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Victory banners, social prestige and religious identity: Ritualized sponsorship and the revival of Bon monasticism in Amdo Shar-khog

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Introduction

This article is an attempt to understand the socio-religious and economic processes of the revival of Bon monasticism in Amdo Shar-khog since the 1980s. I will focus on ‘ritualized’ sponsorship as it is displayed in the public festivals of monastic ritual dances (*'cham*) for this figures as a key element in the annual monastic economy. A comparison between past and present-day performances and the involvement of sponsors will show how former ritual practices have been modified and revived today in the framework of Chinese state religious policies. While the performance of *'cham* is based on a monastic tradition of liturgical texts and on oral transmission by a dance master (*'cham dpon*) it usually constitutes the most important annual socio-cultural event for the entire local community. Through the public performance of ritual dances the monks employ and display their spiritual powers over evil forces. According to Tibetan world view the latter are believed to cause harm to people’s health and can affect environmental disasters. It is believed that monks, with their spiritual and moral authority, are able to subdue them temporarily for the duration of the year. Publicly staged as part of the ritual performance the expulsion is enacted for the benefit and well-being of the lay community who take part as audience and sponsors (*sbyin bdag*, ‘donor’, ‘master of the gift’, Skt. *dānapati*). However, the latter’s role and active participation is a much neglected but important aspect of the performance and for the monastic revival in general.

The performance of the monastic dances is the culminating and public part of a complex one to two week long ritual cycle which requires lay donations and support in order to be staged. In fact the whole monastic community needs lay support (apart from family contributions for daily living) for its very economic existence. In Shar-khog considerable donations are often made just before the dances are performed. Together their amount is high enough to cover not just the expenses of the ritual but a good part of the annual monastic economy. It is significant that it happens in the context of public religious festivals that sponsors are officially recognized and honoured as such. For example, their names and amount of contribution might be listed

and displayed publicly on a blackboard outside a monastery. In the Bonpo community of Shar-ba Tibetans, lay and sometimes monk sponsors are also honoured in public during the dance performance in such a prominent way that one can interpret it as a strategic arena for a ritualized display of sponsorship and gift exchange¹). Seen from this perspective it creates a publicly acknowledged potential for accumulating merit, prestige and heightened status for the sponsors (and their families) while reaffirming the monk's spiritual superiority.

Scholars tend to reproduce the 'ritual knowledge' transmitted by authoritative texts and by ritual specialists, who in turn 'give' meaning to the ritual and 'teach' it to the audience who tend to adopt and modify it as their ritual goal (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 187). Tibetan lay people's attitudes reflect this ritual hegemony of the monks acting as ritual specialists. Consequently, scholars and lay participants themselves often play down their motives, interpretations and roles in public rituals and subordinate them to the monks' ritual knowledge. However, lay people, especially the sponsors of communal rituals, are considerably involved in religious revivals. They are not just 'money givers' but act as motivated and concerned agents in and for Tibetan communities. Through their actions they can create strategic arenas of power for their own interests and for the entire community. In the Shar-ba community there exists a clear gendered division of different ways of sponsorship: while the publicly acknowledged sponsors are exclusively male, women support monks through their labor and on a rather regular, inconspicuous and modest basis²). Simultaneously, the moral and social power of the monastery, the prestige of generosity of its sponsors and the audience's participation fuse into a displayed – and thereby re-created and asserted – ethnic and religious unity of monk and lay Bonpo followers. This display in turn is framed by invited local state representatives watching the '*cham*' performance. This might be one of the reasons why such cultural practices are among the first to be revived in the context of a colonizing and modernizing Chinese state³) and – in our case of the Bonpo Shar-ba community – vis-à-vis a surrounding majority of Tibetan Buddhists.

This viewpoint evolved out of my fieldwork data, gathered during 1996 in Amdo Shar-khog among the Shar-ba Bonpos and also in 1995 among the Bonpo exile community of Dolanji in India. About 95% of the Shar-ba are Bonpo⁴). They live in a valley area locally called Shar-khog (or Zing-chu in Bon sources) mainly to the north and west of the former Manchu garrison and trading town of Songpan (Zung-chu rDzong). Situated in present-day Songpan county (Songpan Xian) of the Aba (rNga-ba) prefecture in the Northwest Sichuan province, this area is an ancient geopolitical and ethnic frontier between the former Tibetan and the Chinese empires. It is located on the fringe of the Amdo high plateau, just before it drops to the Sichuan basin to

its Southeast. A steep and heavily eroding road connects the valley with the provincial capital of Chengdu. It is an ethnic borderland with Tibetan and Han Chinese, Hui and Qiang populations. Most of the Shar-ba Tibetans still live in their villages and among themselves outside of Songpan. They are farmers and traders as they were in the past, seasonally collecting and selling medicinal herbs, while they might now also engage in part time transport and tourism industry and in extended trade including modern luxury goods. Han and Hui usually live either in the town of Songpan to the South of Shar-khog, or along the main road leading north to the tourist attractions of Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong National Parks in small settlements with predominantly Chinese populations, such as Zhang-la, a formerly thriving gold-mining town.

With the liberalized state religious policies of the 1980s, a total of thirteen Bon monasteries along with monastic practices and festivals were reconstructed and reestablished in the area of Songpan County. Controlled by state religious institutions, such as the county based Religious Affairs Office (Chin. zhong jiao ju) and the monastic administrative units of the Democratic Management Committees (Chin. si guan hui), the religious revival took place in the radically different socio-political context of Chinese Communist colonialism and modernity. However, certain traditional social structures of the Shar-ba community were revived, such as the relations between supporting lay villages (*lha sde*) and their local monasteries, as well as individual lay sponsorship. It is this ritual relationship and its socio-economic dynamics I want to focus on here. My fieldwork data is supplemented by a recent local Tibetan monastic history (*Zing chu dkar chag*) and local Chinese documents.

Given their former political independence, their relative wealth through exclusive trading ties with Chinese merchants from Songpan, and their geopolitical and religious marginality, the Bonpo of Shar-khog cultivated a strong ethnic sense of local identity. This concerned primarily being Tibetan vis-à-vis Chinese neighbors and being Bonpo vis-à-vis a surrounding and sometimes threatening majority of Buddhist Tibetans. These geopolitical, socio-economic and religious factors very likely contributed to the development of Shar-khog into a stronghold of Bon religion in Amdo⁵). The revival of Bon monasticism in Shar-khog shows that it is very much part of present-day local religious and ethnic identity.

During the past the Bonpo monasteries of Shar-khog owned no land nor imposed any tax obligation on their lay communities. They were engaged in lending surplus capital, which they had accumulated through lay donations, for interest to local Shar-ba traders. Consequently, the monasteries' subsistence was heavily dependent on voluntary lay sponsors. This fact today applies to all Tibetan monasteries because of expropriation of their former land and wealth and newly implemented Chinese state religious policies

calling for self subsistence. Apart from payment for household rituals wealthy sponsors gave money to the monastery for specific purposes through which they could earn more merit and social prestige. On certain auspicious days they could multiply their merit, for example on the 15th day of the first Tibetan month by 'ten million times' (Cornu 1997: 270). This is one date in Shar-khog when a public 'cham performance is staged where sponsors could also be publicly honoured for their generosity.

1. Lay - monk relations

Support by the surrounding villages or nomadic tribes for their local religious community in return for ritual services is a general feature of ethnic Tibetan societies. Often connected by kinship relations, the reciprocal exchange between a lay person and a monk is first of all based on religious beliefs of karma and rebirth and values of accumulating merit (*bsod nams kyi tshogs*), empowerment (*byin brlabs*), generous giving of gifts to monks (*sbyin pa*), prosperity (*rgyu*), health (*nad med*, 'without illness') and fortune (*rlung rta*). Giving donations to lamas, monks and for monastic buildings is regarded as a virtuous act procuring merit, empowerment and social prestige ('high head', *mgo 'phang*) upon the donor or sponsor. Especially in the context of monastic festivals audience members can be socially and morally expected to contribute a certain amount of donations (see for example, Marko 1994: 140). Examining lay-monk relations in Helambu Clarke derives the social status of the individual villager directly from his accumulated merit. To act as a 'donor' means an institutionalized position and already implies merit and status (1989: 232). Spiro had noted that the popularity of giving alms specifically to the 'sangha' – individual monks and monasteries – in the Buddhist society of Burma is due to the 'measurability' of the merit they imply (in contrast to a rather evasive practice of negatively defined virtue which is difficult to calculate) (1982: 103f).

How do Shar-ba sponsors and audiences express their motivations to participate in the 'cham performance? They first and foremost state that attending a 'cham 'is a fortunate connection' (*rten 'brel yag po red*)⁶ for them. This term seems to be understood in a future sense of auspiciousness implying a kind of simultaneous 'magical' transformation: first and foremost it was worded in terms of procuring prosperity and good fortune, good health and luck. The expression 'meeting the gods' (*lha mjal*) was used as an end in itself, evoking notions of empowerment and blessings for the participants. The ways in which this transaction actually happens will be explained below. Monks would interpret 'cham in terms of religious education of the laity, a purification of their defilements, bestowing blessings (or empowerment) and

merit. A sponsor however obtains a special status through his actions. In Spiro's terms *dāna* is the foremost way of earning merit in 'kammatic Buddhism', applicable to one of the three general orientations in Tibetan Buddhism defined by Samuel (1993), transforming the "social and material status of the self" (1982: 105). A sponsor is expected to give according to his wealth, which in turn is already a sign of his 'power' (*dbang thang*). Consequently, the more he gives, the more merit and prestige he will generate. This implies a surplus of wealth, of time for labor services or food for the monastery and creates in turn a hierarchy of sponsorship crediting the most generous donor with a kind of hegemonic prestige. Mumford calls this the 'hierarchy of liberation' (Mumford 1989: 204).

This often competitive 'individual' sponsorship can be contrasted with another system which can exist side by side with it in Tibetan societies. I will call it 'collective' sponsorship for it requires general cooperation among members of a group. The cooperation is highly regulated and often compulsory in order to ensure the monastic performance of costly annual rituals and maintain the monastery in general. As a duty of village households it can be directly connected with the right to village membership and the accumulation of merit (Clarke 1989: 233). A common structure of sponsorship and village organization in general in Tibetan communities consists in a rotation of organizational duties by affiliated members of a religious community such as lay householders or monks, villages or nomadic tribes affiliated with a monastery, monastic colleges within a monastery or monasteries being a member of a bigger monastic association. This duty can be part of a mutual consensus in a community thereby giving the right to group membership. It can also be obligatory in the form of a monastic tax obligation and/or it can be reinforced by a fining system⁷⁾. Sponsorship requires time and resource management. Also the distribution of food for the ritual agents has to be taken care of. Thus collective sponsorship redefines and reassures members of a religious community reiterating and reinforcing their group loyalty, unity and identity. The historical roots and modes of transactions between laity and monk communities however, vary considerably according to local context⁸⁾.

In Shar-khog, '*cham*' festivals gain an additional socio-religious dimension for the Bonpo community: they are instrumental for annually reconstituting a monastic association of five Bonpo monasteries in Shar-khog. The five monasteries are Rin-spungs, sKyang-tshang, dGa'-mal gYung-drung gling, sNang-zhig and sNa-steng⁹⁾. Consequently, their supporting villages (*lha sde*) are mobilized as well and temporarily constitute a kind of corporate ritual unit of monks and lay participants. This association was started in 1947 with the aim of strengthening the Bon religion in the area vis-à-vis large Buddhist monasteries, and it depended on additional lay support. Its structure

Bon-po Monasteries in A-mdo Shar-khog



was based on an annual rotational duty to perform the 'cham ritual for the entire Shar-ba Bonpo community at the site of the respective performing monastery¹⁰. For that year its organizing and responsible abbot was called 'throne-holder' (*khri pa*). The attendance of at least one lay household representative was formerly expected and mildly reinforced through the duty of gathering firewood or other labor services for the monks in case of absence (Samten Karmay, personal communication). In this way unity and cooperation among its members was constituted and reaffirmed.

After the Chinese takeover and the complete destruction of monasteries and repression of religious and cultural activities during the Cultural Revolution, state religious policies had changed from 1978 onwards under Deng Xiaoping's liberalization allowing 'freedom of religion'. Initially, a limited number of monasteries and temples were allowed to be reconstructed in certain areas, i.e. in 1980 only one monastery was allowed to be rebuilt in the Zing-chu valley. So the Shar-ba decided to revive their association of the former five monasteries in the form of a new monastic establishment which they called Gamel ginka (dGa'-mal dgon-khag). But from 1982 onwards, when the Family Responsibility System was implemented, the government also permitted the reconstruction of the association's five member monasteries, whose buildings were completed in the second half of the 1980s. In the beginning of the 90s this new development seems to have caused a kind of competition for lay support between Gamel ginka and the five reconstructed monasteries. While the latter were able to rely on support from their former affiliated villages, the association's popularity declined among monks and lay people. In 1996, however, the New Year dance performance at Gamel ginka attracted the largest audience in the last ten years. The ways in which this was achieved will be discussed in the latter part of this article.

2. Ethno-historical background

Before the 1950s Shar-ba villages formed eight political federations (*tsho*) under a dual system of local power: an elected Tibetan 'Big man' (*dbang can*, 'the one with power') and/ or a Manchu appointed hereditary 'headman' (Tib. 'go ba, Chin. tu guan). Even though being a Manchu institution, the hereditary headman's influence as a local Tibetan was not connected to an actual political or administrative control by the Manchus. The Shar-ba village federations were politically autonomous with each of the federations being affiliated to a monastery, although the federations all together did not constitute a political entity. Also, they did not have to pay taxes to any outside power – neither to the Manchu administration in Songpan or the viceroy of Sichuan nor to the Lhasa Tibetan government¹¹). In *Les*

Neufs Forces de l'Homme Samten Karmay describes that the villagers had strong internal community ties as *tsho* members with clearly defined codes of honour (*dbu 'phang mtho ba*), renown (*snyan grags*) and power (*dbang thang*) which were connected to the territorial mountain god cult of a village federation. Apart from belonging to a renown family or clan, a gifted orator, a successful hunter or mediator and a wealthy tradesman would be recognized as being endowed with the mountain god's power. While in assemblies commensality (*kha gcig*) expressed group membership and unity, status factors were demonstrated in a strict hierarchical seating order depending on a person's 'rank' (*gral*), obtained through his 'power' and renown which he had to re-affirm annually (Karmay and Sagant 1998). One possibility of increasing a person's reputation was to sponsor the annual festival of a monastery¹².

In Shar-khog the monasteries did not own land and their affiliated villagers did not have to pay taxes to them. They depended entirely on donations. Accumulated surplus was lend in turn on a short term to less well-off Shar-ba merchants, providing these with capital to start their trading enterprises with. The monastery received in turn a certain interest and a part of the profit of the trade (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 49-51, compare with *AZW* 1986 vol.4: 12). Politically, monastic authorities seemed to have played important roles as mediators in local fights among the federations and against the Chinese from Songpan (monastic history of Rin-spungs in *Zing chu dkar chag* (1993: 111-113), and *SXZ* 1967(2): 490-500), but otherwise they mostly kept out of politics.

What also made the Shar-ba special in comparison to other Tibetan societies was the high concentration of Bonpo villages and monasteries in a rather small but fertile agricultural area. Living at the fringe of Tibetan populated areas they had a privileged and exclusive role as middlemen in the Sino-Tibetan tea trade of this area. They bought Chinese tea coming from Yunnan which was sold to them by Chinese merchants from Songpan. The tea trade in Songpan was controlled by Manchu officials and then by the nationalist government of the Guomindang up to 1940 but this restricted only the Chinese merchants. From Songpan they would transport the tea with their big *g-yag* caravans further up on to the Tibetan plateau, a rather dangerous enterprise which required a strong caravan leader and armed co-traders to protect them against bandits and robbers. The Shar-ba traders exchanged the tea against animal products of Tibetan nomads which they sold or traded back in Songpan.

Some of the families in Shar-khog acquired considerable trading wealth, additional to their farming products and animals¹³. They re-invested some part of their wealth into the monasteries in the form of donations: monks would go around and ask for donations to construct new monastic buildings and for new statues, or for sponsoring communal monastic festivals such

as *'cham*. The latter especially were occasions for gaining both merit and social prestige by sponsoring big scale rituals which would benefit the entire monastery and at the same time the community as a whole. There was a certain competitive prodigality among the rich concerning who would be able to sponsor a bigger ritual than the other (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 49, 50). Payment for household rituals – for example, for good luck and prosperity (*g-yang 'gug*) or for funeral rituals, when about four to six monks would be invited to a house to recite scriptures for three to forty-nine days – would be kept individually as the monk's own income. However, some high-ranking monks would receive larger donations in recognition of their highly estimated ritual knowledge and reputation for efficacy and would reinvest their surplus into the monastery's treasury (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 50, Goldstein 1998: 162, note 49).

2.1. The ritual association of the five Bon monasteries of Shar-khog

As Per Kvaerne has noted there was a remarkable founding activity of new Bon monasteries in Amdo since the beginning of the 19th century (1988: 243). In Shar-khog between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century Bon religion appears to have flourished as well. Leading religious teachers founded hermitages and established schools of dialectics and new monastic rituals in some of Shar-khog's Bon monasteries¹⁴. The middle of last century was also a critical time of an armed Sino-Tibetan conflict which is said to have threatened the Bon teachings in Shar-khog (*Zing chu dkar chag* 1993: 276-279). Also there were apparently fights between different Bon monasteries and fractions in the area. In response to this the Thogs-med sprul-sku, who was a lama of the Bya-'phur lineage from the large Bonpo monastic establishment of rNga-ba sNang-zhig¹⁵, called for an association of five Bonpo monasteries of Shar-khog (Khri-skyang dgon-khag lnga)¹⁶. The reasons behind this association was to unite and strengthen the Bon teachings possibly also vis-à-vis political instabilities. Dignitaries of the Bonpo monasteries of Rin-spungs, sKyang-tshang, lCags-mdud (later sNa-steng), sNang-zhig and dGa'-mal gYung-drung-gling discussed his plan to build a 100 pillar assembly hall, probably having in mind as a model the powerful Bonpo monastery of rNga-ba sNang-zhig. However local objections by some 'influential people', not exactly mentioned, are said to have resisted the plan¹⁷.

In the year 1947 discussions about building an assembly hall for the monastic association of the five Bonpo monasteries of Shar-khog were revived¹⁸. At that time many monks of the five monasteries shared the same teachers and studies. Teachers seemed to have good relations among

themselves, such as the influential Rin-spungs sprul-sku Shes-rab nam-rgyal and the Tshab-tsha lineage lama and teacher of the 'old' dGa'-mal monastery. These positive conditions very likely facilitated the forging of the association. Before the assembly hall for the new monastic association could be constructed, the five contributing Bonpo monastic communities from Shar-khog agreed to constitute a ritual association in the same year. It consisted of an annually rotating obligation of performing their 'cham ritual for the whole of the Shar-ba Bonpo community in their respective monasteries and according to their respective ritual calendars. According to the monastic history of the association the Rin-spungs sprul-sku Shes-rab nam-rgyal was made 'throne-holder' (*khri pa*) of the great assembly of the five monasteries in the first half of the 4th month in 1947. The *khri pa* was responsible for the organization and sponsorship of the entire ritual, i.e. he had to provide the resources for this large event taking place at his own monastery. So sponsors had to be found to take over the costs - at least the performing monks had to be fed and paid for their ritual services each day. Usually the *khri pa* distributed the money ('*bul ba*, 'offering', 'gift') among the performing monks¹⁹). For the most part of the two to three week long ritual²⁰) the monks of Rin-spungs performed by themselves, with the monks of the other four monasteries joining them in a collective recitation for about 4 to 5 days. Otherwise the monks of the association took part as audience. The 'great summer retreat' (*dbyar gnas chen mo*) ended with its culminating public performance of masked dances on the 16th of the 4th Tibetan month, at the site of Rin-spungs monastery. In the following years the abbots of dGa'-mal, of sKyang-tshang, sNang-zhig and sNa-steng monasteries respectively took over the position of *khri pa*. As a reward any surplus of money collected through the sponsorship was allowed to be kept by the *khri pa*²¹). The reason for this ritual association was, according to an informant to build up the stronghold of a unified Bon monastic community vis-à-vis the big dGe-lugs-pa monasteries of the neighboring areas, such as dMu-dge and Bla-brang. Still this leaves the question open as to why the Bon monastic association happened at that time and not before. Obviously there was a need for political and religious stability for the Bonpos of Shar-khog. The monastic association was forcefully stopped by the Chinese victory over the Shar-ba uprising in 1957/58.

There were about five to six hundred monks taking part in the monastic association in the 1950s²²). Each of the five monasteries had an assembly of eight to twelve elders (*tshogs 'du rgan po*). Among them were a prayer leader, two discipline masters and two treasurers, each of them elected for three years, completed by three to seven 'men of power' (*dbang can*) who had an outstanding reputation. They were responsible for the monasteries. Twice a year representatives of each monastery would meet in a monastic council

(*Zing chu dkar chag* 1993: 53, Karmay and Sagant 1998: 48,49)²³).

2.2. Sponsorship before 1957

This former revitalisation of Bon monastic teachings and influence in Shar-khog starting in the 19th century coincides with the flourishing tea trade between Shar-ba and Chinese merchants from Songpan²⁴). It is very likely to assume a causal connection between a surplus of wealthy Shar-ba trader's finances and a growth in religious establishments, teachings and rituals in Shar-khog's Bon monasteries in need of additional economic support. Local Chinese documents mention explicitly 78 Shar-ba families who were successful traders between 1852 and 1949. It is claimed that there existed a kind of trade alliance between local headmen and certain monastic representatives in charge of monastic economy and trade issues who were elected for three years (*AZW* 1986: 13)²⁵).

Whereas I could not find evidence for this claim, interviews with former sponsors of '*cham*' from the Bonpo community of Shar-khog made it clear that only a very wealthy family could afford to sponsor the big public ritual of '*cham*' before 1957. The treasurer of a monastery (*gnyer pa*) would go with a *kha btags* to the rich family houses of the neighborhood or also to people who he knew were wealthy from other regions and ask them whether they would sponsor the next '*cham*' ritual. It seemed a matter of honour as an expression of generosity to accept this offer and do so. (In other words it would have been rather humiliating if one had to admit not being able to meet the resources necessary or to appear too stingy.) One informant stated that in his case it was almost like a family tradition to be the annual '*cham*' sponsor. A sponsor would earn a high reputation or renown among the Shar-ba if he agreed to do so. Samten Karmay mentions that in his monastery of sNa-steng, a second sponsor for the next coming year used to be announced as well. He was honoured in advance and on the spot by giving him a high seat in the monastic assembly (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 50). No matter whether it would be a conventional '*cham*' ritual performance or the communal festival for the whole association, there would be only one or two sponsors. Additionally, on several days families could offer a *nyin ja*, a 'one day tea', including soup (*thug pa*) and some money for each monk per day. To sponsor a week long ritual performed by 150 monks, a sponsor had to pay around 400 Chinese silver coins which was about equivalent to the price of 27 *mdzo* at that time (or about a third of a whole *g-yag* caravan required for trading purposes).

A sponsor was always officially recognized as such during and after the performance: he was accompanied by oboe (*rgya gling*) players, dressed in his

best robes, so that everyone would see and hear him and know who he was. This is quite extraordinary treatment, for usually only high religious personnel and deities are venerated and honoured by means of ritual *rgya gling* music, which is also used to invite and venerate the protector gods in a '*cham*'. While the sponsor's sons might join him in public, the rest of the family (wife and daughters etc.) would sit together with the audience. It was only the head of the household who would receive a 'throne' or heightened seat on a veranda of the tea house (*ja khang*) and was served food and drink during the whole performance. After a '*cham*' performance the sponsor was invited to stay overnight in the monastery and the following day was escorted by five monks back to his home place. Two of the escort carried victory banners (*rgyal mtshan*) as an icon of honour for his sponsorship²⁶⁾, and two *rgya gling* players accompanied the small procession. There would be rests with small picnics in between with the monks providing food and drink to the sponsor, and while entering his village, the neighbors would again see and recognize him as an honoured sponsor. In the evening it seemed to be customary for the sponsor to invite his friends around to his house and celebrate with them. The victory banner was hung up into the domestic chapel (*yig khang*), a practice which is still done today.

3. The revival of Bon monasteries in Shar-khog since the 1980s

Following the Cultural Revolution and the local implementation of liberalized state religious policies in 1980, the reconstruction of about a third of the former Bon monasteries, temples and hermitages in the area of Songpan county²⁷⁾ and parts of their monastic ritual cycles and education was made possible with initial financial support of the Chinese government and a constant effort of the local Bonpo population²⁸⁾. Lay people and former monks were voluntarily and actively involved in the religious revival in Shar-khog after the disastrous destruction of their religion and culture during the Cultural Revolution. First of all they revived their religious practices of local pilgrimage, individual and communal religious rituals and festivals. As already mentioned, in 1980 only one monastery per Tibetan populated valley in Songpan County was allowed to be rebuilt. Therefore the Bonpo of Shar-khog decided to finally build a common monastery housing their former ritual association of five monasteries. A new monastery was constructed which is locally referred to as 'Gamel gingka' (dGa'-mal dgon-khag , or Bya-dur dGa'-mal dgon-chen, *alias* dPal gShen-bstan kun-khyab bde-chen-gling, Chin. Gamisi, also Naimisi). It was built at the site of the destroyed dGa'-mal gYung-drung dar-rgyas-gling monastery near the Bon holy mountain, Byang Bya-dur, in the north of the Zing-chu valley in a rather

solitary but religiously well established environment. It received founding capital of about 9500 Yuan from the Chinese government (*SFG* 1987: 37).

Especially during the first half of the 1980s the monastic association of dGa'-mal dgon-khag constituted the main site and power of the monastic revival in Shar-khog. It was able to raise money by selling entrance tickets to Chinese and foreign tourists as well as paraphernalia from the monastery's shop – one of the stipulated major arenas of income for Tibetan monasteries according to new state religious policies. In 1985 and 1986 this income was more than 5000 Yuan (*SFG* 1987: 45). However, lay donations again contributed the major part of monastic subsistence. In the 1990s the monastery's income from this source amounted to approximately 20,000 Yuan per year, and individual sponsors had given roughly between 1000 and 10,000 Yuan each²⁹). Other monastic economies in the TAR, such as that of 'Bras-spungs near Lhasa, also testify the importance of lay donations, which contribute about 50% of the total income (Goldstein 1998: 38, 162 note 53). Even though party or government officials and religious policies express their dislike of the traditional practice of voluntary lay donations for monasteries, this was according to my knowledge not curtailed or prevented in Shar-khog³⁰).

dGa'-mal dgon-khag developed into a kind of hegemonic centre of Bon religion in this area whereas in the past the monasteries of the 'old' dGa'-mal, sKyang-tshang and Rin-spungs were renown for their eminent teachers and monastic practices. Shes-rab mthar-phyin, a former *dge bshes* from sKyang-tshang monastery, was elected and officially recognized as the only abbot 'on duty' of the association's monastery and all the later on rebuilt Bonpo monasteries and their monks in Shar-khog. He and his manager are also closely linked to state religious institutions and hierarchy on the county and prefectural level through payed official religious and political posts. Thus the former association of the five monasteries turned – at least structurally – into a kind of state controlled monastic centre. A new administrative structure was instituted at dGa'-mal dgon-khag (and all reconstructed Tibetan monasteries), the 'Democratic Management Committee' (Chin. si guan hui), consisting of thirteen elected monastic members. Former Bonpo monks and teachers of the monastic association of Shar-khog together with new novices, and the aid of the former's memory and surviving religious texts, started to establish monastic assemblies and rituals³¹).

At the very beginning of the 1980s, the monastic festival of 'cham which used to be performed by the former 'old' dGa'-mal monastery as part of its sMon-lam festival, was revived as a collective ritual of the whole monastic association. It was performed at the time of New Year, traditionally the most important festival time (*dus chen*) in Tibetan societies. The *Mun gsal cho ga* is nowadays performed from the 9th to the 14th day of the first Tibetan month

with a public 'cham performance on the 15th at dGa'-mal dgon-khag.

In the same monastery a second public 'cham performance was organized on the date of the former summer retreat for the monks of the monastic association – the dByar-nas dus-chen (also called *Ma tri cho ga*). Also derived from the ritual calendar of the former 'old' dGa'-mal monastery was the popular earth-ox divination (*sa glang*) – a kind of annual almanac and weather prognostic traditionally performed by the monks of that monastery. In 1983 Shar-ba farmers themselves had asked the monks for its revival. In winter and summer the two public 'cham performances were staged by the monks of the entire association: they were chosen according to their former monastic membership to perform certain dances. Those dancers were assembled together to form a whole performance at dGa'-mal dgon-khag. These two communal events became quite popular, attracting crowds of lay people across Shar-khog and from some neighboring regions (such as Khod-po and Chu-nag). Interestingly, many lay donations at dGa'-mal dgon-khag were given before or at the time of New Year. The timing of donations money to the monastery is of significance because the donors are honoured in turn by monks during the 'cham performance in ways which I will describe below.

In 1985 dGa'-mal dgon-khag started a monastic college (*sgrub grwa*) with 40 young monk students from Shar-khog villages participating. They studied with elder monks on the basis of the pool of collected traditions from the former five monasteries. From 1982 onwards however, religious policies unexpectedly also allowed the reconstruction of the former five member monasteries of the association. Consequently, in the second half of the 1980s a lot of monks preferred to return to or stay at their local village monastery where most of them could live more comfortably together with their families (as was partly the tradition before). Additionally, state religious policies only permit monks who are not permanent students to gather at the monastery for specific monastic assemblies and rituals. Otherwise they are supposed to engage in 'productive labor'.

Next to the new study group of the monastic association of dGa'-mal dgon-khag, the monasteries of Rin-spungs and the rebuilt 'old' dGa'-mal monastery were also able to reestablish their study groups with permanent students. Members of the other three monastic communities assemble only once or twice a month and otherwise stay at home with their families. With the absence of many monks, lay support for dGa'-mal dgon-khag declined considerably after 1986. However, as before 1957, the traditional reciprocal link between affiliated lay community and local monastery regained its former strength and socio-religious significance.

Even though 'revival' actually meant a considerably reduced monastic ritual calendar - mainly due to the lack of resources, monastic teachers or

religious texts -, the public '*cham*' festivals with their week long ritual were reestablished annually according to the five monasteries' specific traditional calendars. Additionally, in order to maintain the association as a whole, the monks of the five member monasteries were obliged now to participate not only in their own reestablished monastic rituals and assemblies but additionally in the bi-annual performances of '*cham*' at dGa'-mal dgon-khag. This meant an annual double effort and expense for all the members of the monastic federation including their lay sponsors. These augmented demands led to an increasing absence of monks and lay audience at dGa'-mal dgon-khag up to the year 1996, and to a kind of competition for sponsorship between it and the individual monasteries.

4. Present forms of sponsorship in the performance of '*cham*'

Among the now six present Bonpo monasteries of Shar-khog³²⁾ forming the association there are slightly different ways of publicly honouring sponsors during and after a '*cham*' performance. Compared to the past nowadays any sponsors are colloquially referred to as 'throne-holders' (*khri pa*)³³⁾. Before 1957 this term was used exclusively for the religious authorities in charge of organizing and carrying out the annual festival for the whole of the monastic association. In comparison to the general Tibetan term *sbyin bdag*, literally 'master of the gift', a lay person being called *khri pa*, 'one of the throne', implies status increase and a high position in the seating order or ranking. This could be interpreted as a secularization of the former term or an increase in the present status of lay sponsors in Shar-khog, possibly due to the lack of other monastic resources such as trade investment. According to state religious policies and in contrast to the past monks are not allowed to ask lay people for donations. Presently there are many more voluntary sponsors than there used to be, however each donates less money than in the past. Nowadays between 26 and 40 sponsors are publicly honoured in each of five different '*cham*' performances in Shar-khog's Bon monasteries. A Shar-ba informant stated in a matter-of-fact way that this might be really a sign of present-day 'democratisation'. '*Cham*' sponsors in the association's dance performances at dGa'-mal dgon-khag were treated differently in the year 1996, a fact which I will discuss later in detail.

However, the ways in which a sponsor is honoured nowadays is very similar when compared to the past. Generally speaking the extraordinary way in which the donor is honoured in Shar-khog becomes clearer when compared to other Bon monasteries near-by (for example in mDzod-dge) or to neighboring Buddhist monasteries. A sponsor will first of all receive a blessed protection cord (*srung mdud*), a welcoming scarf and a receipt ('*byor lan*, or

chin. fapiao – both terms are colloquially used) for his donation, which is a kind of certificate written in beautiful Tibetan letters. Usually the transactions are done by the manager (*gnyer pa*) and members of the Democratic Management Committee. For each 400 Yuan (sometimes 500 Yuan) the sponsor will receive an empowered victory banner (*rgyal mishan*) from the monastery. During the 'cham performance they are attached to the front of the assembly hall and the veranda of guests and sponsors facing the dance ground. The banners were consecrated (*rab gnas*) beforehand. Sponsors believe in their personal protective power³⁴. By counting the victory banners being displayed during the performance the 'cham audience will also know how much money was donated to the monastery on this occasion. In fact the amounts of money donated comprise a big part of the monastery's annual income [Plate 1].

During 'cham performances the sponsors are seated separately from the audience – either on a veranda overlooking the dance ground or – probably due to their number – in a special tent put up for them at one side of the monastery's court yard [Plates 2 and 3]. There they are served by monks with tea, alcohol and sweets. Also, they actively take part in the performance, publicly venerating and making offerings (*mchod pa 'bul*) to the dancing deities by entering the dance ground. Guided by one or two monks holding a bowl with grains and incense, the sponsors will throw grains over the dancers embodying protective deities and tie *kha btags* onto them [Plate 4]. Highly venerated is the 'Queen of the Universe', Srid-pa rgyal-mo, leading the nine protective Bon deities who are generally represented in Bonpo ritual dances [Plate 5]. Black Hat dancers (*zhwa nag*) are venerated as well. They are usually interpreted by monks as belonging to the retinue of a tutelary deity (*yi dam* Phur-pa, Khro-bo, dBal-gsas or Ma-rgyud). Otherwise, some sponsors have a predilection for a certain figure, such as the snow lion (*seng ge*), and will venerate him accordingly. His appearance is thought of as very auspicious in Shar-khog.

After, and occasionally even still during, the performance one or several sponsors will be accompanied back home by three to five monks (if it is close by), either on foot or by vehicle [Plates 6 and 7]. As in the past, a couple of monks will play the *rgya gling* to honour him, others will carry the victory banner(s) which will be hung from the ceiling of the sponsor's private domestic chapel [Plate 8]. One sponsor told me that he believes the empowered victory banners to be a personal protection for him and his family. At the sponsor's house the monks read special scriptures for him and his family for his long life, prosperity, good luck and fortune. Sponsors might also be specially invited to the monastery on the next day, where they will be hosted by a group of monks providing food and drinks for them in a tent, and where scriptures will be recited for their well-being collectively [Plate 9]³⁵.

Thus, the monks who guide and help the sponsors in their offerings to and veneration of the embodied deities also act as mediators between the laity and the retinue of the highest *yi dam*. They re-enact 'on stage' and in a ritualized form their traditional role as ritual specialists in Tibetan societies. At the same time the sponsors and their offering activities are focused upon repeatedly during the dance performance. They become an integral part of the whole ritual performance, i.e. their actions and role become ritualized. They display the idealised lay person, giving donations to the monastery thereby earning merit in more than one way: for their own and the entire community's sake, enabling the ritual performance which in itself is a meritorious act. Publicly monks acknowledge and honour them while the audience is watching them. Through the sponsor's offerings to the monk dancers, both deities and monks as their embodiments become additionally the object and focus of public veneration.

5. Some 'reinventions' of tradition in ritualized sponsorship

Quite different from present-day individual practices of Bon monasteries in Shar-khog, as described so far, sponsorship at the new monastery of dGa'-mal dgon-khag was restructured anew in 1996. Modelled after the former annual ritual rotation practised for ten years from 1947 until 1957, the association's obligatory system of participation for the five member monasteries became reestablished under the authority of its abbot and manager. Each of the five member monasteries was obliged now to perform the two '*cham*' rituals at dGa'-mal dgon-khag once every five years by themselves, in addition to their own local monastic calendar events. As in 1947, in 1996 Rin-spungs monastery again started the ritual rotation, but this time they performed the sMon-lam at the site of dGa'-mal dgon-khag. Now this obligation had been reinforced by a fining system of 100 Yuan to be paid by every non-excused and non-attending monk and also for non-attending household representatives from the supporting lay villages of Rin-spungs. This ensured the attendance of monk performers and lay audience. While imposing a fine in case of the monks' absence is a traditional method of ensuring participation in assemblies and rituals, the laity's fine is a newly applied method in Shar-khog³⁶). Consequently, the new (post 1980) monastery of dGa'-mal dgon-khag which had no traditional supporting villages, succeeded to move twice a year into the centre of attention and gain support from various sponsors throughout Shar-khog, as well as by one of the five monasteries on duty, and their village household representatives of their *lha sde*.

In 1996, the New Year dance performance at dGa'-mal dgon-khag

attracted the largest audience for many years. Rin-spungs monks received about 5 Yuan per day for reciting the ritual texts inside the assembly hall of dGa'-mal dgon-khag, while meals were provided by their families. On the 15th day of the first Tibetan month the monks from Rin-spungs performed a rather short version of their 'cham dances at dGa'-mal dgon-khag – only four short and hastily performed dances out of their usual repertoire of twelve. Even though there were many more sponsors who had donated money to dGa'-mal dgon-khag, during the dances only four individual sponsors were publicly honoured in the usual way on the dance ground by the Rin-spungs monks, and hosted on the veranda and in the tea house. There was no need to erect a separate tent for them.

In contrast to this, the lay audience coming especially from the four supporting villages of Rin-spungs monastery, onto who the fine in case of absence was newly imposed, elaborately celebrated the event most of the time outside the dGa'-mal monastic compound. Rin-spungs and A-stong village men who arrived by horse a day before the public performance first did a collective pilgrimage (*gnas skor*) around the sacred Bon mountain Byang Bya-dur – again a new invention. [Plate 10] I had watched them on the day before the 'cham performance riding up the road along the Zing-chu river on their well appointed horses. Like a caravan in the good old days – one could imagine – they proudly sang songs together, sometimes they stopped for a picnic. Some of them had rifles over their shoulders – a rather rare sight these days where it is generally forbidden to possess or to wear guns in public. These collective sponsors then appeared shortly before the actual 'cham performance on the dance ground, standing in a row in order to venerate the deities inside the assembly hall. [Plate 11].

The other two sponsoring villages of Rin-spungs monastery, Bar-rong and A-gling, had come up together on private trucks, mini buses or tractors pulling trailers full of people - men and women together. Before the 'cham performance started the Democratic Management Committee of Rin-spungs monastery, asked by the manager of dGa'-mal dgon-khag, had addressed the officers and elected headmen of their affiliated villages (Chin. *cun zheng*) to support the monk's ritual performance at dGa'-mal dgon-khag. The office of the next higher village federation level (Chin. *xiang zheng fu*) and the party secretary (Chin. *shu ji*) were informed and asked for approval. The village headmen and some helpers from the *khirim pa* group (an internal, traditional village organization with rotating duty among household groups to protect crops from damage by grazing animals) organized the transport of the Rin-spungs monks and then of the villagers to ferry them to this rather remote place. They had helped to supervise the participation of their local monks and lay household representatives by implementing the fining system.

Arriving at dGa'-mal in the course of the morning of the 15th day of the

1st Tibetan month, each of four affiliated villages of Rin-spungs monastery gathered in big circles in front of the monastic compound. It was an impressive sight and monks and other lay people stood at a distance watching this spectacle. The relaxed celebratory atmosphere of a folk festival prevailed. According to my informants this was the first time this had ever happened in Shar-khog. Formerly, there were no such ‘folk’ gatherings alongside a monastic dance performance. Everybody was dressed in their best robes and showed off with what they had — spherical amber pieces adorned women’s heads like golden crowns, belts with appliqued Chinese silver dollars and heavy coral necklaces embellished their woollen chuba which might be trimmed with expensive otter or sometimes even leopard skins. Also beautiful horses and guns were shown off. Village elders and party secretaries gave speeches in traditional ways, standing in the middle of one circular assembly holding a *kha btags* and some alcohol (*arak*), which was offered. Men and sometimes women performed different row and circle dances while singing [Plate 12]. The Bar-rong villagers had brought a huge *g-yag* mask along and young men took turns at performing the *g-yag* dance to accompanying rhythmical instruments. A-gling villagers took a snow lion mask along and some of them performed a special dance called *di srag* – a kind of New Year dance which also used to be performed at the end of the once important pilgrimage circuit around Shar Dung-ri³⁷). Shortly before noon the manager of the monastic association appeared on the scene with some helpers carrying boxes of liquor and *kha btags*. They called for the headmen and party secretaries of the supporting villages of Rin-spungs monastery in order to thank them for their support in organizing the transport and imposing the fining system for attendance [Plate 13]. They formed a fifth small circle in the middle of the four big ones.

Also, specially invited guests were arriving: members of the Religious Affairs Office from Songpan, some police and Public Security officers, even a camera team from Songpan TV were invited to have a seat in the upper room of the tea-house, called the ‘manager’s house’ (*bdag gnyer khang*). Members of the association’s Democratic Management Committee were entertaining them there to sweets and drinks. They also each received a *kha btags* and a *srung mdud*, and sat on the veranda overlooking the dance ground during the ‘*cham*’ performance, formerly the exclusive place of honour reserved for the sponsors. However, later on during the ‘*cham*’ performance the individual sponsors were invited to sit on the veranda as well.

Shortly before the ‘*cham*’ started a long queue of about sixty male villagers lined up in front of the assembly hall of dGa’-mal dgon-khag. Elders were first in the line and the younger ones behind them. They were the collective sponsors from Rin-spungs and A-stong villages, waiting to donate some money and venerate the empowered statues inside the assembly hall.

They took their hats off and threw the *rlung rta* into the air. To ‘meet’ (*mjal ba*) the empowered statues of rNam-par rgyal-ba, sTon-pa gShen-rab and Byams-ma (*lha sku gsum*) as well as the ‘1000 Buddhas’ (*lha sku stong*) was their main concern. By touching their forehead at the statues’ feet they would receive an empowerment (*byin brlabs*) from them in turn.

In the mean time, some monks had started to draw a circle with chalk onto the dance ground. Additionally, a foot path adorned with auspicious symbols was marked leading from the abbot’s house to the assembly hall, and another one with flowers joined the manager’s house to the dance circle. The latter was used as a designated path for the sponsors of the ‘*cham*. After the monastic orchestra took its position in the ‘house of the drum beating’ (*rnga gral khang*) and started to play, ten Black Hat dancers appeared one by one out of the assembly hall and danced inside the circle on the dance ground (*‘cham ra*). All of a sudden a group of rather young lay people passed by the dance ground with a lion dancer accompanied by loud drum and cymbal beats. It appeared like a kind of counter demonstration of lay pleasures vis-à-vis the serious ‘*cham* performance. (They were villagers affiliated with Rin-spungs monastery onto whom the fining system had been imposed.) During the two most important ritual dances – the so-called Black Hat dance and the dance of the protector deities – four individual male sponsors were guided by three monks onto the dance ground. Among them was a wealthy merchant and a monk sponsor. They were first accompanied to the tea-house, and then venerated the dancing Black Hats and protector deities in the usual way. During the festival the merchant stayed about three days in the abbot’s private house - a traditional practice and sign of honour in turn for his generous donations.

Only nearing the end of the ritual did most of the audience come up to the monastic dance ground to watch the ritual dance of the nine protector deities (*gShen rab dgu ‘cham*) and to participate in the final expulsion of evil when a ritual weapon (*zlog pa*) was cast out of the monastery. [Plate 14] After this, outside the monastic compound, the riders from Rin-spungs and A-stong villages mounted their horses. Led by two riders holding up victory banners as a sign of their collective sponsorship and cooperation in attending the ‘*cham*, they sang and circumambulated the whole monastic compound together. Then they proudly galloped off towards their villages [Plate 15]. The other two supporting villages again formed circles outside the monastery and then went back home. The procession of the monks and dancers who had followed the ritual weapon outside, was still awaiting the return of the monks who had done the final part of the expulsion ritual (*gtor rgyag*, ‘casting the *gtor ma*’) when the audience had already left. Then the monks turned back to their monastery where they did a final concluding rite, almost unattended by any audience.

Conclusion

By implementing the former rotational duty among the five monasteries, using a fining system, and targeting the New Year and the summer *'cham* at dGa'-mal dgon-khag in 1996, its management had succeeded in attracting many more people than in the previous ten years. Thus, dGa'-mal dgon-khag was able to draw attention to its very existence as the main centre of the Bon religion among the Shar-ba Bonpo community. It reaffirmed its role as the most centralised and state approved Bon monastic institution in this area. While the individual sponsors were treated in traditional ways during the *'cham* performance, the presence of the collective supporters, i.e. the affiliated villages of Rin-spungs, appeared as a new innovation.

It appeared to me that the supporting villages whose presence was required at dGa'-mal reacted and orchestrated their gatherings basically by themselves: inside and outside the monastic compound they not only did offerings to and venerated the deities but independently celebrated the event most of the time together with folk dances outside the monastery. All of this however happened under the watching eyes of government officials: the proud firing off and showing off with guns at the rather chaotic culminating expulsion rite seemed more like a mock battle by the Shar-ba men – to show not only their devotion to their religion but to give a statement about their ethnic identity – to themselves, to the monks and to the government officials.

In contrast to this new arrangement in dGa'-mal dgon-khag, sponsors in the five individual Bonpo monasteries of the association appeared numerous and were all treated equally during the performance. Separately seated from the official guests in tents or on a veranda they nevertheless received a traditional recognition for their generosity from the monks. That sponsors nowadays choose to support the monastery in this way may have two implications: the traditional importance of gaining prestige and merit through religious sponsorship seems to still be highly valued and socially recognized; and supporting a cultural display of local religious and ethnic identity vis-à-vis themselves and the Chinese state ideology.

During the performance this temporary power is enacted side by side with the spiritual authority of the monks – the monastic dance performance is a socio-cultural event and collective ritual at the same time. The organization, financing and performance of it presupposes, enacts and thereby re-affirms the traditional socio-religious and economic links between affiliated villages and their monastery and between individuals and the community, thus recreating their unity. The performance of *'cham* in Shar-khog also functions as a crucial means for monastic subsistence and as we have seen, for reconstituting the monastic association of the five monasteries and their affiliated villagers. By requiring both lay participation and sponsorship the

ritual performance re-structures the social relationship between monks and laity. It publicly connects the past to the present through the traditionalizing effect of annually reiterating the religious cosmology and the monastic hierarchy, which in turn ensures its legitimation and redemptive hegemony: the annual purification for the whole community through an exorcistic rite carried out by the monks proves this. Sponsors and audience also acknowledge by their very presence certain moral values: the celibacy of monks institutionalised through the monastery and their Tantric practice still grants their spiritual (and social) power through which they are believed to successfully perform the ritual of expulsion and thereby communal purification and protection. As my informants stated, monks behaviour in Shar-khog is still commonly regarded as a social indicator of the whole community's morality and upkeep of traditional values.

From the monastic perspective the public dance performances are a Tantric method of spiritual realisation and regarded as an offering (*mchod gar*) to the protective deities for their protection. This is the immediate context in which sponsors are publicly recognized and honoured by the monks. Sponsorship is ritualized during the dance performance in a hierarchical way that differentiates the sponsors from the audience by positioning them into marked locations of honour and prestige invested with spiritual power, i.e. height (veranda, former 'seats of height') and of ritual space (entering the dance ground during the performance, i.e. the realm of protector deities, and venerating them). Generous sponsors are further differentiated from the audience by being publicly credited with religious icons of power – the victory banners held up high for everybody to notice during the '*cham*' – according to the amount of donations given by them, and furthermore the ritual *rgya gling* music, usually reserved for high ranking monks or gods. Auspiciousness, prosperity and good luck are granted to the sponsors and to their family through recited prayers of the monks in a kind of reciprocal gift exchange for their donations. All of this contributes to the heightened prestige of the sponsors – in Bourdieu's terms, they have accumulated 'symbolic capital'.

Are there points of conflict concerning sponsorship?

A report of the Religious Affairs Office of Songpan generalises the former system of sponsorship of Tibetan monasteries without any local distinction as being 'forced' onto the lay community in form of taxes and other strategies (*SFG* 1987: 44) and uses this as an argument for the present-day religious policy that monasteries should provide their own income mainly through 'service industry', i.e. to engage in tourism by selling entrance tickets, butter tea and paraphernalia to tourists, in order to be self-maintaining and financially independent from the laity. In reality this is neither wished for

nor found necessary by any Tibetans adhering to their traditions and also unrealistic or even damaging if monasteries want to continue their monastic disciplines and education. Also, monks are forbidden by law to ask lay people directly for donations. An additional control is instituted through the Democratic Management Committees in each monastery which have to lay open monastic accounts of income and expense to the next higher state religious institution, the Religious Affairs Office, which in turn is connected to the party organ of the 'United Front' (Chin. *tong zang bu*). The 'Buddhist Association' (Chin. *fujiao xiehui*, Tib. *Nang-bstan mthun-tshogs*) watches over the 'correct' implementation of the policies on 'religious freedom'. As with most restricting policies those are flexible terms which depend very much on local interpretation and implementation, such as the Chinese state's differentiation and definitions of 'superstition' and 'religion'. In general though monks are expected to engage in 'productive labor' at home except for the time of religious gatherings. It is the latter which are among the first monastic practices to be revived. They give the monastery a traditional opportunity for gathering lay donations which is also sanctified by state religious policies. While voluntary lay donations to monasteries don't fit state religious ideologies, they are however not prevented from happening.

However, we can expect a more radical change of local Tibetan customs and their display in Shar-khog because of the state's increasing promotion of tourism in ethnic areas³⁸). In the 'new' monastery of dGa'-mal dgon-khag there were already thoughts about 're-establishing' a new ritual display of butter sculptures at the time of the celebration of mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan (mNyam-med dus-chen) in order to attract more visitors. A more serious impact onto monastic practices would probably be a loss of interest in traditional status symbols and ways of gaining prestige through the influence of modern Chinese education, ideas and values. Young Shar-ba sometimes live far away from home in big Chinese cities such as Chengdu or Lanzhou. They might not be interested anymore in sponsoring local monastic rituals in their home villages when they come to visit.

Nevertheless in Shar-khog in 1996, not only old Shar-ba male householders but entire families representing all generations did participate in the annual '*cham*' performances, and sons would literally follow their father's foot-steps in sponsoring the communal monastic rituals. Also, many Shar-ba families support one son becoming a monk at their local monastery: they support him to study and maintain a religious tradition which lies at the heart of their local ethnic identity and moral. Local Shar-ba villagers as well as those living mostly in towns still were engaged in giving donations for religious edifices such as stupas, or would buy prestigious (and expensive) Bonpo *bKa' gyur* editions. Even though the meanings of traditional world view, values and beliefs might have shifted considerably through the impact

of colonialism and modernity, the conscious revival of local customs and religious practices – even though modified in parts – shows that these are still important and socially powerful icons of religious and ethnic identity, consciously chosen by the Shar-ba to counterbalance the ideology of the state.

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Notes

- 1) 'Ritualization' is understood here as a 'stipulated' and 'socially and culturally institutionalized' act, characterized by a 'ritual commitment' (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 154).
- 2) This feature also applies to other Tibetan communities (see Watkins 1996: 246) and is also evident in Tibetan school sponsorship in this area (Upton 1996: 104, 114).
- 3) See for example Goldstein (1998: 38, 162 note 53)
- 4) Shar-ba speak a local Amdo dialect called *shar skad*. Exactly how many Shar-ba there are today can be only estimated via Tibetan population data per district (Chin. qu), for neither Bonpo nor Shar-ba Tibetans figure in those terms in the Chinese Census of 1990 (see under Zhanglaqu: 6449 Tibetans, Songchenqu: 6230 Tibetans, Rewugoqu: 4841 Tibetans, in *SNR* 1992: 26/27, 32/33). Before 1958 dMu-dge bSam-gtan estimated about 3000 Shar-ba families as living in the area of the 'seven head men of Zung-chu' (Zung-chu'i 'Go-khag bdun) which roughly can be identified with the area of Shar-khog (1987: 303, 304). Basically they live in the area between the two holy Bonpo mountains Shar Dung-ri and Byang Bya-dur with the Bonpo heartland along the main river valley of Zung-chu (or Zing-chu, Chin. Min Jiang). I estimate their number today around 15,000.
- 5) A rather late Tibetan monastic history of the important Bon monastery of rNga-ba sNang-zhig dates the introduction of Bon religion in Shar-khog back to

a son of Do-'phags sNang-zhig chen-po spreading the faith in this area in the 11th century (Kvaerne 1990: 212f).

- 6) Clarke translates this term with 'material prosperity' which certainly is part of the term's meaning however misses the relational link between lay participant (officiant or onlooker), offerings and the god's power (1989).
- 7) For examples see Clarke 1991, Diemberger and Hazod (1997: 267), Li-Anche (1994: 146,147), Paljor Tsarong (1987: 150-160). Also non-monastic communal rituals, such as the *glu rol* in Reb-skong, can be based on similar rotational obligations among villages and reinforced by fines (see Epstein and Wenbin 1998: 121).
- 8) In the case of the important Bon monastery of rNga-ba sNang-zhig, for example, a systematized organization in the form of ordained monks and a supporting lay community which was taxed by having to provide sons and food and firewood to the monastery on a regular basis, did probably develop at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries. The lama who initiated this system did so after having visited Central Tibet where a lot of monasteries imposed taxes onto their surrounding lay communities (Kvaerne 1990: 214, 220).
- 9) According to the *Zing chu dkar chag* their full names are: Rin-spungs bKra-shis smin-grol-gling; Chin. Linbosi; dPal gShen-bstan dGa'-mal g-yung-drung dar-rgyas-gling (or sTod-pa dgon-pa), Chin. Gamisi or Chachasi which I will henceforth call the 'old' Gamel monastery; dPal gshen-bstan sKyang-tshang Phun-tshogs dar-rgyas-gling, Chin. Shanbasi; mDo-smad sNang-zhig gSer-khang rNam-rgyal kun-grags-gling, Chin. Duihesi; lCags-mdud (sNa-steng) bKra-shis g-yung-drung-gling, Chin. Yuanbasi.
- 10) On another form of ritual rotation among Ladakhi monasteries see Paljor Tsarong (1987: 140, note 1).
- 11) However Tafel who had traveled in the Songpan area at the beginning of the 20th century reports that in the side valley of 'Mao niu gu' (Chin. Mounigou; Khrom-rje, or Khrom 'go-ba'i sa) and 'Karloug' (Zhang-ngu khog?) – where Shar-ba Tibetans live who are mainly Buddhist – there existed a kind of corvee labor for the Tibetans which had to be performed by order of Chinese administred Songpan under the rule of the Sichuan governor (1914(2): 266).
- 12) Similarly but on the scale of the Central Tibetan state before 1959 the sponsorship of big rituals was one of the major factors for ascending in rank (Huber 1999: 159-161).
- 13) On the tea trade of the Shar-ba see *SXZ* 1967 (1924), *AZW* 1986, vol.4, and Baimacuo 1994.
- 14) See the monastic history of the 'old' Gamel monastery (dGa'-mal gYung-drung dar-rgyas-gling) translated by Huber (1998: 203-206). The New Year festival of sMon-lam chen-mo culminating in 'cham dances was introduced at this monastery at about the turn of the century by two eminent Bonpo scholars – one of them being the mKhar-yags mkhas-pa bsTan-'dzin ngag-dbang rnam-rgyal (dates?)- who had studied at the Central Tibetan monastery and centre of learning and debate gYung-drung-gling. Even after the Communist takeover the abbot of sKyang-tshang, bsTan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan, was able to add a new summer retreat holiday (*dbyar ka dus chen*) for the monastic association at the

hermitage of Brag gYung-drung-kha situated at the holy mountain of Byang Bya-dur in 1954. Hor-ba A-khu (Hor-btsun bsTan-'dzin blo-gros rgya-mtsho, 1888-1975) was able to introduce monastic debate in 1955 for the monastery of sKyang-tshang and sNa-steng. For more details on the founding of hermitages and dialectic schools see Huber 1998.

- 15) For the Bya'phur lineage see Kvaerne (1990 and 1995: 132,3). This renown monastery is said to have a branch monastery in Shar-khog (Kvaerne 1990: 218). However, there were divergent opinions among present monastic authorities in Shar-khog about whether sNang-zhig and sNa-steng monasteries actually are branch monasteries (*dgon lag*) of rNga-ba sNang-zhig or not.
- 16) Khri-skyang or Khri-spyang is an old name for Shar-khog which might be related either to the Bonpo sage Gyer-mi sKyang-'phags chen-po who according to local tradition revealed treasures and founded monastic seats in Shar-khog in the 12th century as claimed in the monastic history of dGa'-mal gYung-drung-gling (Huber 1998: 189, note 21), and/ or to a name given to the upper settlement area of six former battalions of the Tibetan empire (*stod khri skyang gsum, smad yu ti gsum*) (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 283).
- 17) These details and the following description are taken out of the history of the association of dGa'-mal dgon-khag, *Zing chu bya dur dga' mal dgon chen nam / dpal gshen bstan kun khyab bde chen gling gi dkar chag lung rig chu shel dbang po'i bdud rtsi'i rgyun shes bya ba bzhugs pa legs so*, in *Zing chu dkar chag* (1993: 51,8-66).
- 18) It is not mentioned why after about 70 years the plan to build a monastic association was taken up again at that time. One can only speculate that there must have been first of all enough resources to undertake it and probably political pressure from the Chinese side must have increased and called for some kind of unification of the different Shar-ba federations, at least in religious terms.
- 19) All this information on the *khri pa* and some of the following on former sponsorship I owe to Samten Karmay (personal communication).
- 20) The duration of the ritual varied according to the individual monastery. In sKyang-tshang it lasted for three weeks, in sNa-steng for two (Samten Karmay, personal communication).
- 21) As Tsering Thar has noted, the system of rotating rituals among a group of certain temples (*gsas khang*) of Bonpo tantric practitioners is also practised in Reb-skong. The annual rituals of spring and autumn are performed for the whole Bon-mang. Next to this rotation the organization of the ritual gatherings is undertaken by an annually elected 'throne-holder' (*khri pa*) who during any ritual assemblies is honoured by a special throne throughout the year (Tsering Thar 1998: 8, 9).
- 22) Different numbers of monks of the monastic association are given in different sources: sNang-zhig had about 200 (Kvaerne 1990: 218), sKyang-tshang 150 (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 48), sNa-steng around 70 (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 46). The Chinese report of the Religious Affairs office lists all together 548 monks for dGa'-mal dgon-khag. Compared to this number the dGe-lugs-pa monastery of dMu-dge had about 480 monks at that time (*SFG* 1987: 31). A very unlikely figure is given in the *AZZ* (1994(3): 2536) with 1520 monks as members of the association. A local informant spoke of formerly 1200 monks of the

association.

- 23) In Shar-khog however monks would switch forth and back between monastic and lay life – only few of them were actually celibate (thus called *gser sku*, “the golden ones”).
- 24) According to Chinese sources *SXZ* 1967 (1924) and *AZW* 1986 (4: 10-15). There is a remarkable parallel in the Sherpa area described by Ortner (1989) on temple foundations and an increase in trade.
- 25) Such statements have to be treated with care because of the obvious political intentions of Chinese colonialists to depict the monasteries as exploiters and use this as an argument for their contemporary religious policies. However, it seems that the wealthy family background of monastic managers often facilitated their search for a sponsor.
- 26) In connection with this former Buddhist royal insignium of a victory banner and the person of the ‘householder donor’ (*sbyin bdag*, Skt. *dānapati*), one is tempted to connect it to the traditional relationship between the royal donor (*yon bdag*) and his spiritual preceptor (*mchod gnas*) (Ruegg 1997).
- 27) See Huber (1998: 182-184).
- 28) Concerning the amount of state support for the reconstruction of the monasteries, ironically monasteries with former land possessions who used to receive taxes from local villagers (such as the dGe-lugs-pa monastery of dMu-dge) were compensated for their loss accordingly while the landless Bon monasteries got much less compensation (see *SFG* 1987: 37).
- 29) In relation to these amounts the estimated average annual per capita netto rural income in Songpan County in 1992 was only around 772 Yuan according to the China Nationalities Economy 1993 compared to town dweller's income in 1994 of about 2,117 Yuan according to the Statistical Yearbook of Sichuan 1995 (in Marshall and Cooke 1997: 1213). These figures seem either not applicable to the average Shar-ba family income who even nowadays appear to be more prosperous than many of their neighbors, or it could indicate that there must be again a considerable surplus of money. A Chinese article by Zhang Jianshi and Shi Suo about sKyang-tshang village notes several families with 10,000 Yuan and more ‘household wealth’ (which however is not annual income) in 1989 (1992: 102). I am indebted to Janet Upton for this material and her translation.
- 30) Like Goldstein regarding ‘Bras-spungs, I could not find any evidence in Shar-khog to support Schwartz’s report on restrictions or even prohibitions of lay donations given to monasteries by implemented government policies (see Schwartz 1994: 67, 68). Furthermore, despite my repeated questions about possible implemented restrictions concerning the reestablishment possibilities, amount and size of monastic rituals, or concerning limitations for the general admission of monks of a monastery, I always got a negative answer. Instead I was told that the monasteries were quite free to do these things as long as they informed the Religious Affairs Office for approval. Whereas I know about restrictions concerning admissions of new *sprul sku* and the number of ordained monks, it is clear that in general the monastic calendar of rituals and monastic education is very much limited - in my understanding rather due to scarce local resources of teachers, ritual texts and finances than through government restrictions.

- 31) In 1996 I found that with the exception of sKyang-tshang – whose site of power seems to have shifted to the new monastery of dGa'-mal dgon-khag together with the association's abbot and manager coming originally from this monastery (let alone the abbot of sMan-ri monastery in exile, Ven. Sangye Tenzin Jongdong, coming from this monastery) – the other four reconstructed member monasteries of the association had about the same amount of monk members than as the past. Concerning sKyang-tshang monastery a Chinese statistic indicates that only about one third of the families (instead of traditionally all) did have monks as family members (Zhang Jianshi and Shi Suo 1992: 104).
- 32) The reconstruction of a seventh monastery is about to be completed. This is the rebuilt gTso-tshang dgon-pa and is situated in Shar-khog in the town of Chuanchusi at the road junction leading to Huanglong in the East and Hongyuan in the West.
- 33) Only monks from the old dGa'-mal monastery did object to this colloquial usage of the term. They explained that this term should be exclusively reserved for 'monk sponsors' only. Several monks who acted publicly as sponsors themselves participated in 'cham performances in Shar-khog. The majority of sponsors however belongs to the laity.
- 34) A victory banner (*rgyal mtshan*) being a 'sign of victory', stands for invincibility and in Bon iconography is an attribute of several deities, among them Sangs-po 'bum-khri, the procreator (Kvaerne 1995: 26,27). In Buddhist and Bon iconography alike it belongs to the eight auspicious symbols.
- 35) As already mentioned the monasteries in Shar-khog honour their sponsors in slightly different ways. At one monastery along side the dance ground a special tent was erected for the sponsors from the year before who were honoured again on that occasion. Men and women and children received sweets and tea from the monastery but did not receive victory banners, special gifts or receipts, nor took part in the public veneration of the deities on the dance ground.
- 36) In the past there seem to have existed a reinforced system for compulsory attendance of households during the *glu rol* in Reb-skong (Epstein and Wenbin 1998: 184, note 3).
- 37) This seems to be a specific dance of the A-gling village. Samten Karmay mentions it as a specific New Year dance (Karmay and Sagant 1998: 282).
- 38) Peng Wenbin has analysed the impact of tourism on the cultural practices of Tibetans from Jiuzhaigou, a neighbor region of Shar-khog (1998).

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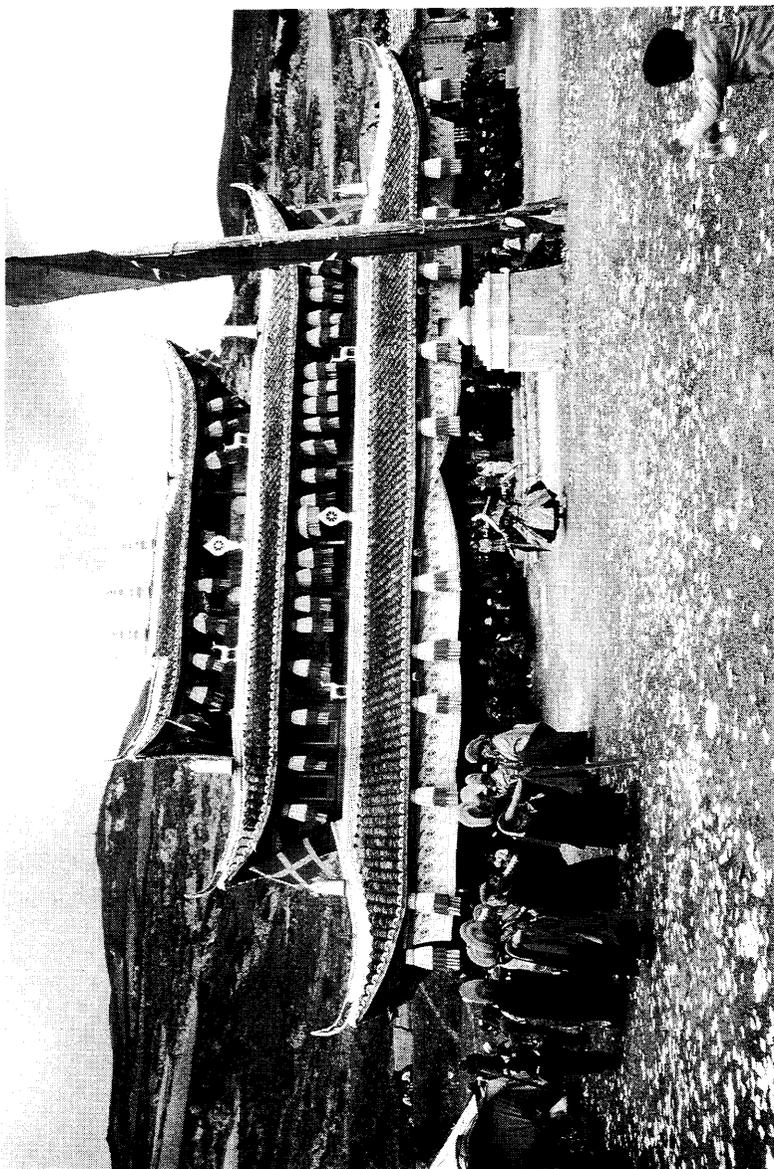


Plate 1 Victory banners being displayed during a 'cham' performance (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 2 In the background: sponsors are seated on the veranda overlooking the dance ground (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 3 Sponsors being accompanied to their special tent
(Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 4 Sponsors tie *kha-rtags* onto a young monk dancer
embodying the Bon protector deity Grags-pa Seng-ge
(Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 5 The highest Bon protector goddess, the "Queen of the Universe", Srid-pa'i rGyal-mo (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plates 6 and 7 Monks accompany the sponsors to their home
(Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 8 A victory banner hung up in a sponsor's private chapel (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 9 Collective reading of scriptures for the well-being of the sponsors and their families
(Photographed by Katia Buffetrille, 1986)

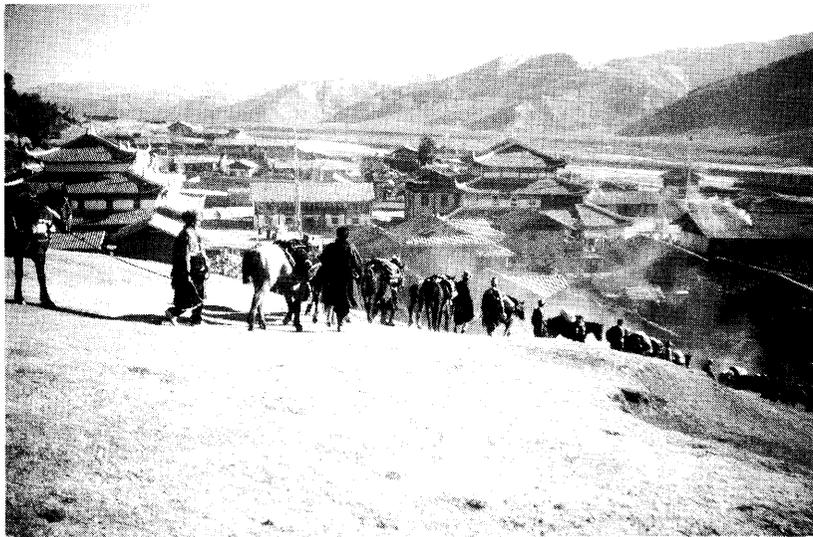


Plate 10 Collective sponsors of 'cham coming from the pilgrimage around Byang Bya-dur on their way to celebrate the 'cham performance at dGa'-mal.
(Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 11 Collective sponsors waiting to venerate the deities in front of the assembly hall (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 12 Affiliated villages from the performing Rin-spungs monastery celebrate the event outside the monastic compound of dGa'-mal dGon-khag (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 13 The manager of dGa'-mal dGon-khag summons the leading village authorities to thank them for their cooperation (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 14 Shar-ba men let off firecrackers to contribute their part to the expulsion of evil forces (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)



Plate 15 Collective sponsors on their ride back home after the '*cham*' performance (Photographed by Toni Huber, 1996)

