsep* (Tib. *grong gseb*) is used mostly in the western region. In Bumthangkha, the language spoken in the central regions, the word **krongtshan* (Tib. *grong tshan?*) is used, while in Tshangla, the language of the eastern region, the word **dung* is the colloquial term for village.

The terminology which tries to cover fluid concepts does not appear to be really fixed and the issue is rendered more complex by the different Dzongkha spellings that are encountered. Today, in the *Dzongkha Dictionary* published by the Dzongkha Development Commission, under the entry *g.yus*, one finds *grong gsep* as an equivalent (1993: 494).

A "village" was traditionally composed of several clusters of houses, sometimes a distance of one hour's walk from each other. It was, in fact, an area coming under one general name, and each cluster

⁵ Department of Education, *Dzongkha Dictionary*, Thimphu, 1993: 289.

⁶ Also written *g.yus kha* in van Driem 1998: 351, 435 and in the *Dzongkha Dictionary* published by the Dzongkha Development Commission 1993: 103, 494.

of houses (Dz. *grong gsep*) had its own name. A *yul* is therefore quite similar to the now outdated connotation of the French word "pays", meaning not the country but the region of origin, and found in the old colloquial expression "on est pays", "we are from the same region/village". In the Bhutanese conception of living space, one could therefore say that the reference unit is the *yul*.

Yet, if the term *yul*⁷ implies an inhabited settlement, it also includes the mountains and any part of the landscape where human activities take place. Contrary to certain regions of Asia where there is a clear differentiation between domesticated and wild spaces, in Bhutan the *yul* as territory does not infer this restrictive notion. It would therefore include inhabited settlements, fields, pasture lands, forests that are used by the people and necessary to their daily life as well as *ri*, mountains. Mountains may or may not be the residence of the *yul lha*, the deity of the territory, or may be the deity himself or herself.⁸ These five elements of the Bhutanese landscape make up a territory. When the monsoon is late at the end of June or the beginning of July, bringing drought at the time when the rice is due to be transplanted, a ceremony of "encircling the fields" (*zhing skor*), such as the one described by Ramble in Mustang takes place (1995: 88). This ceremony is not performed on an annual basis and does not encompass the whole territory (*yul*) but only the fields as usual.

In the popular representation of the *yul*, a territory is defined by the people living on it, and its borders are delimited by the people's conception of where their local deity's power and influence stops.

Of course, the territory is also the product of diverse historical circumstances and, in particular, can be linked to clan structures closely related to the local deity. Unfortunately, in Bhutan, the clan structure has all but disappeared, and sources which might prove that the local deity was a clan's deity have yet to come to light. On the basis of the *rGyal rigs*, a 17th century text (Aris 1986: 12-85), Aris showed that clans existed at least in Eastern Bhutan, and traced their common ancestor to the Tibetan prince gTsang ma (Aris 1979: 94-110; 1986: 25-47). This historical ancestry may explain why there is, so far, no evidence that the Eastern Bhutanese clans (*rus*) had a deity that they would consider their ancestor. Moreover, the clans found in the historiography do not refer to clans of the common people who lived in a territory and about whom very little is known, but only to the

⁷ For practical purposes, I will use the classical spelling.

⁸ On these aspects, cf. Pommaret 1996: 39-56. Although the majority of *yul lha* are male, some are female.

ruling clans, called *rus* or more often referred to by the honorific term *gdung*. The term *gdung* became the title for the petty rulers of the central and South-central region of Bum thang and Kheng. The clans mentioned in the *rGyal rigs* are clearly the ruling clans and the *rGyal rigs* retraces the history of the rulers, not of the ordinary people.

For the ruling clans of Central Bhutan, divine ancestry is sometimes involved but so far there is no textual or tangible evidence that the deity became the *yul lha* of the whole territory. For example, in the case of Bum thang the *rGyal rigs* says:

Now I shall speak about the history of the origins of the gDung [families] of the four districts of Bum thang. Now then, in previous times after the few subjects who came in company with King Khyi kha ra thod had, in the absence of a lord-chief, contended and quarrelled, they searched for a unanimously chosen chief. Since there was no royal family [among them belonging to] a great clan, they did not find a chief and so they worshipped and supplicated the God of Heaven 'Od de gung rgyal.⁹ 'Od de gung rgyal enjoined saying: "The divine son Gu se lang ling,¹⁰ having grasped the divine *rmu* cord, will descend to U ra", and he melted into the light. After he [Gu se lang ling] had resided in the womb of bSod nams dpal 'dren, a woman who possessed the marks of a *dākinī* of Gnosis, in order that he may be born as if by a miracle, a voice from space declared: "Oh! This boy is a divine son and for many generations [his descendants] will come to act as lord-chiefs".¹¹

⁹ 'Od de gung rgyal is a very-well known mountain-deity (*phyva*) in Tibet as he is considered the ancestor of the Tibetan kings. Cf. Tucci 1980: 730; Karmay 1996: 61.

The eponymous mountain (69,998m) is situated in 'Ol kha about sixty kilometers to the east of rTsed thang and close to the town of Zangs ri on the north bank of the gTsang po. This deity's name appears in mythological accounts in Bhutan, and one may ask whether this reveals a possible place of origin for some of the people who came from Tibet, or if it is simply the attribution of a myth of origin to a prestigious deity.

¹⁰ Gu se lang ling does not appear in the list provided by Karmay (1996), nor in Tucci (1980), which does not mean that he is not listed in another yet unknown text. It might also be a local variation.

¹¹ Aris 1986: 46-47. *rGyal rigs* folios 32 a-b: *Da ni bum thang sde bzhi'i gdung rnams kyi chad khungs 'byung tshul kyang brjod par bya'o/ de nas sngon rgyal po khyi kha ra thod dang mnyam po yong ba'i mi ser 'thor bu re yod pa rnams rje dpon med par 'khrugs cing brtsod pa las/ khong rang rnams kha mthun gyi rje dpon 'tshol*

Therefore, unless new sources, textual or oral, surface, it can first be said that when the clans are mentioned, they refer only to the ruling clans of a territory and do not concern the general community; second, that the deity of a particular ruling clan neither appears to have become the *yul lha* of the territory, nor is recognised consciously as the ancestor of the community.¹²

As for the relationship between *skyes lha* and *yul lha*, which needs to be briefly touched upon in this context, it is becoming increasingly clear that if a person is born within the family's territory, his or her *yul lha* and *skyes lha* will be the same deity. Given the stable structure of the rural Bhutanese society of the past, this makes sense. But if the person is born outside the family territory, his or her *skyes lha* will be the deity of his or her birthplace, while his or her *yul lha* will still be the deity of the family territory. With the increasing mobility of the society in the past ten years, a new concept has appeared: the *bom sa* (Dz.), that is the place where one grows up, which may be different from the birth-place. It will be interesting to note which deity is worshipped.

In Bhutan, at least in Bum thang and Paro, *skyes lha* and *yul lha* do not therefore automatically mean two different deities, but two different roles given to the same deity controlling a given territory. As for the term *gzhi bdag* ("master of the ground"), it is often equated with the term *yul lha*.¹³

For practical purposes I will use only the term *yul lha* in this article, while keeping in mind that it can be replaced according to the locality by *gzhi bdag*, *gnas bdag*, *gnas po*, and even *gter bdag*. Several terms are used in the colloquial language and the term *yul lha*, although understood, is often confined to ritual texts. If asked about the *yul lha* of the area, the villager will reply but will automatically revert to the local term.

This apparent dichotomy in terminology could be explained by the strong local particularities and the fact that ritual texts were written in

ba'i rus chen rgyal rigs med pas rje dpon ma rnyed par/gnam lha 'o de gung rgyal mchod cing gsol ba btob pas/ 'o de gung rgyal gvis bka' bsgos nas/ lha'i bu gu se lang ling lha'i rmu thag la 'jus nas/ u ra la bab po 'od du zhun nas/ bu med ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro'i mtshan dang ldan pa bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi lhum su bzhugs nas rdzus skye lta bur 'khrungs pa'i phyir/ bar snang gi sgra las/ 'o bu 'di ni lha'i bu yin pa'i gdung rabs mang po'i bar du rje dpon hyed par 'gyur ro zer ha'i sgra/

¹² On the *pho lha* of the "first clan" who became the *yul lha* of the community, cf. Hazod 1996: 94 and Schicklgruber 1996: 123.

¹³ As is the case in A mdo. Cf. Karmay 1996: 67.

classical Tibetan by clerics for whom the reference was the Tibetan corpus of texts. It would be interesting to know if this lexical difference can also be found in remote areas of Tibet.

For example, the term *gnas po* (Dz. *gnasp*) is very common and can be equated with *yul lha* in the colloquial language. To my knowledge, the use of the word with this particular connotation has yet to be recorded in Tibet, but is found in Mustang (Ramble 1996: 144). *gNas po*, of course, means "host", which reflects the deity's ownership of the place, and the inhabitants are therefore considered as his or her guests. This implies that, as in every society, host and guest have duties towards each other and have to respect a certain code of conduct so that the cohabitation can be harmonious.

If each territory has its deity, each cluster of houses on the territory also has a minor deity. It is also called *gnas po* or *gnas bdag* and is represented as the main deity's emanation, servant or part of his entourage.

For example, the Hum ral mgon po who is the *yul lha* of the area around the fortress of Paro, is the *gnas po* of the fortress, but he is called the Ja'o nep (Dz. *Brag 'og gnasp*) by the villagers, who consider him as an emanation of the Hum ral mgon po.¹⁴ dMug btsan is the powerful *yul lha* of part of the upper Tongsa region, but the fortress itself is protected by a *gnas bdag* called Ga rab dbang phyug to whom a shrine is erected inside the fortress.

2. THE TERRITORY AND ITS DEITY

An examination of the links between a specific territory and its deity can include many different aspects; these include, for example, myths and history, studied recently for the Tibetan dynasty by Karmay, and in Southern Tibet and Northern Nepal by Diemberger and Hazod.¹⁵

The present paper deals with four of these aspects that seem to be most relevant to Bhutanese society: kinship relationships, area of control, power, and rituals.

As seen elsewhere,¹⁶ the deity of the territory, *yul lha* or *gnas po/gnas mo* can be male or female, but the frequency of female deities

¹⁴ On these deities, Cf. Pommaret 2002 and 2003.

¹⁵ Karmay 1996: 59-71 and 1994: 408-429; Diemberger 1998: 43-55; Hazod 1998: 57-78.

¹⁶ Pommaret 1996 and 2004.

of the territory in Bhutan may differ significantly from other Tibetan areas, although this point needs to be researched.¹⁷

Kinship

The local deity is clearly linked to a territory and if he or she is not explicitly considered as the ancestor of the people living on the territory,¹⁸ the term by which the deity is addressed shows that there is a sense of bond, of kinship between the people and him or her. The terms *Apa/Ap*, ("father"), *A rgyas* (Dzongkha) or *Me me* (Tshangla) ("grandfather"), and *Ania* ("mother"),¹⁹ are used in the colloquial language to refer to the deity of the territory. They are more terms of endearment rather than kinship terms as such, but underline the closeness between the people and their *yul lha*. To give a few examples, dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len in northern Thimphu, 'Od 'dod pa in northern Paro, Khyung bdud in Haa, Ra brag in dBang 'dus pho brag, and Yazap/Yasab (Yab zap?) in sTod sbc sa are referred to as "Ap dGe bsnyen", "Ap 'Od 'dod pa", "Ap Khyung bdud", "Ap Radap" and "Ap Yazap". Sometimes they are also called A jo, ("elder brother"). The upper Tongsa district is the territory of a deity, residing on the mountain above Bon sbis, who is addressed as A rgyas dMug btsan, and the people of Kha gling in Eastern Bhutan call their deity Me me Drang ling. Jo mo sKu mkhar, the deity of Sag gteng, is called Ama Jomo ("Lady elder sister"); mTsho sman rgyal mo, the deity of 'Bu li in Kheng, is also called Ama mtsho sman.

The term *Apa/Ap* may also connote "father", since, according to popular belief, the deity often fathers children in his territory. These children are always by women who belong to the deity's territory, and their male offspring are declared the deity's sons because of their fierce temper or unusual strength. The people from Haa are feared because they are said to have inherited the temper of Khyung bdud, but also because this deity can curse people who antagonise his sons.

Pala and Pila, the ancestors of the royal family of Bhutan, who came from the north-eastern region of sKur stod, were believed to be the sons of the deity of the territory who passed on to them his strength

¹⁷ Ramble notes that the *yul lha* of Bon ri in Kong po is Yu 'od sman btsun also called Bon ri Ama (1997: 174-176).

¹⁸ Karmay 1996: 59-70

¹⁹ In this particular case, the terms mean "Father" and "Mother", but depending on the region and the context, the meaning of these terms can be respectively "husband" and "aunt".

and power. Similarly, in Tibet, in the 'Dan khog region of Khams, if a man was tall and strong, he was believed to be the son of gNyan chen thang lha.²⁰

One myth about the origin of the noble families (gDung and rJe) of Central and South-central Bhutan tells the story of a woman bearing a child by Gu se lang ling, the divine son of 'Od de gung rgyal. Gu se lang ling had become the *lha btsan* of the Mukulung region (Aris 1986: 50-53).

The sexual encounter between the deity and the women of his *yul* is vividly symbolised and ritualised in O rgyan chos gling in sTang, Bum thang, where the local deity, called Indrabhuti, was offered a cake (*tshogs*) in the shape of a vulva and called by the now rarely used term *tshogs ama* or "mother offering".²¹

A *yul lha* may often be married to a *mtsho sman* living in a lake, but would never marry a lake deity outside his territory. If the *yul lha* is the *mtsho sman*, as in the case of 'Bu li (Pommaret 2004), she is married to the *btsan*, deity of the rock, but once again not outside the territory.

This couple formed by a lake and a rock or a mountain - whichever of the two is the deity of the territory -, is one of the constant cultural traits of the Tibetan world.²² The theme of a lake deity marrying a man is well-known in folk literature.²³ Sexual encounters between a *mtsho sman* and a man can also produce an offspring such as in the case of Seng ge nam rgyal, the powerful 'Bu li dpon po, who lived at the end of the 19th century (Rigden and Pelgen 1999: 40).

It is clear that for the people of a particular area, the men are, metaphorically or otherwise, the sons of the *yul lha*. In the same way, because they are under the protection of Tshe ring ma who is their *yul lha*, the girls from the upper Paro Valley are said to be very pretty because they are considered this deity's daughters.

This sense of belonging to the *yul lha* is therefore expressed in terms such as "father", as already mentioned, but it can also take subtler forms such as the marriage practice peculiar to sTang in Bum

²⁰ Personal communication, Sras mo Chime Wangmo, July 1999.

²¹ I will not elaborate here on the sexual symbols present in many local Bhutanese rituals, especially in the eastern region. Cf. Pelgen 2000: 671-683.

²² Cf. among others, Bellezza 1997.

²³ Kinley Wangmo 1997: 90-95: "Lengo Dago", a serialised cartoon published in the weekly newspaper *Kuensel* in 1999. See also Macdonald 1972: 39.

thang.²⁴ In this area, it is common for a girl to become pregnant before making a relationship official. The girl is then obliged to declare that she is pregnant and name the child's father because failing to do so will bring calamities upon the area. The community then considers the couple impure and that a marriage and purification ceremony called *gTsang ma* ("pure") must be performed to remove the pollution (*sgrib*) and avoid them bringing disaster upon their households and themselves.²⁵

The fumigation ritual (*bsang*²⁶) is first performed for the hearth deity (*thab lha*), in the kitchen, then outside the house for the deity of the territory (*yul lha*) and the birth deity (*skyes lha*). If the boy recognises the child as his, he sits with the girl and is offered a cup of arak. But when he wants to drink, the cup is withdrawn and villagers scold him for having done something so reprehensible. This is repeated three times and only then the boy and girl are allowed to drink from the same cup, a gesture that officialises the marriage.

In case the boy refuses to recognise the baby, the girl must find a "substitute" (*tshab*) who is willing, for payment, to act as a husband for the time of the ceremony. If she cannot find anybody to accept this role, she must have a ransom effigy (*glud*) made and this ransom effigy, the substitute, is thrown away after the ceremony. If the girl has children from other men, she must repeat the ceremony each time.

The extent to which a girl must go to restore the social order and remove the pollution seen to be caused by her action is highly unusual in Bhutan. It certainly reveals the importance given to the local deities in this particular region. The whole ceremony is obviously aimed at removing the pollution from the territory so that the birth deity (*skyes lha*) and the deity of the territory (*yul lha*) do not get angry and inflict calamities upon the community. However, in a country where for a girl to be pregnant out of wedlock is generally accepted, this ceremony from sTang seems to go beyond the act of purification and needs to be researched further. If it were simply a cleansing ceremony, a fumigation ritual should be enough. The importance of the presence of a husband - either real or substitute - highlights, among other things, the ambiguous role of the deity of the territory: at the same time "father" of all the members of the community and potential sexual

²⁴ Personal communications from Kunzang Choden, October 1998 and August 1999.

²⁵ Brauen (1994: 116) speaks of a "Beer drinking" ceremony which has the same purpose in the village of Thangbi, in the Chos 'khor valley of Bum thang.

²⁶ I have chosen the spelling *bsang* rather than *bsangs*.

partner of the women. In either role, the deity would have to make sure that the child is not fathered by a stranger - always a portent of danger - or even by a demon likely to harm the community through the girl and the child. This may explain the importance given to the husband and to the kinship link between the deity of the territory and the women of his community.

In sTang, the sense of belonging to the deity of the territory is very strong. I was told the story of a young couple, both from sTang but living in Thimphu, who had a baby but had not gone through the proper ceremony in their village. They were so frightened of some impending disaster that they came back to sTang for the *gTsang ma* ceremony.

Another example of this special relationship between the community and the deity of its territory is the annual worship of Ama Jomo, called Jo mo gsol kha in the Eastern Sag gteng region. Every summer in the 8th month, the whole community goes up the mountain where Ama Jomo resides. On that particular day, once people enter her domain,

all barriers are lowered when it comes to sharing salacious jokes. Most Brokpa jokes are sexual, and crudely so, but under normal circumstances such jokes would never be shared by individuals between whom sexual relations would constitute incest. About two kilometers away from Ama Jomo Phodrang, every pilgrim goes through the motion of "hanging his or her embarrassment" on the stump. Having done this, no daughter should feel inhibited from sharing crude jokes with her father, uncle or brother. The entire day is spent making jokes, drinking, dancing and horse-racing. When the pilgrims return from Ama Jomo's Phodrang and cross the boundary of the tree stump, normal relationships are resumed - crude jokes are shared only by those between whom sexual relations are not forbidden by incest prohibitions (Wangmo 1990: 143).

This custom could be understood as a sign that all the people are equal before the deity of the territory and consider themselves her children. Whatever the explanation may be, it shows that a special

relationship exists between the deity and her people, which transcends the social norms and behaviours.²⁷

Control of space and residence

People have a very clear idea of the space - the territory - ruled by the *yul lha* and they can even indicate its exact limits. There might not be any man-made physical mark in the landscape, but certain points in the landscape, especially mountains or rocky outcrops, mark the boundaries between two territories, and long prayer-flags (*dar lcog*) or even gates made of wood, like those which formally existed in Sag teng and La g.yag, are often erected on the "border".

The *yul lha* can live on a mountain, in a rock, or in a grove. His residence is usually referred to by the term "palace" (*pho brang*) and is considered "sacred". A soul-lake (*bla mtsho*) may be attributed to him, such as 'Od dod pa's soul-lake in the upper Paro valley; he also has a grove in the forest which is considered his playground.

The shrine dedicated to the deity is a small square construction made of stones with a slanted roof and can be called *gnas khang*, *btsan khang*, or *la btsas*²⁸ in Eastern Bhutan, although this last term generally refers to a stone cairn at the top of a pass. It is generally built on the spot of the deity's residence, or not far from a cluster of houses. Prayer-flags are usually erected next to it. The "palace" and the shrine should not be disturbed, otherwise calamities will plague the community, as in the case of the shrine of Brag dmar dpal bzang, the deity of Rukubji, described by Dujardin (1997: 78-81). It is also known that in the mid-1990s the feeder road from gSum 'phrang to Shing mkhar in the Ura region of Bum thang was lengthened in order to avoid passing through, and therefore disturbing, a rocky area which was the palace of the territory deity.

In most regions, the deity of the territory is also represented inside the local Buddhist temple, either in the chapel for the fierce protectors (*mgon khang*), or in a special shrine placed at the side of the main altar. It can be just a mask or a painting, but it is frequently a kind of effigy attired in accordance with the deity's iconography - either a fierce-looking general in armour, or a figure clad in white brocade with a flat rigid hat called *A mdo phying zhva* ("felt hat from A mdo"). It is very often surrounded by weapons and shields, offered after a

²⁷ Cf. Buffetrille 1996, vol.II: 350, and forthcoming (Oslo) concerning the pilgrimage to Kha ba dkar po.

²⁸ On this term in Tibet Cf. Karmay 2000.

victory against enemies. The chapel for the fierce protectors is usually off-limits to women, except if the *yul lha* is female.

Contrary to what has been assumed, the *yul lha* does not always stay on his or her territory but travels about as Buffetrille notes regarding the Reb gong area in A mdo (Buffetrille 2002).

I have also been told that in the 'Dan khog region of Khams, the sudden breaking-up of the ice at the end of winter meant that dGe bsnyen, the *yul lha*, was travelling back to his place.²⁹

This seems to imply that in some cases, the deities of the territory migrate at certain times of the year, a belief that is also found in Bhutan. Brag/Drags pa dmar btsan, the deity of the Dur territory in Bum thang, migrates in winter to warmer regions, and the high pastures are closed until he returns.³⁰ In Kha gling (Eastern Bhutan), where people used to migrate in winter to the Assam-Bhutan border to graze their sheep and trade, Drang ling, the deity of the territory, leaves the lake that is his palace high up in the mountain, and in the 11th month migrates to the warmth of the south. When he comes back in the 2nd month, people welcome him with alcohol and butter, and present the cattle to him as he doubles as a deity of cattle and wealth (*nor lha*).

In some places another type of migration is associated with members of a family who leave the area. In O rgyan chos gling (sTang, Bum thang), the family has numerous deities to worship, eight of them being *klu*, worshipped especially by women. These deities (*yul lha* and *klu*) travelled with the persons who came to marry into the religious nobility family (*chos rje*) of O rgyan chos gling.³¹ When the names of all these deities are recited during the annual ritual, it is possible to trace the territories of origin of family members, and this can be assimilated to a "genéo-geographical" chart.

As this is an aspect of the subject that I discovered recently, I have not yet carried out a proper study of the travelling deities of the territory. However, I am under the impression that at least in Bhutan,

²⁹ Personal communication from Sras mo Chime Wangmo, July 1999.

³⁰ Several anthropologists have noted this. Among others, cf. Diemberger 1996: 223.

³¹ Personal Communication from Kunzang Choden, October 1998. She also told me as an example that Jo mo, the important female local deity from Eastern Bhutan, is worshipped in O rgyan chos gling because in the middle of the 19th century, sGrol ma, who became the wife of the dPon slob mTsho skyes rdo rje, came from the eastern region of bKra shis g.yang rtse and brought her deity with her.

these migrating *yul lha* belong mostly to areas where cattle migrations take place, but this has to be confirmed by further research.

On the other hand, it is said that the people of rTsa mang in Mon sgar district who migrated to Kheng (Zhal sgang district) at the end of the 19th century, still go back every year to rTsa mang to perform the rituals for their deity (Rigden and Pelgen 1999: 25).

Adjacent or historically linked territories were often ruled by deities of the territory who were brothers. Five *yul lha* of the Paro and Haa Valleys in western Bhutan are said to be brothers: 'Od 'dod pa, Jo bo brag skyes, Khyung bdud and Bya rog btsan (Schicklgruber 1997: 159-175). Brag/Drags pa dmar btsan, the *yul lha* of Dur in the upper Chos 'khor valley of Bum thang, is said to have nine brothers who live on the ridges surrounding Dur, but he appears to be the main deity of the territory.

An absolute and ambivalent power

One of the most important and well-known roles of the *yul lha* is the protection of his or her territory and its well-being and fertility. This includes not only human beings but also cattle and the whole landscape, and implies a strong notion of ownership. The *yul lha* has to preserve the integrity of the territory against enemies, and this is why he is often also considered, as the warrior-deity, the *dgra lha*, and is depicted as a warrior with armour and helmet. We know of the case of Khyung bdud defending the region of Haa against the Tibetan invaders (Pommaret 1996: 47).

Even kinship does not prevent the *yul lha* from fighting with their siblings for their own territories.³² Numerous stories regarding the rivalry between Jo bo Brag skyes and Khyung bdud, and between Khyung bdud and dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len bear testimony to this (Pommaret 1996: 46). The rivalry often concerns the welfare and the

³² A delightful story which took place in Tibet is told in the short account of mChog gyur gling pa's life by Ogyen Tobgyal Rinpoche (1988: 18). mChog gling crossed the territory of a deity called Samten Khangsar (bSam gtan khang gsar) and subdued him. The deity came to see him. After he left, the lama said that the deity had complained in such terms: "Heading towards Lhasa you made cleansing offerings to Nyenchen Thanglha and the others but gave me nothing. As I am also important I created this obstacle. Nyenchen Thanglha and I are the same, accepting the orders of Guru rin po che in the same way'. Chokling answered: 'You are not the same. Shall I call Nyenchen Thanglha right now?'. 'Please do not say that' replied Samten Kangsar."

prosperity of the deity's territory, such as the water dispute between Haa and Paro.

Sometimes this rivalry can turn vicious and we find *yul lha* harbouring fierce enmity towards each other. In Dur, one of the *yul lha* cut the other's arm with a stone from his slingshot. In Eastern Bhutan, the *yul lha*³³ of sGra med rtse was jealous of the *yul lha* of Yon phul la, the two places facing each other, each on a mountain ridge separated by a deep river valley. The *yul lha* of sGra med rtse challenged Yon phul la's *yul lha* to a game of stone throwing. He won and seized all the wealth of Yon phul la, including, in particular, the cattle.

Archery is a bond between people from the same territory who compete against adjacent territories, and here again the deity of the territory is involved. Participation in archery is widespread to the point of obsession, and a match usually takes place after the ceremonial offerings to the deity of the territory. It is clearly linked to the *yul lha*, but one may ask whether it is not because he can also be the *pho lha*, the male deity. In the traditional context,³⁴ archery is an all-male game and women are forbidden to touch the bows and arrows. Before a match against another territory, the archers go and sleep in a house where no women are allowed, and together with the astrologer (Dz. *rtsip* / Tib. *rtsi pa*), they perform rituals dedicated to the *yul lha* / *pho lha* most of the night, invoking his protection and help to defeat their adversaries, even resorting to magical means.³⁵ As in the case of war, the *yul lha* must protect the men of his territory and fight side by side with them. An interesting case is a female deity (*mo lha*) who is also a water deity (*mtsho sman*) worshipped by archers from one area of Thimphu, and this needs to be further researched.³⁶ A journalist from the national newspaper vividly reports about the desecration of the deity's shrine:

³³ In eastern Bhutan, the *yul lha* is often called *gter bdag*.

³⁴ Since 1982, Bhutan has had an Olympic archery team that includes women, but the context is so different from the traditional set-up that the admission of women was never an issue.

³⁵ The archers may also sleep in the *mgon khang* in order to obtain the protective deities' empowerment.

³⁶ Cf. *Kuensel* Saturday May 5th, 2001. "The Jashi Mom chorten in Changzamtog: revered as well as desecrated". By Ugyen Penjore.

Losing an archery match has often led to wrathful scenes at the playing arena. But not until last week have some dared to vent their anger on the deity they had invoked in order to win. The real loser in last week's archery semi-finals between Chang geog and the Finance Ministry happened to be the Jashi Mom chorten in Changzamtog. The chorten, known for its supernatural spells, was found at the end of the day smeared with human excrement. It is hard to say who did that exactly, whether someone from the losing team in a fit of anger over the Molha's (the chorten's female deity) failure to help, or a winning member to inflame and distract her from supporting the opponent team which had sought her help. It could be either way. While the chorten's Konyer (caretaker), Ap Pema, suspects the archers the most, he does not rule out the mischief of the children in the locality. Inhabitants in Chang Bangdu are inclined to believe that the sacrilegious deed was the act of the desperate archers. Within Thimphu, the chorten's Molha is highly regarded for her power to enervate the opponent's vitality at games. Her intervention is much sought after by archers, footballers, basketballers and even boxers. "The spells of the deity, Molha, is believed to be very powerful and always comes true", says Ap Pema. Only except this time. The chorten's history remains a mystery but, as far as Dophu (an old-timer) remembers, people in and around Thimphu always did come to seek its help whenever there happened to be big matches. While some archers believe that the Molha grants her favours on a "first come first serve basis", some believe that her powers cease to be effective if one crosses a river or a stream. According to a regular visitor to the chorten, Jashi Mom chorten is also known for her generosity in granting wishes. "The Molha flirts with every man coming to seek her help and tries to please everybody equally," the visitor said. But the wishes are fulfilled on one condition: the archery range should not be located across the river from the chorten.

Weird as it may sound, many archers also believe that the Molha greatly favours the team which has the player with the biggest male organ. The man is usually sent to seek her favours. Ap Pema recalls an incident where a soldier who had this reputation was hired purposely to seek her help. However, Ap Pema believes that the chorten is losing its power,

especially after it was vandalized by robbers a few years ago. With such strong beliefs in the divinity of local deities, archers can be very apprehensive about winning and losing a game."

However, when archery is practised in the context of a propitiation ritual of the *yul lha*, it lacks this competitive or aggressive inter-territorial edge, and it is rather seen as homage to please the deity. It is also a way to find out which man in the territory has the favour of the *yul lha*, as the winner sees his prestige and influence considerably enhanced. This recalls the ritual hunt and horse-race described in the Shar wa society of A mdo, or in Dolpo (Karmay and Sagant 1999; Schicklgruber 1998: 106).

Belief in the deity's power is far from disappearing. In a golf tournament, which took place in Haa in May 1999, the winner, Major Gurung, posted in Haa as a Royal Bhutan Army officer, thanked Ap Khyung bdud. The Veteran's Cup winner was also from Haa and the weekly newspaper, *Kuensel*, dated May 8th, 1999, headlined the article "Haa Golf: Was Ap Chhundu involved?"

The *yul lha* can also "offer" his territory and the people living in it as a sign of submission to a powerful lama, thus giving the latter political legitimacy over the territory (Pommaret 2002). The Hum ral mgon po of Paro "prostrating himself completely in front of the *Zhabs drung* [Ngag dbang nam rgyal], offered him as his subjects all the areas which are crossed by the Paro river from top to bottom" (*lHo'i chos 'byung*, folio 42b). A lord has to placate and propitiate the *yul lha* if he wants to rule a new territory without any problem. A similar process has been noted by Karmay regarding the Tibetan kings' annexation of local deities: "If one local chief annexes neighbouring territory, he seems also to adopt the local deity of the annexed territory for propitiation in order to safeguard his annexation" (Karmay 1996: 63). The links between the deity of a territory and political power in Bhutan is a topic in itself and will be examined elsewhere. Here I simply want to stress the sense of ownership that the *yul lha* has over a given territory.

The deity of the territory has to be kept happy because he or she looks after the water supply -- going to such lengths as to try to steal water from another territory (Pommaret 1996: 46) if necessary, but drying up a lake or bringing other disasters if angered (Pommaret 2004). In 1996, the bursting of a glacial lake in the northern region of Lug nag nang and the ensuing flash flood were attributed by the people

to the anger of the deity of the territory. In the Shar pa region of the upper Paro valley, 'Od dod pa is seen to control the flow of the river towards Paro and has a small shrine near the river, to which people make offerings to prevent floods.

In the south-western jungle region of sTag ti chu which is crossed by the road linking the capital to the Indian border, some people attribute frequent car accidents to the wrath of a powerful local deity (called here *gnas po*) to whom people used to sacrifice animals on a large flat stone high on the mountain. As these stopped, it is believed that the deity is taking revenge in this way.

Cattle, in particular, are the subject of the care or the wrath of the *yul lha* who often doubles as a deity of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*), such as Tshe ring ma. Within the herd, yaks or sheep consecrated to the *yul lha* wear red tufts of wool on their ears and usually walk at the head of the herd when it moves. The literature provides examples of yaks, among other animals, consecrated to the local deities such as the *lha g.yag*, mentioned in the Tibetan manuscript translated by Macdonald under the title "Histoires du Vetala d'or XIX" (1972: 29-33).

As already noted above, in some areas such as Dur in Bum thang, the grazing periods are controlled by the *yul lha*, as one cannot go to the high pastures unless the deity has returned from his winter migration. Disease among the cattle is attributed to the anger of the *yul lha* caused by a breach of social norms, or by pollution, such as that mentioned earlier. The female water-deity (*mtsho sman*), who is the *yul lha* of Kheng 'Bu li in South-central Bhutan, caused the death of all the cattle of the house in which she was residing because she was displeased (Pommaret 2004). The importance of the deity of the territory as lord of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*) is well symbolised by the fact that a deity in a high region is often mounted on a yak, such as 'Od 'dod pa of upper Paro or g.Yag bdud nag po of U ra in Bum thang. Also the sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma*) dedicated to them often represent a yak, as is the case for 'Od 'dod pa, Tshe ring ma, Khyung 'dud or dGon/mGon mo of mGar sa.

Of course the *yul lha* is concerned with the crops that he or she protects or can destroy by hail or drought. Depending on the region, a short ritual is performed for the *yul lha* at each important step of the agricultural calendar: ploughing, sowing, transplanting (in case of rice), and harvesting.

The deity's intercessor (*rnal 'byor ma*, *dpa' bo*, or *dpa' mo*, *gter bdag*, *lha 'bab*) plays an important role in the daily life of the

community as he or she is called whenever an unwelcome event disturbs the life of a house or the community. Through possession of the medium, the deity reveals the causes of social or physical disturbances and therefore acts to re-establish harmony. This is a well-known process which does not need to be commented upon here. The intercessor also performs divination either for individuals or for the community and performs certain rituals of exorcism for certain categories of spirits.³⁷ An intercessor seldom leaves the deity's territory unless he or she is called by somebody from the territory but living outside of it, and for the annual general ritual of the intercessors, about which not much is known to date.

Unless he or she is engaged in squabbles with another deity, a *yul lha* will only rarely extend his or her almost infinite power over the daily life of the people by bringing misfortune to people outside of his or her territory. They belong to another deity and territory, and it is just as if they did not exist. On the other hand, if strangers come to the deity's territory, they have to obey certain rules so as not to incur his or her wrath. The case of a soldier in upper Paro who did not believe in 'Od dod pa, uttered derogatory remarks on the deity and died the next day after meeting a black dog, is documented by Schicklgruber (1997: 169). Pollution (*sgrib*) rules are also to be respected by strangers.

In Sag gteng, Sos, La g.yag and Gling bzhi, high-altitude regions devoted mainly to yak herding, the deities are so sensitive that they cannot tolerate being polluted by any kind of "dirty smoke", and that is why dead bodies are never cremated but exposed to the vultures. Therefore, as soon as strangers enter these deities' territories, they are advised not to burn garbage or to smoke, lest they meet the wrath of the *yul lha* (Pommaret 1996: 52). More generally, if a woman alien to the territory is menstruating, she should also obey the rule and not go near the sacred domain of the *yul lha*.

These attitudes attributed to the *yul lha* towards the outside world, ignoring it in one sense but obliging it to respect his or her rules in the other, show once more that the deity exercises his or her power over a specific and well-defined territory.

³⁷ The specific attributions of the intercessor and the local priest will be examined elsewhere.

Rituals

In exchange for the protection and well-being of the territory, the community performs rituals for the *yul lha*, a process that is well documented throughout the Tibetan world. However, throughout Bhutan the style of worship has no set pattern and each territory has its own customs and rituals, although basic characteristics such as fumigation (*bsang*) and libations (*gser skyems*) seem to exist everywhere.

Two specific cases of worship have to be briefly commented upon: the deity of the territory as "birth deity" and as "warrior deity".

Individually, a person - man or woman - would appear to go for annual private worship (*bsang* and *gser skyems*) either to the Buddhist temple where the *yul lha* is housed, or preferably to the palace of the *yul lha*. In fact, this individual worship is not for the *yul lha* as such, but for the "birth deity", the *skyes lha* who, as we have seen earlier, is usually the same deity. Therefore, it seems to me that there is no individual worship of the *yul lha* but only of the *skyes lha*.

If the deity of the territory is also the warrior deity (*dgra lha*), as is often the case, he might, for this specific role, be dedicated a special annual ceremony, like the propitiation ritual for the warrior deity (*dgra lha gsol kha*) of the fortress of Paro.

This is a short ceremony performed, as one would expect, only by men dressed as a general and his soldiers. Led by the intercessor (*dpa' bo*), they make offerings and libations to the warrior deity and perform a dance, swinging their swords and shouting at the top of their voices.

Besides these specific cases, as a *yul lha*, the deity is worshipped annually by the whole community, and its members living far from the territory try to come back for this occasion. In Bhutan this ceremony has almost as many different names and dates as there are territories, and this makes it really difficult at times to discern whether or not this particular ceremony is for the *yul lha*, unless one attends it. However, the two most common terms used for this propitiation ceremony are *gsol kha* and *mchod pa*. This annual ceremony may also have different phases and women are included in some of these.

To take a few examples of this diversity: in Paro Dos phu shar ri (Dz. Dop sha ri), in sKyabs khra/cha, or in Bum thang, only men go to the palace of the deity, and each house has to send there at least one man or a representative. They offer fumigation and libation (*bsang* and

gser skyems) to the deity. The prayer to the *yul lha* names the deity of the territory but also all the neighbouring deities who, as we have seen earlier, are often related to him. The prayers are usually led by the local priest called by different names according to the region: *rtsis pa* (Dz. *rtsip*), *pha jo*, *bon po* or *phramin*,³⁸ but monks from the state clergy are never involved and do not participate. Women join the men only later and then archery matches, drinking and dancing start.

The deity's intercessor (*rnal 'byor ma*, *dpa' bo*, or *dpa' mo*, *gter bdag*) may become possessed by the deity on that day and utter prophecies regarding the territory and its people, but possession does not always occur.

Women are included in the main ceremony for the worship of Khyung bdud in Haa, which consists of a procession and the killing of a yak (Pommaret 1996: 47). In Kheng 'Bu li, where the *yul lha* is a female water-deity (*mtsho sman*), women and men worship together.

In most Tibetan areas, the worship of the deity of the territory includes archery contests and horse racing, sometimes both combined with acrobatic performances (Schicklgruber 1998: 99-108). Because of the rugged nature and steep slopes of the terrain, horse races do not take place in Bhutan where the people are not great riders. However as mentioned earlier, archery plays a part in most celebrations for the deity of the territory and a competition may take place after the ceremonial offerings as a concluding event, but it can also be the essential part of the ritual to the *yul lha*. Archery is also associated with fertility, and it is believed that an archery match on a day of celebration to the *yul lha* increases the fertility of the place. At g.Yag sa, a small settlement in northern Paro where yak herding provides the livelihood, an archery match which takes place in the second month, starts with a *mar chang* offering³⁹ to Jo bo brag skyes and his brother Khyung bdud. If this ceremony does not take place, Jo bo brag skyes is displeased and calamities befall the settlement and the cattle. In the

³⁸ *Phramin* is a word used in Tshangla (Tshangs la - Shar phyogs pa'i kha), and therefore has no written form. However one may ask whether it does not refer to the Tibetan word *phra men*. This word is found, for example, in Mi la ras pa's *Hundred Thousand Songs* by gTsang smyon, when Mi la ras pa questions beautiful young women on who they are in reality: "Are you magic *dākinī*?" (*phra men*). Cf. Chang 1977: vol. 1: 314; and is used by the 5th Dalai Lama in his '*chams yig* and translated by Nebesky-Wojkowitz as "witch" 1976: 91, 169-173. Also Das 1977 gives the meaning of "magical forecasts". However, one notes that in classical Tibetan, *phra men* seems to be applied only to women, and not to men.

³⁹ For an explanation of *mar chang*, see below.

same way, archery is considered to be the most important part of the annual ritual to Me me Drang ling, the deity of Kha gling in Eastern Bhutan, who is male and lives in a lake.

Offerings to the *yul lha* can also differ according to his or her nature. They can simply be dried cakes made of flour (rice, wheat, barley), alcohol, and sometimes even milk. In many cases, it also includes chunks of meat, and even the sacrifice of a whole animal such as a yak or a sheep. There is a general consensus in Bhutan that animal sacrifices were common in the past, except maybe in Bum thang, and that it is only quite recently (the last 30-50 years) that the practice has been slowly disappearing. The sacrifice was performed by the local priest, who then offered the best pieces of meat to the deity, and the people shared the rest according to a pattern which has already been analysed in a historical and anthropological perspective.⁴⁰

The worship of the deity of the territory may also include a *mar chang* ceremony. It is a ceremonial offering of alcohol, butter and an arrow to protective as well as local deities. A large copper or bronze vat containing alcohol is placed on a stand in front of the person representing the lord or high authority of the territory. The vat is ornamented with horns made of butter. The master of the ceremony who stands in front of the vat facing the lord, offers a ladle of alcohol while saying a short prayer. Then he brings the lord a long arrow (*mda' dur*) wrapped in pieces of cloth of five different colours. The lord quickly touches it, ending the short ceremony, which is clearly at the same time a ritual of propitiation and allegiance to the deities.

Besides this particular occasion, the *mar chang* is also performed in many other circumstances and there is no official function in Bhutan which does not include a *mar chang*. To my knowledge, this ceremony has not been mentioned in any ethnographic or historical writings about Tibet, although the symbolism and role of the arrow is well documented.

In the course of the year, a fumigation ceremony (*lha bsang*) for the deity can be performed by individual houses if they fear they have angered the deity or polluted him, or simply if they have a request to make regarding the well-being of the household. This ritual always includes the notion of *g.yang 'gug*, "the calling of the fortune", and a *g.yang gtor* is added to the sacrificial cakes representing the deities. If

⁴⁰ On ritual dismemberment in Tibet and the Himalayas, cf. Stein 1959: 464; Macdonald 1980: 199-208; Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 261-279. However one may argue that we have here a case of sharing of meat as a social act, and not a dismemberment which creates a society.

the *yul lha* is also the deity of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*), the *g.yang gtor* will be ornamented with yak horns or a yak head made of dough, as in the case of Tshe ring ma, who looks after the border region in the upper Paro valley,⁴¹ or Indrabhuti who rules over O rgyan chos gling in Bum thang.

In areas where cattle migration is part of the way of life, as in northern Paro, Bum thang and Sag gteng, people will not go up to the high summer pastures without making offerings to the deity once they reach them. By this gesture, they ask the deity permission to graze the cattle on his or her property.

In this context of rituals to local deities, one must mention the numerous festivals of Eastern Bhutan, especially, those that have a strong sexual component and where men and women alike participate. In the present state of research, it is difficult to say whether these festivals are linked to the worship of the deity of the territory or if they are simply fertility festivals. The Bhutanese classify them as *Bon chos* and the local priests (*pha jo*, *bon po*, *phramin*, etc.) preside over them.

Buddhist ceremonies also often includes a part which is dedicated to the deity of the territory. Examples of this include the *bskang gso* of O rgyan chos gling in sTang (Bum thang),⁴² the *mchod pa* in Kheng 'Bu li (Pommaret 2004), the festival of Chu stod Nam kha'i lha khang in sTang (Bum thang), and the lHa rdzong (Dz. Hong tsho) festival in the Thimphu region. In O rgyan chos gling, Indrabhuti the host (*gnas po*) of the place, as well as other local deities which came from Tibet with Klong chen and rDo rje gling pa; and sKu bla mkha' ri, dGong dkar klu bdud gi grags pa rgyal mtshan and Jo bo lha dar, are invoked in the *bskang gso* ritual dedicated to the protector (*chos srung*) mGon po Ma ning. At Chu stod nam kha'i lha khang, in the 10th month, dPal ldan lha mo and mGon po, as well as the local deity, here called a *gter bdag*, are worshipped. At this place, the local deity has a yak head and his name, Rwa skyes, reminds us, of course, of Zo ra rwa skyes, a complex deity present in this valley and also found in other parts of the Himalayas.⁴³

Another instance is the Hong tsho mchod pa. On the second and last day, once the religious dances are over, the deity of the territory, here also called "host" (Dz. *gnasp/* Tib. *gnas po*) Yazap/Yasab (Yab

⁴¹ Ceremony of *lha bsang* observed in Chu yi, Paro, 9th November 1996. For more details, cf. Schicklgruber 1997: 170-173.

⁴² This ceremony will be studied in a forthcoming article.

⁴³ On Zo ra rwa skyes in Bhutan, cf. Pommaret 1998.

zap?), is taken out of the temple where he resides the rest of the year. Addressed by the villagers as Ap Yazap, he is also the *yul lha* of sTod sbe sa (Chhoki 1994: 111), which is located on the other side of the rDo skyongs la pass, closer to Punakha than to Thimphu. The fact that he is also the deity of Hong tsho village, most probably reflects the ancient seasonal migration pattern between the Thimphu and Punakha valleys. Ap Yazap is represented by a huge effigy dressed as a warrior. He is accompanied by two other effigies, also housed in the temple and called mGon yab yum which are said to represent a male and female form of Mahakala. Preceded by the main festival officiant dressed as a Tantrist priest with a black hat, and lay attendants carrying sacrificial cakes made of dough, the three deities are taken in procession to a field at the limit of the village where the offerings are thrown and burned in an exorcism ritual (*gtor rgyab*). Although the ceremony of this village is not entirely dedicated to the deity of the territory, his being carried in a formal procession from the temple to the limit of the village bears witness to the importance that the villagers accord him for the protection of their properties.

These are only a few examples that illustrate that the deity of the territory is also worshipped in different ways, during Buddhist rituals.

CONCLUSION

The information provided here, although still sketchy, raises some questions and allows some remarks.

It is quite impossible to give a definite pattern for the worship of the deity of the territory (*yul lha*) in Bhutan, but we can remark that, albeit protean, it is alive and requires the participation of the whole community. The size of the territory controlled by one deity makes no difference to the importance he or she has for the community, and the worship is carried out with the same diligence. However, there is clearly a hierarchy among the deities of the territories, and it seems that it is linked to the extent of power attributed to the deities.

In this context it appears that certain deities who are also present in Tibet, such as Khyung bdud, dGe bsnen Jag pa me len, and Tshe ring ma, are considered the most powerful, owing to an origin which gives them prestige over the more indigenous deities, even if this is not articulated in such explicit terms by the people.

The *yul lha*, and its association with a territory, imparts a strong sense of identity to the people who live in osmosis with their

respective deities to the point of acquiring certain of their characteristics (toughness, wittiness, beauty, etc.). This has certainly played a role, along with other geographical and historical considerations, in the difficult emergence of the concept of Bhutanese nationhood.

Although the Bhutanese state (*gzhung*) has existed since the 17th century, it was seen as a political entity superimposed by a centralised power, and people identified themselves first with their territories of origin. The idea of a Bhutanese nation is relatively new and is linked to the monarchy - in Dzongkha, "nation" is translated by the term *rgyal khab*, "kingdom"⁴⁴ and to the feeling of having to fight for survival in a particular geo-political and demographic context.

The first allegiance of the people was to the deity of the territory and his or her human representative, who could answer their immediate needs. It is interesting to note in this context that the government policy of the past thirty years has been to strive to get closer to the people through a process of decentralisation which would "serve" them better. The great prayer-flag (*dar lcog*) which is erected near the fortress housing the provincial government and is dedicated to the protective deities (*chos srung*) of the nation, is a telling symbol. Each household of a district must send a member on the day when the prayer-flag is to be renewed, otherwise a fine is imposed.

From the four perspectives examined above, the deity of the territory emerges like an anthropomorphic lord ruling an estate with a large range of rights over individuals but also duties regarding their protection and well-being. If the deity also takes the function, as is often the case, of birth-deity, cattle-deity and warrior-deity, his or her powers over daily life are almost unlimited. In exchange, the people offer him or her rituals which are testimonies of allegiance, gifts, supplications and sublimated taxes, and they try not to break the social and physical order so that the lord is not offended. This alliance - one might also call it a contract - has a strong feudal component and creates a powerful bond which is reflected in the relationship between the territory and its human ruler.

Indeed, the relationship between the deity of the territory and the political power is one of the key issues for any comprehensive study of

⁴⁴ In Tibetan too though, but in Bhutan the word started to be used with the connotation of "nation" in the specific context of the monarchy.

this deity, as well as for an understanding of the traditional political set-up in Bhutan.

In this context, two issues must be taken into account: first, the disparity of politico-historical contexts which differ greatly from one region to another; second, the apparent lack of related myths and historical texts that might allow an in-depth study such as those carried out by Diemberger, Hazod and Karmay. Even the ritual texts of fumigation and libation rituals have been disappointing thus far as they often contain no more than just a list of names, far from the poetic and descriptive style found elsewhere.

We all remember the pioneering assessment of Stein, who forty years before this field of study became *en vogue*, wrote:

Il nous semble digne de remarquer que, par la nature même des documents, nous avons constamment été obligés de passer des faits religieux et légendaires à des faits réels. C'est que dans la religion indigène des Tibétains, chaque groupe humain homogène a conscience de se relier, dans l'espace, au site qu'il habite et, dans le temps, aux ancêtres dont il descend, et de communiquer avec eux. Car l'ancêtre est inséparable de la montagne sacrée qui domine, comme lieu-saint, le pays habité et communique avec le ciel. Les relations des clans et de leurs chefs avec les divinités qui peuplent les accidents du terrain, sont conçues comme des liens de famille. (Stein 1959 b: 85).

This assessment obliges us to ask whether, in some regions, the *yul lha* is considered the ancestor of the community and whether he is the deity of the rulers who took over the territory. Part of the answer may lie with an investigation of the "personal male deity" (*pho lha*), which can also function as the deity of the territory (*yul lha*).

However, according to the short mythic accounts related at the beginning of this article, the deity of the rulers did not become automatically the deity of the territory. It is also known that Shel ging dkar po, the *pho lha* of the King of ICags mkhar, who is believed to have ruled Bum thang in the 8th century, did not become the *yul lha* of the valley where ICags mkhar was located. In Eastern Bhutan where Prince gTsang ma is said to be the royal ancestor of all the ancient clans, his deity's name is not even recorded. Some deities are believed to have arrived with great lamas after people had already settled within a territory, such as Ra brag in dBang 'dus pho brang, or the *yul lha* of

U ra in Bum thang. On the other hand, certain deities came with the people as did A ma Jo mo in Sag gteng.

The question of ancestorship is therefore too complex and too linked to each local history to be answered easily. The socio-historical framework of the regions of Bhutan, which differ greatly from one another, must also be taken into account. While the western part of the country became the stronghold of religious schools as early as the 12th century, the eastern part remained divided into fiefdoms ruled by petty kings (*rgyal po*) until the 17th century; and the central region was ruled, also until the 17th century, by a nobility of chiefs who combined, by way of marital alliances, prestigious religious descent and royal origin from Tibet.

And yet the *yul lha* is addressed in kinship terms and he or she is identified with a specific territory. Is the historical perspective at odds with the ethnographic findings? The deity of the territory is a trickster and may well deceive strangers stepping into his or her territory.

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SUR LA TENDANCE AUX MÉTAPHORES VISUELLES:
 ALLER VOIR LHA BTSUN CHEN PO AU SIKKIM

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Abstract: Although the biography and iconography of lHa btsun chen po nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1650) are usually well known in Sikkim, people are generally unaware that he is also the object of an important oral tradition following the example of Guru Rinpoche's. Numerous accounts narrated by shamans, lamas and villagers enrich the historical actions and events surrounding lHa btsun's visit to Sikkim, of his encounters with the saints and heroes of the past as well as his visions and prophecies. These narrations mostly refer to the *sKam zhed*, an important ritual celebration where visual metaphors relating to lHa btsun are openly expressed. Using a number of accounts collected in northern and western Sikkim, I attempt to analyse the anthropological role of lHa btsun's images which seem to refer to a myth found throughout the Himalayan region: that of the encounter between the Tibetan guru and the indigenous shaman who share a world of practice and belief spanning the extent of the territory they've conquered.

« Toutes les méditations se rencontrent sur un même terrain quelle que soit la solution apportée: la question de l'image n'est pas fondée sur les objets, mais sur la nature des regards portés sur eux. Ces regards ont à voir avec le désir, et la passion de voir doit faire le deuil de son objet. »

Marie José Mondzain, *Le commerce des regards* (2003)

« Pour beaucoup de théologiens du Moyen Âge, la vue était reconnue comme le plus parfait de nos sens. 'C'est par la vue que pénètrent les corps sublimes et lumineux', écrivaient Bonaventure et Thomas

d'Aquin »¹. Il en est ainsi au Sikkim pour ce qui concerne la vue des images attachées au corps de l'ascète tibétain lHa btsun chen po nam mkha' 'jigs med (1597-1650), dont l'iconographie dans le pays est aussi omniprésente que discrète. Sa statuaire, les fresques riches et variées des *dgon pa* et le *thang kha* montrent l'*arhat* tibétain sous des tailles diverses², mais toujours en méditant, assis jambes croisées, le ventre gonflé, la barbe en pointe, la coiffure en chignon auréolée de cinq crânes humains; il enserme un *khātvāṅga* sous le bras gauche et tient un *rkang gling* dans la main droite et un *kapāla* dans la gauche. Son corps, entièrement vert ou bleu, révèle ses affinités avec Milarépa, tous deux réputés s'être nourris exclusivement d'orties pendant leurs retraites.

Autour de ce personnage central du bouddhisme sikkimais, introducteur de la doctrine du *rDzogs chen*³, se déroule une fois tous les trois ans l'un des rituels les plus secrets du Sikkim, le *sKam zhed* (lepcha *kochenlo*) ou, littéralement, « séchage » (des vêtements du saint). Des pèlerins se rendent une fois tous les trois ans, au mois d'avril, jusqu'au sanctuaire retiré de Do lung à Dzongu, dans la réserve lepcha du district Nord, une région tenue elle-même aussi secrète que la doctrine qui fut propagée par le saint au 17^e siècle. Ils vont assister au *darśan* très particulier de lHa btsun : des malles scellées, qui contiennent les effets personnels du saint, et maints précieux trésors du royaume sont ouvertes une à une, tandis que le sGom chen de Lachen présente successivement à la foule les vêtements de lHa btsun et de précieuses reliques humaines et animales de toutes sortes, avant de procéder au « séchage » proprement dit des étoffes au soleil.

Certains voient dans ce rite « la réalisation des vœux de paix que lHa btsun chen po aurait faits jadis pour le Sikkim »; d'autres y trouvent « un véritable médicament »; d'autres encore vont assister aux « miracles » qui se produisent inmanquablement lors du déploiement

¹ Roland Recht, *Le croire et le voir. L'art des cathédrales (XIIe-XVe siècle)*. Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 137.

² Voir Anne Chayet sur l'onométrie et l'iconographie dans la peinture et la sculpture tibétaines (*Art et Archéologie du Tibet*, Paris, Picard 1994 chapitre V, et p. 185 au sujet de l'influence de la peinture chinoise sur l'iconographie des *arhat* au Tibet). *Va* peintures des *arhat* de Gyantsé in F. Rica & E. Lo Bue, *The Great Stupa of Gyantse*, London, Serindia Pub., 1993 p. 214-217.

³ Cf. Dr Ridzin Ngodup, *Collected Works of lHa btsun nam mkha' jigs med* reproduced from mss. collections from Sikkim and Darjeeling by Jurme Drakpa, vol. I, New Delhi, 1974. *Va* Anna Balikci, *Buddhism and Shamanism in Village Sikkim*, Doctoral Thesis, SOAS, University of London, 2002 vol. I p. 25-6, and Saul Mullard, *Bulletin of Tibetology* n° 1, May 2003, p. 13-24. *Va* note 17.

des effets personnels de lHa btsun et de ses trésors. Dans tous les cas, tout le monde s'accorde sur le caractère profondément merveilleux des phénomènes qui se produisent ce jour-là, et sur le fait que lHa btsun mérite bien le qualificatif de *mthong grol* (« qui libère par la seule vue »). Le merveilleux se révèle en particulier à travers les pouvoirs posthumes du saint de conserver en vie les poux qui habitaient sur ses vêtements: on les voit encore le jour du *sKam zhed*. En outre, lHa btsun apparaît en rêve à beaucoup de ses zélateurs, et dans les récits où on décrit ses exploits, il se métamorphose, vole dans les airs, et convainc ses opposants de se convertir à sa doctrine par des procédés purement spirituels. En cela, il déploie les mêmes talents que le Guru Rinpoché, confronté à ses adversaires, chamans ou divinités mauvaises de l'Himalaya, qu'il convertit à la doctrine par ses pouvoirs de guru⁴.

Tous les objets et trésors qui sont montrés au monastère de Do lung le jour du *sKam zhed* se trouvaient jadis à Pad ma g.yang rtse. Ils furent soustraits à la fureur iconoclaste des envahisseurs gurkhas du Népal au 18^e siècle, au temps du cinquième *chos rgyal* du Sikkim (Namgyal Phuntsog 1733-1780)⁵, et furent mis en lieu sûr dans ce sanctuaire retiré dans le nord du pays, lieu par où précisément, aux dires des habitants du Nord, lHa btsun serait arrivé du Tibet.

L'image de lHa btsun, propagée et revivifiée lors du rite, se dévoile donc non pas seulement à travers des reliques vestimentaires, mais bel et bien comme une présence encore vivante, quasi charnelle bien qu'invisible: en témoignent les parasites corporels qui continuent d'habiter sur ses vêtements. L'image est celle d'un être à la fois réel et imaginaire, un personnage historique à l'origine des enseignements tantriques secrets de la secte rNying ma pa, mais aussi un magicien capable de provoquer illusions et apparitions. Les rites et dévotions qui l'entourent, et les nombreux récits qui continuent d'entretenir sa légende, vont nous permettre d'envisager cette image au-delà de ses fonctions proprement esthétiques. En tant qu'elle relève du culte plutôt que de l'art, et qu'elle a partie liée avec la relique, cette image n'est pas seulement un objet défini à travers ses seules fonctions esthétiques; on peut en effet y voir plusieurs modalités :

⁴ Voir un chant de la rencontre entre le Guru Rinpoché et le chaman *bompo tamang* au Népal dans B. Steinmann, « The Lost Paradise of the Tamang Shaman. Origins and Fall », *Revue d'Études Tibétaines*, avril 2004, n° 5 p. 4-34, (<http://digitalhimalaya.com/collections/journals/ret/index.html>).

⁵ Cf. 9th Chos rgyal sThu stobs mam rgyal & rGyal mo Ye shes sgröl ma *History of Sikkim* (typescript, unpublished) 1908 p. 50-65.

- Celle d'une effigie matérielle, la statue de l'ascète, présente dans de nombreuses *dgon pa* du Sikkim, principalement dans l'ouest et le nord;
- Celle d'un corps⁶, investi d'une véritable corporéité de substitution, qui se traduit aussi bien par des parasites vivants que par les reliques contenues dans les statues;
- Celle d'un personnage céleste, *bodhisattva* qui reste présent aux hommes sous une forme immatérielle; ou d'un magicien agissant dans les rêves⁷.

Ces trois types de réalité, « statue, corps, personne céleste », forment un système en tant qu'ils sont différents et qu'ils s'appellent l'un l'autre pour assurer ensemble l'efficacité des croyances et des comportements rituels. On a ainsi une certaine structure de références autour de l'Ha btsun, qui comprend des récits de miracles, venant corroborer une situation sociale ou une institution (définie par un lieu, des acteurs et des objets concrets), la construction symbolique d'un espace (défini par la manifestation onirique de l'image), et enfin des usages politiques du culte (au sens large).

Nous allons envisager successivement ces trois modalités à travers la biographie du saint telle qu'elle se raconte maintenant, et à travers les récits de ses exploits magiques : récits oraux, rêvés et visionnaires

⁶ Pour la compréhension du lien profond entre image et corps, voir les brillantes analyses de Marie-José Mondzain (*Image, icône, économie. Les sources byzantines de l'imaginaire contemporain*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p. 29), qui montre comment, pour ce qui concerne la doctrine byzantine, « La doctrine de l'incarnation et celle de l'icône ne sont qu'une seule et même chose, identité que subsume le concept d'*oikonomia* (...), premier concept organiciste et fonctionnaliste qui concerne simultanément la chair du corps, la chair du discours et la chair de l'image (...) Dans une société chrétienne, il ne peut y avoir de légitimité politique sans constitution d'une doctrine articulant sans défaillance l'adhésion doctrinale au dispositif institutionnel qui légitime le pouvoir temporel. Croire et obéir sont les deux versants d'un même montage symbolique, qui met en œuvre l'équivalence du faire croire et du gouverner. (...) On passe insensiblement du « ne croire qu'à ce que l'on voit » au « n'obéir qu'à ce que l'on croit », c'est-à-dire en acceptant d'avoir *relativement* perdu de vue ce qui pourrait devenir l'objet d'un savoir ou, plus encore, d'un doute. L'économie fonctionnelle comme une gnose de l'énigme. »

⁷ Nous nous référons ici à la définition de l'image donnée par Jean Claude Schmitt (*Le corps des images. Essai sur la culture visuelle au Moyen-Age*, Paris, Gallimard 2002, p. 21) : « Toutes les images sont représentatives des tendances profondes de la culture d'une époque, elles sont chargées de valeur symbolique, remplissent des fonctions religieuses, politiques, idéologiques, liturgiques, voire magiques ».

qui constituent sa légende et qui sont évoqués en particulier au sujet du *sKam zhed*. Ces récits vont nous permettre d'analyser l'enjeu des pratiques dévotionnelles autour de lHa btsun.

LA FABRICATION DU MYTHE: L'ENTRÉE DE LHA BTSUN PAR LE NORD OU
TRANSLATIO DU SAINT

Le mythe transparait tout d'abord à travers des récits caractéristiques des « trajets » et « déplacements » du saint; l'un me fut raconté par un membre d'une famille sikkimaise bhotia résidant sur les terres où a été bâti le monastère contenant les reliques de lHa btsun; et l'autre par un moine lepcha rNying ma pa résidant dans un monastère rNying ma pa du Sikkim du Nord. Tous deux présentent une certaine vision du patrimoine et des traditions sikkimaises inaugurées par lHa btsun, dans le monde laïc et dans le monarchique :

Récit I :

« Notre famille descend de trois frères qui vivaient au Tibet, à Sakya, il y a sept à huit générations. lHa btsun chen po les a envoyés directement à Do lung, là où se trouve le monastère actuel contenant les reliques du saint. L'aîné et le cadet des frères firent une erreur et confondirent Do lung avec Walung (situé au nord-est du Népal). Plus tard, lHa btsun vint et les trouva à Walung. Il leur dit :

« Vous vous êtes trompés; vous devez vous rendre à Do lung, un lieu semblable à un lotus ». Les deux frères revinrent donc à Do lung et cette fois, un corbeau leur indiqua le chemin. Ils arrivèrent par la vallée de Lhonak, au-dessus de Thangu, par les lieux dits Dawa Thang, Diki Thang, Shera, Ringzin, Phodang. Quand ils arrivèrent à Do lung, il y avait là un ancêtre lepcha nommé Khyung Bizik; ce dernier, très effrayé à leur vue, voulut les tirer avec son arc. Mais la flèche se planta dans un arbre, qui sécha. On voit toujours l'arbre, à Shera.

Les frères avaient du sel, et les Lepchas avaient une plante qui colore (tse). Ils firent du troc. Les Tibétains avaient des animaux, de l'or, des marchandises. Mais là où ils s'arrêtèrent, une avalanche emporta les cornes d'animaux dans lesquelles étaient dissimulés les trésors, l'or et l'argent de la famille.

Chaque année, notre famille fait une puja en hiver, et le corbeau qui avait guidé les frères vers le Sikkim revient. Dans l'un des lieux où séjourna notre famille, à Chanag, on cultive des tubercules (yam,

pakho). Si quelqu'un consomme ces plantes sans notre permission, sa bouche se met à brûler. Tous les trois ans a lieu une grande célébration : le sGom chen de Lachen vient et montre les vêtements de lHa btsun chen po et tous les trésors. C'est le sKam zhed. On met les vêtements à sécher au soleil. Les Lepchas viennent aussi et font des offrandes devant le mchod rten du roi. Ils offrent des parties de la tête, des pattes et des entrailles d'un taureau, qui sont insérées dans un récipient de bambou et qui sont offertes devant le mchod rten. Comme c'est pour l'esprit du roi (dont les reliques se trouvent aussi à Do lung), il est permis de faire une offrande animale. La puja du sKam zhed ne commence qu'ensuite. Alors, le lama ouvre les boîtes une à une et montre les objets. Il montre aussi des livres de taille différente, comme des ossements stratifiés, des pierres précieuses, de l'ivoire, de l'or, de l'argent, des pots en terre. Beaucoup de trésors ont été accumulés, et il y a également des thang kha dont l'un date de l'époque de Dīpankara.

En 1980, on a voulu démonter le monastère. Nous avons été très troublés et toute notre famille s'est rendue à Do lung. A ce moment-là, j'ai vu le premier sKam zhed. Il y avait le lama rDo sgrub chen. Cette année-là (avril 2003), il y a eu un arc-en-ciel au-dessus du joyau (nor bu) lorsque le sGom chen l'a montré. Ce joyau est une sorte de pierre précieuse noire. »

Le récit continue avec la relation du rêve que fit la troisième réincarnation de lHa btsun chen po, 'Jigs med dpa' bo, au temps du cinquième chos rgyal du Sikkim (Namgyal Phuntshog) :

« 'Jigs med dpa' bo rêva que le Népal allait envahir le Sikkim. Le roi ne voulut pas croire au rêve du saint. Les Gurkhas du Népal envahirent alors le Sikkim et menacèrent le royaume de destruction. C'est alors qu'on envoya tous les trésors du royaume qui se trouvaient dans le monastère de gSang snggas chos gling (dans l'ouest du Sikkim), à Do lung. Mais aujourd'hui, il y a encore une chaussure de lHa btsun qui se trouve à Pad ma g.yang rtse, et une autre à Do lung! ».

Dans ce récit, retenons tout d'abord le fait que le saint se manifeste en rêve directement à ses descendants, et leur confère ainsi une forme de propriété à la fois matérielle et spirituelle sur les biens et les terres du monastère, qu'ils revendiquent encore aujourd'hui en tant que gardiens des trésors qui y sont recelés. Ce droit de propriété se manifeste en particulier par des signes magiques : on ne peut s'emparer

des terres de la famille qui sont protégées par des plantes aux pouvoirs extraordinaires; un corbeau indique le chemin aux ancêtres; le saint leur apparaît en rêve tout comme il est apparu en rêve au roi pour indiquer que le pays était menacé par les Gurkhas. Les images et les trésors furent donc sauvés de la fureur iconoclaste des ennemis et transportés à Do lung, mais une chaussure du saint resta à Pad ma g.yang rtse, lieu historique de la fondation de la royauté sikkimaise.

Le récit insiste sur le fait que l'image du saint ne pouvait être vénérée sur les lieux mêmes de son intervention humaine. La biographie de l'Ha btsun chen po mentionne qu'il serait d'abord arrivé, en tant que personne physique, à l'ouest du Sikkim, accompagné d'autres lamas. Ce récit, qui le fait venir par le nord, tend donc à montrer que le saint aurait choisi lui-même son lieu d'élection, le lieu où son culte se propagerait : on retrouve ce thème du « déplacement » ou de la *translatio* dans les cultes de saints de l'Occident médiéval⁸. Le saint divise en quelque sorte ses pouvoirs et un miracle se produit : l'une de ses chaussures reste à Pad ma g.yang rtse, tandis que l'autre se retrouve à Do lung. Ce mythe du « monosandalisme », selon J. C. Schmitt⁹, « fait partie d'un ensemble mythique attesté depuis les histoires d'Œdipe et de Jason, jusqu'aux contes populaires contemporains ». Ici, le saint conserve un pied dans chaque monastère important attaché au culte du roi et des reliques par les populations bhotia et lepcha du Sikkim. La mention des offrandes animales qui sont faites par les Lepchas devant le réceptacle funéraire du roi à Do lung est un des éléments importants des usages « politiques » du culte, qui souligne la situation de relative subordination des Lepchas aux Bhotias bouddhistes.

Récit II

Le récit suivant¹⁰ est celui d'un moine enseignant la philosophie dans un petit monastère rNying ma pa lepcha du nord du Sikkim. Les Lepchas proclament volontiers aujourd'hui qu'ils ont été « convertis » au bouddhisme par les Bhotias qui ouvrirent le pays à la doctrine du Guru Rinpoché.

⁸ Nous empruntons aussi à J. C. Schmitt (*op.cit.*, 239) ce schéma descriptif des pouvoirs et des trajets des saints du Moyen-Âge, bien qu'il s'agisse d'une terminologie latine ; les phénomènes merveilleux décrits à leur sujet dans la chrétienté sont très similaires à ceux que l'on rencontre chez les *arhat* indiens et tibétains.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ J'ai recueilli ce récit en langue népalaise et non pas en lepcha.

« *lHa btsun chen po* avait obtenu une très grande connaissance. Au début, il méditait comme nous. Il était de la même couleur que nous. Quand il étudiait à l'école, il était un *rdzogs srid singha* ou « un véritable lion des études bouddhiques et de la pratique »¹¹. Au Kham, il était devenu un tantriste en méditant sur les lieux de crémation. Un jour, il eut un rêve où on lui enjoignit de se rendre à *sBas yul 'bras mo jongs*. Il arriva à l'ouest, à *dPa' ho hung ri* (le tout premier monastère du Sikkim, aujourd'hui disparu). Là, il vit un lieu extraordinairement vert et il fut rempli d'une paix immense. Alors, sa couleur changea et il devint vert. Pourquoi a-t-il un *rkang gling* à la main ? En ce temps-là, il n'y avait pas de *dharmas* au Sikkim, mais seulement les ancêtres des Lepchas. *lHa btsun* bénit le lieu de *bKra shis sdings*, (l'un des monastères de l'ouest fondés par *lHa btsun*) et rencontra *Mun Salong*, un puissant sorcier¹² *lepcha*. Ils discutèrent ensemble, et *lHa btsun* lui enseigna le *dharmas*. *Mun Salong* prit un épi de maïs, le fit griller et le coupa en deux : il reconnut le visage du *Guru Rinpoché* sur l'un des deux morceaux, et il comprit alors que *lHa btsun* avait béni le pays. C'est ainsi que le pays devint bouddhiste.

lHa btsun alla méditer ensuite à *bKra shis sdings*. Les Lepchas ne comprenaient pas le tibétain, mais ils capturaient les paroles de *lHa btsun* par l'esprit. De là, *lHa btsun* se rendit ensuite à *Yoksum* (lieu du couronnement du premier roi); il y avait un arbre, sous lequel il médita également. Il rencontra les trois lamas (*yokmun*) et ils couronnèrent le roi *Phuntsog*. Ils formèrent un groupe et construisirent *sGrup sdi dgon pa*. C'était l'époque de *Chagdor Namgyal*, qui inventa l'écriture *lepcha*. A l'époque de *Tensung Namgyal*, *lHa btsun* se rendit à *Do lung*; il rencontra le roi et lui dit : « il faut construire trois *mchod rten* à *mChod rten dgon pa* (*Gangtok*) ». Mais le roi n'obéit pas. C'est alors que les Gurkhas, ainsi que les Bhoutanais, vinrent attaquer le Sikkim. *lHa btsun* souffrit beaucoup et déclara qu'il ne resterait pas à *gSang snggas chos gling*. Il envoya son vajra, qui arriva jusqu'à *Do lung*. Il y avait beaucoup d'eau là-bas; le vajra arriva sur un lac, sur une feuille de lotus. *lHa btsun* fit alors bâtir une petite *dgon pa* avec l'aide des *mimayin* (*bhut-pret*), qui bâtissaient la nuit. *lHa btsun* médita et

¹¹ Il s'agit d'une expression métaphorique où l'on traduirait en fait *rdzogs srid singha* par "lion de la vacuité et des phénomènes mondains".

¹² L'informateur a utilisé ici les termes anglais de 'witch', 'wizard', et non pas le terme générique népal pour shaman : *jhankri*.

Tensung Namgyal regretta de ne pas avoir obéi. Les éleveurs de yak offrirent aussi leur aide à lHa btsun.

Il retourna au Tibet et ramena des ouvrages qu'il fit venir sur des bateaux en peau de yak, sur la rivière Teesta. Mais des marchands les interceptèrent et les volèrent pour les vendre. lHa btsun revint au Sikkim et se rendit à lHa ris snying phug (l'une des grottes secrètes au nord de Pad ma g.yang rtse). Il y a une immense falaise appelée rKang gling gang. Il joua du rkang gling. Les sons parvinrent à lHa ris snying phug. lHa btsun découvrit alors des gter ma dans la grotte. Il découvrit le Rig 'zin srog sgrub.

Les Bhoutanais vinrent de nouveau faire la guerre. Ils arrivèrent à Nambong Patam (à l'est de Mangan). Les Lepchas purent repousser les Bhoutanais car ils avaient été convertis. Les Gurkhas revinrent aussi et arrivèrent jusqu'à Geyzing. Il y avait des mchod rten construits par les populations, et les Gurkhas furent repoussés. lHa btsun revint à Do lung, puis il retourna enfin au Tibet où il mourut. Un de ses élèves se trouvait à Lingtem (Haut Dzongu), un autre à Hee Gyathang (Bas Dzongu) et un autre à Tingbong (Haut Dzongu). Ils étaient d'excellents élèves lepchas et avaient appris à maîtriser la grêle. Ils furent très en colère en apprenant que leur maître était mort au Tibet. Ils s'y rendirent et combattirent avec les Tibétains. Ils voulurent ramener le corps de leur maître. La nuit, ils coupèrent la tête de lHa btsun avec leur couteau (bamphuk). Comme ils étaient de puissants pandit, ils pouvaient faire pousser les arbres, arrêter la pluie, etc. Ils arrivèrent à Lachen avec la tête seulement et se reposèrent. De nouveau, ils étaient pris d'une très grande colère de n'avoir pu ramener le corps entier. Ils montrèrent de nouveau leurs pouvoirs et construisirent le mchod rten de lHa btsun. A cette époque, il y avait là une sorte de très vieille étable. Tout le monde fut recruté pour bâtir la dgon pa. Les trois élèves entrèrent alors en état de méditation (thugs dam) et moururent. Un arc-en-ciel brilla, en même temps que le soleil; il plut des fleurs. »

Le narrateur évoque ensuite sa propre *dgon pa* de Mangan et les empreintes de pas du saint dans les rochers tout autour. Il décrit le petit lac qui est sous le bâtiment et tous les maîtres qui vinrent au monastère, dont un lama réincarné du lignage de Nga bdag sempa chen po (Khenpo Tsetup Ngagden Rinpoche). Enfin, il décrit un miracle : du lait sort des tuyaux d'irrigation le jour de la pleine lune; seuls l'obtiennent les individus vertueux. Puis il évoque le rituel du *sKam zhed* :

« Sur tous les vêtements, il y a des poux. Ceux qui étaient sur les vêtements de lHa btsun ne meurent jamais. Ce jour-là, on montre la couronne de lHa btsun, les pendentifs qui ornent sa poitrine, son sceptre et sa coupe crânienne. Lorsqu'on assiste au sKam zhed, on obtient le don de longue vie et la réalisation de ses vœux. C'est une réalisation des vœux de paix que lHa btsun fit pour le Sikkim. Beaucoup de gens sont venus en effet vivre ici et ont pu coexister. Le kochen lo (il emploie à ce moment-là le terme lepcha) est comme un médicament pour les Sikkimais. Les gens voient lHa btsun avec les yeux intérieurs. »

Ici, la première manifestation des pouvoirs ésotériques du saint est la transmutation du corps, qui change de couleur de façon mimétique avec l'environnement. La statuaire de lHa btsun reflète cette variété de couleurs ascétiques qui vont du bleu au vert, métamorphose du saint interagissant directement avec la nature : par mimétisme, tous les éléments naturels se transforment en image du corps du saint (l'épi de maïs), image qui, à son tour, s'imprime dans les rochers et dans le paysage. Une autre manifestation récurrente est l'épiphanie lumineuse du saint qui a un double sens : il agit sur la lumière, il provoque arc-en-ciel et lumière solaire; inversement, il est « vu » avec les « yeux intérieurs », il apparaît en rêve. Mais la narration insiste sur le fait qu'on voit le saint en rêve, et non pas qu'on « rêve de lui ». Cette vision comporte donc un élément conscient. Enfin, lHa btsun a pouvoir sur la vie puisque les poux de ses vêtements lui survivent et qu'il confère la « longue vie » à ses dévôts. En revanche, les pouvoirs du saint peuvent devenir martiaux puisqu'il laisse les ennemis envahir le royaume lorsque le roi n'obéit pas à ses ordres.

lHa btsun est donc lui-même un visionnaire, il voit l'avenir du pays qu'il maîtrise. Il produit à la fin des enseignements tirés des lieux mêmes qu'il a conquis par ses pouvoirs. Le son du *rkang gling* dirige ses pensées, qui atteignent les lieux où seront découverts les enseignements.

Le rêve fait par 'Jigs med dpa' bo est relaté dans l'histoire du Sikkim des 9es souverains, Maharajah Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Dolma of Sikkim¹³; il a été repris à leur propre compte par les héritiers

¹³ *History of Sikkim, op. cit.*, 1908. sThu stobs nam rgyal, l'un des deux rédacteurs de l'Histoire du Sikkim ou 9^{ème} Chos rgyal, naît de la cinquième épouse de Tse phug nam rgyal (lui-même le 7^{ème} Chos rgyal, 1785-1863 : le successeur de Tse phug sera son deuxième fils. Srid kyong nam rgyal, 1819-1874, qui régnera avant sThu stobs nam rgyal).

présomptifs du saint (voir *Récit I*) comme modèle de stratégie centralisatrice et guerrière. Le roi est menacé lui-même de perdre ses pouvoirs s'il n'obéit pas au saint, de la même façon que tous ceux qui font atteinte à la sacralité des lieux ou des objets qui sont en contact à Do lung avec le corps du saint, sont menacés de maladie ou de mort.

A travers les récits transmis oralement qui entourent la biographie de lHa btsun, apparaît de façon récurrente un autre personnage historique important, Mun Salong, que l'histoire lepcha présente soit comme un lettré lepcha, soit comme un chaman¹⁴. A côté de la version lepcha bouddhisée donnée ci-dessus, le récit lepcha suivant (fait par un laïc), insiste sur les modalités du pacte de pouvoir qui fut scellé entre le saint bouddhiste et le sorcier lepcha Mun Salong, lui aussi maître de vie. Dans ce récit recueilli à Hee Gyathang (Bas Dzongu), les Lepchas revendiquent leur autochtonie à travers un lien intrinsèque avec le sol, producteur des ressources et de la vie :

Récit III :

« Mun Salong, l'ancêtre lepcha, rencontra lHa btsun et ils comparèrent leurs pouvoirs tantriques. Mun Salong était capable de venir par le sous-sol, alors que lHa btsun volait au-dessus des montagnes. C'est Mun Salong qui arriva le premier à Konchenchu (le mont Kanchendzonga). Il planta du maïs et prépara une offrande pour lHa btsun. lHa btsun arriva en volant. Il avait son étole rouge (celle qu'on voit sur la statue du monastère de gSang snggas chos gling). Mun Salong cassa un épi de maïs en deux : il donna la partie supérieure à lHa btsun en tant que maître de l'air et de la doctrine, et garda la partie inférieure pour soi, en tant que maître du sol et des plantes.

Mun Salong se rendit ensuite à hKra shis sdings. Il fallait construire un temple, mais il n'y avait pas d'eau. Il urina et produisit des torrents d'eau. C'est depuis ce temps que toute l'eau a séché, après la construction du temple.

¹⁴ Heleen Plaisier, dans l'important catalogue des manuscrits lepcha de la collection Van Manen qu'elle vient de publier (*Catalogue of Lepcha Manuscripts in the Van Manen Collection*, Leiden, Kern Institute 2003 : 19), précise que : « Lepcha tradition has it that the script was invented by the Lepcha scholar thi kung men sa long -Thikung Men Salong-, who is believed to have been a contemporary of Lama Lhatsün Chenpo, i. e. 'Lama Lhatsün Namkha Jimi (1597-1654), the patron saint of Sikkim, considered to be responsible for the conversion of Sikkim to Buddhism ». Elle mentionne également comment c'est sous la rubrique « shaman » que Mun Salong est décrit dans les versions orales qui narrent les mythes (*ibid.*, 22).

IHa btsun fit un rêve : d'épais nuages noirs s'amassaient au-dessus du pays. Il raconta son rêve au roi, qui ne le crut pas. IHa btsun décida alors de « séparer les propriétés » et de tout emporter à Do lung. IHa btsun cacha tous les trésors. Auparavant, il dissimula son rdo rje sous la terre, à Sakyong et à Pentong (villages du Haut Dzongu), pour savoir si l'emplacement était bon. Mais le lendemain, le sceptre était sorti. Mauvais signe. Il fit de même à Do lung, et là, le rdo rje resta sous la terre. Il retourna ensuite à Pad ma g.yang rtse et envoya les trésors. Une déesse qui habitait les lieux, dans un lac en dessous de Do lung, s'opposa à lui. IHa btsun la supplia et la déesse finit par accepter.

Tous les trois ans, lorsqu'on ouvre les boîtes contenant les trésors de IHa btsun, un éclair jaillit, le tonnerre gronde. Un jour, j'ai entendu l'explosion; je suis allé demander à des ouvriers qui travaillaient à la construction d'un pont. Mais ils ne savaient pas d'où cela provenait.

Les Gurkhas attaquèrent Phuntshog Namgyal. IHa btsun interdit désormais aux rois de venir dans son domaine de Do lung sous peine de mort. Mais l'un des rois finit par s'y rendre en allant au Tibet. Il passa par Do lung pour vérifier où étaient les trésors. Ce roi mourut, son mehod rten se trouve à Do lung (au premier étage se trouvent les reliques de IHa btsun et en dessous, celles de Tsephug Namgyal¹⁵). Il n'y avait encore aucun mantra. Après la mort du roi, de nombreux désastres frappèrent le Sikkim. Des abeilles sortaient du corps du roi la nuit, et le matin, elles y rentraient. Le gardien regarda le corps et vit que du sang en sortait. On décida de brûler le corps (les Lepchas enterrent leurs morts). Tout alla mieux. Il n'y avait alors que sept mandal (chef de village) dans le pays de Dzongu. Chaque année, les mandal offraient une puja spéciale : le corps entier d'un cochon, de l'alcool, du riz séché, du maïs, des fruits. Si on ne faisait pas l'offrande, la maladie frappait, les démons sortaient de tous les côtés.

Padmasambhava était aussi passé par ce lieu, à Lachen, un peu en dessous, Chungthang. Là, il y a un endroit appelé Guru Longstok, où Padmasambhava rencontra le Lepcha Thikong Adik. Les Lepcha offrirent des racines tubéreuses (ban thorul); ils discutèrent. « Il y a des Tibétains d'un côté, et beaucoup de Lepchas de l'autre ». Padmasambhava dit qu'il voulait prêcher. Les Lepchas et Padma firent une compétition. A Mangsher, il y a une prairie où pousse

¹⁵ Voir ci-dessus, note 12. A son époque, des raids incessants des Gurkhas ont lieu au Sikkim : le roi installe sa capitale à Tumlong (cf. *History of Sikkim, op. cit.*, p. 70) en 1815 ; les Anglais chassent les Gurkhas. En 1817 est signé le traité de Titalia. Le roi se rend à Lhasa en 1844.

spontanément du millet. On pesa deux feuilles de cette plante sur un plateau. Guru Padmasambhava s'assit sur un des plateaux et se transforma en mouche. Thikong Adik s'assit sur l'autre et se transforma en petit insecte des montagnes. Guru Padma perdit la compétition car il était plus gros. Des murmures de menace parcouraient les rangs des Lepchas. Padma prit alors du riz séché et prouva qu'il pouvait le planter et le faire reverdir. Mais les plantes qui sortiraient mouraient aussitôt. Il le fit, et les Lepchas, effrayés, demandèrent pardon. Padma déclara alors que désormais, les tubercules de la forêt pousseraient en s'enroulant sur eux-mêmes. Après Chungthang, il y a un village appelé Bok : les Lepchas l'ont appelé ainsi du nom de la plante.

Guru Padma avait aussi prédit le futur. Si les Lepchas se conduisaient bien, ils vivraient jusqu'à la seizième génération, sinon, les rois ne dureraient que douze générations, jusqu'à une année « du cochon ». En effet, le douzième chos rgyal était de l'année du cochon. Après viendrait l'année du tigre, celle de l'annexion à l'Inde; puis quelqu'un de l'année du singe viendrait de Chine pour gouverner le Sikkim. sBas yul 'bras mo ljongs signifie non pas « pays caché où pousse le riz » mais « pays prédit par le riz ». La prédiction du tigre est arrivée : les Indiens ont détruit notre pays et maintenant ils construisent des barrages pour le noyer... »

La première partie de ce récit relate la partition des pouvoirs entre lHa btsun et le roi, et parallèlement, entre Bhotias et Lepchas; les Lepchas demeurent les maîtres du sous-sol et des fondations, tandis que les Bhotias maîtrisent l'air et la doctrine. Sont énoncés ensuite les pouvoirs du sorcier sur l'eau et les fondations des temples, et ceux de lHa btsun sur le sceptre et la foudre. Les Lepchas (qui attribuent l'origine de l'alcool et des montagnes au tonnerre), ont reconnu lHa btsun comme le maître de ces forces naturelles, signe de leur conversion. Le narrateur s'attache ensuite à évoquer la conversion des Lepchas au bouddhisme à travers les rites funéraires : on s'est mis à faire des crémations avec la dépouille du roi dont les reliques sont à Do lung (et non plus des enterrements, selon la coutume lepcha). Ce fut l'origine d'un culte aux reliques royales, qui est réitéré lors du *sKam zhed*, devant le *mchod rten* du roi. Ce culte des Lepchas est décrit ainsi par les Bhotias résidant à Dzongu : « Les Lepchas transportèrent le corps du roi depuis Pad ma g.yang rtse jusqu'à Do lung et lui offrirent le corps d'un cochon, la tête d'un taureau et le corps d'un lièvre dépouillé de ses poils. »

Enfin, la dernière partie du récit réitère le mythe de IHa btsun à travers celui de Padmasambhava, qui rencontre aussi un sorcier lepcha, Thikung Adik : la partition initiale entre les ressources du sous-sol attribuées aux Lepchas, et la maîtrise de la doctrine attribuée aux bouddhistes, est justifiée par une divination par le riz qui prend un tour apocalyptique : l'issue du débat est incertaine. Pour les Lepchas du Nord de Dzongu, le rêve de IHa btsun chen po n'indiquait pas une destination fixe. Les *yokmun* lepchas pensent que IHa btsun aurait « fait un compromis ». Il serait d'abord arrivé à Pentong et ensuite seulement, il se serait rendu à Do lung. Le narrateur suggère en fait que les Lepchas n'ont jamais été réellement convertis par le saint. Ce sont surtout ses exploits magiques qui sont mis en exergue par eux.

La revendication de l'établissement d'un centre de diffusion des pouvoirs tantriques de IHa btsun oscille donc entre l'ouest et le nord; les récits lepcha tendent à réaffirmer l'antiquité des pouvoirs de leurs sorciers par rapport à ceux des saints bouddhistes : seul le sorcier lepcha aurait pouvoir sur la vie et la croissance des plantes; quant aux Bhotias, ils assimilent la venue du saint à la légitimité d'un lignage et à la revendication d'une terre et des trésors matériels qui y sont amassés; le prouve encore cet autre récit, complément du *Récit I*, et issu de la même famille :

« Notre ancêtre eut une vision pendant son sommeil. IHa btsun lui apparut et annonça qu'il y aurait un déluge. Il faudrait quitter Do lung et trouver un autre refuge. C'est pourquoi la famille partit s'installer en dessous, à Chanag, à treize kilomètres plus bas. Là, quand l'eau se mit à tomber, seule la statue du Guru Rinpoche qui est dans notre maison put surnager. A côté, il y a un champ qui a la forme d'un yak : on voit les marques de ses sabots dans le sol. Si les paysans (des tenanciers népalais) mangent des racines de yam qui poussent dans ces champs sans notre permission, cette nourriture les empoisonne. »

A ce récit de défense de la propriété par l'impression du corps du yak, qui représente le gardien et la richesse principale des Bhotias, correspond tout un ensemble de récits dans lesquels les Lepchas, soupçonnés de manger les tubercules en question, sont inversement soupçonnés ou accusés d'être eux-mêmes des « empoisonneurs ». Parallèlement, les voleurs qui tentent de s'emparer des trésors du monastère sont soumis à des châtiments naturels :

« Sur le chemin de Do lung se trouvent deux maisons lepchas (...) Ces gens fabriquaient du poison, ils empoisonnaient les commerçants. L'un d'eux était mort sur le chemin de Do lung (...). En dessus de Do lung, se trouvent des trésors pétrifiés dans les rochers : ce sont des livres, et les empreintes de mains des voleurs qui tentèrent de s'en emparer. Grâce aux pouvoirs terribles des dieux de Do lung, les voleurs errent éternellement. On avait laissé l'une des cymbales de lHa btsun chen po à Pad ma g.yang rtse, et l'autre au monastère de dBen chen. Les gens mouraient tous de diarrhée. On a compris que les cymbales avaient été volées à Do lung et on les a ramenées. Tout est rentré dans l'ordre. Le plus étonnant est que rien n'est jamais abîmé : mais on a changé les malles de bambou pour des malles de métal ».

Si l'intervention d'une autorité civile et militaire est nécessaire pour conserver les trésors de Do lung, néanmoins, le pouvoir des masques, des statues et des effigies du monastère, tout particulièrement ceux de mDzod Inga, à se protéger eux-mêmes, est un fait largement admis à Dzongu. Un thème de jugement par ordalie apparaît de façon récurrente dans les récits et les mises en garde : les justes et les saints surnagent, tandis que les voleurs qui tentent de s'emparer des trésors et des biens attachés à la personne du saint, *via* celle des propriétaires, sont « empoisonnés » et « avalés » par les rochers et par la terre. Le récit de ces miracles et injonctions divines, répété à satiété, ne constitue pas tant un corpus d'histoires auxquelles on croit, que d'histoires auxquelles on doit croire : il s'agit d'inculquer un certain habitus, un ordre qui a été transmis et qui doit continuer à se transmettre aux descendants afin de légitimer leur statut. Ainsi, les Lepchas, en tant que principaux rivaux des Bhotias pour la maîtrise des ressources dans cette réserve naturelle, sont-ils constamment décrits comme les sauvages barbares des confins, en même temps que les indispensables médiateurs de la continuité du culte de la dépouille royale.

LA FABRICATION DES RELIQUES : *OSTENSIO* ET *TRANSITUS*

Si les récits oraux déploient la gamme des pouvoirs qu'on attribue à lHa btsun, l'autorité du saint appartient exclusivement à un monastère, à une communauté de moines ou de clercs. Ce sont les monastères qui sont les détenteurs des images et de la statuaire de lHa btsun. Ainsi, le mode d'apparition du saint, qui passe par l'étalement au grand jour des trésors, habituellement cachés, ne vise pas tant à raconter l'histoire de

IHa btsun, qu'à en livrer une figuration symbolique qui transcende les contingences de la simple perception. C'est une mise en scène matérielle, imagée et rituelle, tout autant que politique, qui permet cette figuration. Ainsi que l'explique M. J. Mondzain (voir note 2), « on a relativement perdu de vue ce qui pourrait devenir l'objet d'un savoir ».

En effet, à côté des pouvoirs de « déplacement » du saint ou *translatio*, il aurait également celui d'être 'vu' par ses disciples et par les dévôts avec les « yeux intérieurs ». On touche ici directement au pouvoir des reliques et à la faculté de passage ou de transfert (*transitus*) des vœux des dévôts vers le corps du saint, dans son réceptacle reliquaire, pouvoir médiatisé par le fait de montrer (*ostensio*) les vêtements. Certains objets ayant été en contact direct ou indirect avec le corps du saint, ainsi que le corps de certains animaux, assurent ce passage. Réciproquement, le fait de montrer (*ostensio*) les objets lors du rituel du *sKam zhed* s'appuie sur certaines croyances relatives au *transitus*.

Quels sont les objets de dévotion et d'admiration ?

Ce sont les ustensiles du culte bouddhique (*rdo rje*, *rkang gling*, ossements, livres), tous objets qui ont touché le corps de IHa btsun, qui en sont issus ou qui lui ont appartenu, c'est-à-dire des matières du corps humain (vêtements, ornements), d'autres qui lui sont consubstantielles (poux), des instruments du culte, des objets mystérieux et magiques qui se trouvent dans une sorte de surnature (corne de cheval, pierres de foudre), des matières précieuses et brillantes (or, argent, ivoire).

Comment fonctionne le transitus ?

La propension à « voir » le saint et à pouvoir communiquer avec lui est expliquée différemment par les Lepchas et les Bhotias, selon qu'ils sont laïcs ou religieux, installés ou non sur les terres du monastère. Mais la communication avec les esprits, en revanche, se fait chez les uns et les autres par l'intermédiaire d'un « animal véhicule », le *gzung* ou *gzung beug*. Il peut s'agir d'un cochon, tel celui offert par les Lepchas en hommage au *chos rgyal* à Do lung, d'un lièvre (celui qui est entièrement découpé et dépouillé de ses poils) ou encore d'un yak. Lors du rituel du *gzung*, la viande de l'animal sacrifié est entièrement débitée et mélangée à des boulettes de riz séché. Les chamans lepchas (*bongthing*, *mun*, *padim*) offrent aussi aux esprits (*rum*) du gingembre, du poisson séché, des feuillages variés et des céréales, des poissons et

des petits oiseaux desséchés. Toutes ces parcelles d'offrandes sont réparties sur un plateau. Cette offrande, lors du *sKam zhed*, est dite « destinée au roi » car c'est vers le corps du roi que vont les vœux des Lepchas. *lHa btsun* n'a d'importance que pour les lamas lepchas (*yokmun*). Pour les chamans, ce qui importait avant tout étaient les circuits d'offrandes qui circulaient entre la capitale où résidait le roi, les montagnes et les villages lepchas.

Du temps du dernier *chos rgyal*, le père du *bongthing* Nong Thaso, à Tingvong (Haut Dzongu), se rendait ainsi à pied à Gangtok pour offrir la *puja* annuelle au roi. Il revenait avec un yak entier offert par le souverain. On sacrifiait le yak en le découpant entièrement et en le mélangeant à du riz séché. L'offrande était dédiée au mont Konchenbu et transitait par les espaces souterrains. L'année d'après, le *bongthing* retournait à Gangtok, il franchissait les portes de la ville et sur le rocher élevé situé en dessous du palais royal, offrait le bénéfice de l'offrande précédente à l'esprit du roi. Outre la médiation d'un mammifère, yak ou cochon, les Lepchas insistent beaucoup sur celle des insectes et des poissons.

La mythologie lepcha permet de comprendre l'importance des poux, en tant que médiateurs de la conscience, et celle des poissons, éminemment liés à la génération et aux femmes. Dans une légende (*gsung*)¹⁶, on raconte comment le chasseur Thing Gwokmu voulut attraper une femme-poisson des lacs. Il ne put l'attraper que grâce au vêtement maternel dont sa mère elle-même lui fit cadeau pour en faire un filet. Lorsqu'il put attraper la femme-poisson des lacs, cette dernière secoua les poux de sa tête qui tombèrent dans le lac et devinrent des poissons. Ces poissons furent considérés désormais comme sacrés et sources de vie. Une autre histoire raconte l'origine de l'alcool et comment une vieille femme avait dissimulé de la levure dans ses cheveux. Le cafard voulut s'emparer de la levure. La vieille femme enferma le cafard sous une hotte renversée, mais ce dernier, qui pouvait voir à travers les mailles de bambou entrelacées du panier, hypnotisa les poux de la vieille femme, qui s'endormit; ainsi, il put lui voler sa levure.

Poux, levure et conscience vitale, étroitement mêlés, circulent à travers les eaux, les lieux obscurs et les espaces souterrains. Ils soulignent l'importance que les Lepchas accordent aux pouvoirs de vie et de reproduction de leurs sorciers, maîtres des espaces cachés, en face des saints bouddhistes, qui se déplacent dans les airs. Les grottes et les

¹⁶ Recueillie en langue népalaise à Hee Gyathang (Bas Dzongu), en août 2003.

lacs sont ainsi pour les Lepchas avant tout des lieux où l'on va pour se soigner, des lieux où la vie elle-même prend son origine.

Tous, Bhotias et Lepchas s'accordent sur l'idée que l'établissement d'un musée pour entreposer les trésors du monastère ne ferait que provoquer maladies et désastres. Les objets les plus investis de pouvoir sont les plus brillants, les pierres précieuses, les diamants, l'or. Les pierres et l'or ont un rapport étroit avec les images dont ils manifestent la puissance active : le joyau reluit, l'éclat de l'or rehausse les peintures et les fresques. En outre, l'action du saint tantriste régule le temps et fait briller le soleil. Un Tibétain (Khampa), qui s'est rendu trois fois au *sKam zhed*, affirme :

« *J'ai tout vu, tous les vêtements, des vêtements usés; il y encore les poux vivants dessus; j'ai vu les clochettes, tous les objets tirés des malles. Lorsqu'on a suspendu les vêtements sur un fil pour les faire sécher, la pluie qui tombait s'est arrêtée tout le temps du séchage. Ensuite, elle a recommencé à tomber.* »

Opposition des modèles de la nature

Si les Bhotias voient dans les montagnes un modèle hiérarchique social, les Lepchas y voient avant tout le lieu des origines et des fins dernières. Pour les premiers, la société est verticale; les offrandes au dieu *mDzod lnga* se font à travers un rituel qui reflète cette structure : la *puja* de *mDzod lnga*, décrite dans le *gnas gsol*¹⁷, commence par le *bsangs* aux dieux d'en haut, les évocations des noms des principaux *gzhi bdag* du Sikkim dont *mDzod lnga* et les offrandes aux gens supérieurs; elle continue par les dieux des montagnes du sud du Sikkim, puis par les dieux qui habitent avec l'homme (*'go ba'i lha lnga*), les *dgra lha*, et se termine par les offrandes (*gser skyems*) aux gens inférieurs.

Chez les Lepchas, la structure des offrandes est circulaire. Les dons venus d'en haut, de la personne du roi, circulent à travers tout le village, et reviennent au roi après être passés par les montagnes, en suivant les chemins qu'empruntent les âmes.

Tandis que pour les Lepchas les richesses sont attachées aux sous-sols (par exemple les racines de certains arbres contenant les empreintes des sorciers, les traces animales des êtres surnaturels habitant les lacs et les grottes), le déploiement des trésors de la nation est pour les Bhotia une partie intégrante de la persona des saints.

¹⁷ *History of Sikkim, op. cit.*

L'hagiographie de lHa btsun insiste sur le fait que les lamas bâtissent tous des monastères et des *mchod rten* : le premier aurait été sGrub sde dgon pa, bâti par lHa btsun, le deuxième le lHa khang dmar po, bâti par mNga bdag, le troisième le monastère de Kathog, et le roi aurait bâti le bKra shis steng kha. Les statues de lHa btsun se trouvent dans les chapelles des grands monastères de Pad ma g.yang rtse et de gSang snggas chos gling, et aux étages supérieurs dans les monastères du nord du Sikkim. Au contraire, pour les Lepchas, les images importantes sont celles qui se trouvent spontanément dans la nature; des statues du Guru Rinpoche se trouvent dans les principales grottes des lieux saints, comme à bDe chen phug par exemple, et sont objet de vénération. Aujourd'hui, les Lepchas se disent volontiers « animistes », afin de retrouver une identité non bouddhiste et non chrétienne. Cet animisme est volontiers décrit comme un amour inconditionnel de la nature. Les Lepchas soulignent l'expressivité propre de la nature à travers la forme des montagnes, qu'ils réfèrent à des éléments de l'univers quotidien; par exemple, à Pentong, le mont Longmyong est « une femme portant son enfant sur le dos » ou encore Ingbongbu, « montagne qui porte l'enfant ». Les cascades sont des métaphores des cheveux des femmes. Les mythes d'origine évoquent le chasseur qui, en se lavant, trouve dans sa main un cheveu de femme recueilli dans une cascade. Il suit le fil et parvient dans une grotte où lui apparaît le roi des serpents, père de la femme qu'il convoite. Il doit subjuguier le serpent pour se rendre maître de la femme de la cascade. Les montagnes, quant à elles, sont produites par la foudre, le tonnerre et les éclairs. Le tonnerre, à son tour, a un rapport direct avec le rire humain : on risque d'être tué par la foudre lorsque l'on rit devant certains animaux, à certains mois de l'année. De même, le tonnerre est le premier à avoir goûté aux boissons alcoolisées fabriquées par les hommes; la foudre peut-être subjuguée grâce à l'aspersion d'alcool dans une pièce. La montagne et les forces qui l'habitent sont en rapport direct avec la vie des hommes. Pour accéder aux montagnes, on doit emprunter des voies souterraines, des grottes et des lacs. Cheveux, cascades, serpents ressortent de l'univers des femmes; pics, tonnerre, alcool, de l'univers des hommes. Tandis que les Bhotias vénèrent les masques et les effigies, les Lepchas vénèrent les ombres, les abris sous roches, les eaux et les racines des arbres.

LES USAGES POLITIQUES DU CULTE

Les rêves du saint, les visions des pèlerins, l'*ostensio* des reliques, jouent donc un rôle d'opérateur logique en même temps qu'idéologique. Ils rapprochent des images différentes, des récits multiples, leur assignent une place dans la hiérarchie des objets de dévotion, et surtout, ils permettent de modifier constamment cette hiérarchie. C'est ainsi que les prétendants à la garde du saint et à la possession du domaine de Do lung, reconstituent une généalogie de leurs propres ancêtres à la mesure de la généalogie royale, en lui donnant un sens de fondation de pouvoir sur la communauté. Historiquement, la position des *chos rgyal* a toujours changé, de même que les thèmes de la dévotion, le nombre des images et les groupes qui en assurent la production. Dans l'histoire du Sikkim, les *dgon pa* et les statues sont tout autant des monuments érigés à la gloire du monarchisme et de ses fonctions politiques, que des jalons dans l'histoire collective des rêves. Étroitement associées au mythe de fondation de la royauté et à la centralisation opérée par l'expansion de la doctrine bouddhique *rNying ma pa*, leurs emplacements ont néanmoins sans cesse varié, de même que l'importance des ordres *rNying ma pa* chargés de diffuser les enseignements secrets de *IHa btsun*.

Dans l'Histoire du Sikkim des souverains¹⁸, la présentation de la biographie de *IHa btsun* insiste sur les pouvoirs miraculeux du saint et contribue à propager la sainteté du culte de la personne même des souverains, dépositaires du bénéfice du culte des dieux montagnes attachés aux lieux où médita *IHa btsun*.

« (...) fondateur du *rDzogs chen* au Sikkim, *IHa btsun chen po nam mkha' 'jigs med* (...) est né à Jarpa dans le sud du Tibet, dans le village de *IHa yul gzhi rab*. Son père est *Chos skyong mgon po* et sa mère *Yid 'ong bu*. Il est né l'année de l'oiseau de feu en 1597 AD. Il reçut les enseignements de *bSod nams dbang po*, *Rig 'dzin 'ja tshon snying po* (1585-1656) et de *Padma legs grub* (...) Il répara six fois le monastère de *bSam yas*. Il reçut les révélations de textes cachés *gTer gсар*, *Dag snang* et *dGongs gter*. Dans l'oracle de *Thang lha*, son apparition est prédite : par la grâce de *Chenrezig (sphyan ras gzigs)* et de *Indra*, un

¹⁸ *History of Sikkim* (1908), *op. cit.*, p. 20. *Va Chos rgyal sThu stobs mam ryal & rGyal mo Ye shes sgröl ma. lBras ljongs rgyal rabs*, The Tsuklakang Trust, Gangtok, Sikkim, 2003 p. 37 sq.

être céleste *naïtra*, nommé *Kun dga' snying po*, qui ouvrira les cols dans les montagnes du pays caché. Il partit de *Kong bu* et vint au *Sikkim*, accompagné de 35 disciples, proclamant que le moment était venu de pénétrer dans le pays caché. Il se rendit d'abord à la grotte de *Mag blo bde plug*, où il célébra une cérémonie de bénédiction, et s'en revint. Il eut une vision à *Rong mo lding*, l'année du singe de bois; l'année suivante il fut dirigé par le grand *gTer ston 'Ja tshon snying po* pour servir tous les êtres humains, le 25^e jour du 12^e mois, au monastère de *Bang ri bkra shis 'od 'bar*(...). Il entra au *Sikkim* le 13^e jour du 5^e mois de l'année du chien de feu et arriva au voisinage de *Shel mkhar rgyal rtsi*. Il eut une vision du *Sikkim* à travers les nuages. Il se vit traversant les pâturages et les villages du Tibet en rapide succession et à la fin, illuminé par ces visions, il offrit un mandala de remerciement; il vit alors un cygne blanc venant du *Sikkim* et il eut une longue discussion avec lui; l'oiseau, émané d'un être divin, lui apprit les noms des différents lieux du *Sikkim* et leur nature sacrée. Les anciens disent que c'est là que fut composé le *gNas gsol*, le guide des lieux saints du *Sikkim*. Tandis qu'il séjournait dans la grotte de *Nyams dga' tshal*, le premier lama de la secte *Ka thog* nommé *Ka thog pa Kun tu bzang po* arriva par le col de *rKang la nang ma* et le voisinage de *sPre gyab lag*; comme il ne trouvait pas de chemin, il se dirigea vers *rDzong ri*, où il vit les falaises de *rKam pa khab rag*, la chaîne qui s'étend à l'ouest des monts *Kabru* jusque vers la rivière *Ra nthong chu*. Il n'y avait pas de chemin par là non plus. Il revint sur ses pas à *Nyams dga' tshal*, où il rencontra *lHa btsun*. *Ka thog* dit à *lHa btsun* qu'ils devaient s'en retourner car il n'y avait pas de chemin (...). Mais *lHa btsun* lui répondit que le col du nord lui était réservé à lui, tandis que *Ka thog* devait ouvrir le col de l'ouest. *lHa btsun* passa par le *rKang la nang ma*, et grâce à ses pouvoirs magiques, il traversa droit sur les précipices, au dessus du mont *Kabru* et au dessus du *sPre gyab lag*, devant les yeux de ses disciples. Il ne revint pas pendant sept jours et ils conclurent qu'il avait péri dans les précipices. Ils commencèrent à faire son deuil et édifièrent un men dongs. Alors qu'ils l'avaient terminé et qu'ils s'en retournaient, ils entendirent résonner son *rkang gling*. Il revint trois semaines après, (...) de la même manière dont il était parti, et ses disciples crurent en lui. Un col fut ouvert miraculeusement à *rDzong ri* (...). Il arriva ensuite à *Yuk sum nor bu sgang* le 3^e jour du 10^e mois. Le second lama, *Ka thog Kun tu bzang po*, était le plus haut lama du monastère *rNying ma pa* de *Ka thog rDo rje gdin* (...). Sa venue a été également prédite par *gTer ston Ratna gling pa*. (...) Il vint à travers le *dBus* et le *gTsang* et explora les cols

nord et est conduisant au Sikkim (...). Il vint finalement par le col de Singalila. (...) Le troisième lama, nommé mNga' dbag sems dpa' phun tshogs rig 'dzin était d'ascendance royale, de la région de Gu ge. (...) Le 25^e jour du 3^e mois du cheval d'eau, il vint de gZHis ka rtse et subjugué les esprits locaux. Il parvint au Sikkim le 3^e jour du 8^e mois de cette année, à Yuk sum nor bu sgang. (...) Certains disent que le lama mNga' dbag vint du Népal, après avoir été le guru du roi gorkha et le prêtre domestique du roi magar. Mais en fait cet événement se produisit plus tard. lHa btsun chen po les réunit [et procéda au couronnement du roi Phun tshogs rnam rgyal]. »

Le roi du Sikkim fut donc consacré comme un çakravartin, un roi selon le dharma. L'identité politique du pays s'est constituée à partir de cette imposition d'un ordre spirituel enraciné dans les monuments, qui sont décrits dans les récits oraux comme des émanations directes des pouvoirs des saints et des sorciers locaux mis à leur service. Dans l'Histoire du Sikkim, bKra shis sdings est décrit comme le lieu central de propagation de la doctrine¹⁹ : un arc-en-ciel apparaît, et le roi et les lamas construisent le mChod rten mthong ba rang 'grol (qui libère par la seule vue). L'arrivée de lHa btsun est prédite dans le *dGongs 'dus*, ainsi que sa rencontre avec le sorcier Thi Kong Salang à Chu dkar spang gshongs, puis à Khrag 'thung rong et Phag mo rong, ainsi que Lha ris snying phug et Yang gsang phug, et enfin bDe chen phug. Des traces miraculeuses de Thi Kong Salang apparaissent aussi comme autant de témoignages historiques, des traces de pied à Khrag 'thung rong, et des bosquets de bambou qu'il planta.

La direction des domaines de Do lung ne daterait en fait que de la première décennie du 20^e siècle. Une famille fut chargée de la garde et de l'entretien du monastère, et a revendiqué les terres lepchas, traditionnellement inaliénables et propriété privée de la reine. Cette occupation a tendu à éliminer les Lepchas dans des régions plus reculées encore. Un mouvement général de reviviscence identitaire a touché à la fois toutes ces populations minoritaires du nord, ainsi que les anciens possesseurs de domaines qui subsistaient à travers une forme de commerce ritualisé, enraciné dans le culte de dieux du sol et des montagnes. L'image des saints bouddhistes demeure une référence essentielle à ce passé revalorisé, mais les modalités du culte ont changé sous les transformations internes des écoles bouddhistes et les rénovations incessantes des monastères. Les rites bouddhiques sont

¹⁹ Voir Saul Mullard, 2003, *op. cit.*

toujours axés autour du don et de l'échange des produits et des ressources locales, mais privilégient les donations extérieures, embrassant un univers international élargi aux riches entrepreneurs étrangers (Taïwan, Hongkong, Europe). La colonisation externe par l'Empire britannique, qui a modifié considérablement la répartition des terres et la juridiction, en introduisant de nouveaux colons indo-népalais, s'est doublée d'une colonisation interne par les nouveaux migrants, tibétains et indiens. La reviviscence du culte des reliques et les récits merveilleux qui l'entourent sont largement alimentés par un désir de contrôle politique de l'État sur les ressources nationales.

CONCLUSION

Dans cette analyse de la fonction anthropologique de l'image de lHa btsun, nous avons essayé de prendre en compte trois aspects du saint : la statue ou effigie matérielle, le corps-reliquaire et la personne céleste, pour rendre compte de toute la structure de référence autour de l'image : le sujet figuré (le support, les matériaux), sa mobilité, les lieux de son exposition, l'identité des possesseurs de l'image et les usages dont elle est l'objet sont autant d'éléments importants dans l'élaboration du mythe dont il fait l'objet.

Ce mythe s'élabore en premier lieu à partir de la translation du saint jusque vers son lieu d'élection propre. Ce mythe est entretenu par les récits de ses exploits merveilleux. L'ostension des reliques est inventée ensuite par tous ceux qui ont intérêt à maintenir l'intégration du royaume dans ses pratiques religieuses, ancrage pour le maintien d'un ordre social tournant autour du culte de la personne royale. Ce culte a des référents variés, voire même antagonistes, pour les Lepchas et les Bhotias. Ces populations attachent des valeurs différentes aux échanges de ressources et ont une vision différente de la nature. Si, pour les Bhotias, le déploiement des trésors de la nation est une partie intégrante de la *persona* des saints, pour les Lepchas, relégués par la conquête à une place politique inférieure, l'image sainte n'est qu'un élément de la nature, dans laquelle on vénère surtout les traces des anciens chamans, les espaces noirs et souterrains, l'épaisseur des forêts, là où les Bhotias vénèrent les lieux lumineux, métaphoriquement représentés par les miracles opérés par le saint. En témoignent les cultes aux montagnes des uns et des autres, qui passent respectivement par les airs et par les souterrains. Enfin, l'hagiographie du saint, retravaillée par ses héritiers présomptifs, a servi de garantie pour la reconstitution d'un royaume

entraîné de se désagréger, et pour la mainmise sur des ressources et des domaines dont le sens n'était plus lié à la relation avec un corps royal, mais à de l'argent, dominé par des forces coloniales extérieures. Cette décadence royale s'accompagne de visions apocalyptiques qui se déploient également sous forme de thèmes divinatoires, intégrés dans le mythe de l'Ha btsun.

THE *DZUMSA* OF LACHEN: AN EXAMPLE OF A
SIKKIMESE POLITICAL INSTITUTION

SOPHIE BOURDET-SABATIER¹

translation ANNA BALIKCI-DENJONGPA

Every society requires some kind of political framework to ensure its continued existence. In most regions of the world, today this structure is provided by a strong central government that determines the behaviour of the various populations inhabiting its territory. Indigenous political systems were once numerous and varied allowing social groups isolated from the centre of power to organise themselves according to their own particular needs and circumstances. In recent decades, these local structures have increasingly been threatened by national governments and their decentralisation policies. Many have already disappeared, and it would thus seem interesting to consider the prospect of the surviving ones. Within the Himalayan context, the *Dzumsa* (*'dzoms sa*) of Lachen provides an interesting example of a political institution inherited from the past that has managed to survive and adapt itself to changing circumstances.

Located some fifty kilometres from the Chinese border, the village of Lachen falls within a restricted area of Sikkim's North District.

¹ This study of the *dzumsa* of Lachen is part of a larger research project undertaken for the degree of Ph.D. in Geography (Paris X Nanterre) focusing on the political, social and economic activities of the people of the Lachen region. Fieldwork research was carried out from January 2002 until November 2003, a two year period during which my husband and myself shared the life of Lachenpa society. Setting up household in the village, we shared their life-style, interacting and participating in all social events such as monastic dances, funerals, marriages and village council meetings. In order to better understand the migration process, we stayed in Lachen at 3000 m as well as in Thangu at 4000 m. In order to gain some understanding of this complex society, I collected data directly from the different areas of production and through a large number of interviews. I was initially confronted with a number of difficulties such as the harshness of the climate, the lack of local understanding and cooperation, the army's restriction of our movements and the language barrier. Eventually, thanks to the moral support of my family, my thesis supervisor and my partner, and thanks to the intervention and support of the Chief Secretary of Sikkim S.W. Tenzing as well as the *Pipon* of Lachen Anu Lachenpa and my loyal friend and translator Rinzing Chewang Lechenpa, the situation rapidly improved and I was able to continue working on the research I had come to Lachen for.

Under military surveillance, access to the valley is strictly monitored and few scientific researches were ever carried out in the region. Only some short terms studies were undertaken usually by government servants for the purpose of the Sikkim administration. From a socio-economic viewpoint, the valley of Lachen, even more so than that of Lachung, remains relatively unknown. This study is an attempt to throw light on the institution of the *dzumsa*, the political system of the people of Sikkim's extreme north which today can still be witnessed in Lachen, one of Sikkim's remotest valleys. The case of Lachen appeared interesting for two reasons: 1. This local political system not only seemed robust but seemed to have preserved its status and powers (or part of these) despite the establishment of a strong Indian governing system following Sikkim's integration within the Indian Union in 1975; and 2. The agro-pastoral practices of Lachen are of a particular kind. Like most societies settled at high altitudes, herding is a central economic activity of the valley. Pastoral-nomadism has always been practiced by local populations, but contrary to usual practices, the entire Lachenpa community moves with the seasons, leaving the rest of the valley, and notably the main village of Lachen, practically empty of inhabitants for most of the year. Even though practices have changed with new economic conditions, all households still gather their members and together migrate with the seasons in search of better pastures for their yaks and sheep.

What is the dzumsa?

The *dzumsa* is the traditional administrative system of the villages of Lachen and Lachung, high altitude communities speaking a Tibetan dialect and settled in Sikkim's North District. This system of self-governance was initially established during the first half of the 19th century in order provide structure and cohesion for these societies and their activities. These communities were too far removed from the central authority to follow rules applicable to other regions of Sikkim. Many similar cases can be found throughout the world, particularly in Nepal and Tibet: the studies of Te in Nepal presented by C. Ramble (1990, 1993) and of Nyi-shang by Ph. Sagant (1990) provide interesting comparative examples. During the time of the Sikkimese kingdom, the *dzumsa* and the *pipons* (*spyi dpon*) or village chiefs were recognised and used by the king (*chos rgyal*) as a means of delegating his authority. In the 1970s, when the Indian Government initiated the reorganization of Sikkim's administration and introduced the

'panchayat' system of local government, the new system was not imposed in the valleys of Lachen and Lachung. Eventually, the *dzumsa* was officially recognised in 1985 and continues to function today. The *dzumsa* is an interesting example considering that few of these surviving political systems throughout the Himalayas were officially recognised by the governments in place (see for example the case of Nyi-shang in Nepal where the system ceased to exist in 1977 after the establishment of the panchayats).

The word *dzumsa* has three meanings. Literally, it refers to the 'gathering place' but also to the institution in-charge of administering and organising activities within a given territory, as well as to the general council of villagers composed of household heads.

The *dzumsa* - or general council of Lachenpa villagers - is directed by a group of people, elected or designated by villagers depending on the period, to represent them and manage village affairs. This council of representatives, referred to as the *lhey-na* (*las sna*) and now better known as the panchayat, is composed of two *pipons*, six *gembos* (*rgan bo*), two *tsipos* (*rtsis po*) and two *gyapons* (*rgya dpon*). This council or *lhey-na* is changed every year unless the public wishes to renew its mandate. It is responsible for the application and respect of the community's laws and regulations, and for the organisation of the main village events. It schedules the meetings of the village's general council where decisions are taken and meets before each one in order to discuss the agenda and measures to be proposed. Within the *lhey-na*, the *pipons* and the *gembos* are the issuers of orders while the *tsipos* and the *gyapons* are there to assist them. The two *pipons*, originally called *chipons* (*spyi dpon*) or 'king of the public', are the village chiefs, possessors of authority, spokesmen of the *lhey-na* and Lachen's representatives to the outside world. Since 1978-79, they are no longer nominated as was customary but are elected by the general village council. The *gembos*, literally the 'responsible people' of the village, are to assist the *pipons* in their functions, in taking decisions, in making the system work and in dispensing justice. They were previously designated by the *pipons* but are now also elected by the public. The *tsipos* or 'accountants' were previously the collectors of the various taxes that were to be handed over to the Chogyal. They have now lost this function and instead are responsible for calculating fines and maintaining the books. The *gyapons* finally are designated by each of the *pipons* as their assistants during the village meetings notably by calling members to assemble by announcing the traditional 'zum niao!' ('*dzoms nya'o*).

The elections of the *lheyna* take place every year at the time of the lunar New Year just after the monastic mask dances. Until about thirty years ago, the *pipons* were not elected as is the case today, but were nominated by a group of people called *theumi* (*thos mi*) who were considered to be the most respected, honest and experienced members of the community. In the mid-1970s, Sikkim entered a new era following its merger with India. The entire Sikkimese administration was upset and restructured, and the repercussions of this upheaval were felt in the remotest corners of the old kingdom. The *dzumsa* did not remain unaffected by these changes and gradually took on a structure that would be considered as 'more democratic' by Western societies. This new system gave an equal voice to all villagers when it came to choosing the group of *pipons*, which was not the case in other Himalayan Buddhist societies whereby village chiefs were often chosen by means of ritual (Sagant 1990). In Lachen, this new measure even served to better legitimise the *pipon's* status. The first elections were in 1978-79 and continues to be held to this day. After closing the accounts and wrapping up any unfinished business, the *lheyna* officially resigns by ordering the *theuton* (*grol ston*) or last common meal and returning the *dzumsa* house keys to the public. Elections are organised in the next couple of days by a transitional group designated by the general council of villagers. In order to give more legitimacy to the new *lheyna* and channel the votes, a list is compiled which consists of those considered to be eligible for the status of *pipon*. Elections begin once the general council of villagers and the lamas (who have been participating in elections since the early 1990s) agree on who should be included on the list. Everyone receives two voting ballots (with the seal of the *pipon* of Lachen on the reverse in order to avoid fraud) and writes on these the name(s) of his candidate(s). Once the voting is completed, the ballots are sorted by name and counted. The candidate with the most votes becomes the first *pipon* and the runner-up becomes the second *pipon*. Those from the third to the eighth place are elected *gembos* and those in the ninth and tenth position are elected *tsipos*. Once the elections are over and the new *lheyna* is in place, the public shares the meal offered by the departing *lheyna*.

The general village council is composed of Lachenpa household heads residing for the most part in Lachen. All Lachenpa household heads are not necessarily council members or *khepo* (*khas po*) either because they are lamas or because they recently separated from the main household. Further, only men can become members of the *dzumsa*, and no women are officially authorised to attend the various

meetings. However, a widow will take her husband's place until their son is old enough to take charge or if they had no son, until she adopts one. When, according to villagers, the *dzumsa* of Lachen was first established during the first half of the 19th century with Dorje Samdup as the first *pipon*, it had a very small membership and anyone who wished to join could do so if he met the previously mentioned conditions. The *pipons* of those days even promised land to those willing to join. The number of members then rose from about 60 in 1936 to 80 in the early 1970s and to 175 in 2003. In the early 1990s, new measures were put in place in order to limit the membership's rapid growth, and today the rules are much stricter. Only Lachenpas by birth can now join the *dzumsa*, and the general village council only accepts two new members a year.

Meetings are held in the *dzumsa*'s new house or *mang khim* (*mang khyim*) built in 1984-85, and which today represents the 'gathering place'. After the 'zum niao!' call to meetings, people have thirty minutes to assemble and make their presence known to one of the *gembos* taking attendance. Members then sit in a circle without following any specific order or reserved seating except perhaps for the *lhey-na* in order to favour discussions and debate. If the lamas join the meeting, as it is the case when the matter of the day is of interest to them, they will sit on the central benches facing the *lhey-na*. *Dzumsa* meetings are held as often as situations call for them. Previously, they only happened a few times a year in order to organise the main religious festivals, set sowing dates and when to move the herds. They are now much more frequent and varied. The functions of the *dzumsa* have evolved and multiplied since Sikkim joined the Indian Union, and the body itself has become the intermediary between the government and the people and acquiring, in this sense, more and more responsibilities towards both. Today the *dzumsa* has new functions that call for regular meetings, such as calls for tender and the redistribution of property and money, topics to which we will return later on.

The dzumsa's historical functions

As previously mentioned, the *dzumsa* was established to favour cohesion within the community by organising activities shared by the entire social group. In order to accomplish its objectives, the *dzumsa* has since the beginning enforced a number of rules of conduct. The old rules however were not compiled in a register, and it is only in 1991

that they were put down in writing in a 'book of rules' written in Tibetan and called *tepchen* (*deb chen*).

The *dzumsa* of Lachen has a number of social responsibilities. First of all, it has a strong judicial role: the *dzumsa* determines the conduct rules to be followed by all individuals and sees to their implementation and respect. These paramount policing and judicial functions exemplify the system's rigidity and socialising role. Before a police station was established in the village, the *dzumsa* had the power to arrest all those who broke the law, but now only intervenes in the event of minor offences committed within its sphere of influence. The 'old' rules are numerous and the *dzumsa* also sanctions absences and lateness to meetings, disrespect of dates set for sowing or for moving herds, absence from community work, failure to make the required wood contribution to funerals and of butter for the lamps at the monastery. The *dzumsa* can formulate new rules such as not being allowed to attend village meetings or monastic dances (*'cham*) in a state of drunkenness, to fight, to gamble to the extent of putting the household's finances at risk, to throw *tsampa* (*rtsam pa*) on the *phami* (*bag mi*) or middleman in-charge of negotiating marriages, etc. Whenever a rule is broken, the *dzumsa* imposes a fine which varies according to the gravity of the infraction and is recorded in the accounts' register. At the end of the year, before the new elections, a *tsipo* (accountant) and a *gembo* work out the total fine to be paid by each individual and collect the dues that are kept in a common fund. In its judicial capacity, the *dzumsa* arbitrates disputes and conflicts within its own community without having resort to the courts of Chungthang or Mangan. In such a case, a complaint is first registered by the *lheynga* who then becomes the only referee and judges the case. Cases handled by the *dzumsa* are numerous and varied: these may concern illegal land occupation, defamation, adultery or physical and moral injury. Judgement is pronounced by calling and informing the 'guilty' party who must then apologize and offer a *khada* and a *chang* to each member of the *lheynga* and to the other party. The 'winner' is then offered a *khada* and a *chang* by the *lheynga*.

Since its inception, the *dzumsa* also plays the role of intermediary between the different social strata and the government. It facilitates exchanges by acting as collector and distributor, notably in regard to taxes. Under the monarchy, the *pipon* collected the grazing, forest and land taxes once a year that were then handed over to the king by the new *pipon* when he presented himself after taking up office. Today, the *pipon* still collects some land tax for the government. The *dzumsa*

also serves as intermediary between the lay society and the monastery, a relation that involves a number of obligations towards both. During the important rituals, the *dzumsa* takes care of collecting the supplies necessary to prepare the *tormas* (*gtorma*) and feed the lamas. It also takes care of the annual collection of butter or *makay* (*mar skal*) to feed the monastery's butter lamps. Once a year, it collects kitchen wood from each household for the council's meeting house. Each member is to supply the prescribe quantities or pay a fine.

The *dzumsa* plays a very important role at the time of traumatic events such as death or repeated natural calamities when its solidarity function comes into full play. Death is a particularly important moment both for the concerned family and society, and the *dzumsa* offers its support to be former by monopolising the entire community. Strict rules are to be followed and each household has to contribute to the funeral by bringing, as soon as the *gyapon* has made the call, a bundle of wood for the house of the diseased (*khas shing*) and one or two logs for the funeral pyre (*ro shing*). Log and bundle sizes are checked by the *gyapon* with a bamboo ring and names are entered in the register. Since 1991, new rules regarding cremation have been put in place testifying to the evolution of the *dzumsa*. For example, in order to reduce funeral expenses, it was decided that only 15 people would help with the cremation and accompany the diseased. Workers are chosen by lot among volunteers while the rest contribute Rs25 that the *dzumsa* hands over to the family to help with expenses. In 2002, the *dzumsa* also decided that no meat or alcohol would be consumed at funerals.

The *dzumsa* is also in-charge of organising collective works undertaken for the benefit of the community. During the time of the monarchy, these were mainly concerned with the visits of high ranking civil servants or the building of communal structures such as the monastery or the *dzumsa* house. Since the establishment of the new decentralising government, more and more responsibilities are delegated to the *Dzumsa* such as the organisation of plantation works, construction of draining channels, etc. These represent an important source of income for the *dzumsa* and hence the local population. Important works intended for the benefit of the entire community are carried out jointly by all members of the village's general council and the monastery and are referred to as mandatory and non-excusable. Every household has to participate and absences are severely penalised. In the case of smaller tasks, such as the construction of welcome gates

or the sweeping of streets prior to the visit of high ranking officials, a small number of workers are selected by lot.

The *dzumsa* of Lachen has always carried out a certain number of economic functions and played an important role in the organisation of traditional activities. In order to coordinate the community's efforts and give everyone the time to repair the fences that will protect their crops from the animals that roam freely throughout the entire territory, the *dzumsa* sets the sowing and harvesting dates for the different levels of the valley, especially for the village of Lachen and the hamlets located to the north of Samdong. In order to favour the re-growth of the grass, the *dzumsa* also sets the dates for moving the herds and determines the altitude below which the animals are not allowed to graze during the summer months. It sets the dates for bringing in the hay from public lands in order to give everyone the opportunity to put up adequate winter reserves.

Adapting to emerging challenges: the new roles of the dzumsa

Even since Sikkim joined the Indian Union, the *dzumsa's* responsibilities have not ceased to evolve and the original system has shown a high level of flexibility and adaptability when faced with new economic and political situations. The challenges have indeed changed, and the *dzumsa's* position as a viable institution is constantly being re-evaluated.

On the economic front, the *dzumsa* now has additional duties. Sikkim merger with India and the closure of the Chinese border have caused a number of changes in traditional activities that were then primarily centred around agro-pastoral activities and trade. The Lachenpas used to barter wood and oranges originating from Sikkim's lower regions for Tibetan barley since the locally produced quantities were insufficient. With the establishment of an Indian bureaucracy, the local population found itself stripped of certain rights, notably that of managing its own territory and its resources. For example, pressure from the army has gradually and continuously reduced the extent of the territory exploited by the people of Lachen, and the government restricted access to protected forests and the gathering of minor forest products and medicinal plants. As a result, the people of Lachen have had to look for alternative sources of income and re-orient their activities. Today, most households still practice agro-pastoralism and agriculture as their basic economic activity but all are also investing in

new economic ventures such as tourism, contract work, employment with the government or the army, etc.

In response to this changing economic landscape, the *dzumsa* adapted itself by implementing a number of measures allowing it to take advantage of the situation. For example, it has put into place a very strict system for the allotment of government jobs that do not require a qualification beyond Class X - such as electrician or watchman -, or for the allotment of government contracts that are auctioned during the meetings of the village's general council. Contract go to the highest bidder, whether a layman or a lama, although they cannot be given to non-*dzumsa* members. Once a contract has been allotted, the successful contractor must quickly deposit the due sum in exchange of which the *lheynga* issues a certificate or agreement (*gan rgya*) in order to protect him from any extortion attempts. The entire sum is paid into the communal *dzumsa* account which, as we will see, will be equally redistributed among members of the general village council, including the lamas.

The *dzumsa* has also implemented a business tax. Every year, at the time of *Drug ko tshes bzhi* - one of the annual Buddhist festivals held during the summer -, it collects a tax on shops, gaming parlours and cinemas that varies depending on the size and revenue of the business and which is paid into the communal *dzumsa* account. Since 1985, it has also been setting the price of certain local products, particularly butter, cheese and livestock in order to protect the poorer members of the community. Before this measure was put into place, prices were sometimes very high for the profit of the rich who produced a surplus and to the detriment of the poor who were forced to buy from them².

Finally, the already mentioned redistribution role of the *dzumsa* is one of its most important. It represents a significant means of financial help for the entire community without which many households would find themselves in difficulty. This redistribution role is relatively recent and came with the changes previously discussed. The money collected from auction sales, taxes and fines is accumulated in the *dzumsa* account and redistributed among members as need be. The

² In most cases, the *lheynga* sets very reasonable rates: Rs150-180 for one kg of butter, Rs 120-150 for cheese compared to Rs200-250 in Gangtok. The price of a medium sized bull is set at Rs 9,000, Rs15,000 for a yak and Rs 1,800 for a sheep. These prices have not changed since 1996 and whoever tries to sell at a higher price risks a very stiff fine.

dzumsa of Lachen, unlike that of Lachung, does not redistribute once a year but whenever it is most required by the population, generally four or five times a year. This usually coincides with important religious or social events when people have to incur important expenses like in December before the monastic dances or in June before moving the herds or harvesting the first potatoes.

The greatest challenge for the *dzumsa* of the 21st century is met on the political front where important pressures constantly put into question the viability of the system. The greatest 'danger' comes from the intrusion of state level politics, and the *dzumsa* indeed nearly failed during Sikkim's 1999 general election. The *dzumsa* was then divided in two distinct factions, one supporting the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) party and the other the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). At the time of the *lheynga*'s annual elections, instead of putting aside their differences and prioritising the welfare of the whole community, each party elected its own representatives and further divided the community. Relations between households became tense with some taking radical measures against opposing families. The population remained divided for nearly a year until the next general elections with two separate *dzumsas* organising the usual activities such as sowing and moving herds, independently. Later on, the *lheynga* supporting the SDF party gained full legitimacy, and gradually, a few influential persons, saddened to see the system disintegrate, preached for a reunification which did eventually happen a few months after the elections. In order to prevent a reoccurrence of such events and protect their institution, the leaders of the *dzumsa* decided to take some measures before Sikkim's general elections of April 2004. Several motions were voted and adopted by the entire population. For example, displaying party flags in the village or talking politics during the village's general council meetings became finable offences.

Conclusion

The role of indigenous political systems is increasingly being questioned by government institutions that favour uniformity within their territory. National policies have taken over and few local systems can resist the economic and political pressures. For the time being, the *dzumsa* of Lachen seems to be adapting itself and finding ways to survive the pressures of state politics; it has indeed proven itself capable of adapting to changing circumstances. Structural changes within the *dzumsa* have been numerous since Sikkim became a part of

India, and the Lachenpas seem more than ever determined to defend their interests and an institution that is so beneficial to village life. But for how long will the *dzumsa* be able to face these internal and external threats? Is this structure really indispensable and will it keep on renewing itself successfully?

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