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THE RELIGION OF LOCALITY: LOCAL AREA GODS AND THE CHARACTERISATION OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

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The aim of this paper is to look at how two facets of Tibetan Buddhism, that is the "classical" monastic tradition, and the localised "Folk Religion" of local area divinities, interact in a single ethnographic site in Ladakh. In order to do this, I will look at the ritual relationships that a large Gelukpa monastery has with the local divinities in its area. As part of this agenda, I would like to highlight the endemic problems and conditions that are imposed on Buddhism by the necessity of going about its business within the context of a specific understanding of locality and authority. The conclusions drawn will be used to reflect on the characterisation of Buddhism as a religious form.

As an introductory note I would like to fully acknowledge the fact that I have chosen my theoretical agenda in part response to the works of Eva Dargyay, who has already explored the problem of the characterisation of the divine in Tibetan Buddhism,¹ especially with reference to the problem of the relationship that local divinities have to Buddhist orthodoxy. Dargyay's works (one of which focuses ethnographically on Zanskar) are both metaphysical and philosophical in approach, which I hope to complement with a more sociological look at the issue, concentrating on the problematic of how Ladakhis and Zanskaris on the ground conceptualise and ritually embody these divine relations. As such, I take my agenda, if not my method, from her seminal works.

1. See Dargyay, Eva K., "The Concept of a Creator God in Tantric Buddhism", in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1985, 1, pp.31-47; and "Buddhism in Adaptation: Ancestor Gods and their Tantric Counterparts in the Religious Life of Zanskar", in *History of Religions*, 1988, 28, pp. 123-134.

The present paper was built out of fieldwork conducted in Ladakh and Zaskar between Autumn 1993 and Spring 1995. Ethnography centres on the monastery and village of Lingshed, on the very border of Ladakh and Zaskar, and those surrounding villages (all found within the Trans-Singge-La Area) that are considered under the ritual purview (*mnga' yog* - "under the might") of Lingshed Monastery and its under-gompas. Except where it is specifically stated, ethnographic data pertains to this region. Lingshed Monastery is a large Gelukpa establishment with four under-gompas (which are in essence single shrine rooms (*lha.khang*) maintained by a temporarily resident monk (*dgon.gnyer*)), and has a floating population of some 60-65 monks. Six villages in total are "under" Lingshed Monastery, a total of almost 900 people. Because the material here refers specifically to a Gelukpa Monastery², it should not be seen as a broadly representative picture, and therefore its *positive* assertions can only be seen as provisional.

At the present stage of Tibetan studies, there exists a large library of books, articles and studies on religious matters, very much of which has taken as its core assumption that, in its essence, we already *know* what Tibetan Buddhism, and indeed Buddhism in general, is about. This is an understandable position, given the vast quantity of scriptural and philosophical material that has been translated, commented on and analysed in the last fifty to sixty years, and especially within the last twenty, from Mahayana and Theravadin sources. Indeed, it has generated a theoretical perspective amongst many Buddhist scholars that the *core* understandings of Buddhism are, by and large, available to us, and that all that really needs to be done is to look at the 'local context', the problematic and messy issue of 'Folk Religion' that seems to creep in at the corners of our picture of pristine Buddhist orthodoxy, corrupting the philosophical purity of monastic endeavour with "pre-Buddhist", or "animist" beliefs, whose aim is primarily focused on pragmatic ritual efficacy, rather than the pursuit of Buddhahood. Crook, for example, argues that the wide availability in Zaskar of "private libraries, the ability to read scriptures and biographies of saints and folklore concerning the great meditational tradition of the valley" and the "philosophically

based reformed Buddhism clearly representative of Tibetan orthodoxy" that emerge from the strong Gelukpa presence in the area, exist in direct opposition to "the role of monks in offering rituals, in exorcisms and in funeral rites"³.

Indeed, so marked is the analytic attempt to separate the centralised hegemony of Buddhist scholasticism from 'Folk Religion', that the latter has occasionally been championed by anthropologists intent on support of underdog belief systems. This issue is especially important in Ladakh studies, where the "local context", in religious terms, is comparatively rich and diverse.

It is this radical analytic bifurcation of Tibetan religious life that I wish to look at, largely because it presents a potent litmus test as to whether or not we actually *do* understand Buddhism, or whether, as highly literate Westerners, we are simply bolstering up our own assumption that a *literate philosophical* tradition is entirely representative of the *religious and ritual* traditions of which it is a culturally embedded adjunct. Given the highly specific position that texts, as exemplifications of the dharma, have within Tibetan Buddhism, and the limited religious literacy (especially amongst the female population) in Ladakh and other ethnically Tibetan areas, such an assumption seems dangerously premature. Tony Huber notes of this tendency: "Most scholars seem to divide the material up into that which fits a certain view of doctrinal Indian Buddhism on the one hand, and local Tibetan data that does not fit with it on the other. This tendency to "split" may partly be as a result of what could be called the 'encyclopaedia syndrome', of having to fit a complex subject into a small publishing space. But I think it also has to do with according explanatory priority to particular Western interpretations of Indic Buddhism rather than looking long and hard at what actually happens or happened on the ground in Tibet."⁴ Huber's comment has two implications: first, it raises the question of how Buddhism would now be being characterised in the encyclopaedias, if it had first been studied in a Tibetan ethnographic context, rather than a predominantly Indic scriptural one; and

2. Moreover, the issue of refugee relations with local area gods also seems to be an important area of study. I thank Nicolas Sihle (pers. comm.) for his comments on this area.

3. Crook, J.H. "Monastic Communities", in *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*, eds. J.H. Crook & H. Osmaston, 1994, New Delhi.

4. Huber, T., "Putting the *Gnas* back into *Gnas-skor*: Re-thinking Tibetan Buddhist Pilgrimage Practice", pp.32-3, *Tibet Journal*, Summer 1994.

second, therefore, how much is our characterisation of Buddhism a product of the historically accidental processes by which Westerners themselves came to study it?⁵

In order to examine this issue in ethnographic light, I would like to concentrate on the complex and subtle relationship that monastic Buddhism has with local area gods, or *yul.lha*, and indeed a whole host of other localised "supernatural" entities. Almost all areas of Tibet and its surrounding regions (such as Ladakh and Zaskar) are replete with local area gods, and a host of other supernatural forms, that are strongly linked to specific areas or geographical features, such as mountains, lakes, streams and caves.

The majority of studies on these areas have treated these fringe elements in isolation as separate cults⁶ or "aberrant" practices, explicitly perceived as "non-Buddhist" or at least at odds with philosophical forms of Buddhism. Further, they are usually discussed in terms of their pre-Buddhist historical status⁷, and many have described their incorporation into the lamaic ritual cycle as being a corruption of Buddhist practices with pre-Buddhist elements (often

5. This issue is discussed within the ethnographic study of Theravadin Buddhist societies, for instance Garannath Obeyesekere's "The Great Tradition and the Little in the Perspective of Sinhalese Buddhism", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Feb 1963, and Stanley J. Tambiah's *Buddhism and the Spirit Cults of North-East Thailand*, 1970, C.U.P. Tambiah also comments that the assumption of a single unified literate tradition of Theravadin Buddhism holds profound contradictions, since "no such meaningful entity exists in fact (except in the sense of a library of diverse works). It is a fabrication of anthropologists which they have bequeathed to the modern Indian consciousness." (ibid. p. 371).

6. The precedent for this approach may lie in works such as Nebesky-Wojkowitz's *Oracles and Demons of Tibet: The Cult and Iconography of Tibetan Protective Deities* who, for instance, whilst treating protective divinities as the central theme of his book, dismisses reference to the tutelary divinities (*yi.dam*) that control them as being beyond the scope of the book. This is especially peculiar when one considers that many protective divinities that the author gives whole chapters of description to, are, in certain contexts, themselves treated as *yi.dam*!

7. For example, Crook, 1994: "In Zaskar, where the traditional Tibetan Buddhist paradigm remains relatively untouched by outside influences, this view of life is intimately interwoven into the annual cycle of subsistence. It is interfused with much older beliefs of an animist nature so that the spirits of place and landscape are always hovering in the background of the stage upon which the play of karma is acted out." (Crook, J.H. 1994, "Social Organisation and Personal Identity in Zaskar", in *Buddhist Himalayan Villages*, Ch.15, eds. Crook and Osmaston.)

lumped together under the flag of Bon beliefs and practices). Rarely do studies attempt synchronic analysis of the part these divinities play *within* the Buddhist ecclesiastical or pastoral hierarchy, and the subtle processes of metamorphosis and moral hegemony that are involved in Tibetan Buddhism's agenda of the incorporation of divine forms are often ignored.

The present paper therefore endeavours to characterise the position of *yul.lha* in terms of their indigenous, or -emic, context, as one layer of a series of personified identities that represent and perpetually recreate a chthonic environment within which Tibetans and Ladakhis play out their lives. An appreciation of this context is crucial to understanding situated religious practice, because both laity and monks alike are viewed as being born within the domain of power of a specific set of local area and household gods and spirits, and their fortunes are very much bound up with them. The pantheon of local divinities serves as a personalised framework according to which major productive and reproductive rights and duties, and the constant turning over of the agricultural cycle, are conceived. Such rights and responsibilities are articulated according to a tiered hierarchy of localised elements, from the household up to the *yul*, or local area, (and, in reference to certain ritual and ecclesiastical functions that are outside the scope of this paper, beyond to the *ljongs*, or country) each nestled within the other, each based on a strong conceptual foundation of localised geographical space.

Many observers of Ladakhi society and culture have taken note of how the household (*khroong.pa*) is the essential conceptual building block of social life, presenting a core articulation of kinship processes⁸. Most economic and ritual duties involving the whole village, are organised on a household-by-household basis, with all members within that house being considered (by-and-large) to be substitutable for one another⁹. The household itself is a complex of a single

8. See especially Phylactou, Maria, 1989, *Household Organisation and Marriage in Ladakh, Indian Himalaya*, Ph.D dissertation, London School of Economics. On its importance in Tibetan scenarios, see Aziz, B., 1978, *Tibetan Frontier Families*, New Delhi, Vikas.

9. One example of this from my own fieldwork, came when a government official was visiting the area. Because the village headman (*'go.pa*) had been urgently called away to tend to his yaks, he was replaced by his 13-year-old son. The official commented tactfully that this was perhaps not the best of choices given the

central house (*khang.chen* - "great house") housing in general the main reproductive couple and their children; and a set of 1-3 *khang.bu*, or *khang.chung* ("small houses"). The house (whether great or small) as a social and economic entity revolves tightly around the nexus of the hearth, and the tradition of hospitality embodied there¹⁰. Also embodied there is the *thab.lha*, or hearth god (the articulation of this idea seems to be generally very weak, with no names given, although it is perceived as providing protection for those whose natal household it is¹¹).

Maintenance of the laity's ritual needs by the monastery is generally enacted in terms of the household, or its constituent *khang.chen* and *khang.chung* being treated as singular, corporate entities, rather than as collections of individuals. In-marrying husbands and wives, for instance, are expected to adopt both the *pha.lha* and monastic divinities relevant to their marital household.

At a higher level, and receiving a great deal of ritual articulation, is the *pha.lha*, or household god, whose shrine is always found within the *khang.chen* of a household, although its domain of power (*byin.rlabs*¹²) and protection (*srung.byes*) encompasses both *khang.chen* and *khang.chung*. The literature on this subject is vast¹³, but it seems wise to outline the fundamental social and ritual conjuncts of this class of divinity.

financial nature of the dealings he was involved in, and could perhaps a replacement be found, since, whilst the boy made undeniably good tea, his knowledge of village affairs was limited. No change was made, since the boy was from the 'go.pa's household, and must therefore be sufficient.

10. Phylactou, *ibid.*

11. Often very young children in Ladakh, who are ill or being taken on a long journey, will be marked on the forehead with protective ash from the hearth. This mark, called *khyi.sna* ("dog's nose"), can actually be provided by any hearth or even stove, although the hearth of the *khang.chen*, the central house, is seen as providing the most sure protection.

12. This term is often, equally validly, translated as "blessing". See Huber, 1994, for a discussion of this term.

13. See, amongst others, Phylactou, *ibid.*; Crook, J., 1994, "Social Organisation and Personal Identity in Zaskar", in Crook and Osmaston, 1994; Dollfus, P., 1989, *Lieu de neige et de genévriers; organisation sociale et religieuse des communautés bouddhistes du Ladakh*. CNRS Paris; Brauen, M., 1980, "The Pha-spun of Ladakh", in *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson: Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibet Studies*, Oxford, 1979, New Delhi, Vikas.

Pha.lha identities bind together sets of households (*khroong.pa*) who share the same *pha.lha* into closely knit social units, organising the processes of birth, marriage and death, and the economic processes of planting, harvesting, and animal husbandry. Those bound by a single *pha.lha* are usually represented by Ladakhis as being a consensual¹⁴ exogamous unit, although rarely can anyone actually directly trace kin relations within this unit.

On a level of geographic generality above this come three types of spirit or divinity: the *sa.bdag*, the *bzhi.bdag*, and the *yul.lha*. These are entities whose power exists over a specific domain of geographical space, their names giving indications of the size of their domains, with *sa.bdag* ("owners of the soil" is the standard translation here, although this does not confer the sense of essential nature, or selfness, that is implicit in the term *bdag*) often having power over specific sites and geographical features, such as fields, waterways, or boulders; *bzhi.bdag* over larger areas (*bzhi* translating as "surroundings" in this instance); whilst the *yul.lha* have a distinctly higher status as *lha* (that is gods, who may have power over *sa.bdag*, *bzhi.bdag*, and other creatures) and have control over the entire "local area" (*yul*).

Of these, generally the most salient types are the *yul.lha*, which seem to have considerable, if circumscribed, power over the lives of monks and villagers in Zaskar. Although it is important not to see *yul.lha* as being "gods" in the Judeo-Christian sense of the term (in other words as representing some sort of ultimate or essential ground to reality), they are perceived as having the power to cause illness, inflict storms and hail, and to affect the normal course of natural events, such as the coming of the spring melt waters, if they are displeased. Similarly, their greater access to spiritual power (some laity described this as *rgyud*, or tantric capacities, although it was not clear in what sense this was meant) meant that they could 'see' things that were invisible to humans, and therefore could be consulted on matters of misfortune and illness to determine their causes. However, their power is limited solely to the region they control, can only have strong influence over those that are born

14. That is "sharing the same bone", or, in Ladakhi *rus.cig.cig*, an idea corresponding closely to Western consanguinity, and implying close kin relations, sexual relations between whom would be considered incestuous.

within their domain, and cannot influence people's lives beyond death (in other words, in their next re-birth). Although monks and literate laymen often tried to play down the importance of the role of *yul.lha* and other local influences, the monastery was constantly engaged in a process of ritual mediation, designed to maintain the *yul.lha* and other local divinities' support of village and monastic life. In Lingshed, a whole cycle of practices, performed by the monks, is given over to propitiating and coercing them. In general these fell under the *bsangs.gsol* (pron. 'sang sol') class of offering rites, and included:

i) Monthly *bsangs.gsol* performed on the 3rd day by monks at each of Lingshed village's seven *yul.lha* shrines, which were scattered across the valley. Offerings were also given at the main shrines of each of the village's household *pha.lha* shrines.¹⁵

ii) Annual changing (*lha.tho.spo.byes*) of the "clothes" of each of the *yul.lha* and *pha.lha*. This generally occurred at New Year, although, with reference to the *yul.lha*, it was often postponed because of difficulty reaching the gods' shrines.

iii) Annual *khrus.chen.mo* (pron. "Truus chenmo" - 'great cleansing' rite) performed on the 3rd day of every 8th month to atone for lapses or delays in the performing of each of the previous two sets of rites. This annual rite was instituted in 1991 by a visiting *rin.po.che*¹⁶ (a class of Tibetan religious specialist whose very high status derives from their perceived history of being able to consciously reincarnate themselves from one life to the next, due to their yogic accomplishment), after receiving complaints from a representative of the local *yul.lha*, speaking through an oracle. This rite had to be performed annually to maintain the *yul.lha*'s adherence to Buddhism and support of local human goals and activities. Moreover, the necessity of consultation with a *rin.po.che* highlights the general feeling amongst Lingshed people that such a ritual precedent was beyond the capacities of any of the local monks¹⁷.

15. The text for this rite is the standard Gelukpa *lha.bsangs.rnam.phyogs.bsdus.dang*! *sde.brgyad.gser.skyems*!

16. In this case, Dagon Rinpoche, presently based in Kathmandu.

17. Mumford, Stan R. 1989, *Himalayan Dialogue: Tibetan Lamas and Gurung Shamans in Nepal*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, records the same problem existing in Gyasumdo, in Nepal, where difficulties with a powerful

iv) Often *bsangs.gsol* to *yul.lha* is performed on specific occasions according to demand. This may include propitiation for transgressions, the curing of specific types of illness, or requests for more favourable weather, which is within the power of the often capricious *yul.lha*.

v) *Yul.lha.bsangs.gsol* were regularly performed on the occasion of vow-taking, monastic ordinations, and the appointment of high offices such as *slob.dpon* (pron. "lopon", the acting head of the monastery), and *dge.bskos* (pron. "gyes-gus"- the proctor) within the monastery. Rather than being performed at the shrines of the *yul.lha*, these were done on the roof of the gumpa (a symbolic statement of hierarchy that will be discussed below).

In general, all of these rites (with the exception of the last) were performed by the Lingshed monks with sponsorship of offerings performed by alternating households in the village. The Summer *khrus.chen.mo* rite is sponsored by the entire village. What is important to note is that, not only are members of the monastery the active ritual participants in local area god propitiation, but that such rites form a crucial element in the constitution of the monastery as an ecclesiastical structure (see v, above).

All the *yul.lha* of Lingshed were seen as *chos.pa*, or those who adhere to the Buddhist faith, and, indeed, one of them has attained the status of *chos.skyong* (Skt. *dharmapāla*), or protector of the Buddhist doctrine. It is in their capacity as *chos.pa* that they are seen as legitimate objects of offering by the monastic community. Their status as *chos.pa* and *chos.skyong* derived ultimately from their having been "subdued" (*dul.ba*) at some point in the past¹⁸, an act requiring considerable ritual authority, usually performed by high lamas and *rin.po.ches*¹⁹, and "converting" them initially to *dam.can* ("bound ones") who are bound to adhere to the Buddhist faith, and

yul.lha were beyond the ritual capacities of the local monks, requiring outside intervention from a passing high lama from Tibet.

19. Alas, the precise histories of any of these subduals were unknown to anyone I asked, although all agreed them to have been a long time before living memory.

19. The archetype of such subdual of local gods goes back to the activities of Guru Padmasambhava at Samye and other parts of Tibet, but a modern example of such subdual in Nepal is described in Mumford, 1989, *Himalayan Dialogue*.

thereby obey the demands of the lamas, and only accept vegetarian offerings in future. Indeed, as Samuel, notes, it is the Tantric re-enactment of this initial subdual that lamas use to constantly keep local gods in line²⁰.

Nevertheless, disagreement existed between monks and laity as to how important *yul.lha* and *pha.lha* were to the lives of villagers. Lay villagers often referred to both these types of divinity (assuming they were directly relevant to them) as *srung.ma* (protectors), whereas monks and higher members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy played down their importance, referring to them as *rog.pa* (helpers). Monks stated that villagers should not have faith (*dad.pa*, a term which implies an active compliance rather than passive belief, a definite "going to" for protection) in such divinities, since their protection (*skyabs*) was only available for this lifetime, and presented no hope of liberation from suffering beyond that. On the other hand, the Three Jewels (*dkon.mchog.gsum*) of Buddhism protected even beyond death and gave ultimate release from suffering, and therefore were an ultimate source of refuge.

Nevertheless, people are born and live their lives within the domains of these powerful entities, and indeed constitute much of their personal identity, of who they are and where they are from, in terms of the physical spaces that such divinities represent²¹. The relationship that an individual has with his *yul.lha*, *pha.lha*, etc., is strongly linked to the issue of natality - to the process of birth or, in the Buddhist sense, of physical incarnation. Tibetans and Ladakhis are born within the domain of certain gods, and their bodies are "inhabited" by related *skyes.lha*²² ("birth-divinities"). Upon the birth of children, a complex series of purification rites must be performed in relationship to local and household divinities to avoid *grib* (pron. "dip", and generally glossed as 'pollution'). However,

one's relationship with *yul.lha* and *pha.lha* only extends to the sense of one's physical incarnation, and therefore is broken upon death, as is evident in the way in which Ladakhis and Tibetans speak about death, that the departure of the mind (*sems*) upon death is akin to one's departure from a broken house, and the oft heard teaching that one should view this life like a traveller who moves from one guest house to another, without particular attachment to any of them.

Relationships with *yul.lha* are complex, and villagers do not see themselves as being born "under" such gods, although these forces have power over them. Rather, people live within a space that is defined and circumscribed by these natural divinities, a circumscription and definition which extends to the realm of human space, and thence of human identity²³. In a very real sense, it is this personalised chthonic geography within which they live their lives.

I would suggest, therefore, that *yul.lha* and other local divinities represent a complex matrix of personifications that both organise and describe the fabric of personal and agricultural life for Ladakhis. People are born and live their lives within the domains of these powerful entities, and indeed constitute their personal identity in terms of them.

This circumscription applies as much, although in different ways, to monks, as it does to laity. Although ordination to the monkhood, and later to the offices of the monastery involves a definite shift in one's relationship to local divinities, members of the Sangha (monastic community, *dge.'dun.pa*) are far from being exempt from their influence. The necessity of giving *bsangs.gsol* offerings at the time of monastic ordination and on the occasion of the appointment of monastic officers, combined with the inability of local monastic officers to institute compensatory *khrus.chen.mo* rites to the *yul.lha* (see above) demonstrated that the relationship of the local monastery to its surrounding *yul.lha* is far from being one of unproblematic hegemony. Indeed, the performance of *yul.lha* propitiation on the roof of the gompa is highly suggestive of the possibility that the gompa itself is perceived as being within the hegemony of the

20. See Samuel, 1993, pp. 180-186.

21. Nicolas Sihle (pers.comm.) has asserted that many Tibetan refugees in Ladakh have used the ritual of *bsangs.gsol* as a method towards the articulation of Tibetan identity in the refugee circumstance. Similarly, he noted that many young Tibetans who were born in exile find their relationship with *yul.lha* complex and ambiguous, as a result of being born under *yul.lha* that are not Tibetan but Ladakhi, but at the same time finding it difficult to justify the relevance of territorial divinities who are still in Tibet, to their lives in exile.

22. See Phylactou, 1989.

23. Nicolas Sihle (pers.comm.) has noted the use of *yul.lha.bsangs.gsol* rites as a vehicle for the motivation of political identity amongst Tibetan refugees in Choglamsar.

yul.lha Only those who were either born outside a yul.lha's domain, or who have transcended the processes of birth and death (i.e. the reincarnating *rin.po.ches*), and therefore of local embeddedness, are free of a yul.lha's influence within his own yul.

Therefore, it is in reference to this complex structure of local divinity and localised constructions of identity that Tibetan Buddhism, in a ritual and ecclesiastical form, must exercise its ritual authority. Whilst Buddhism never seeks to deny the existence of local divinities, the dynamic of 'dul.ba, the subdual and incorporation of non-Buddhist divinities, necessitates that the Buddhist Sangha maintains a constant hegemony of the Buddhist doctrine over them. In a sense, therefore, if Buddhism is to maintain its authority within the context of this wide panorama of localised divinity, it must enact and maintain a subdual of localised space itself.

It is also in this sense that the consciously re-incarnating *rin.po.ches* is seen as being beyond locality. Indeed, that Buddhist authority is intimately linked with the structure of localised space can be seen in the explicit hierarchy of divine elements that lamas and laity themselves use in ritual forms such *khrus*.

Khrus are cleansing rites that purify *grib* or pollution, and thus re-establish a person's or place's correct relationship with divinity. In general, the rite employs a "cleansing mirror" in which divinities are visualised in a definite order, from the highest, and most pure, to the lowest. Each in turn is "washed" through pouring consecrated water onto the visualised image in the mirror. The order of cleansing also progresses downwards, from high divinities (such as Buddhas) whose involvement in the world of humans is general and uncontingent, to lower divinities whose realm of involvement is progressively more localised. The generic order is as follows:

Guru (*bla.ma* - pron. "lama", seen as being identical with the highest Tantric Buddha, Vajradhara);

yi.dam (one's tutelary divinity, generally of Buddha status, and therefore residing beyond the phenomenal world);

sangs.rgyas: the Buddhas;

byang.chub.sems.dpa': the bodhisattvas (who exist within the world, but whose domain is often vast - such as Chenresig, whose "field of merit" is the whole of Tibet²⁴);

chos.skyong (in this case, the protectors of Buddhism in general, whose status is very high but still "within the phenomenal world");

chos.skyong.srung.ma (those whose mandate is to protect the particular sect and monastery);

rgyal.po ('kings', whose domain is generally large, covering many yul);

yul.lha; (local area gods);

bzhi.bdag (beings whose domain is often areas within yul);

sa.bdag (similar entities linked to specific sites);

pha.lha (gods linked to sets of associated households);

klu (pron. "lu": the water spirits of specific streams and lakes).

Implicit within this order is a hierarchy which inversely links Buddhist spiritual purity with geographical localisation. Indeed, the link here seems to be that it is localisation itself that is progressively subdued and transcended by Buddhist renunciation, until, eventually, the entire phenomenal world (*'jigs.rten*) is overcome in the state of Buddhahood.

This is a corollary of the *khrus.chen.mo* rite mentioned above, wherein the authority of the *rin.po.ches* over the *yul.lha* of the local domain of Lingshed was seen as being beyond the capacities of local monks, that is, beyond the ritual power of those born within that domain.

Similarly, the necessity of *bsangs.gsol* rites as a condition of monastic ordination, the fact that monastic personnel are born (physically incarnated) within the local domain, makes active ritual control, by them, over the divinities of that domain impossible, although they may act as mediators in previously instigated ritual

24. See Kapstein, Matthew, 1992, "Remarks on the Mani bKa'-'bum and the Cult of Avalokitesvara in Tibet", in *Tibetan Buddhism: Reason and Revelation*, eds. Goodman & Davidson, SUNY Press.

propitiations. The authority to instigate ritual practice that is effective over a particular domain depends on social transcendence of that domain. As Samuel notes when discussing the broad layer of Tibetan charismatic religious authority (which he terms "shamanic"):

"A characteristic feature of shamanic procedures is the ability to enter a visionary state that transcends and encompasses some or all of the 'ordinary' modal states corresponding to the cultural patterns of ordinary life...The shaman cannot have too personal an interest in the cultural pattern. He or she has to be able to see it from the 'outside' and this involves going beyond any personal sense of self. Whether a particular shaman is able to achieve such a state or not is actually not so much the point at issue. What is important is that people see the shaman as representing a kind of non-partisan compassion." (Samuel 1990: 395).

Therefore, the Buddhist Sangha as exemplified, in this case, by Lingshed monastery and its population of monks, must maintain a constant ideology of transcendence over the local domain within which it is embedded. Largely, this occurs through the maintenance of *khirms* (pron. "Trims"), or monastic discipline, which separates the Sangha from over-involvement in the earthly matters of production and reproduction, within which the laity are mired, and which represent the main activities associated with most forms of local divinity, especially *pha.lha* and *yul.lha*.

Other mechanisms of transcendence of local influence involve meditational retreats (*mtshams*) on the monastery's *yi.dam* (tutelary divinity, of Buddha status, and therefore beyond the realm of phenomenal existence, and by extension, locality), and the involvement of visiting *rin.po.ches* in the ordination of monks, or the instigation of ritual practices²⁵. Such tactics are aimed at maintaining a constant, if

precarious, position of transcendence, and therefore authority, over the local domain and its divinities. This spiritual hegemony is essential to the maintenance of faith in the Three Jewels, in all of their instantiations, as a method to transcendence of the phenomenal local domain, and the suffering it involves. By extension, such transcendence is also the essential condition of the ritual efficacy of monastic rites. Whilst the transcendence of individual monks cannot perhaps be achieved, the authority of the Sangha as a whole is thereby constantly reconstructed.

Moreover, I would suggest that the encircling role of *yul.lha* in the constitution of monastic institutions can be extended logically to their relationship to the founding of those monasteries. This relationship, and the crucial founding influence of *rin.po.ches*, can be sought out in pan-Tibetan traditions such as the stories of the Padma Kathang²⁶, the biography of the semi-mythical founder of Tibetan Buddhism Guru Rinpoche - and especially the story of the founding of Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. The anti-Buddhist opposition of local area gods to the foundation of Samye meant that all attempts to build it were doomed by the occurrence of nightly earthquakes that destroyed everything that was constructed in the daytime. This impasse was only overcome by the arrival of Guru Rinpoche, whose practice of sexual tantric methods, and self-created birth in a lotus, gave him the spiritual authority to subdue the inimical gods of Tibet, thus allowing the building of the monasteries and spread of Buddhism.

The importance of the Padma Kathang and the widespread knowledge of this story make it therefore, a reasonable candidate for what Samuel (1993) refers to as an entrenched "cultural pattern", a widely held indigenous understanding about the legitimate relationships between cultural elements: in this case, the relationships between *yul.lha*, *rin.po.ches* and monasteries have to one another within dialogues of founding.

introduction of new material, whether primarily philosophical, literary, prophetic, or (most often) ritual into an otherwise closed corpus of traditional practices. Their real significance is as a mechanism for cultural change." (p.301)

26. See Douglas, K. and Bays, G. (trans.) 1978, *The Life and Liberation of Padmasambhava*, Emeryville, California, from the text *U.rgyan.gu.ru.padma.'byung.gnas.kyi.skyes.rabs.rnam.par.thar.pa.rgyas.par.bkod.pa.padma.bka'i.thu.ng.yig.ces.bya.bzhugs.so*

25. We may also note that this problem of the local instigation of ritual practice is a general one to Tibetan Buddhism - possibly emergent from a history in which ritual and scriptural texts were, in general, only seen as being authoritative if they were brought from outside Tibet (i.e. India, in the majority of cases). The extension of this argument to the question of *gter.ma* and *gter.ston* (that is, hidden texts and treasures and their revealers) revelations has already been made by Samuel, 1993, who states that *gter.ma* discoveries functioned to "provide a mechanism for the

Nevertheless, the precise picture I have drawn here of the relationships of authority and power extant between the strict ecclesiastical structure of a Gelukpa monastery in Ladakh, and the divinities that populate and constitute its chthonic environment, cannot and should not be perceived as representative of general Tibetan culture. As Samuel also notes, the extensive involvement of celibate monks in lay ritual and the maintenance of outlying village shrines is a feature peculiar to Ladakh, a region characterised by highly 'ecclesiastical' Buddhism²⁷. Moreover, it is a region which, especially in the last 20 years, has witnessed a considerable resurgence of Buddhist activity, and regular subduals of local divinities by visiting *rin.po.ches*. It can therefore be seen as presenting a picture of a high degree of Buddhist hegemony, and incorporation of local divine forms. This is not, however, necessarily the case in all other regions of the Tibetan cultural area²⁸. In other words, the relationship between the Buddhist Sangha and local area gods (of whatever kind) is a mutable matter dependent on site-specific questions of ritual hegemony: it is a relationship that cannot be decided *a priori*, nor for that matter can it be assumed that understanding of that relationship is uniform, even within a specific region. Whilst a broad consensus may appear, Mumford, 1989, has elegantly demonstrated that such relationships emerge as the dynamic resolution of *on-going* processes of negotiation, which exist within a historical, rather than static, time frame.

In conclusion, several points emerge. In general, they are related to the problem of characterising a religion that is profoundly different from the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions that represent the paradigm case in the experience of most Western analysts:

i) It is important to emphasise that "gods" (the term here - *lha* - really could benefit from a less culturally-loaded translation) in Tibetan areas exist, in many (but not all) senses, as historically-embedded personalities, whose existence, though often not corporeal, is akin in nature to that of human beings (although *lha* are much longer lived, and more powerful). As such, they have biogra-

phies which continue to this very day: they came into being, their existence was recognised, they were subdued and bound to the Buddhist doctrine, given a shrine, presented with offerings, have their needs attended to and in many cases contemplate the Buddhist doctrine, become religious practitioners, perhaps even take vows, and ascend the ladder towards spiritual attainment and eventually Buddhahood.

In such a scenario, it is therefore simplistic to approach local area gods and their peers as though they can be discussed and analysed solely in terms of their pre-Buddhist origins, and thereby their relationship with Buddhism dismissed as static and of little true consequence.

ii) Because *yul.lha*, *pha.lha*, and other personalised elements of the local domain, represent a crucial aspect of the articulation and constitution of personal identity for both lay and monastic Ladakhis that are born within their domain, and because identity is not as strongly individualised as it is within modern Western societies, we must be prepared to accept that ritual attentions of Tibetan Buddhism (which, even in its most philosophical form addresses primarily the very issues of personal and communal identity) will almost inevitably encompass and involve such divinities. That ritual activity therefore addresses and focuses on personalised articulations of identity that are broader than strict western notions of the isolated individual, and that often include the construction of identity in terms of agricultural and reproductive activities, should not be surprising, or indeed regarded as a deviation from the Buddhist agenda of bringing personhood within the ritual and religious domain.

This is, of course, above and beyond the fact that one of the primary agendas of all Mahayana Buddhist renunciates is to care for the well-being of all sentient beings, and therefore it would seem a logical outcome of the bodhisattva vow that local divinities are ministered to, kept bound to the Buddhist doctrine by regular offerings and the reading of scripture, and that the relationship of these often powerful entities to the Buddhist laity kept as equitable and beneficial as possible.

iii) Nevertheless, the heart of the issue still remains with the problematic translation of the term "divinity" in the Tibetan context.

27. Samuel, *ibid.*, p.318-9.

28. Especially contrasting pictures of this relationship are portrayed, for instance, by Mumford 1989 and Holmberg, David, 1989, *Order in Paradox: Myth, Ritual and Exchange amongst Nepal's Tamang*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.

The broad characterisation of Buddhism as a fundamentally atheist doctrine is prone to lead to confusion. Very possibly this results from the historical problem that Western scholars are prone to interpret "atheism" as the absence of belief in divinity, and therefore assume that the introduction of divine elements to an atheist Buddhism is somehow a corruption of it. This emerges largely as a function of being brought up in a culture where *the defining characteristic of a religion was its relationship to divinity*. Therefore, if a religion had a god (as in the case of Buddhism), then it was defined with reference to that God; if it was atheist, then it must therefore have no supernatural entities at all, let alone gods. The incorporation and propitiation of local divinities by Buddhist monks is thereby perceived as a corruption of a fundamentally atheist religious system.

Here, however, is where the fallacy lies: Buddhism is not, at base, a *fundamentally* atheist religious system. Rather, because divinities are themselves considered within the realm of phenomenal existence that the Buddhist discourse of liberation and enlightenment refers to, the specifics of divinity are irrelevant, one way or the other, to the essential characterisation of Buddhism. This is why Tibetan Buddhism incorporates literally thousands of divinities within a host of parallel and often extremely area specific cosmologies throughout the Tibetan region: each divinity is seen as being part of an ultimately dispensable method (*thabs*, Skt. *upāya*) to the achievement of a goal which itself transcends the entire issue of personalised divinity.

This approach to the characterisation of divinity balks against the Occidental tendency to define religious traditions in terms of an exclusive divine creed, rather than as a contingent element within a general and incorporative spiritual methodology that can be applied to almost any available pantheon. Hence, rather than working *against* pre-Buddhist elements, it transforms and incorporates them into the Buddhist agenda of enlightenment and liberation.

In this sense, we may read Buddhism in the Zanskar scenario as implanting itself within, rather than displacing, a context of chthonic representations which it progressively incorporates as part of an agenda of transcendence and spiritual authority. This process of the incorporation of locality and the range of identities that constitute it,

therefore challenges Western analysts to re-think how literate religious traditions *instantiate* themselves within localised scenarios, rather than simply acting in transcendent opposition to them. Dargyay (1988) comments that difficulties in analysing such situations emerge as a result of a tendency

*"to degrade the mundane level of religious faith", causing us "to see a tension where the insider and faithful follower of a tradition would see a range of values, one blending into the other, one complementing the other. The increasing secularisation of this world and the tendency to restrict the sacred to the other world, so characteristic of the Occident in the post-Reformation era, provides a conceptual framework that is not truly suitable for understanding religious expressions outside its own cultural context."*²⁹

The problem with this restrictive secularizing approach is that it neglects the crucial role that ritual plays in conceptually integrating the ecclesiastical literate traditions of Buddhism and the 'Folk Religion' in an instrumental whole: one tends to the needs of the other. All ritual practitioners are, to a lesser or greater extent, born within the realm of 'Folk Religion' (or what I call here the religion of locality - the strictures on identity constituted by physical incarnation within a specific localised domain whose principle features are divine), and must refer to it as the context of all acts of ritual authority and transcendence. This social embeddedness within the local domain, therefore, is one of the principal concepts for the understanding of ritual authority.

iv) Relationships of dependence with local area gods are not simply a lay phenomenon but apply *in an institutionalised form* to monks and to the constitution of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This is because, whilst Buddhism has an intrinsically soteriological and transcendent agenda, that transcendence is of a local cosmological domain that underlies the social constitution of the lives of both monks and laity alike.

In general, this paper advocates an anthropological approach to Buddhist practice within Ladakh and the Tibetan region, that is

29. See Dargyay, 1988, op. cit. pp. 123-134.

sensitive to the possibility that indigenous concepts have complex valence and meanings that are impossible to pre-assume or pre-judge in terms of their application on the ground. Approaches that place Buddhist philosophical and literary traditions at the heart of an explanatory or descriptive methodology for looking at social and religious forms in Tibet, are in grave danger of ignoring the fact that such traditions are themselves embedded in a social context. Whilst it is obvious that Buddhist discourses are of axial importance in understanding Buddhist societies, we must be fully aware of the place those discourses have within those societies. If we are not then we risk privileging what we believe to be a Buddhist -emic understanding over what is actually understood as being so by Tibetans on the ground, in the place we are looking at.

Western analysts must be prepared to allow specific ethnography to determine conclusions on relations between Buddhist orthodoxy and localised practices, rather than assuming that a single picture (that either divides society into distinct traditions, or seeks to integrate them into a single unit) will suffice *a priori* for all circumstances.³⁰

30. For a discussion of this issue with reference to Chinese popular religion, see Catherine Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture: Towards an Assessment of 'Popular Religion'", in *History of Religions*, 29, 1989-1990. I would also like to thank Dr. Jonathan Spencer and Dr. Nick Tapp, both of Edinburgh University, for their contributions and advice on both the theory and writing of this article.

LADAKH: A MICRO-MINORITY COMMUNITY

P. Namgyal

Leh

In order to explain the concerns and needs of minorities, concerns that are evident in India as well as elsewhere, it is necessary to first take a step back and consider the process of global change that characterises the contemporary period of world history. On the one hand the end of the cold war has brought hope of a new era of global peace and stability, of prosperity and co-operation; however, on the other hand, we have also seen a rapid growth of sub-national and regional conflict, often dubbed as "ethnic" conflict by observers in the post-Cold War era. In general, there has been a reassertion by various sub-national groups of their rights, needs and demands. This trend of fragmentation and subnational conflict has left politicians and academics puzzled.... Why, in spite of sometimes more than a century of nation-building, did minorities suddenly re-emerge so rapidly and often violently onto the national and international scene? Obviously, there cannot be one answer to explain the many different movements, but we can identify some basic problems that are shared by many groups both at home and abroad.

The deepening of India's involvement in the global economy has brought many new challenges to our politicians and businessmen, as well as to our workers. Similarly, the integration of minorities into cash economies, and national political and cultural frames, has posed significant problem and challenges for these minorities. For example, we Ladakhis never considered ourselves as a "minority" until we became part of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, until that time, we were a proud, independent and vibrant society, an ancient culture. However, just as many national leaders now express concern over the effects of the onslaught of the foreign media, fashions, images, morals and money on our sovereignty and culture, in the same way minorities now experience the influx of "outside" influences, both national and foreign. In fact, we minorities often face a double threat, both from global influences, as well as from well-meant but