The *smyung gnas* Fast in Zangskar: How Liminality Depends On Structure

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*smyung gnas* in Zangskar

In short, whatever physical and mental sufferings arise
At all times of abiding in the fast,
Thinking that the suffering of all migrators be purified by this,
May I voluntarily accept the sufferings with the thought to
bring benefit and happiness [to others].

It is 2:30 a.m. and the snow falls softly as the lonesome sound of the conch floats out over the nunnery rooftops, muffled in snow. One by one, figures emerge from the individual stone cells, straggling through the thin snowdrifts. The figures move as if pulled by invisible threads which converge at the doorway of the ancient temple where the door stands open in expectation of the coming rite. Odd pairs of shoes are already piled outside the door to signal the presence of those inside. The bundled figures, mostly women, squeeze through the narrow, low doorway of the temple which is lit softly from within by butter lamps. A huge stucco statue of the ‘Eleven Faced One’ (bcu gcig zhal) upon whom they will meditate over the three day fast looms at the front of the room. After prostrating three times, they settle into a cross-legged position inside the dark and dank temple. The tightly pressed bodies slumped against each other afford some comfort against the numbing cold of the temple walls, I notice. On the right side of the temple is a raised platform where four monks sit in a row, shrouded in heavy maroon robes with their heads bowed in meditation or drowsiness. They
have spent the night in the temple, after finishing the preparation of the altar offerings (mchod pa byang byes) which are arrayed amidst the ethereal glow of butter lamps. When all the participants have arrived, the chantmaster (dbu mdzad) begins a deep, sonorous chant which signals the start of the ritual.

Why have these women gathered in this 10th century temple founded by the famous translator Rinchen Zangpo in Karsha, Zangskar? They are performing the smyung gnas fasting rite which was founded by a 10th century Kashmiri nun known as dge long ma dpal mo (Blkshnshi Laksmi in Sanskrit). Although born a princess into a royal Kashmiri family, she became a devout practitioner of Buddhism and sought desperately to avoid an impending marriage. When her father and brother sent her off with a dowry that consisted of an elephant loaded with gold, she fled to a monastery instead. Although the monks were all too keen to accept her gold, they later turned out to be rather unkind hosts. While she distinguished herself in monastic debates and eventually became the abbot of the monastery, they grew suspicious when she was struck with leprosy and withdrew to a retreat chamber. As rumours circulated about blood dripping through the floor of her cell, jealous monks suspected her of having a miscarriage or abortion. Although she was a fully ordained nun (dge long ma) and they had no proof of their unrelenting accusations, they threw her out of the monastery. She wandered without food or shelter until she found a cave where she prayed to Avalokitesvara for guidance. After practicing austerities for many years, she gained enlightenment when she attained a vision of the 11-Faced, many arms, she was cured immediately of her leprosy. In gratitude, she composed a song of ecstatic liberation which is still recited by practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism a millenium later. As Turner noted: ‘What the prophet and his [sic] followers actually did becomes a behavioral model to be represented in stereotyped and selected liturgical form...’

The fasting rite which dge long ma dpal mo founded is known throughout the Himalayan region where Tibetan Buddhism is practiced. It remains one of the most popular communal lay practices for removing defilements and making merit in hopes of a better rebirth. An impressive lineage of teachers (including the 5th and 7th Dalai Lamas) in Tibet and Nepal have composed liturgies for the rite. However a full exegesis of the ritual and a full length biography (rnam thar) of the founding nun is lacking. She receives short shrift in classical sources such as the Blue Annals where Gzhon nu dpal spends only three lines on dge long ma dpal mo but devotes considerable space to later male proponents of the rite she initiated. The rite remains exceedingly popular in Ladakh and Zangskar, two regions of the Indian Himalaya only several hundred kms from Kashmir, where the founding nun was born. In central and lower Zangskar alone, eighteen different smyung gnas fasts are held every year. In the single Zangskari village of Karsha (pop. 438), three fasts are held every year. Most fasts are held during auspicious months (such as the 1st and 4th Tibetan lunar months) and days (i.e. the full and new moons). Merit accumulated during these times is multiplied one hundred-thousandfold.

The notion that fasting brings the practitioner closer to divinity is as old as the Vedas and found in religious traditions throughout the world. In the Vedic era, the sacrificiant commonly fasted before the full moon, as a means of purifying his body and as a mark of respect for the deities who were being propitiated. In Medieval Europe, fasting signified a means to control or subdue the innate passions of feminine sexuality, as well as to renounce


society’s control over the female body. Rather than trace the history of fasting in this essay, I shall interpret one fasting rite in Zangskar, Northwest India.

In applying Victor Turner’s notions of liminality to the smyung gnas fasting rite, I will show how liminality signifies both the destruction and creation of structure. While the practitioners of the rite experience a radical dissolution of structure, the organisers of the same rite are involved in extensive affirmation of that same structure. The creation of liminality requires elaborate manipulations of reciprocity, kinship, and household organisation. Just as normative frames are abolished and the ‘liquified’ state of communities is created, an extraordinary nexus of structural relations is also taking place. To find structure within the ritual process is not surprising; however, the extent and the significance of this structure is significant.

A Zangskari rite dedicated to the abolishment of normative and structural relations between members of society becomes an occasion for the most dramatic affirmation of those same relations. How can a three day fasting rite initiate one of the most extensive mobilisations of food, fuel, and labour in the Zangskari ritual calendar? The smyung gnas fast held at Karsha monastery (with 300 to 500 participants) brings together more butter, beer, and barley than any other lay rite or celebration in Zangskar. Although the participants consume symbolic, communal meals during the rite, this is only a slight portion of the food and beer allotted for the month-long festivities. Most of the food and beer is consumed during elaborate reciprocal feasts between sponsors, donors, and monastic beneficiaries of the rite. While the fasting practitioners have renounced commensality and sociality, the organisers, officiants, and donors of the rite are fully engaged in those same principles.

The smyung gnas fast has been interpreted by previous theorists in many ways. Ortner (1978) likens the emphasis on generalised altruism as a means of identifying or merging with Avalokitesvara or Chenrezig (spyan ras gzigs) whose maternal care is intended to supplant the familial and parental connections the participant has cast off. March (1979) sees the ritual as an attempt to cure or avoid sickness and disease while Schlagintweit (1863) emphasises the atonement of sins. The Zangskari fasters whom I interviewed did not stress identification with the deity nor with the founding nun but

10. C. Bynum (1988, 1986) has written extensively about feminine fasting in the Middle Ages.
11. Victor Turner was a member of the renowned Manchester School of Anthropology and an early proponent of symbolic and processual anthropology.

The participants in the fast pray to avoid rebirth in one of the lower three realms of rebirth (i.e. hell beings, hungry ghosts, and animals) which lie immediately below the human realm. Since women represent a ‘lower rebirth’ (skyed sman) and are more likely to be reborn as animals, they comprise a large percentage of the fasting practitioners. In two smyung gnas rites in which I participated at Karsha nunnery (1994 and 1995), women comprised 74% and 97% of those present. Women’s bodies are innately polluted (grib can) by menstruation and childbirth. In broader moral terms, women represent insatiable attachment, worldly desires, and uncontrollable passions. This conception is instantiated in myths of the intensely beautiful, sapphic sman mo deities who seduce and then kill lonely male travellers.
The smyung gnas rite is believed to purify and thus ‘liberate’ (sgrol byes) women from both their negative karma and defiled body. A common proverb suggests that one will be interrogated about fasting experiences when one reaches the bar do or the intermediate state after death and preceding rebirth.16

A participant observer view of the fast

On the first morning of the rite when the chantmaster had finished reading the liturgical text, the senior most officiating monk (in this instance, the abbot of Karsha monastery) briefly explained its meaning. He noted that we carry our sins, bad karma, and defilements like a basket full of dung which gets heavier and heavier as we go along. Through our own efforts, we might cast off this load as if setting down a heavy basket. He warned us not to think of our hunger or thirst in the coming days, but to focus our minds on compassion. Then the ritual began in earnest. In unison, we all rose up and cast off this load as if setting down a heavy basket. He warned us not to think of our hunger or thirst in the coming days, but to focus our minds on compassion. Then the ritual began in earnest. In unison, we all rose up and cast off this load as if setting down a heavy basket. He warned us not to think of our hunger or thirst in the coming days, but to focus our minds on compassion.

Next, the monks performed a mandala (a three-dimensional model of the universe) out of rice in their laps, and we prostrated while reciting the ecstatic offering hymn 21 times. After we prayed and prostrated a third time, the monks then performed an ablution (khrus) in which saffron water is poured over a brass mirror (me long) while beings of the six realms of existence are invited to come and cleanse themselves. Each person drank a drop or two of the ablution water which symbolised blessing (sbyin rlabs) and purification (gtsangs par byo byes) in emulation of the founding nun’s vision of Chenrezig.

The officiating monks recited a few more lines of text before concluding the morning prayers. We were permitted a brief intermission to stretch our legs and circumambulate the temple. After the cool darkness of the windowless temple, the village landscape below appeared bright, harsh, and slightly unreal. The tiny villagers toiling in the fields seemed immeasurably distant; as remote as if seen from an aeroplane window. As we circumambulated the temple chatting about news from distant villages (who was getting married, to whom, who had died, and who had given birth), I fell into step beside a group of Zangskari women and girls. One woman explained that she was performing her 15th smyung gnas fast in order appease the evil affects of karma accumulated in this life. She was a ‘fallen’ nun who had gotten pregnant by a monk at the nearby monastery. She and her lover had been driven out of the village and had lived in exile in a neighbouring district for several years.17 Other reasons given for doing a smyung gnas were: to get out of the house, to purify the bad karma of a child’s death, and to visit the shops in Karsha village.

After the short break, we filed back into the temple for another set of recitations, prostrations, mandala, and ablutions, punctuated sweet and salty tea. Village men had been pressed into service as cooks and bearers. Quickly and efficiently, they served us each a precise portion of pa ba dough, clarified butter, a dollop of buttermilk (ta ra), three flat breads (gro dkar), and a measure (’bre) of roasted barley flour (tsam pa). After polishing off the meal, we each mixed the last bit of tea with tsam pa in our cups in order to make a portion of dough which we rubbed over our bodies before squeezing it through the palm of the left hand in order to make an irregular shape or chang bu. When the chang bu are collected, carried outside, and tossed off the cliff as symbolic food for the demons, defilements (grib) are removed from the body. Through these actions, the fasting participants symbolically move into the ascetic realm.

After lunch, we performed a large circumambulation (skor ba) of Karsha’s fields, village, and monastic sites. The circumambulation transforms the landscape into a sacred mandala or cosmogram, which is imbued with religious meaning and symbolism. The route is a precise explication of how a landscape may be considered a didactic message for the faithful and knowledgeable pilgrim. Ani Padma showed us the self-manifesting (rang byon) Maitreya Buddha high in the cliff above Karsha village. In the boulders near the creation grounds at the eastern (downstream) end of the village, she found the self-arisen images of a crow, bones, and mustard seeds as well as the rounded hollows which were the cups from which the hungry ghosts (yi

16. Another nun explained: ‘When you meet Shin pho chos rgyal [Lord of Death] in the bar do, he weighs the good and bad karma you have accumulated in this life and he will ask you: have you done a smyung gnas...?’

17. Thirty years ago, the penalties for defrocked monks were harsh. A defrocked monk might be beaten, smeared in ashes, and forced to ride out of the village backwards on a donkey. A nun paid only a small fine (500 Rupees). The fines for fallen monks are now as high as five thousand Rupees, while a fallen nun pays ten thousand Rupees ($350), a considerable sum in the Zangskari economy.
Before, this time without food, tea, or talk. The silence was a bit uncanny; sets of recitations, prostrations, a mandala, and an ablution just as the day had time to pray not to oversleep the next morning.

The abbot had given us instructions on the yoga of sleeping specifying the posture, the last thought to have upon going to sleep, and the first thought to have upon rising. Falling into my bed in an exhausted stupor, I barely had time to pray not to oversleep the next morning.

Long before dawn, I awoke to a gentle shake of my shoulders. After hastening to the temple where the others were gathered, we performed three sets of recitations, prostrations, a mandala, and an ablution just as the day before, this time without food, tea, or talk.

The silence was a bit uncanny; ordinarily chit chat would flow like water between such densely clustered bodies. By the third morning, the forlorn sound of the conch and the pale afterglow of the setting moon on the purple western horizon was familiar. The meditations were having a visceral as well as mental effect. While the prayers were recited so hastily as to be nearly incomprehensible, their underlying import had begun to pervade the very pores of our bodies.

After one set of prayers, the last drops of ablution water were distributed around the room to bodies humbly bowed to receive them. Miraculously, the servers appeared, bearing flasks of steaming hot tea and plates of tsam pa. When we each had received tea and a handful of tsam pa, we recited an offering song (mchod pa) as thanks for the food we were about to take. Collectively, we each bowed our heads to the bowls of tea and took that indescribably delicious sip of hot sweet nectar. The servers then brought fried breads (khu ra), salty tsam pa porridge (thug pa or thug skyang), sweet rice (bras sil), endless rounds of salt tea, and finally another measure ('bre) of tsam pa as a symbolic blessing (sbyin rlabs) for having completed the fast. The food was too rich a repast. I understood how meditators could subsist on a few morsels of food a day. When the abbot finished his prayers, we took a closing vow and asked forgiveness for any inadvertent mistakes committed in the course of the ritual.

Stepping out into the scorching daylight was to be burnt by fire. In retrospect, the rigours of the fast were transformed into a luxurious escape from desire. As the worldly sphere rushed in, one had no choice but to submit to its mundane demands. Some women were sent to fetch barley flour while a few men purchased the requisite candies and biscuits which were needed for the communal offering (tshogs), which are consumed by the practitioners at the close of most Buddhist rites of blessing (but not exorcisms). After partaking of the communal meal, we gathered in the courtyard in front of the temple to engage in a customary bonding ceremony in which one finds a religious soulmate. Each participant placed a bangle, ring, or some personal item from the plate, two at a time, whose owners were thus declared to be 'religious brethren' (chos spun). The chos spun are considered helpmates in this lifetime as well as the only individuals whom one will recognise in the intermediate state (bar do) after death. Later that afternoon, a larger offering

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18. The crown is associated with the Tibetan sky burial which is no longer practiced in Zangskar. During funeral ceremonies and at the springtime ancestor rite (rgyas tsha or brgya tsha), mustard seeds are used to purify or cleanse the bones of negative Karma and defilements (grib).

19. Schlagintweit (1863) reports that participants have their own spittotons during the fast, although I have not seen this in Zangskar. While Schlagintweit notes that the prayers are said inwardly and in silence, prayers are recited aloud in Zangskar.

20. As Schlagintweit (1863) notes, the lion's posture of sleeping (seng ge nyal stabs) is given: i.e. lying on one's right side, with feet extended and one's head supported by the right hand. In Vajrayogini practice, the yoga of sleeping specifies that the practitioner should sleep with her head to the north, and facing west, from which direction the Dakinis are believed to come. See Kelsang Gyatso (1996: 32ff).

21. In a Zangskari smyung gnas fast, each set of recitations involves the following texts: thugs rje chen po zhal bu gce gvat pa dkyil mo legs gyes sgrub smyung gnas pa'i cho ga dang de'i bila ma brgyud pa'i gos 'deh bcas bzhugs so (read by the officiating monks); smyung gnas smon lam (recited once along with prostrations); phags pa thugs rje chen po la bsod cing gsul ba 'debs pa phan de'i char 'pho bsus bya ba bzhugs so (recited twenty-one times along with prostrations), and rgyal ba bskal mtsad mtsad pa'i smyung gnas smon lam bzhugs so (recited three times with prostrations).

22. The prayer of forgiveness begins: 'Since we are beginners and under the influence of drowsiness and excitement, our concentration has not been clear, our mantras have been incorrect, we have made additions and omissions in the ritual, have been scarcely clean and so on. I request you Arya Great Compassionate Ones to forgive us... Cf. Zopa and Churinoff (1995: 165).
cake (tshogs) and long-life pills (tshe ril) were served at the long-life initiation (tshe dbang) held annually in the nunnery courtyard.

How does smyung gnas represent liminality?

The fasting ritual is a classic example of a rite of passage whose three stages were defined by Van Gennep: separation, limen (or threshold), and re-aggregation. The ritual process of fasting takes participants to a time out of time where ordinary conventions and codes are abandoned, before returning the participants to society imbued with fundamental insights and new status. A necessary hardship is translated into a purified or higher state. Three major characteristics of liminality may be identified:

1) voluntary poverty or an abolishment of status, rank, and hierarchy;
2) sensory deprivation, abstention of sociality, and total obedience; and
3) sacred initiation into Buddhist notions of renunciation and withdrawal.

The smyung gnas rite presents a unique organisation of space within the temple room where the practitioners have gathered. The fasting participants not only come together in one room where they sit on the same hard and cold floor, but also abandon the basic hierarchies of space so important in most Zangskari transactions, whether public or private. The anonymity is in profound contradiction to the ordinary spatial codes of Zangskari society. Ordinarily, strict norms regulate the type of room, the quality of rugs and furniture, as well as the porcelain, silverware, and food offered to each guest. Every person is received and treated in a manner befits his station and rank relative to the host.

Strikingly, the temple space where participants gather is not organized in accordance with the most fundamental principles of Zangskari rank and order. Seating orders (gral) are a basic and defining feature of any formal events or gathering in Zangskar. A few basic principles of rank are maintained: (1) Monastic celibates (monks and nuns according to seniority and status); (2) Aristocrats and other honoured members of lay society (doctors, teachers, politicians); and (3) Lay men and then women in descending age.

Most rooms are arranged with two such seating rows whose head (mgo) is furthest from and whose tail ('jwg) is nearest to the door. In contrast, during the fasting rite there are no visible rows or other formal divisions of gender or rank. Although the monks are seated above and separate from participants, the men and women are randomly arrayed in the temple space.
The wisdom (mana) that is imported in sacred liminality is not just an aggregation of words and sentences; it has ontological value, it refashions the very being of the neophyte...

More than most other rites attended by laypeople (i.e. initiations, teachings, monastic dances, or pilgrimages), the smyung gnas fast incorporates its teachings in immediate and visceral ways. The physical isolation of living at the nunnery reinforces the vows of celibacy and temperance. The most dramatic marker of this monastic setting is the prohibition against song and dance so common to most village festivals. The coolness and physical isolation of the temple from the concerns of the village affords a respite from the heat of the day as much as from the inexorable duties and desires of village life. As the ritual progresses, the abstentions from commensality become more severe. All social intercourse is severed and the participants are forbidden to speak, eat, and drink for thirty-six hours.

The absolute denial of commensality and reciprocity signals a sharp removal from the mundane sphere. However, the rite does not proselytise; practitioners are not enjoined to become monastics nor to abandon their attachments to home and family. By abandoning basic principles of rank and social norms, participants are free to reflect on the contrast between fundamental social norms and deeper Buddhist ethics. A paradox emerges. While universal compassion demands that enemies and friends of all rank be treated alike, Zangskari norms of hospitality require detailed attention to difference. The ideals of non-attachment resolved in the course of the rite? The mundane and the absolute exist on different levels. In Buddhist philosophy, mundane action and structural ties. "

We are presented, in such rites [of liminality] with a ‘moment in and out of time,’ and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalised social bond that has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.

Contrary to Turner’s theory that the liminal moment is temporarily and spatially opposed to the normative and structural frames of society, I suggest that the exercise of liminality simultaneously denies and affirms structure. What does Turner mean by structure? Roughly put, structure is a patterned arrangement of roles, status, moral codes, and legal norms as well as the processes or ordered regularities by which these are related. Turner’s definition of structure should be distinguished from both British and French schools of structuralism. While the former considers structure as an empirically observable uniformity of social relations, the latter defines structure as a systemic arrangement between interchangeable terms whose universal grammar lie undiscovered in the human mind. Turner’s notion of structure is neither empirical nor fixed; it is an ordered regularity which permeates social life and institutional forms but remains in continual and creative flux.

Turner spoke of liminality (or communitas, a closely related concept) as the emptiness which holds society together, just as the hole at the centre of the chariot wheel holds the spokes in place. While Turner was interested in how structure depends on liminality, I focus on how liminality depends on structure. The fasting rite depends upon an elaborate mobilisation of the very norms that the practitioners are renouncing: i.e. hierarchy, social reciprocity, and hospitality. Every aspect of the rite, from food to fuel, to labour, demands a formalised commensality between donors (sbyin bdag) and sponsors (gnyer pa) which depends on principles of hierarchy as well as allegiance to kin, village, and clergy.

I shall contrast two fasts held annually in Karsha village: one held at the nunnery and one at the monastery. The monastic smyung gnas fast involves...
ten times as many participants as the nunnery’s fast; however, the difference is more than simply a matter of scale. The monastic rite reveals century-old patron-client relations between the monastery and villages which are conspicuously absent in the case of the nunnery. While the events of the monastic fast stretch over a month, the nunnery’s fast never lasts more than a week. Both fasts bring people from all over Zangskar to make merit, visit friends, and make purchases, or fix trade and wedding negotiations. While both fasts are held during the Great Prayer Festival (smon lam chen mo) of their respective institution, only the monastic fast will receive an excess of donations which are then used to sponsor the monks’ prayers at this time.

Donations and solicitations

The monastery’s fast involves tremendous resources of butter, barley, fuel, and labour which represent historical links of patronage. Before the Dogra invasion of 1834, the byang ngos or ‘northern’ region which lies north of the Doda River (spanning some 85 kms from Abran to Rinam) was under the jurisdiction of the King of Padum and the minister of Karsha. Through gifts given by the King and noble families, the monastery acquired considerable land in this region, and this land is still leased out to villagers. During the fast, these villages have unique obligations in the form of grain and labour taxes (skyed dang ‘u lags). More than a century ago, Karsha monastery gave each household in this region a monetary loan of one Dolo, a British silver dollar used during the Raj. As interest (skyed) on this ‘loan’, each household still pays ten kilos of barley to the monastery every year. This barley provides the beer which donors drink after bringing donations to the festival. Excepting the few houses who have repaid the loan, there are roughly 175 houses in twenty-three villages and hamlets which pay this barley tithe. The monastery’s fast involves tremendous resources of butter, barley, fuel, and labour which represent historical links of patronage. Before the Dogra invasion of 1834, the byang ngos or ‘northern’ region which lies north of the Doda River (spanning some 85 kms from Abran to Rinam) was under the jurisdiction of the King of Padum and the minister of Karsha. Through gifts given by the King and noble families, the monastery acquired considerable land in this region, and this land is still leased out to villagers. During the fast, these villages have unique obligations in the form of grain and labour taxes (skyed dang ‘u lags). More than a century ago, Karsha monastery gave each household in this region a monetary loan of one Dolo, a British silver dollar used during the Raj. As interest (skyed) on this ‘loan’, each household still pays ten kilos of barley to the monastery every year. This barley provides the beer which donors drink after bringing donations to the festival. Excepting the few houses who have repaid the loan, there are roughly 175 houses in twenty-three villages and hamlets which pay this barley tithe. The two households who serve as sponsors for the monastery’s annual fast are only chosen from the byang ngos region.

Two sponsors or gnyer pa who organise the fasts at the nunnery and the monastery solicit donations of food, cash, and the kind, throughout the length and breadth of Zangskar. The sponsor’s hold ‘begging beers’ (long chang) for months beforehand in order to solicit donations for the upcoming fast. An entire village is invited to drink barley beer (chang) at these parties. The sponsor waits until his guests are sufficiently inebriated before inviting them one by one to stand up and pledge a donation. Months later, the donors travel on foot or horseback from distant valleys to deliver their promised goods as well as catch up on the latest gossip and purchase items unavailable where they live.

While the nunnery’s fast required only ten such begging beers, the monastery’s fast involved forty-two beers in 1995. The fruits of these begging beers are varied: the Muslims in Padum donated over 3000 rupees and 1000 kg of barley which was roasted and ground into flour (tsam pa) in Abran. The Muslims can afford to be generous with their barley since they do not drink chang like the Buddhists and so have an excess of this crop. In Lungnag valley where grain is short but butter plentiful, the sponsors received 30 kilograms of butter alone. Elsewhere donations include: butter, barley, money, and other food items as well as pledges of monetary gifts (‘gyeb ) during the monks’ Great Prayer Festival. While the monastic fast requires four times as many begging beers as the nunnery fast does, the donations collected by the monastery can be up to tenfold that of the nunnery’s, as Table 1 shows.

Firewood is a precious and non-renewable resource in Zangskar. Strict rules regulate the collection of firewood, the members of each village having the sole right to forage in specific areas. Fuel is solicited for both nunnery and monastery fasts with an obligatory beer fest. For the nunnery’s fast, every main and subsidiary house (khang chen and khang chang) is required to send one load of firewood to the sponsors.

Fuel for the monastery’s fast is collected in early spring, some ten months before the actual event. Enough wood is needed to fire hearth fires continuously for more than two months while cooking the barley beer and feeding the donors. The sponsors for the fast use the springtime circumambulation of the fields (‘bum skor) in order to solicit such prodigious quantities of firewood from the neighbouring five village regions (yul gsun lnga) Following in the tracks of a party of monks on horseback, the sponsors announce that: four days hence, whosoever shows up with a load of wood is invited to drink beer. When the villagers arrive on the appointed day with

28. Because Zangskar lies under snow from December to April, there is far less agricultural and food processing work to be done in this time.
29. When the solemn party of monks arrive bearing white blessing scarves and a ceremonial bottle or two of locally distilled liquor (‘a rag), the householder may run but cannot hide. It is difficult to refuse such a petition without a sound excuse like death or serious misfortune.
30. In 1994, the donors brought a total of 5733 rupees, 42 kg butter, 30 kg of tsam pa, and 20.3 kg lard for lighting butter lamps. In 1995, the donors brought 5302 rupees, 22 kg butter, and 14 kg of lard.
Table 1: Expenditure and Collections for the Fast

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<td>Butter, Ghee, Lard (kg)</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>43.0</td>
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<td>145.0</td>
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<td>Ration Flour (kg)</td>
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<td>40.0</td>
<td>600.0</td>
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<td>Rice (kg)</td>
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<td>400.0</td>
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<td>Oil (kg)</td>
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<td>2.0</td>
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<td>Kerosene (lt)</td>
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<td>220.0</td>
<td>200.0</td>
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<td>Sugar (kg)</td>
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<td>Dried Apricots (kg)</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
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<td>Blessing Scarves (number)</td>
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<td>35.0</td>
<td>2,000.0</td>
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<td>Tibetan (Green) Tea (kg)</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Tea (kg)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goods Solicited:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beer (kg barley)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-made Flour (kg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flat Breads (bushels)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood Loads (60 kg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butter and Lard (kg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money (Rs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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heavy loads of thistlewood on their back, they are greeted with a hearty meal and enough barley beer to ensure that all become sufficiently drunk. As the beer flows like water, the tired villagers forget the hardship of going down to the riverbed, digging out the thistlewood (tsher ma) with unwieldy pickaxes, and bearing the awkward loads to Karsha. Altogether, nearly 200 loads of wood are collected.

The fasts monopolise tremendous resources of barley and butter, which are the bone and marrow of Zangskari livelihood. In short, these resources are labour incarnate. Barley is an essential home-grown resource which provides tsam pa and chang, the dry and wet staples of the Zangskari diet. Local butter is solid gold. It is far preferred to the inferior Indian (Amul) butter sold in stores. An elaborate system of corvee labour ('u lag) enables the monastery to ensure that sufficient supplies of precious Zangskari butter arrive at the monastery shortly before the festival. If the butter were delivered in the summer, it would rot long before the festival. The porterage system involves ten stages between Abran and Karsha (some 80 kms) and roughly 15-20 persons depending on how many loads are to be carried. After each stage, a new set of villagers from the next hamlet will take up their burdens, which often weigh no less than seventy pounds.

The sponsors must also organise personnel for the monastic fast: six or seven friends will serve as cooks, food bearers, water carriers (chu ma), and chang servers (chang ma) for the month long reciprocal feasting which precedes and follows the fast. The cooks at the nunnery’s fast often includes the men who will serve as next year’s sponsors who treat this as a kind of trial run. Two kitchens with complete sets of cooks and bearers are required: one at the sponsor’s house where visiting donors are feasted, and one at the temple for the fasting participants. Pots, cauldrons, utensils, and other furniture (rugs, low tables, blankets for the monks) are carried up to the makeshift kitchen at the temple, while the sponsor’s kitchen in the village borrows from neighbours.

Reciprocal feasting at the monastery’s fast

Two weeks before the fast, on the twenty-fifth day of the twelfth Lunar month, the sponsors hold a special dinner (gong gzhung) for the monks whose assistance they depend upon in the next month. On the fourth day of the first month, the load bearers ('u lag pa) arrive at the sponsors’ house where they are fed with beer and a rich meal in return for their efforts. The next day, the butter they have brought is weighed by the monastery’s treasurers (de ba) who are especially skilled at this task since they collect hundreds of kilos of butter in tithes each year. On the sixth day of the first month, the

31. In similar fashion, firewood collections are solicited from villages near Karsha such as, Rurug, Ufti, Nyerogs, Rgyapag, Sallapi, Shamoling, Tzazar, Pishu, Zangla, and Pidmo.

32. The sponsors invite: the abbot (mkhan po), head teacher (slob dpon), chantmaster (dbyu mdzad), asst. chantmaster (dbyu chung), labrang managers (labrang gi de ba), disciplinarian (dge sku), asst. disciplinarian (dge yod), the monastery’s inner and outer retinue (nang ’khor dang spyi ’khor), the monks who will be cooks and servers (lan byes), and finally the eight monks (chos spun) who will officiate during the smyung gnas fast.
sponsors host a lavish feast for the monastic officiants and all monks who attended the opening meal on the twenty-fifth.

During the three day fast, the upper kitchen at the temple feeds the fasting participants and the celibates assembled for the concurrent Great Prayer Festival, while the lower kitchen at the sponsor’s house serves donors around the clock. After the fast is complete, the festivities are hardly over; the sponsors must host visiting donors for an entire month. Sponsor’s must spare nothing to host the lay donors who have brought offerings to the monastic fast, prayer festival, and two fire sacrifices (sbyin rseg), all of which are held in the first Tibetan month. By the middle of the month, the sponsors invite the same group of monks invited earlier to a ‘cut-off dinner’ (‘or cad). Shortly thereafter, the sponsors are hosted and thanked by the monastery’s treasurers (de bṣa). Between the 17th and the 22nd, the sponsors and their assistants are hosted in most monastic cells, turn by turn. The monks spoil their guests with the finest foods, richest butter tea, and liberal portions of Indian Army rum as well as locally distilled spirits (a rags). Afterwards, the sponsors return the favour by calling all of the hosting monks to a ‘return feast’ (sgron län).

During the ‘completion tea’ or mthun ja, the sponsors offer an entire day of food (nyin ’khor) to the assembly of monks. They also present the annual gift (byor phyags or ‘blessed treasure’) which will be listed amongst the monastery’s permanent collection. Gifts range in cost from from eight to twenty-five thousand rupees and include statues, texts, thanks, other hangings, and other ritual items. Significantly, such gifts are not given to nunneries by sponsors of nunneries during this festival. Between the 25th and the 29th, the sponsors are hosted by households in Karsha village. This too demands return feasts at the houses of the sponsors, where all the Karsha hosts are invited. On the last day of the month, the sponsors’ houses finally fall silent after nearly thirty days of continuous partying and hosting.

Conclusion

Structure, or all that which holds people apart, defines their differences and constrains their actions, is one pole in a charged field, for which the opposite pole is communitas, or anti-structure [the egalitarian sentiment for humanity of which David Hume speaks] representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship between person and person...33


34. Turner 1974: 275 states: ‘The contrary processes [structure and liminality] go on in the same religious field, modifying, opposing, and being transformed into one another as time goes on.’

35. Geertz 1973: 112 noted: ‘In ritual, the world as lived and the world as imagined, fused under the agency of a single set of symbol forms, turn out to be the same world.’
Bibliography


