

# THE CULT OF MOUNT MURDO IN GYALRONG

SAMTEN G. KARMAY

*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris*

## Introduction

In August 1993, I stayed for two weeks in Gyalrong (rGyal-rong, Chinese: Jinchuan) doing some fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> It was during this stay that I was able to observe the cult of Mt Murdo (dMu-rdo).<sup>2</sup>

Gyalrong was considered as a 'hidden land' (*sbas-yul*) being an almost inaccessible place. It is associated with legends of the renowned Tibetan monk Ba-gor Vairocana of the eighth century A.D. He is believed to have been exiled to this region after being accused of having had a liaison with one of the queens of the Tibetan Emperor Khri Srong-lde-btsan (742-797).<sup>3</sup> This legend is important, as will be seen, for understanding the motives of Sangye lingpa (Sangs-rgyas gling-pa, 1705-1735)<sup>4</sup> and his journey to Gyalrong and ultimately the significance of Mt Murdo for the present-day Gyalrong people.

- <sup>1</sup> The research mission I undertook in Amdo and Kham in 1993 was under the auspices of the Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, Université de Paris-X, Nanterre. Thanks are due to the Tibetological Centre in Beijing which sent one of its personnel, gDugs-dkar Tshe-ring, to assist me on my travel.
- <sup>2</sup> In Gyalrong dialects dMu-rdo is pronounced as Murto and is often written Murto. There are also other names for this mountain: gNas-chen dMu-rdo lha-gnyan, g.Yung-drung spungs-rtse and sKu-lha dBang-phyug.
- <sup>3</sup> For a short account of the life-story of this monk, see Karmay 1988: 17-37.
- <sup>4</sup> Alias Padma g.yung-drung snying po, Byang-chub rdo-rje-rtsal and bsTan-gnyis gling-pa. He is one of the four masters in the Bon tradition (Karmay 1972:185)

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Gyalrong is situated to the north of Dartsedo (Dar-rtse-mdo, Ch. Kangding). To the east it has a natural barrier, the Alashan mountain range, which cuts it off from Sichuan province proper, but is under the jurisdiction of the Sichuan government. It consists mainly of a long and very narrow valley stretching for more than 200 km, starting from the region known as Tsha-kho in the north. The valley gradually widens in its lower parts, particularly from the point where Chakzam county (lCags-zam rdzong) is situated. Traditionally this is the Sino-Tibetan frontier. There is the famous iron suspension bridge over the river. A legend has it that it was built by Thang-stong rgyal-po (b.1385). From this place the inhabitants also become more explicitly Chinese.

The basin of the valley is occupied by the great river Gyalmo Ngulchu (rGyal-mo rngul-chu) which flows from the north in a southerly direction. At the point where it reaches the Rongdrag county (Rong-brag rdzong, Ch. Dan Ba), it picks up an affluent coming from the west and then makes a sharp bend, cutting through gorges flowing on in an easterly direction. After a short distance, it meets another large tributary, the Tsanchu (bTsan-chu) which streams from the north-east and passes by the town Tsanla (bTsan-la) on the left and Mt Murdo on the right. At certain points of the main valley, the gorges are so narrow that the river occupies the whole width of the basin, about 700 metres wide. There is only one main route in the valley running along the river on its right. The other side of the river often being steep rock-faced mountains, one sees only a strip of the sky at several points. The steep side of the rock-faced mountains is often totally vertical for about 800 metres, then the valley gradually opens up allowing habitation and agriculture.

In summer, especially in August, there is heavy rain. Consequently the river now and then rises and overflows, washing away parts of the poorly-built road alongside the river bank on the right. Another cause of the damage to the road are the landslides. Sometimes an enormous rock has fallen into the middle of the road, totally blocking it. When this happens, the only way to remove it in a short time is to dynamite it. (Travellers with vehicles are asked by the roadmenders to pay for the explosive.) The road which follows the course of the river is the only main road communication in the valley for going up to Barkham ('Bar-khams) or going down to Chakzam. (If it is cut by flood or

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belonging to the trend which was the precursor of the eclectic movement (*ris-med*) in the nineteenth century. On the *ris-med* movement, see Smith 1970; Blondeau 1985: 153-57; Karmay 1988: 35-37.

landslides one risks being stuck in a place for days and this is what happened to us!)

### **The administrative set-up in present-day Gyalrong**

Although the people of Gyalrong are culturally homogenous and geographically constitute one entity, the region has been the victim of the old Chinese policy: 'divide and rule'. It is chopped up into two halves: the northern part is under the administrative unity of the Ngaba (rNga-ba, Ch. Aba) 'autonomous prefecture' whose administrative centre is in Barkham; and the southern part, which begins just after the Chuchen county (Chu-chen rdzong), comes under the jurisdiction of the Gardze (dKar-mdzes, Ch. Ganzi) 'autonomous prefecture' whose capital is now Dartsedo. This division is totally arbitrary. Indeed, it has the intended effect of cutting off one half of the population from the other and as usual there is now little communication between them. When the Gyalrong people were united they were famous for their tenacity in fighting against the Manchu army in the eighteenth century and their resistance to the communist onslaught was of epic proportions (Karmay 1990: 141-42; Mansier 1990: 128-30; Greatrex 1994). Because of these historical memories, the Chinese have made sure that they are not easily reunited. (The same policy has been applied to the other parts of the provinces of Kham and Amdo; cf. Karmay 1994b: 7).

Neither the Ngaba nor Gardze regions traditionally have anything to do with Gyalrong except that they are people of Tibetan culture. The administrative centre for the Ngaba prefecture should logically be in the Ngaba region itself, but Barkham, though it is in Tshakho and was traditionally close to Gyalrong, has been chosen since its environment and climate are congenial to the Chinese settlers. For the same reason, Dartsedo was chosen as the capital for Gardze prefecture yet Gardze town itself should logically be the capital. In both cases, the Tibetan names Ngaba and Gardze are used to designate the prefectures simply for political reasons.

The administrative centres of the counties like Rongdrag or Chuchen in Gyalrong are situated in commercially strategic places, that is, down at the riverside. They are predominantly occupied by the Chinese with their concrete buildings. In spite of their appearance of modernity, the interiors of the buildings look shabby and incredibly dirty.

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The villages in rural areas are mostly situated far away up in the mountains. They, however, seem to have been little affected, at least in appearance, by the recent social and political changes. People in the villages still live in their traditional houses which are invariably square with stone walls. The first floor is extended at the front about one metre beyond the wall itself on which it rests, allowing more space for the open-air terrace. The living quarters, comprising several bed-rooms and the kitchen, are situated on the same floor. The second floor is usually smaller, constituting one room with another small open-air terrace. In one corner on this floor there is usually a square stone tower with flagpoles. A lot of the houses have vegetable plots around them growing fruit trees - apple, pear and walnut. In August, the villagers descend to the towns in order to sell their vegetable products and fruit which they, usually women, carry in large baskets on their backs.

#### **The problem of communication**

The Gyalrong people do not possess a writing system of their own. They have various dialects which they consider as basically Tibetan (Mansier 1983: 30-34). The classical Tibetan script was used for written communication up to the 1950s, but it is now being replaced by Chinese writing. When two Gyalrong persons from different regions speak to each other, they often cannot understand one another and resort to Chinese, which has now become the common language among the younger generation in the towns. But many of the young people also remain as ardent in their religious belief as their parents in the villages. As an example, let me mention our friend in Rongdrag. A young charming woman in her twenties called Lhamo. She is married to Tsering, a scholar who works in Beijing. Both come from families of Bonpo background. Being an official she lives in a government owned flat. Her parents live in a village house up in the mountains whereas Tsering's father lives in a flat owned by the local authorities, since they are army personnel. He also has a village house and a farm up in the mountains.

Lhamo is a member of the party and the president of the local Communist Youth League. I was told that she stands a good chance of becoming the general secretary of the Party Committee. Indeed, she has a natural propensity for politics. She considers that the Marxist ideology does not contradict one's belief in religion. She does not miss any opportunity for visiting temples when occasion arises and readily accepts the silk amulet to put around her neck which the lama in a temple never fails to give to visitors.

Although she fiercely claims to be an adherent of the Bon religion, it was obvious that she and her generation knew little about it. Though her manners and ways of thinking seem to be completely Chinese after an education in Chinese schools, behind this Chinese upbringing there was no doubt a very strong Tibetan personality which, as I came to learn, was quite common among the young people of today's Gyalrong. The economic and political situation in Gyalrong, at the time of our stay, was one of the least strained in China I have ever witnessed.

### The making of a mountain as a holy site

Mt. Murdo is known to the Bon tradition through two 'textual treasure revealers' (*gter-ston*): Sangye lingpa (Sangs-rgyas gling-pa) and his disciple Kun-grol grags-pa (b.1700).<sup>5</sup> The biographies of these masters are now available in printed editions.<sup>6</sup> This is due to the efforts of our colleague Dr. Charles Ramble who first made microfilms of the manuscripts in Tibet and later helped to make the manuscripts themselves available at Kathmandu. The name of Mt Murdo occurs among the place names where religious texts were believed to have been concealed (*gter-gnas*).<sup>7</sup>

In 1727 Sangye lingpa was travelling to Central Tibet from Khyungpo in Kham. On the way news of political turmoil in Lhasa reached him.<sup>8</sup> He therefore changed his direction and took the route to Kongpo (*rDo-rje rin-chen*

<sup>5</sup> Still active in 1767. His other names are: sMon-rgyal Nam-mkha' ye-shes, Rig-'dzin g.yung-drung gling-pa, sNang-gsal 'ja'-tshon snying-po. Cf. Karmay 1972: 185.

<sup>6</sup> The cover title: *sPrul sku sangs rgyas gling pa'i rnam thar gsung pod*. Inside: *U rgyan rgyal tshab bstan gnyis gling pa'i skyes rabs rnam thar gter 'byung lo rgyus bcas rdo rje rin chen phreng ba'i rgyan* (hereafter *rDo-rje rin-chen phreng-bai rgyan*), Poti I-IV. No indication is given concerning the date and place of publication.

*Rig 'dzin kun grol 'ja' tshon snying po'i rnam thar* (hereafter *Kun-grol rnam-thar*). This 'biography' is divided into three: *Phyi'i rnam-thar* (pp.1-378), *Nang-gi rnam-thar* (pp.379-759) and *gSang-ba'i rnam-thar* (pp.661-830). It is the second part which contains some historical accounts, but it covers only upto 1737. It is this part that I shall be using and will refer to simply as *Kun-grol rnam-thar*. Neither the date nor the place of publication is given.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Legs bshad mdzod* by Shar-rdza bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan (1859-1934) (Karmay 1972: 179).

<sup>8</sup> This refers to the civil war that broke out in 1727.

*phreng-ba'i rgyan*, Vol.II, 4-5). In Kongpo he received prophetic signs which indicated that he would be able to reveal 'textual and sacred objects' in Kongpo, Tsha-ba-rong in Kham and especially from Mt Murdo in Gyalrong (Vol.II, 127). In 1728, still in Kongpo, he met a monk named Blo-ldan snying-po who was related by blood to the king bsTan-'dzin nor-bu of the kingdom dGe-shes-tsa in Gyalrong. The monk became a disciple of his. In the same year the same king sent some messengers to invite Sangye lingpa to Gyalrong (Vol.II, 260-61). In 1729 he left for Gyalrong, stopping in many places in Tsha-ba-rong (Vol.II, 323). He 'opened the door'<sup>9</sup> of the *gnas-chen* Padma 'bum-gling where he received more messengers from the king of dGe-shes-tsa with an urgent request to visit Gyalrong (Vol.II, 570, 506). After visiting various places on the way he arrived in the monastery bKra-shis smin-grol-gling in Nyag-rong where for the first time he met his two chief disciples: sMon-rgyal Nam-mkha' ye-shes, to whom he later gave the name Kun-grol grags-pa, and Ye-shes snying-po. The latter was a prince monk of the dGe-bshes-tsa royal house and Sangye lingpa gave him the name gSang-sngags grags-pa (vol.III, 225; *Rig-'dzin kun-grol 'ja'-tshon snying-po'i rnam-thar*, p.458). The influence of these two men in Gyalrong was extremely important for the venture of Sangye lingpa as we shall see. Sangye lingpa then passed through Me-nyag where on the 20th of the 8th month (1730) he was received in audience by the VIIth Dalai Lama who was then residing at 'Gar-thar (Vol.III, 376).

This account of his travels shows us what Sangye lingpa's real motivation was. He is incessantly urged in his visions to reveal 'treasures' (*gter*) from Mt Murdo and to identify the mountain as a holy site. He believed that Mt Murdo was a place visited by the Bonpo master Dran-pa nam-mkha' in the eighth century A.D., and he considered himself as a rebirth of Vairocana, a disciple of the master, whom we mentioned above. This belief in a master-disciple relation in the past with regard to Mt Murdo seems to have been the driving force behind his undertaking his arduous journey. Unlike other Tibetan wanderers in his time, he made the journey on horseback with an entourage consisting of several people and was received, as we have seen, by various people sent by the king to meet him on the way. Here is a sketch of the account concerning his adventure around Mt Murdo in Gyalrong given in the biography (*rDo-rje rin-chen phreng-ba'i rgyan*, Vol.IV):

<sup>9</sup> For the expression *gnas-sgo 'byed-pa*, see below.

He arrives in Gyalrong at the beginning of 1731 from Dartsedo. He is welcomed by the king of dGe-bshes-tsa to whom he imparts various teachings.<sup>10</sup> One month after his arrival, he sets out with five assistants for the cave Zla-ba-phug in the valley of Mu-la 'o-kha<sup>11</sup> to the south of Mt. Murdo. This is the beginning of the tracing out of the route for the circuit of the holy mountain (*skor-lam*). There he receives various prophecies in a dream. The next day, gSang-sngags grags-pa and Kun-grol grags-pa, his chief disciples, and the king of dGe-bshes-tsa and other people join him. He conducts a *tshogs-'khor* (*ganacakra*) ceremony at the cave for them (Vol.IV, 36-45). He then leaves for dMu-ra lha-steng (45).<sup>12</sup> From there he goes to the cave of g.Yu-sgra-phug<sup>13</sup> accompanied only by his assistants. In this cave he finds various *gter* objects. Some messengers from the king of bTsan-la come to meet him at the cave. Sangye lingpa remarks that this king was not well-disposed to him at first because of the influence of a bad minister (Vol.IV, 50-51).

In the fourth month, he is invited by bsTan-'dzin rdo-rje, the king of Pa-vang<sup>14</sup> for the restoration of a stupa believed to have been built by Vairocana near the town Pipiling.<sup>15</sup> After the restoration he writes a *dkar-chag* of the stupa. He presents some of the sacred objects found at the cave to the king as gifts. (Vol.IV, pp.51-54). After this he asks his disciple Kun-grol grags-pa to join him at a place called sByar-tshul where they perform an empowerment ceremony (*dbang*) for some unnamed people (Vol.IV, p.55).

- 10 Here Kun-grol grags-pa is invited by the king of dGe-bshes-tsa to join him and Sangye lingpa for tracing out the path around Mt Murdo. Kun-grol at this time was in Kham (*Kun-grol rnam-thar*, p.572).
- 11 This is probably near the place where the temple dMu-rdo lha-khang is situated and there the celebration of Mt Murdo takes place (see below). I have not been able to identify most of the placenames and names of villages or towns mentioned in the biography since so much change has occurred, particularly in the last four decades. Most of the places now have Chinese names.
- 12 This is probably the chief monastery of the Rab-brtan kingdom in Chuchen usually known as g.Yung-drung lha-steng. Cf. Kvaerne, Sperling 1993.
- 13 This cave is believed to be that of g.Yu-sgra snying-po, a disciple of Vairocana, cf. Karmay 1988.
- 14 This is written as dPa'-dbang on a modern map.
- 15 Kun-grol grags-pa states that in the prophetic texts the town is called Pipiling and in the local dialect (*yul-skad*) it is called (or it means?) Nyams-gzigs-khog (*Kun-grol rnam-thar*: 477).

Sangye lingpa then accompanied by his assistants goes to bDe-chen-thang<sup>16</sup> where another stupa is restored and also writes a *dkar-chag* of it and he performs an empowerment ceremony for more than one thousand people. This place is adjacent to the town Kumulu<sup>17</sup> to the south of Mt Murdo. During this period, a child of an unnamed queen dies and Sangye lingpa is so distressed by this event that he begins thinking of abandoning his route and returning to Kham, his home land. But in a long prophecy which he receives in a dream he is strongly encouraged to continue the work (55-67).

At Kumulu, Sangye lingpa writes a long letter to the king of bTsan-la (name not mentioned) stressing the importance of the opening of the path and requests him to provide facilities for the journey (68-74). The letter is dated second day of the 5th month (1731). He then leaves for bTsan-la, situated to the east of Mt Murdo. After having some difficulties in crossing the river bTsan-chu, he arrives at Lingling, a town where he again meets Kun-grol grags-pa and bestows on this disciple a special red hat and predicts that the latter will rediscover various 'textual treasures' (pp.74-80).

Sangye lingpa then arrives at Kalingka, a town to the north of Mt. Murdo, where he is welcomed by the king of Ke-gno (80-81). After this he arrives at Kalam (the whereabouts of this town is not indicated, but presumably it is to the west of the mountain). From this place he writes a long letter to the king of Rab-brtan in Chuchen requesting him to protect the pilgrims who would do the circumambulation in the future. This letter is supplemented by another written by Kun-grol grags-pa in order to add weight to his requests (81-96).<sup>18</sup> (Kun-grol was the *dbu-bla*, the royal preceptor of the Rab-brtan king). Sangye lingpa continues tracing out of the *skor-lam* through various places and arrives at Mu-la 'o-kha, the starting point of the route.<sup>19</sup> There he was met again by gSang-sngags grags-pa and the king of dGe-bshes-

16 In the *Kun-grol rnam-thar* (p.478) it is stated that this placename occurs in the prophetic texts and in the local dialect it is called A-zha-thang.

17 This is certainly the name of the village where the temple dMu-rdo lha-khang is, see below. The *Kun-grol rnam-thar* has Srib-nang (p.479) and on the modern map it is written as sPro-snang.

18 No mention is made in the autobiography whether Sangye lingpa meets the king of Rab-brtan, but it is clear from the *Kun-grol rnam-thar* (p.482) that he was invited to stay in the palace of the Rab-brtan king which was in Li-ver (Ch. Louwuwei, Mansier 1990:129), the capital of the Chuchen kingdom.

19 This place is in the vicinity of the Kumulu.



tsa, altogether about a hundred people. At this place he announces the completion of the tracing out of the *skor-lam* which constitutes what one calls the 'opening of the door of the holy place' (*gnas-ngo phye-ba*) (96-100).<sup>20</sup>

From this account of the venture it appears that the process of the 'opening' of a *gnas-ri* was an extremely complicated matter indeed. It required a number of appropriate conditions: prophetic signs suggesting that the time has come and the appearance of the *gter-ston*, a lama of unusual character with the ability to command the cooperation of the local tribal chiefs as well as to rally the uncouth people on the way.

In the autochthonous setting, most of the mountains in Tibetan tradition were seen as the residence of the deity of the local territory (*yul-lha*).<sup>21</sup> Many of these mountain sites were chosen as *gter-gnas* ('place of treasure') i.e. a place considered as suitable for 'concealing' mainly written religious texts as *gter* at the time of persecution of the Bon religion, or for future purposes in the case of the rNying-ma-pa school (cf. Karmay 1972: xxxi-xxxix). Both traditions maintain that these events took place in the eighth century A.D. It is the notion of the *gter*, in my opinion, that is one of the elements that inspired the establishment of sites for pilgrimage including mountains. A long list of *gter-gnas* is known to the Bon tradition and many of these are mountains of historical significance (*ibid*: 96). They are often described as being geographically suitable for hermits to dwell in. If the site is designated as *gter-gnas*, its local deity then becomes *gter-bdag* or *gter-srung*, 'the guardian of the treasury', and the place is already considered as sacred.<sup>22</sup> When a textual treasure or other sacred objects are excavated from the place it becomes even more sacred, but to obtain the status of *gnas-ri* for a mountain it must be instituted by a man of religion. The making of a mountain *gnas-ri* therefore went through different phases in time and space. Its establishment as the *gnas-ri* for pilgrimage has a specific function: it is a very effective means for renewing a cultural event by fixing the date of the circumambulation and the celebration of the closing day of the annual event. The celebration is

20 For Kun-grol grags-pa's own account of his participation in the tracing of the path, see *Kun-grol nam-thar*: 472-90.

21 For a short analysis of the function of this local deity in Tibetan secular culture, see Karmay (in press).

22 For an enlightened analysis of the conception of *gnas*, see Huber 1994: 23-31.

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shared by both clerics and laymen alike, not only local but from other parts of the country as well.

The phrase *gnas sgo 'byed pa*, 'to open the door of the holy place', thus conveys the central notion of the pilgrimage site. This action entails the following stages:

1. to trace out the foot-path around the mountain for circumambulation in the presence of the public;
2. to identify various places on the path as traces of early dwellers;
3. to designate the last day of the 'tracing out of the route' for the annual celebration;
4. to write a guide (*dkar-chag*) of the holy mountain.

The *dkar-chag* which Sangye lingpa claims to have 'revealed as textual treasure' from Mt Murdo is available from the local cultural bureau in Rongdrag dzong. The bureau has taken care to publish the Tibetan text with a Chinese 'translation'.<sup>23</sup>

Like many of the *dkar-chag* type work it is mainly concerned with the religious accounts of the holy site, making it look like a supernatural sphere and thus its descriptions of the mountain hardly correspond to the geographical reality.

### The celebration of the 'birthday' of Mt Murdo

The Gyalrong people have continued to celebrate the event every year. They call it the 'birthday of Mt. Murdo' (*dMu-rdo 'khrungs-skar* or *skyes-skar*). This appellation is curious. We will return to it below. The celebration takes place on the 10th of the 7th month, i.e. the horse month in the Tibetan

<sup>23</sup> Byang-chub rdo-rje, *rGyal mo rong gi gnas chen dmu rdo*, Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1992. The colophon title of the *dkar chag* runs: *sBas pa'i rong bzhi'i nang tshan shar phyogs rgyal mo rong gi gnas chen dmu rdo g.yung drung spungs rtse la sogs ri bo drug cu'i dkar chag* (10-37). In the colophon, the author states that he rediscovered the *shog-ser* manuscript in the cave of g.Yu-sgra-phug on the 24th of the fourth month in the iron-hog year (1731) and later 'translated it into Tibetan' (*bod-yig tu bsgyur-ba*). The title claims that the *dkar-chag* is concerned with '60 mountains', but the names of these mountains are not given in the work itself.

calendar (in 1993, it was August 27th). From the 23rd of August, pilgrims in small groups began performing the circumambulation. It takes three days of going through gorges, high mountain passes and forests. Mt Murdo is obviously the highest mountain in the region, being 4820 metres high. It is a beautifully shaped mountain with about four small peaks if one looks at it from its southern foot. It is situated to the east of the town Rongdrag at the distance of 7 km from it, to the east of the river Gyalmo ngulchu and on the right of the Tsanchu that flows past the town Tsanla.

Concerning the circumambulation, people perform it in different ways. It seems that the only way of expressing the difference between religions is to show in which direction one performs the circumambulation of a sacred place such as Mt Murdo. The terms the Gyalrong people often use to indicate their religions are *bandhe* (=Buddhist) and *bonpo* (both terms are often abbreviated as *ban-bon*), but they often simply say that 'we are the ones who go this way', with hand gestures to show in which direction they go round a sacred place, hence identifying their religion. This religious sentiment was expressed in a most spectacular way on the celebration day.

A small temple called Murdo lhakhang is found at the foot of the mountain on the southern side. The old temple was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. However, at the beginning of the 1980s, a Buddhist monk took the initiative to rebuild it. The main statue on the ground floor is that of the Murdo mountain deity as was the case in the old temple. The new temple has two storeys with Chinese styled roofs. On the first floor, there is an image of Thang-stong rgyal-po, the 15th century Tibetan engineer whose presence here is explained by the iron bridge which we mentioned above. On the second floor there are images of Tsongkhapa and his two chief disciples. (In the same place there is also an image of Indra in Chinese style, but I could not get any explanation of the presence of this statue in the temple.)

Pilgrims who went on to do the circumambulation of the mountain had made sure that they would arrive on the day of the celebration near the temple. They were joined by other people from different parts of the country who came just for the celebration, including Chinese. These Chinese have lived in the country for several generations and have adopted Lamaism. The officials, both Chinese and Tibetans from the Rongdrag county, came in their official cars to join in the celebration. (I was told that this was the first time they had come.) People came group by group streaming up along the road. The

first thing a group of people did when they arrived at the place was to make a visit to the temple in order to pay homage to the Murdo deity. However, members of a family and friends in a group often parted at the entrance of the temple in order to follow the tradition of their own religion. Those who considered that their religion was Bon performed the circumambulation in the Bonpo way (*bon-bskor* or *g.yon-bskor*), i.e. they went round the temple keeping it on the left, and those who were Buddhist went round the other way (*chos-bskor* or *g.yas-bskor*), keeping the temple on the right, but they crossed each other at the back of the temple making jokes to each other. Finally they met again at the entrance and then went together into the temple. Once inside, one could hardly see any difference in their behaviour. Old and young prostrated themselves in front of the imposing image of the divinity of Mt Murdo who looks very fearful and is mounted on a horse and carries a spear with a flag in his right hand. The whole image is literally covered with cloths of the *rlung-rta* type. Many of the people brought handfuls of burning incense as an offering so that the temple, which was very dark inside and terribly crowded, was suffocatingly filled with incense smoke. Beside the main statue, there was a large box for contributions to the upkeep of the temple. One slid money into it by a small slit near its top. A lama beside the statue gave a strip of red silk with a knot in the middle (*srung-mdud*) to each of the visitors. They put it around their necks in the belief that it protects them from evil. Some people asked for it not only for themselves but also for their people at home.

Outside the temple on the right, there was a rock about eight metres high on whose peak was a cairn (*la-btsas*) dedicated to the Mt Murdo. The visit inside the temple accomplished, pilgrims went out and performed the *sang* (*bsang*) purification ritual<sup>24</sup> by burning juniper branches on the rock just described. Many of the pilgrims who went to do the circumambulation carried a bunch of juniper branches on their back for this purpose. They performed the *bsang* ritual in front of the cairn and made prostrations and scattered the *rlung-rta* prints on paper into the air.<sup>25</sup> Having accomplished this ritual devotion, people began to have picnics in tents among the willow trees on the temple grounds and the bank of the Tsanchu which flows beside it. At the same time a lion *'cham* and folk dance were performed in another place. This was a most spectacular sight. While men wore just a simple *chuba* (*phyu-ba*)

<sup>24</sup> On this ritual, see Karmay 1995.

<sup>25</sup> On the symbol of this image, see Karmay 1993.

like men in any other part of Tibet, the women wore a typical Gyalrong woman's dress. Their head-dress was somewhat simple but impressive, having a lot of silver work in it.

The cult of Mt Murdo in Gyalrong represents the kind of popular belief in which dogmatic differences are totally ignored. For example, Tibetans normally make a distinction between a holy mountain (*gnas-ri*) and the mountain on which deities of the local territory dwell. The holy mountains are *a priori* a special site where early saints resided for their spiritual realisation. They therefore constitute a proper object for veneration (*yul khyad-pa can*). Through performing the circumambulation of these holy mountains, pilgrims believe that it helps them purify their karmic defilement accumulated in countless previous rebirths. It is in this Buddhist sense that the *gnas-ri* are considered as holy. The mountain deities that are believed to dwell on *gnas-ri* are seldom iconographically represented. One very rarely sees an iconographical representation of the *gter-bdag* of Mt Tise or Bon-ri. On the other hand, the *yul-lha*, the local mountain deities, are always iconographically described in propitiatory texts as well as depicted, mostly in the form of a warrior mounted on a horse. Furthermore, they are often considered as ancestors of the local population and as such are the object of requests for mundane affairs (Cf. Karmay 1994a: 115-20).

Although Murdo is considered purely as *gnas-ri* in the guide by Sangye lingpa, it now embodies in popular belief the notions of both *gnas-ri* and of *yul-lha* for the Gyalrong people. The only other example of this I know is Mt Amnye Machen (A-myes rMa-chen) which is worshipped in similar terms by the local people.

The use of the term 'birthday' (*'khrungs skar*) for the celebration of the mountain is unusual. It is not mentioned in the guide of Sangye lingpa. In my opinion, it is a reflection of the folktales in which people tell that such-and-such a mountain is born, married, has children and goes through other adventures and conflicts. The geographical formations near the mountain in question are often taken as representing different members of the family. These folk tales are more known among the nomads, but they also occur in written sources.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For example, Grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin rin-chen (b.1801), *'Dzam-gling gangs-rgyal ti se'i dkar chags tshangs dbyangs yid 'phrog* (hereafter *Tise dkar-chag*), MS

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In another work, Sangye lingpa, on the other hand, states that one should perform the circumambulation of Mt Murdo in the horse month (i.e. the 7th month in Tibetan calendar), and especially in the horse year, because in that year all the holy persons of the past 'gather together' on Mt Murdo.<sup>27</sup> However, no mention is made of why they meet together there in the horse month and horse year. The same year is also taken to be an important occasion for performing the circumambulation of Mt Tise.<sup>28</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Sangye lingpa believed that Mt Murdo was once visited by the master Dran-pa nam-mkha' as is the case with Mt Tise. Now, in the Bonpo tradition this master is believed to have been born in a horse year.<sup>29</sup> This seems to be the reason for Sangye lingpa's claim that in the horse year the saints gather together on the mountain in order to celebrate the sage's birthday. The rNying-ma-pa often celebrate their rituals on the 10th day of a month or in the monkey month and particularly the monkey year, because it is the birth year of Padmasambhava. The Gyalrong people therefore seem to have forgotten whose 'birthday' it meant. It has simply become that of their sacred mountain.

The celebration is nevertheless very significant for the Gyalrong people. Indeed, it is a unique occasion for manifesting their religious identities among themselves as well as a means of expressing their cultural difference from the Chinese.

### Concluding remarks

In spite of the communist ideological drive that has now spanned more than four decades, the religious belief of the Gyalrong people has remained very strong and has even counteracted the relentless sinification policy of their neo-imperialist master. This religious belief, given particularly lively expression through the mountain cult, embodies all the aspects of their ethnic

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preserved at the library of the Bonpo Monastic Centre, Dolaji, Himachal Pradesh, India, fol.24b,4; 70b,4.

<sup>27</sup> *gNas chen dmu rdo skor ba'i phan yon*: 6-7. This text is found in the booklet containing the *dkar chag* of Sangye lingpa, pp.5-9. For other references see note 23.

<sup>28</sup> *Tise dkar-chag*, fol.58b,2.

<sup>29</sup> See Kvaerne 1971: 226 (41).

identity. The mountain cult is a characteristic trait of Tibetan secular culture. However, the Gyalrong people express it in their own way in the form of popular belief reflecting many elements of Bon and Buddhism in a most harmonious manner that is rarely found elsewhere in Tibet.

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