

THE ROUTE TO HELL

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I don't know if the fact that having read *La turquoise de vie. Un pèlerinage tibétain*, but also about the Tarap and Dolpo pilgrimages, was at the origin of my decision to write my dissertation on "Montagnes, lacs et grottes : lieux de pèlerinage dans le monde tibétain". Once the subject was chosen, I went to see Corneille Jest to discuss my project. I remember the first conversation we had in a Paris café and his enthusiasm that someone would pursue research on this subject. Many other meetings followed in Paris, but most often in Kathmandu. Throughout my years of research, I often referred to his material and the Tarap maxim which says, "pilgrimage is the religious offering of laics"; it could serve as the conclusion of my work.

"Pass without hindrance between the closed walls of the rock 'Digpa karnag' (*sdig pa dkar nag*); 'Rock of white sins and of black sins' is a means of being purified," Karma, C. Jest's informant, used to say. These "narrow passes" (*phrang lam*) are also called *dmyal lam*, "route to hell". They are found throughout the Tibetan world, around sacred mountains, for example at A myes rMa chen, or at Kailash, as well as in the caves of Halase-Maratika in Nepal. Purification, the liberation of all faults is one of the reasons generally given by pilgrims to explain their desire to pass this test but each knows (or says) that the narrow passages are linked to the bar do (the intermediary period between death and rebirth).

In slipping into the narrow passage, the pilgrims not only seek to erase their sins, but to carry out a rite which will keep Yama, the god of death, from learning of their sins during this life. It is a kind of rehearsal in the world of the living, of tests that man will face after his death and which will help him at this difficult time when he meets Yama. He will see the god born at the same time as himself count his beneficent deeds with white pebbles, and the demon born at the same time as himself count his maleficent deeds with black pebbles. Thus, Yama will look into the karma mirror in which every deed (good or bad) is reflected. The deceased will have no means of escape, no means of evasion, no excuse will be possible, and we understand the fear which grips "the *bar-do* being", as well as the living before the narrow passage.

When one enters the narrow passage, one does not know what will happen, if the weight of one's sins is

such that one will remain trapped. The fright that the devout feels is equal to the stakes. The notion of the ordeal is present, and with it, that of the supernatural sanction associated with purification. The devout anticipates the moment of his meeting with the god of death ; he sees him.

A Sherpa lama encountered at Solu, with whom I spoke of the Halase-Maratika caves, told me of his experience :

"Once I saw a woman who could not leave the "route to hell". She wept and begged Padmasambhava, promising to make offerings to him if he would help her leave. Thanks to her promise, she was able to leave. I myself was so afraid that I did not try".

