

Notes from the Field

This section introduces current research directly bearing on Bon or indigenous religions in the Himalayan regions within or bordering the cultural sphere of Tibet.

Ancient Rituals in a Twilight World

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Introduction¹

Arunachal Pradesh is a marvellous place. This recently formed state of the Indian Union sports a kaleidoscopic variety of climates, flora and fauna as well as ethnic stocks and related cultures. This region has escaped most influences of the outside world. Only the recently formulated Donyipolo² religious movement has had a significant impact on the traditional religious environment. This movement strives to institutionalize, make uniform and confer political presentability upon the scattered shamanic cults existing here. For example, the Donyipolo zealots often consider the shamans who make use of trance states to be 'heterodox' and in response have started to build temples, something that is completely alien to the very essence of these traditions, for which nature itself is the temple. The Donyipolo church draws adherents mostly among the

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² Donyipolo, sun and moon in Adi language, is the name of a somewhat artificial new religion aimed at adapting for the modern world the extremely complex and variegated beliefs of the Adi and Apatani tribes. Founded by Talom Rukbo in the nineteen eighties, this movement strives to record in writing the tribal ancestral mythological and epic heritage, but introduces many concepts completely alien to the tradition – like standardised rituals, equalitarianism, transcendent divinity and so forth – and aims to strip the cult of some of its ritual core – like spirit possession and animal sacrifice. This religious phenomenon still awaits serious academic discussion.

various branches of the Adi and Apatani tribes who live in the central and mid-western regions of Arunachal Pradesh.

The north-western districts of Tawang and West Kameng are home to some 91,000 people belonging to five tribes: the Mijis, Akas, Buguns, Sherdukpens and Monpas. The latter is a tribe of Tibetan stock; its name in Tibetan generally designates those peoples who live in the lowlands towards the south, beyond the Himalayan watershed, from the point of view of the Tibetan Plateau. In Tibetan literature, *mon yul*, a term that can refer to regions as far apart as Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan and the whole of India, often connotes areas where Buddhism is not practiced and people are hunters, thus insinuating their 'barbaric status'. In Arunachal Pradesh, the term *mon pa* has come to indicate a particular tribe, also called Menpa or Menba by the speakers of Indic languages, which includes people living in minor settlements scattered in the areas along the Tibetan border as well as in Bhutan. In the two districts in which our research took place, Tawang and West Kameng, the 1981 census recorded a population of around 35,000 Monpas belonging to the Tawang, Panehan, But, Dirang, Khoitam and Lish sub-groups.

The main religious, cultural, commercial and administrative centre of the Monpas is the town of Tawang, dominated by its massive Dge lugs pa monastery, the Dga' ldan rnam grol lha rtse, which in the last four centuries has been the local fountainhead of institutional scholastic Buddhism in the area, entertaining close links to Lhasa up to the mid-20th century.

As one descends towards the plains and across the high mountain Se Pass, the doctrinal influence and charisma of the pure monastic lifestyle of the Dge lugs *dgon pa* gradually fades away, with less institutional forms of religious belief and practice becoming increasingly prominent and finally supplanting it.

Religious environment

Small Rnyig ma gonpas and related isolated village lamas scattered in the various settlements are more common in the districts of west Kameng, where mostly elderly and isolated monks administer their cult alongside other individuals who perform rituals according to what appear to be very ancient forms of religious worship. We could describe these as belonging to a local form of the Bonpo (*bon po*) tradition, characterized by numerous traits that could be broadly defined as 'shamanistic' even though they are not necessarily fully contained within the confines of that term. This

can be established from the fact that in general the shamanic world lacks a higher heavenly dimension, which, as we shall see further on, is in general present here, at least as a post-mortem possibility.

Together with a research team from the University of Venice, I travelled to these remote areas three times in a period of seven years³ and I have been able to survey this extremely interesting environment, also witnessing some relevant changes that have been taking place in the recent past.

In the severely impoverished areas farther apart from the main settlements, religious life is thriving. On most days, it is likely that in one or the other of the small huts in a village a ritual of some kind will take place.⁴

Apart from Buddhists, we encountered a number of religious specialists who could broadly be defined as Bonpos, although, as we shall see later, only some of them refer to themselves using this term. In many instances the generic Hindi term *pūjāri* or the Nepali word *jañkhri* are used.⁵ All these denominations are part of the vocabulary of both the functionaries themselves and the people who seek their services. It appears, on the other hand, that in this area it is not possible to simply define as purely Buddhists those who seek guidance, advice or ritual performance from Buddhist lamas, nor is it possible to call Bonpos all those who come to Bonpo priests. In general, the majority of people refer indifferently to one or the other, mostly depending on the specific nature of the problem that urges them to look for assistance and on their faith in the ability of the various specialists to provide some form of solution. Often, they tend to try out all different choices available until their issue is resolved.

We had the possibility to witness this apparent syncretism on several occasions, for instance when we were invited into a hut in the village of Sallary where a yearly offering ritual for the spirits was performed by a Bonpo priest.

³ Our research journeys took place in the autumn of 2001, 2002 and 2008.

⁴ These rituals include the sacrificial offerings of alcoholic beverages, seeds, smoke, animal blood etc. as well as various forms of divination and are carried out both inside shelters and in the open air at crossroads, in the vicinity of water streams, crevices and other places where spirits are said to dwell.

⁵ In this context it is interesting to note that this region is characterized not only by remarkable religious promiscuity, but by tremendous linguistic diversity as well. In particular, along with the various native Monpa dialects, a considerable number of Hindi terms and usages are common, mostly functioning as a *lingua franca* among speakers of mutually incomprehensible dialects. As a consequence, we were able to communicate quite well with locals. Another point that deserves mention is that tradition and culture in these areas are transmitted orally only; hence the use of predominantly phonetic transcriptions of names and other terms in this article.



Bonpo priest wielding vajra and ghanta. Photo Fabian Sanders.
the hours-long ritual without even saying his name.

Many Buddhist prayer flags had been hung around the dwelling place, and at the door Buddhist mantra charms were attached side by side with some *mithun*⁶ skulls. As the *pūjāri* performed his ritual, a woman from the family continuously recited the six-syllable *mantra*. Unfortunately, the Bonpo did not want to be interviewed and rushed away straight after

Cosmology

Given all the imaginable differences in the conceptions, beliefs and goals of the religious specialists fostered by the various traditions of this area, there is one feature that is common to all: the notion that the empirical world, the bodily aspect of existence subject to observation by our senses, abides side by side with a subtle dimension. This is reflected in a cosmology which, in its more complex, broad and complete forms, encompasses all the gods of existence who dwell high above in the heavens, gradually descending along a very detailed hierarchy through the so-called 'Eight Classes', the local guardians and down to the *pretas*, demons and all the different classes of chthonic residents. An important place in this pantheon is accorded to the natural spirits of mountains, lakes, rivers, hills and valleys. These are thought of as the subtle or psychic aspects for which these geographical features represent the body.

As is well known, the Tibetan tradition in particular envisions a subtle world of extraordinary complexity, spanning all vertically stacked horizontal levels of existence, from the celestial realms all the way down to the underworld. The gods living in higher

⁶ The *mithun* (*bos frontalis*) is a cross-breed between an Indian *gaur* and another species of bison. It is domesticated but normally roams freely in the outskirts of villages. It is the sacrificial animal *par excellence* among all tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

realms are understood as being more luminous and powerful, and the luminosity and power of beings progressively decrease towards the lower realms where darkness reigns.

Consequently, a great deal of effort in terms of rituals and practice is devoted to perpetuate or restore a harmonic relationship with these sentient beings, which are mostly understood as living in a bodiless condition and, according to their nature, can nevertheless be worshipped, petitioned, summoned, queried, even tamed, subdued and enslaved. The gods and spirits are known to have a close interactive relationship with the human world, which they can influence both on a macrocosmic level - in terms of weather, harvest, pests, epidemics and so on - and a microcosmic level - individual health, prosperity, misery, fortune and disgrace, for instance. The reverse is of course equally possible: gifted or trained individuals can establish various kinds of relations with these beings. These relations function mostly on a *do ut des* basis.

From the point of view of entertaining this relationship, in the case of our area of interest, it is possible to divide the religious professionals - both Buddhist and non-Buddhist - into two main categories: those who rely mainly upon mechanical⁷ rituals of offering, ransom and so on, and those who have the necessary quality and ability to enter a state of trance and during this condition are possessed by gods or spirits. The second group can also be divided into two and consists of those whom we can call oracles, who are possessed by gods and officiate their services with the help of a ritualist lama, and those who are possessed by inferior gods or spirits - ancestral or geographic - and act alone or with the help of an interpreter/assistant.

Officiators or functionaries

In the district of West Kameng, in the areas of Dirang Dzong and the Naphra Circle, officiators of all these categories are present side by side. I will not discuss in detail the Buddhist oracle of Sapper, currently represented by the *sku rten*⁸ Dge legs Chos bzang, living in a village just a few miles upstream from Dirang, but I would like to point out a few traits that distinguish the oracle and the Buddhists in general from all other

⁷ Hereby is meant a mechanical repetition of gestures and utterances, which does not involve any participation or alteration of the performers mental condition. Aside from the ability to carry out the rite no qualifications such as an initiation, an acquaintance with a spiritual practice or the ability to directly communicate with spirits, are required.

⁸ A *sku rten*, lit. 'physical support', is a technical term used to designate the person who lends his or her body for the deity to possess.

officiators in the area. First of all, the Buddhists, even in the case of village lamas, always trace their knowledge back to a specific 'human' lineage of teaching which is well known in the area, belonging either to the Sarong Gonpa in the Tawang district or to the local Rnying ma monastery of Dirang. Secondly, but most importantly, even though they might be primarily involved in rituals for the benefit of the community, the Buddhists always keep in mind the final goal of human existence as set out in the teachings of the Buddha: the obtainment of freedom from rebirth and the realization of Buddhahood. Consequently, they apply the methods - meditative and tantric - that help them to proceed on the path. This cannot be said of any of the other categories of ritual officiators in the area: independently from the scope of their cosmology, they perform rituals with the exclusive intent of solving problems of a worldly nature. In general, as we shall see further on, they simply pursue the accumulation of power in order to increase their efficacy and hence their status.

The first type of non-Buddhist religious functionary active in this area is the so-called *phrami*. The *phrami* is the primary and ordinary priest of his community, the depositary of the traditional oral culture of his people. He is supposed to know the myths and legends of his clan and takes care of daily rites, the consecration and maintenance of sacred places and so on. It is his duty to give advice on the rules of conduct which allow people in his community to live a prosperous and harmonious life in order to proceed towards a desirable post-mortem experience. He also is involved in performing funeral rites. The function and knowledge of the *phrami* are hereditary in a patrilineal lineage from father to son.

In Dirang Dzong we had the opportunity to meet and interview the *phrami* Pema Dragpa, an elderly man belonging to the Dirang Monpa sub-group who was particularly exhaustive in illustrating his function and the situation of his profession, of which, to his dismay, he was the last remaining representative in the area. The *phrami*, he said, does not have the ability to enter states of trance and thus to be possessed and have a concrete, personal relationship to subtle beings. He performs mechanical rituals, even of a remarkable complexity, but does not see the beings to which the ritual is offered. For this reason he admitted that the *phrami* is probably a less powerful figure among the Monpas in terms of efficacy, but at the same time the inability to enter into trance keeps him safe from the polluting and contaminating contact with inferior spirits, demons and malicious beings. In contrast, he said, many Monpas tend to engage in contact with these beings with the sole intent of gaining more power. In fact, he set out a code of conduct, probably influenced by the Buddhist monks, so strict with regards to

purity of behaviour and even dietary prescriptions that it seemed practically impossible to avoid hell, especially in the local social and economic milieu.

On the other hand, the cosmology and eschatology he described also allowed for a kind of heavenly status after death, a *pitrloka* of sorts, for those who observed the correct ritual and conduct rules. It is interesting to note that in purely shamanic contexts, which always have a bipartite cosmology, this heavenly dimension, which fits into a tripartite image of the cosmos (earth, heaven and hell), remains unknown. While deprecating the fact that many people nowadays prefer to consult the Buddhist lamas, Pema Dragpa affirmed that the *phrami* is in fact the most important among Monpa religious figures and reinforced his remark by saying that the ancient forefather of all the Monpa priests was one ancient mythological person named Bon Sharamira who came from the east spreading the (Bon) tradition. In the heavens too, a kind of archetypal deity of the *phramis* resides. Called Kunman Jemo, he is the protector of all his followers.

In any case, the other religious figures of the Mon-pas, although technically



Phrami wearing the horned peacock headgear. Photo Stefano Beggiora.

more powerful, often refer to *phramis* as their lamas, persons who can give reliable advice drawing from traditional knowledge.

Let us now consider the other preeminent religious figure among the Monpas of the Naphra district, particularly the But and the Khoitam sub-groups. These religious functionaries, interestingly, call themselves and are called Bonpos. They are identified by their peculiar ability to enter states of trance and thus to be possessed by subtle beings having supernatural qualities. The individuals we had the oppor-

tunity to interview all share a similar personal history; it matches that of comparable figures who have been widely described in scientific literature relating to Central Asia, the Himalayas and the Indian subcontinent in general. They inherit their ability from some members of the previous generation of their family after their death and, most often during puberty, experience dreams and visions, often accompanied by some periods of apparent insanity during which they roam the forest, seemingly aimlessly. They call this troubled and painful phase the 'initiation' stage, during which they are contacted and possessed by the spirits of their deceased ancestors. In the process, they gain experiential knowledge of the subtle world, make acquaintance with their 'spirit guide', are taught the methods of inducing their own trance and are familiarized with the arcana of ritual and its performance. This innate ability is founded on what can be considered a gift or an anomaly, a phenomenon that is explained as an opening, a hole or a crack in the psychic integrity of these individuals. It is said that through this opening they give and have access to the subtle world of gods and spirits.

We had an opportunity to meet and interview three Bonpos in the villages of Jerigaon and Sallary in the Naphra Circle of West Kameng. Two of them had very similar features. To begin with, their ritual attire and paraphernalia are extremely interesting and symbolically quite explicit. The headgear, formed by folding a woollen scarf around of a woven basket-like framework or just around two wooden sticks, reproduces the horns of a *mithun*. The mithun represents the civilized, well known and safe environment of the village. Some peacock feathers, a widely used symbol in Tibet and India, are inserted between the two 'horns'. In this case, the feathers may well be a reference to what is generally known as 'shamanic flight'.

But the most striking ritual implement of the Bonpos is unquestionably a wooden tablet that is slung over the right shoulder to the left side. This tablet is said to be the power source and store of the Bonpo priest. Dried animal parts or bones are tied to its flat surface with some vegetal fibre strings. On the two tablets belonging to the Bonpos 'Guruji' Wang Di and Chetang Ropu, we were able to identify a hornbill beak, the skull of a dog (or similar), some eagle claws, the hoof of a mithun and, most importantly, a varying number of lower jaws from a tiger or leopard. In Hindi, the term *sher* is quite generic and can designate any big cat, but in any case at least symbolically a tiger is implied. As is evident from the thick blood stains that cover it, the tablet is re-consecrated at least once a year, by ritually sprinkling over it the blood of a sacrificed *mithun*, in particular on the jaws of the tiger. This blood, understood to be the vehicle of

the animal's *ātmā* or spirit, is supposed to nourish the spirit of the tiger, represented by its jaws.



Chetang Ropu's Ritual Tablet. Photo Fabian Sanders.

The *mithun* headgear and the tiger tablet identify the highest ranking religious functionaries of the Bonpos in this area. The jaw of the tiger is procured by a Bonpo during his 'initiation' period in the jungle in the course of a kind of ritual hunt; otherwise tigers are a hunting taboo. Those who rightfully possess the tablets draw their power and abilities from Juhung, the tiger spirit, an extremely powerful being whom they call their subtle guide or *guru* and sometimes their *śakti*, its female form. This spirit - a kind of god or goddess of the jungle - dwells in the forest; it epitomizes the wilderness, the uncivilized and dangerous unknown.

In addition to these implements, it is interesting to note that in this context all the Bonpos use the classical Tibetan style *vajra*⁹ and a bell (*dril bu*), in lieu of the normal Bonpo *gshang*. The rhythmic sound of the bell, which contrary to Buddhist practice is held in the right hand with the *vajra* in the left, occasionally integrated with a single skin drum, is a necessary element that allows the Bonpos to enter a state of trance.

In their trance sessions, Guruji Wang Di and Chetang Ropu are possessed by Juhung, and through its power they roam the mysterious wilderness of the subtle world of spirits. Here they are able to diagnose the specific subtle aetiology of problems that have manifested for their clients, which they will try to solve later, after the session, through the performance of the appropriate rituals. During rituals such as these, the Bonpo shaman sits on the ground and arranges a small altar in front of him. Then, depending on the complexity and importance of the ritual, he places a varying number of mats or woollen scarves in front of the altar on which the invited spirits are requested to sit. A small metal offering dish is prepared for each spirit. The Bonpo, in ceremonial dress, then starts his jaculatory prayers, accompanying himself with the bell and sometimes giving clear signs of entering a trance state. These signs are a general tremor, some clonic jolts and often ample and fast up and down movements of the head. When the spirits have arrived, abundant oblations are offered. Rice, corn, dried fish, *chang*, *arak* and other alcoholic drinks as well as the smoke of burnt herbs are all presented one after the other. As Chek Cha Lamaji (the third Bonpo we met) said: 'I offer the *ātmā* (soul) of the fish and the *arak* to my guide *ātmā* and the others'. Finally, after entreating them to help solve the problems that prompted the ritual, the spirits are requested to return to their abodes.

All of our informants, both Buddhist and Bonpo, unanimously conceded the great power of those who have an intimate relationship with Juhung, but at the same time they dreaded the possibility of those people being overpowered by their savage guiding spirit and, for the sake of accumulating great power, derailing into sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. We do not have the time to discuss this aspect in detail here, since its origin can be traced back to the creation myths of Monpas, but according to tradition, the practice can result in a metamorphosis of the religious figure, a therianthrope shift in which the Bonpo becomes a kind of were-tiger, and is then

⁹ The *vajra* is also sometimes used to perform a kind of preliminary divination aimed at ascertaining whether the ritual, the possession and so forth will be successful. In this divination the *pūjāri* attempts to put the *vajra* in a standing position on a brass or bronze offering vessel with the help of some rice grains and the rim of the vessel.

obviously considered extremely dangerous for the human community. Parallel phenomena can be found in traditions from other areas of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁰

The danger of were-tigers, along with the performance of animal sacrifices still quite common in the area, meets with the firm opposition of the Buddhist lamas. As an example, the first two times we met the Bonpo Chetang Ropu in the village of Jerigaon, with an interval of around one year in between, he proudly and openly spoke about all the details of his office, carefully explaining the nature of his guiding spirit, the appearance and form of the spirits he encounters during his journeys, the importance and employment of his paraphernalia, his power to solve the most serious problems and so on. Then, about five years later, in 2008, we met him a third time. Along the main road, the village was now festooned with brightly coloured *dar lcog*. Chetang Ropu, looking much more shy and unpretentious than before, was wearing a Buddhist *mālā* around his neck and was very reluctant to speak about his Bonpo duties. His tablet was still hung on the wall of his hut, but he referred to it as a mere inheritance from his forefathers, without much use nowadays. He had, spontaneously it seems, come under the influence of the lama of the small local *gonpa*, who had re-consecrated him, confirmed his role as the *pūjāri* of the village and given him the *mālā* and a mantra to recite. Chetang Ropu still performed his rituals, but said he avoided animal sacrifices.

In light of this dramatic change in the attitude of Chetang Ropu, it seemed clear that for the Buddhist lamas, the taming of the savage gods and demons of these remote areas once begun by Guru Padmasambhava is not yet over. In a small chamber in the Dzong of Dirang, a black stone venerated as a relic is held to be the petrified heart of a demon once slain by Padmasambhava as he strode through these lands. Perhaps someday it will be joined by the heart of Juhung, the tiger spirit.

¹⁰ We had a similar encounter in the outskirts of the far eastern Arunachali town of Tezu, this time in a Mishmi settlement.