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Games, popular rituals and economic structures
in the mDos-rgyab of Klu-brag monastery (Nepal)

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The secular surroundings of a Bonpo ceremony: Games, popular rituals and economic structures in the *mDos rgyab* of Klu-brag monastery (Nepal)

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Introduction

An aspect of Tibetan civilisation that has arguably received more scholarly attention than any other is that of religion and ritual. There are several approaches to the subject, and they are all necessarily partial. For example, many studies of rituals are based either exclusively on the examination of texts, or have a textual focus supplemented by the observation of the rites being performed by specialists. The description of this approach as “partial” should not be understood as a criticism: in a number of cases the rituals in question are obsolete, and are preserved only in literary form; in other cases, it is clear that the author’s interest is limited to the text and the prescribed performance. The approach is likely to be misleading only when ceremonies in this isolated form are generalised to represent “Tibetan religion”.

Certain anthropological treatments of Tibetan religion are more problematic, inasmuch as they limit their attention to textually-prescribed practices but reinterpret these in terms that are extraneous to Buddhist or Bon doctrine. In this approach, too, the details of the apparently peripheral activity going on around Lamaist rituals are the first casualty. Whatever else it may be, ritual is a matter of formalised action and speech, and a proper investigation of village religion must be prepared to take seriously, as an integral part of the overall ceremony, those activities that would ordinarily be ignored as incidental to the liturgical performance.

The present article, too, cannot claim to be anything more than a partial treatment of a complex subject. The focus of the investigation is an end-of-year exorcism in Lubra (Klu-brag), a Bonpo community in Nepal’s Mustang district, involving a *mdos* ritual. Ideally, the enquiry would give equal weight to the textually prescribed aspects of the ritual and to the social circumstances in which it is embedded. Here, however, I shall have very little to say about the former component, partly because such an ambitious undertaking would require a great deal of space, and partly also because I wish to give special emphasis to the social and economic dimension of the ceremony, including the games, “meta-rituals” and

dramatisations of historical episodes that have become closely associated with it in the course of time.

The relationship between a corps of sacerdotal specialists and the lay community may assume a number of different forms. In the more extreme forms of the *mchod yon* dyad, the specialists perform the rites and take care of the spiritual well-being of their patrons, while the latter in turn provide material - and often political - support to their chaplains. The actual ritual activity of the patrons is minimal, and the interaction between the two groups is restricted to these formalised exchanges of services.

The case I wish to examine here represents the opposite extreme: the actual benefactors of the ceremony are all long dead, and it is the priests and the families themselves who must play the role of the laity. Under these circumstances, the relationship between the village and the temple becomes a very complex one.

Before turning to the internal social and religious organisation of Lubra, a few words may be said about the establishment of the settlement as a priestly community.

1. A short history of Lubra

Lubra is one of the nineteen settlements that form the old political enclave known as Baragaon (Tib. Yul-kha bcu-gnyis). It is about two hours' walk north of Jomsom, the headquarters of Mustang District, on the southern bank of the Panda Khola, an eastern tributary of the Kali Gandaki.

The early history of Lubra can be derived from three main sources in the Tibetan language. The texts are as follows.

1. The first is entitled: *Kun gyi [gyis] nang nas dbang po'i mdangs [dang] ma mig ltar mngon [sngon] du byung [byung] ba gshen ya ngal bka' rgyud kyi [kyis] gdung rabs un chen tshangs pa'i sgra dbyangs zhes bya ba* (more simply, the *Ya ngal gdung rabs*). A manuscript of this book, consisting of fifty-four pages written in Tibetan script, is kept in the village of Lubra. It has also been published in India. The lineage history occupies approximately one half of the text, while the first part comprises a Bonpo cosmogony.

2. The second source is entitled *Dong mang gur gsum gyi rnam thar*. This is a short piece containing brief biographies of several lamas from the Ya-ngal clan. It has been published in India in a collection entitled *Sources for a History of Bon* (1972).

3. The third work is the *rDzogs pa chen po zhang zhung snyan rgyud kyi brgyud pa'i bla ma'i rnam thar*: "The biographies of the lamas of the

rDzogs-chen zhang-zhung snyan-rgyud lineage”. It contains the life stories of over a hundred Bonpo lamas. It has been published in India under the title of *History and Doctrine of Bonpo Nispanna-Yoga* (1968).

The *Ya ngal gdung rabs* begins with the divine origin of the Ya-ngal lineage at the time of gNya'-khri btsan-po. Ya-ngal is said to have been one of his three court priests. The list of descendants, which is too long to discuss here, runs for seventeen generations from the heads of three main branches, called the Three Gu-rib, who lived in the early eleventh century.

The main history begins in the life of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan, who was born in 1077 in the village of Taktse Jiri in Upper Tsang, in Tibet, where the Ya-ngal clan had lived for many generations.

He had four different names: since he was born thirteen days after the death of his father he was known as Tshab-ma-grags (“the One Called the Replacement”); his clan was Ya-ngal, and so he was known as Yang-ston chen-po; according to a prophesy he was an incarnation of sPang-la nam-gshen, and his given name was Sherab Gyaltzen (*History and Doctrine*: 60).

One of his teachers, 'Or-sgom kun-'dul, initiated Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan into the lower transmission (*Nyams brgyud*) of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*. He then instructed him to go to sTod mNga'-ris, where he would have two sons and would receive many disciples. About this time there lived in the village of Bonkhor (the extensive ruins of which are just north of the city of Lo Monthang) a lama named Rong rTog-med zhig-po, who had many patrons in the area. The story of their meeting is related in *History and Doctrine*. The night before their encounter,

a woman came to Rong rTog-med zhig-po in a dream. “The incarnation of sPang-la nam-gshen is coming as your student. Give him an audience and instruct him thoroughly in the *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud*”, she commanded. In the second half of the night, a man came for an audience carrying the equipment of a Bonpo tantrist...

The next morning, a servant said, “a Bonpo who has come from the village of Dongkya, over there, is asking for an audience”. Rong rTog-med zhig-po asked what he looked like and was told that his dress and tantric equipment were such and such, and he said, “The one who appeared in my dream last night is here.”

It should be added, for reasons that will become apparent below, that the description of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan's tantric garb – omitted in this translation – includes the mention of a *phur pa* thrust through his waistband. Shes-rab

rgyal-mtshan received from Rong rTog-med zhig-po the upper transmission of the *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud*.

bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, the younger son of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan, is generally known by the title of 'Gro-mgon Klu-brag-pa, "the Protector of Living Beings, the Man of Lubra", because he was the founder of Lubra village. Before he could settle in the valley, however, he was obliged to subdue a man-eating demon called sKye-rang skrag-med, who is now revered as Lubra's territorial god (*yul sa*). The Ya-ngal clan was later joined by other priestly lineages. Two of the most prominent were the Ja-ra-sgang and the Glo-bo chos-tsong, which established their own residential temples on the territory. The priests and their families lived mainly thanks to the support of private patrons in the surrounding settlements. The structure of the community gradually changed. The Ya-ngal clan itself died out in the nineteenth century and was replaced by an adopted, unnamed lineage, while the other clans ceased to have their own private patrons. Farming and trading became the main economic activities.

2. Households, trade, and the organisation of rituals

As in so many other communities of Mustang and Tibet, a clan-based social structure was replaced by a residential model in which estates (*grong pa*), rather than lineages, are the basic unit of economic and political organisation. There are now nine-and-a-half⁽¹⁾ estates which are subdivided into lesser households. All estates have equal rights (such as entitlement to irrigation water) and obligations (for example, the provision of incumbents to occupy rotating official positions). Moreover, all heads of households are nominally "monks" (*grwa pa*), though all are married and several are not literate.

In accordance with this development, the importance of the individual clan chapels came to be eclipsed by the community temple. This building, gYung-drung phun-tshogs-gling, was constructed in the nineteenth century by Ka-ru Grub-dbang bsTan-'dzin rin-chen (author of, among other things, the *dMar khrid dug lnga rang grol* cycle and the *Gangs Ti se dkar chag*).

There are currently more than twenty ceremonies that are performed annually in the village temple. The way in which these are organised is, to a great extent, a translation into spiritual terms of the fundamental economic principles underlying the priests' trading activities. The Bon religion has declined in the area over the centuries and there is insufficient interest among the laity to ensure regular sponsorship of ceremonies. The Lubragpas (Klu-brag-pa) have therefore devised a system whereby they can be seen to function as priests without depending on an uninterested laity. In brief, they operate as professional "merit-brokers": the community of Lubra collects investments from patrons on the understanding that the capital will never be returned. The sum is invested in trade by the priests, and

ten per cent of the principal is put towards the performance of a given ceremony. This sum is understood as the value of the merit that the patron can expect to receive annually and in perpetuity, while any interest beyond this ten per cent is kept by the priests themselves.

These investments and the interest that must be paid by each of the estates are recorded in a register of temple contributions referred to as the *ma yig*, the “mother document” which constitutes the basis on which memoranda for current use are drawn up. The documents in question are in the form of sheets of coarse paper measuring 9.5 inches by 8.5 inches sewn together along the centre and folded horizontally to make a booklet. The two booklets are not, however, the original documents, but were copied from an earlier scroll by an educated lama from Mustang who lived in Lubra for a short time at the request of the villagers. Households listed in the text are identified by the heads of each, and the names in the register refer to men who occupied this position in the last generation. The copies are therefore comparatively recent, and the fact that they have been updated unfortunately makes it impossible to draw many inferences about the village as it would have been during the time of the document’s original composition. The type of patronage revealed by the register is not based on a private relationship between a lama and a lay householder, but embraces any number of people who wish to confer their patronage on the Lubra temple and its community of lamas. This system itself has two slightly varying forms. The first of these is apparently an earlier method and operates as follows.

If someone from a neighbouring village loses a close relative, he or she may wish to bestow a certain amount of money on a religious institution in order that prayers be said and lamps lit to generate merit for the deceased. Such donations are known as *sbyar chog*²⁾ and are collected until the total is sufficient for the establishment of a ritual. Originally the money used to be divided up into eight equal portions and each portion given to one of the estates. This sum was used by that estate as capital with which to trade, and interest to the value of ten per cent of the capital was contributed towards purchasing the foodstuffs necessary for the ceremony. Sometimes the sum given to each householder was not the same, and the form in which the interest was to be paid frequently differed, but these variations are all recorded in the register and must still be paid as they are entered. The names and perhaps the motives (usually the death of the named relative) were probably recorded in the original register, but the more recent booklets contain only details of the original contributions required of each household, and make provision for the new ninth *grong pa*. The half-estate that was created a few years ago is of course not included in these documents. Rituals that are financed by this method are referred to as the ‘old ceremonies’ (*mchod pa rnying pa*), and these are contained in the first of the two *ma yig* booklets.

Whereas the recipients of the patronage used to be the estate, the money is now distributed among the ‘monks’ (*grwa pa*) and nuns (*jo mo*). ‘Monks’ in this

case still refers to village priests and the money continues to be invested in household trade, but a household with two priests (for example, an extended household occupied by a father and his eldest son) or with a resident nun will be given a proportionately larger share of the capital. The system may be represented by a simple diagram. Let us suppose that at a certain point in time there are five priests or nuns in Lubra's religious community (in fact there are now fifteen), each represented in order of age by a letter. To simplify matters, it may be assumed that the sum of money collected as *sbyar chog* is fifty rupees, and each person is consequently required to pay commodities to the value of one rupee per year as interest. The amount payable is represented by a number following each letter:

A1 B1 C1 D1 E1

When a monk or a nun dies his or her payment of the interest ceases. But the terms of receiving *sbyar chog* from patrons are that the ritual be perpetuated on as grand a scale as the capital permits, and the onus of the deceased's temple contributions is transferred to the two youngest members of the community. The capital that has been allotted to the deceased is given in equal portions to the two youngest, but in view of the depreciation of money the sum comes to a good deal less even than the interest which they are required to pay in the form of foodstuffs. The bracketed letter represents the deceased.

(A1) B1 C1 D1^{1/2} E1^{1/2}

If a new priest or nun, F, joins the community he or she then receives the obligations of the deceased priest which had been allotted to the two who until now had been the youngest. Everyone is again paying the same amount of interest:

B1 C1 D1 E1 F1

If another young priest then joins he receives half the interest-obligations of each of the two oldest:

B^{1/2} C^{1/2} D^{1/2} E^{1/2} F1 G1 H1

If the oldest then died, not the youngest member but the youngest member paying half a share would receive the obligations:

(B) C^{1/2} D^{1/2} E1 F1 G1 H1

Finally, to conclude the possibilities, the premature death of a young priest or nun would affect the two who are paying half a share each:

C1 D1 E1 F1 (G) H1

In this way no one pays less than half a share or more than one and a half.

It is not clear why this system was introduced in preference to the older one which was based on estates. It may be that *grong pa* were fragmenting into separate households at that time, and since each house must have a resident lama, this was regarded as a fairer system. The theory would be that the combined wealth of the two households forming a split *grong pa* would be greater than that if the *grong pa* was still a unit. However, this is not necessarily the case, and it does not explain why nuns and junior lamas in a house should have to pay, since they do not necessarily strengthen the economic situation of that house. The rituals that are financed by this method are known as the ‘new ceremonies’ (*mchod pa gsar pa*).

3. The *mDos rgyab* ceremony in the register

Although the second volume of the register is primarily concerned with the “new ceremonies”, the first entry, item XIII, is actually classified as being an “old ceremony”. This is the *mDos rgyab*, which is undoubtedly the most important ritual in the calendrical cycle of Lubra’s temple. The occasion, which is primarily an end-of-year exorcism for the benefit of the community, coincides with the birthday of gShen-rab Mi-bo. It may be mentioned that the Bonpo Monastic Foundation in Dolanji, India, differs from Lubra inasmuch as it follows an alternative tradition, prevalent at sMan-ri in Tibet, which celebrates the occasion exactly a month later, on the fifteenth day of the first month.

Before turning to the performance itself, let us see what the register has to say about the material organisation of the occasion³⁾.

*bdud [bdun] srin bran du bkol [bren su bskor] ba'i mchog sprul / bkra shis
rgyal mtshan zhes bya ba'i gdan [sden] sa / yongs dgongs bsam gtan [rten]
gling gis dgu gtor [stor] chen mo bzhugs so // hor zla bcu gnyis pa'i gshen
rab 'khrungs mchod //*

Contained here is the great *dgu gtor* ceremony of Yongs-dgongs bSam-gtan-gling, the dwelling-place of that excellent incarnation named bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan, who enslaved the demons and goblins. The birthday ceremony of gShen-rab in the twelfth month.

The translation of the next passage may be most conveniently represented in tabular form. The names represent the heads of the respective households when the register was recopied four generations ago, and the numbers signify the position of the estate in question on the village roster. The cash figures denote the sum that each household received as principal when the total investment of the patrons was divided up, and the volumetric measures show the corresponding sum of grain that could be bought for ten per cent of the cash sum at the time of the investment. It is this quantity of grain that must be paid now, every year, by the descendants of these householders⁴⁾.

gshen rab 'khrungs ['khrung] mchod kyi [kyis] rgyu rten la / thog mar pad ma dbang 'dus la / tram bco lnga dang pe sa bco brgyad la zo ba bco lnga dang gru drags phyed gnyis / gtso mchog skyabs dang bstan [rten] pa tshul khrims gnyis phyogs [phyog] nas yin / tram sum bcu so gcig [cig] dang pe sa bco brgyad la zo ba sum bcu [bcu] so gcig [cig] dang dru grags phyed gnyis / ke mi'i⁵⁾ rdo rje la / tram nyer gnyis dang pe sa drug la zo nyi shu rtsa gnyis dang dru grags phyed / tshe dbang chos 'phel la / tram bco lnga dang pe sa bco brgyad la zo ba bco lnga dang dru grags phyed gnyis / tshe ring bstan [rten] 'dzin la / tram bco lnga dang spe sa bco brgyad la / zo ba bco lnga dang dru grags phyed gnyis / kun bzang bkra shis la / tram bco lnga dang pe sa bco brgyad la / zo ba bco lnga dang dru grags phyed gnyis / dpal skyid bstan [rten] 'dzin la / tram bco lnga dang spe sa bco brgyad la / zo ba bco lnga dang dru grags phyed gnyis / yang skyar [yangs kyir] pad ma dbang 'dus la / dngul cig dang a na dgu la zo ba gnyis dang gru drags gsum / tshe dbang chos 'phel la / tram lnga dang a na sum la zo ba lnga dang dru grags cig / mgon skyabs tshe dbang la / tram cig dang a na gsum la / zo ba cig dang dru grags cig / kun bzang bkra shis la / tram cig dang a na gsum la / zo ba gang dang dru grags gang / tshe ring bstan [rten] 'dzin la / tram gnyis dang a na dgu la / zo ba gnyis dang dru grags gsum / dpal skyid bstan [rten] 'dzin la / dngul bzhi [bzhis] la zo ba brgyad / tshe ring bkra shis la / dngul cig dang a na dgu la zo ba gnyis dang dru grags gsum / ci kag gsal ma 'debs [gdab] rgyu chod //

As the material base for gShen-rab's birthday ceremony:

1. Padma dbang-'dus	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
3. gTso-mchog-skyabs and	31 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	31 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
8. bsTan-pa tshul-khrims				
2. Kami rdo-rje	22 <i>ṭam</i>	6 <i>paise</i>	22 <i>zo ba</i>	0.5 <i>drudra</i>
4. Tshe-dbang chos-'phel	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
5. dGon-skyabs tshe-dbang	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
6. Tshe-ring bstan-'dzin	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
7. Kun-bzang bkra-shis	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>
9. dPal-skyid bstan-'dzin	15 <i>ṭam</i>	18 <i>paise</i>	15 <i>zo ba</i>	1.5 <i>drudra</i>

In addition to this:

1. Padma dbang-'dus	R 1	9 <i>anna</i>	2 <i>zo ba</i>	3 <i>drudra</i>
2. Kami rdo-rje	5 <i>ṭam</i>	3 <i>anna</i>	5 <i>zo ba</i>	1 <i>drudra</i>
5. dGon-skyabs tshe-dbang	1 <i>ṭam</i>	3 <i>anna</i>	1 <i>zo ba</i>	1 <i>drudra</i>
7. Kun-bzang bkra-shis	1 <i>ṭam</i>	3 <i>anna</i>	1 <i>zo ba</i>	1 <i>drudra</i>
6. Tshe-ring bstan-'dzin	2 <i>ṭam</i>	9 <i>anna</i>	3 <i>zo ba</i>	3 <i>drudra</i>
9. dPal-skyid bstan-'dzin	Rs 4		8 <i>zo ba</i>	
4. Tshe-ring bkra-shis	R 1	9 <i>anna</i>	2 <i>zo ba</i>	3 <i>drudra</i>

Husked two-row barley shall be given.

No reason is given for the existence of a second list concerning household contributions of two-row barley. However, it is probable that investments from new patrons were accepted after the establishment of the ceremony, and the second list is the outcome of the distribution of the capital. There is evidence of such subsequent investment later in the text. The last person in this list, Tshe-ring bkra-shis, belonged to a dependency of estate no. 7 but later bought half of estate no. 4 after acquiring independent means. The fact that Tshe-ring bkra-shis and not Tshe-dbang chos-'phel is named here as the representative of the estate probably indicates that the latter had recently died and that his daughter was still unmarried.

(XIIIb) *gsol ma'i [mi] rgyu rten la / thog mar padma dbang 'dus la / dngul gnyis dang a na gsum la / rgya bra [rgyab ras]⁶⁾ zo ba bzhi dang dru grags cig / gtso mchog skyabs dang bstan [rten] pa tshul khirms gnyis la / dngul gnyis la zo ba bzhi / gnyis phyogs [phyog] la yin / ke mi'i rdo rje la tram gnyis la zo ba gnyis / tshe dbang chos 'phel la / tram phyed bzhi la zo ba phyed bzhi / mgon skyabs tshe dbang la / tram cig la zo ba gang / tshe ring bstan [rten] 'dzin la / dngul cig dang a na dgu la / zo ba chong sdong gsum / kun bzang bkra shis la tram gsum la zo ba gsum / dpal skyid bstan [rten] 'dzin la / tram cig dang a na dgu la zo ba chong sdong gnyis / 'di rnams rgya bra [rnam rgyab ras] yin / phyug mtsho [tshu] tshe dbang gis sbyar chog [byar phyog] grwa tshogs la tram lnga lnga yod / skyed zo ba lnga lnga 'debs [gdab] rgyu chod / nas btab [gdab] na 'un 'dzin yin / 'bras btab [gdab] na do [dos] re yin / tshe las [la] 'das na dngul 'gag [bkog] rgyu chod //*

(XIIIb) The material base for the food:

1. Padma dbang-'dus	Rs 2	3 <i>anna</i>	4 <i>zo ba</i>	1 <i>drudra</i> of buckwheat
3. gTso-mchog-skyabs and 8. bsTan-pa tshul-khrims	Rs 2		4 <i>zo ba</i>	
2. Kami rdo-rje	2 <i>ṭam</i>		2 <i>zo ba</i>	
4. Tshe-dbang chos-'phel	3.5 <i>ṭam</i>		3.5 <i>zo ba</i>	
5. dGon-skyabs tshe-dbang	1 <i>ṭam</i>		1 <i>zo ba changdong</i>	
6. Tshe-ring bstan-'dzin	R 1	9 <i>anna</i>	3 <i>zo ba changdong</i>	
7. Kun-bzang bkra-shis	3 <i>ṭam</i>		3 <i>zo ba changdong</i>	
9. dPal-skyid bstan-'dzin	1 <i>ṭam</i>	9 <i>anna</i>	2 <i>zo ba changdong</i>	

These payments shall be in buckwheat. For the patronage bestowed by Tshe-dbang of Phyug-mtsho [in southern Dolpo], as many monks as there are shall receive 5 *ṭam* each, and shall pay 5 *zo ba* each as interest. If six-row barley is paid, the ratio shall be 2:3, and if rice is paid it shall be 1:2. If anyone dies his contributions shall cease.

It is interesting to note that at this time the value of buckwheat is the same as that of two-row barley, while in the later entries and at the present day, it has almost doubled to equal that of rice.

The following section deals with additional contributions based on the dated investment of a patron identified as rNal-sang su-pha. The date, Earth Sheep year (1919) helps us to identify the donor as Narjang Subba, a wealthy Gurung who held the lucrative customs contract on the salt trade - and with it the title of *subba* - in the Kali Gandaki Valley from 1918 to 1920.

(XIIIc) *sa mo lug lo la // rnal sang su pha'i sbyar chog [byar phyogs] la / dngul nyi shu rtsa lnga yang {skyar [skyir]} tram lnga mchod me la song [sung] / dngul nyi shu phyed rtsa gsum gsol ma'i [mi] rgyu la grong pa re re tram lnga lnga rang cha [chag] la yod / skyed la 'bras dru grags lnga lnga 'debs [gdab] rgyu chod / mar gyi [kyi] rgyu la grong pa dgu la tram phyed gsum gsum la / ci kags dru grags re re ling mar dgar rgyu yin / spyi ba gnyis la mar gyi [gis] dngul drug la nas gsal [sal] ma dru grags gsum ling dgar [gar] rgyu chod / spyi ba gnyis phyogs [phyog] la yin / sgom [rgom] phug dbyar ston [stong] la dngul bzhi / spyi ba spos rlab [pogs lab]⁷⁾ dngul bzhi sdom [rdom] par dngul bcu bzhi lag sprod la yod / dang rdzong⁸⁾ tshe 'das pad ma'i don du [tu] dngul bcu sbyar chog [byar phyog] 'bul ba mdos rgyab [gtor rgyags] rgyu rten [brten] la song [sung] / gshen [shes] rab 'khrungs [khrum] mchod rgyu rten la klu brag yul nas gro zo ba sum bcu / chang gi rgyu la gtong [btangs] rgyu chod pa yin / gshen [shes] rab 'khrungs [khrum] mchod kyi [gis] sbyin bdag rnam la chang*

mar sbyar [byar] bsodus skyogs [kyog] bzhi / tshe bcu bdun nyin chang skyogs [kyog] lnga par cha zin dgos / gsol zhu [zhus] dus sngo chang skyogs [kyog] gsum re zhu rgyu yin / phud chang g-yang gshe 'brug ris mar che ba bzhi / de nying khu yin / spyi ba gnyis la ya lung mar tshag zo ba gang ma re re / g-yang chang nying khu zo ba gnyis gnyis yin // khyi 'gal⁹⁾ bsod-nams skar bzang don du dngul lnga sbyar chog / spu ra ong dus dngul cu sbyor chag / spu ra skyin 'dzom dngul lnga / khyi mkha' tshe 'das skar bzang [dkar gsang] dpal mo'i [mos sdon] du sbyar chog [byar chogs] dngul lnga yod //

(XIIIc) Female Earth sheep year: Narjang Subba made a contribution of Rs 25 and 5 *tam* for lighting lamps. Rs 22^{1/2} for food shall be divided as 5 *tam* per estate, and 5 **drudra* of rice shall be paid as interest. Each of the nine households shall pay 2.5 *tam* for the equivalent in butter of 1 **drudra* [of grain, probably six-row barley] weighed on a hanging scale. The two stewards between them shall give Rs 6 worth of butter, the weight equivalent of 3 **drudra* of husked six-row barley. At the dByar-ston festival of sGom-phug¹⁰⁾ and at the changeover of headmanship the stewards shall receive Rs 4 in payment, that is Rs 14 altogether¹¹⁾.

For the sake of the late Padma of Dangkardzong [a village about an hour's walk west of Lubra], Rs 10 has been paid as patronage towards the *dGu gtor* festival.

As material for gShen-rab's birthday celebration, 30 *zo ba* of wheat shall be given by Lubra village for making beer. The patrons for gShen-rab's birthday ceremony shall each be given 2 ladlefuls of beer with butter attached [to the flask as an auspicious sign], and 5 ladlefuls on the seventeenth day, after it has been tasted [by the precentor]. When they are given food, they shall each receive 3 ladlefuls of beer.

[The precise meaning of the next sentence is unclear, but it almost certainly refers to the four *g-yang rdzas* bowls, decorated with butter from the *gtor ma* of *zhi ba* and *khro bo*, that feature in the transfer of authority to the new Stewards that is described below.]¹²⁾ The beer should be *nyingkhu*. Each of the Stewards shall receive 1 *zo ba* of **yalong martsa* and 2 *zo ba* of **nyingkhu* for luck. There has been a donation of Rs 5 for the benefit of bSod-nams of Khyenga; Rs 10 for dBang-'dus of Purang; Rs 5 for sKyid-'dzoms of Purang; Rs 5 for the deceased sKar-bzang dpal-mo of Khyenga.

**Nyingkhu* and **yalong martsa* are different kinds of beer that feature in the ritual for the changeover of village headmen (here referred to as "Stewards" for reasons

that will be discussed presently). Two of the four wooden bowls have survived; they are cracked and unusable as drinking vessels, but are put on display during the course of the ceremony, which is described below. Interestingly although this text specifies that the beer contained in the vessels should be **nyingkhu*, it is actually **yalong martsa* that is used today.

The text continues with a series of regulations concerning the lamas and other members of Lubra itself.

Fürer-Haimendorf (1975: 216) reports that men of Lubra who do not return from the winter trading in India in time for the *mDos rgyab* ceremony - specifically the fifteenth day of the month - are required to pay a fine of Rs 100 to the village. In fact the sum was reduced to Rs 60 shortly after his visit, but the following passage in the register reveals something of the history of this fine.

(XIIIId) ...*tshe bcu bzhi nyin phyag khrus thog la ma bslebs [rma rleb] phyin / phyed rgyad yin / ldem [bdem] gang gi [gis] gur khang gang tshar tshar ma bslebs [rma bleb] phyin tram cig yin / tshe bco lnga nyin phyag bsil bsil ma bslebs [sil sil rma rleb] phyin tram phyed gnyis dgongs [gong] mo 'cham [cham] gong mar me 'dzin dus ma bslebs [zin bdus rma sleb] phyin tram gnyis / tshe bcu [cu] drug bcu [cu] bdun bco brgyad bcu dgu 'di ma bslebs [rma rleb] phyin tram re re yin / 'di thug ma bslebs [thub rma rleb] tram drug yin / 'di nas phar sleb [rleb] kyang lab rling zer sa gang yang med //*

(XIIIId) ...For failing to arrive by the time of the washing of hands [prior to making the *gtor ma*] on the afternoon of the fourteenth day, there will be a fine of an eighth (?) [of a rupee]¹³⁾.

For failing to arrive before the completion of the pattern within the image, there will be a fine of 1 *ṭam*¹⁴⁾.

For failing to arrive before the washing of hands on the afternoon of the fifteenth day there will be a fine of 1.5 *ṭam*.

For failing to arrive by the first dance in the evening in which butter lamps are held [by the dancers], there will be a fine of 2 *ṭam*.

For failing to arrive on the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth by the same time there will be [an additional fine of] one *ṭam* [per day], and whoever does not arrive by then shall pay 6 *ṭam*. Even if someone does arrive [just] after that, he may make no excuses.

(Further regulations, dealing with the prohibition of recently-widowed women and low-caste people from attending the festivities are then listed, but these do not concern us here.)

The contributions listed in the register by no means account for all the payments required of the estates: other obligations are either listed separately or are not stipulated in writing at all. Thus, for example, each estate must also provide a quantity of mustard oil: four *phulu*, a small wooden flask that is kept expressly for this purpose; each household must also give a few handfuls of bitter buckwheat flour, garlic and chilli that are needed for the construction of the *mdos* and the smaller *glud* effigy that accompanies it.

One of the ancient privileges of the Lubragpas, as a priestly community, is the entitlement to collect grain offerings (called *me tog*, literally “flower”) in many of the villages of Mustang. This collection is made each year by the two headmen who go from door to door in each of the villages concerned to receive these donations. The total quantity of grain (six-row barley or wheat) collected in this way usually amounts to some 250 *zo ba* (roughly 125 litres - see fn. 4). About 100 *zo ba* are roasted and used a part of the *tshogs*, while the remaining 150 *zo ba* or so are transformed into beer for the festivities.

4. The ceremony in outline

The liturgical aspect of the *mDos rgyab* will not, as stated earlier, concern us here. However, a brief outline of the main features of the ceremony may be given. The two principal tutelary divinities on this occasion are Khro-bo (“the Wrathful”) gTso-mchog mkha’-’gying and Zhi-ba (“the Benign”) Kun-bzang rgyal-ba ’dus-pa, represented by two spectacularly-decorated *gtor ma* on the highest stage of the altar. Below them stands the more modest *gtor ma* of a third *yi dam*, sTag-la me-’bar. Most of the reading that takes place in the temple during the ceremony involves the liturgies of these three gods. ’*Cham* dances are performed in the temple on the nights of the 15th, 16th, 17th and 18th. The cast of dancers mainly features gTso-mchog mkha’-’gying himself and members of his entourage, though other figures (see below) do appear as the ceremony progresses. On the afternoon of the 19th day a public performance of ’*cham*, with several more masked characters, is held in the courtyard of the temple in public view.

On the 17th day the *mdos* itself is made. This is not the place for a general discussion of the history and character of *mdos* rituals; the most substantive work on the subject has been carried out by Anne-Marie Blondeau, and the reader is referred to her studies (1990; in this volume). *mDos*, in brief, may have at once the character of both offerings of model universes and agents of expulsion (see Ramble 1992-93 for an example), and the present example conforms to this complex. It is significant that, while the occasion is popularly referred to as a *mdos rgyab*,

“casting out a *mdos*”, the available local documents avoid this expression, in apparent acknowledgement of the principle that a *mdos* is something that is offered, not expelled. The register refers to the ceremony as the *dgu gtor*, the “casting-out on the nineteenth [lit. ninth] day”, the usual Tibetan expression for such rituals. The manual for the construction of the effigy does not refer to it as a *mdos* either, but as a *zlog bcas* (presumably for *zlog chas*), “equipment for repulsion”. The effigy is constructed according to a set of instructions contained in a compendium of *mdos* rituals in the private possession of one of the priests. Here is a translation of the relevant passage.

Three levels must be built up from a base of black clay. This base must be square. On top of this set a triangular base... and put a *ling ga* [blockprint] inside the triangle. Place eight dough *ling ga* in a circle on top: these are what are known as the eight great planets. On top of this, set a three-faced *gtor ma* one cubit tall. This is the tutelary divinity gTso-mchog [mkha'-gying] with three heads and six hands. Place a *khyung* at the apex of the *gtor ma*.

On the level below this place, on the perimeter square, place four [effigies of] mothers and fathers in a circle around the triangle; and on the level below this one, place sixteen fathers and mothers...

Then place in the entourage in front of it, in the sky, a single triangular *gtor ma* as a parasol (?). On the level below it place the twenty-seven *dbal mo* in a circle; they should be [represented by] triangular [*gtor ma*]. On the *g-yang ta* there should be ten warriors and ten generals, twenty in all, and these should be triangular. Twelve bejewelled tormas should be disposed in a circle to represent the twelve *bri tan ma*. There should be a ring of cups of blood corresponding in number to the years.

Four square tormas should be placed in the four directions to represent the four Kings, and each should have a turban wound around its apex. Images of four men should also be placed in the four directions...

The completed construction is placed in the temple, beside the altar. On the 19th day, the blacksmith collects wood and prepares a triangular (*drag po*, fierce) pyre in the courtyard. Following a “public” *'cham*, a fire-ritual (*sbyin sreg*) is performed. The villagers all purify themselves by rubbing with bitter buckwheat dough and performing an ablution, with the waste being thrown into a basket containing an effigy, the *lam ston* (“guide”). This is carried outside the village, followed by the *mdos* itself, and hacked to pieces by sword-bearing young men called “Chinese soldiers” (*rgya dmag pa*). Magical “bombs” (*zor*) are hurled, another *ling ga* destroyed, and the *mdos* incinerated.

This is obviously a highly abbreviated summary of a complex and very spectacular ceremony. Let us leave it to one side and examine more closely some of the more inconspicuous activities that are going on at the same time.

Much of the “secular” ritual that runs through the *mDos rgyab* revolves around the catering. This is due in part to the interaction of social categories that are either specially created for the occasion or else give dramatic expression to a pre-existing corporate character. The main offices and categories with which we are concerned here may be outlined briefly.

As stated above, the head of every household (estate or sub-estate) is referred to as a “monk” (*grwa pa*). In order to avoid confusion with the more familiar application of the term *grwa pa* to mean “celibate renouncer”, I shall designate these householders as “priests”. All priests undergo an initiation that includes a token “hair-cutting” (*skra bcad*), and some will receive a formal religious education, either from an older male relative or a fellow-villager, or from a visiting lama who has taken up long-term residence in the village.

The close interlocking of religious and secular institutions is revealed also in the political structure of the village. All villages in Mustang have one or more headmen who serve for varying periods of time, but usually one year. The term for headman is *rgan pa*. Lubra, too, has two headmen, and their everyday secular role is similar to that of corresponding officials in any neighbouring settlement (collection of taxes and fines, supervision of crops and irrigation, mediation in disputes etc, reception of visiting government officials and so forth). In Lubra however, the headmen are called not *rgan pa* but *spyi pa*, “Steward”. The name relates to the fact that their main role is regarded as being ceremonial. Each of the twenty or so ceremonies in the ritual calendar has one or two stewards who serve, by rotation, only for the duration of that ceremony. The great *mDos rgyab* ceremony has two Stewards, and it is they who occupy the role of village headmen for a duration of one year.

It is immediately after the *mDos rgyab* ceremony that the new headmen are appointed and the old ones depart from office.

5. The temple, the kitchen, and the women

The door of the village temple faces south onto a small, partially covered courtyard. On the south side of the courtyard is the communal kitchen, *chang mdzod*, literally “beer-repository”.

The most salient opposition that pervades the festival is between these two spaces and the people associated with them.

On the fifteenth day of the month - the day of the full moon, when the main *gtor ma* are placed on the altar - the men gather in the kitchen to select the officials. First, dice are rolled to choose the “head cook” (*thab dpon*). The Cook and the two

Stewards constitute the team that is responsible for preparing and serving the food and beer throughout the ceremony.

The two oldest priests then appoint two officials known as *mchod dpon*. Because the latter are the main dancers, and must take care of all the dancing equipment (masks, robes etc.) they are also called '*cham dpon*. For the sake of convenience I shall refer to them as "Dance-masters". The Dance-masters are for the temple what the Stewards are for the kitchen – the managers and representatives of the priests when dealing with other groups during the course of the festival. The priests also have their own officials – such as a precentor (*dbu mdzad*) and proctor (*chos khrims pa*) - who hold office for varying periods on a rotational basis, but these are not specific to the *mDos rgyab*.

A group that displays its distinctive identity on this occasion is the society of Housemistresses (*khyim ba mo*); that is to say, the assembly that comprises the senior woman of each estate. This group is responsible for the production of certain types of food, most notably the three hundred pieces of fried bread that are prepared as part of the *tshogs* on the eighteenth day, but also has an important ceremonial function during the festival.

6. Food and drink

Outsiders - whether Westerners or Tibetans - who visit Lubra on the occasion of religious ceremonies have been known to comment unfavourably on the apparent disorder of the proceedings, as well as the quantities of alcohol consumed. It may be pointed out, by way of defence, that the seeming chaos actually masks a very elaborate order that is invisible only because it is unfamiliar to observers acquainted with more refined monastic environments. This may be illustrated by a brief discussion of the way in which the provision of food and beer is organised.

Three meals a day are eaten in the temple. For the morning meal the family of each priest brings to the kitchen a quantity of buckwheat flour and some vegetables or meat for the sauce. The Cook and Stewards collect the ingredients and prepare the meal for the priests. The afternoon and evening meals, by contrast, are provided individual estates on a rotational basis. On the evening of the 15th, one of the Dance-masters rolls dice within the temple to determine at which estate the circuit should begin. The number of meals to be provided by the estates exceeds the number of estates. If the circuit is completed with meals still outstanding, a second roster is not begun, but the food is prepared instead by collective contributions: each estate gives two or three **drudra* (about a litre - see fn. 4) of buckwheat flour, and the sauce is contributed by the Stewards.

In fact this situation does not usually arise, because several meals are also offered by private individuals, either from Lubra or from neighbouring villages, who wish to generate merit through their patronage. A private patron takes

precedence over an estate on the roster, and the interruption of the sequence at various points means that the circuit is rarely completed.

Far more complex than the provision of food to the priests is the reciprocal distribution of consecrated food to the lay community. Apart from a single large *tshogs* that is divided up among the priests and their households each night (except on the 19th, when the exorcism itself takes place), the breaking up, reconstitution and apportionment of the main *gtor ma* at the end of the festival is a highly complicated affair. The bodies of certain effigies - notably *zhi ba* and *khro bo* - are kneaded together, and moulded into new shapes of various sizes, some with red dye and some with butter ornamentation. Exactly what an individual is entitled to receive at the end depends on his or her temporary or long-term status: that is, according to whether one is, say, the precentor, an ordinary priest, the patron of a meal, a non-contributing spectator from a neighbouring village, or a child.

The preparation and distribution of alcohol is also a precisely-regulated affair. Beer (*chang*, honorific *chab ka*, lit. "water") is made from two-row barley (**cika*) to which a certain amount of six-row barley (*nas*) or wheat (*gro*) may be added to improve the quality. Two-row barley is not grown in Lubra but is purchased from villages further south, at lower altitude. The grain is boiled and spread out on cane mats to cool, following which yeast (*phabs*) is added and the mixture stored for about ten days in large earthenware fermenting jars. Within the last decade or so these jars have been replaced by PVC drums, which are rented from individual householders with community funds. If beer is required for household consumption, to be drunk in small quantities, water may be added to a few handfuls of the fermented grain (*glum*) and the mixture mashed by hand in a sieve. The beer which is pressed through the sieve is thick, sweet and not particularly strong. This variety of beer is referred to as **tsemo* (possibly *tser mo*). **Tsemo* is made by the Stewards at certain points during the *mDos rgyab*: they rise at three o'clock in the morning of the sixteenth day to sieve and warm a special morning treat for the priests; and on the 20th day, a special type of white **tsemo*, made from fermented rice, features in the ceremony for the changeover of Stewards (see below).

But the greater part of the beer, as on most festive occasions, is the kind that is generically referred to as *sngo chang*. Water is added directly to the grain in the fermenting jar and left for up to a week. The beer which is drawn off at the end of this period is the best and strongest which may be obtained by this process, and is known as *khowa* (probably *khu ba*). The jar is refilled with water, and the beer that is drawn off after one day is called *nyingkhu* (probably *rnying khu*, "old *khu ba*"). The jar is again refilled but the water, instead of being left to acquire greater alcoholic potency, is tapped immediately and the somewhat weaker result is called **yalong martsa* (either *yar blugs mar btsags*, "poured in at the top and drawn off below", or, more likely, *yang blugs mar btsags*, "poured in again and drawn off below"). Water is again added, left for a day, and drawn as *bar chang*, "middle (quality) beer". The process is repeated and the mildly alcoholic drink obtained on

the following day is called *gsum chang*, “third(-rate) beer”. Water is added for a last time and the thin, sour beer is aptly named *siu* (probably *se-bo*, meaning “grey”). The lees (*sbang ma*), containing hardly any goodness, are dried and used for feeding cattle and dogs and for cleaning pots and pans.

Contrary to appearances, beer-drinking does not go on at random: beer is brought into the temple and served only during certain breaks (*mtshams*) in the liturgy; furthermore, the Stewards mix the beer in such a way as to avoid a steady decline in quality from the strongest *khu ba* at the beginning to unpalatable *se bo* at the end. Too much *khu ba* at the outset would, in any case, render the priests incapable of reciting any liturgy at all.

One jar of beer that is prepared with special attention is the *phud chang*, the “first-offering beer”. This is made from 18 *zo ba* (around 9 litres) of dry grain; while the grain is being boiled by the Stewards, well before the *mDos rgyab* begins, a purifying juniper fire (*bsang*) must simultaneously burn nearby. A sprig of juniper is then attached to the jar in which the must is stored. The drawing of the first beer from this jar on the 15th day is accompanied by burning of incense, and the Steward who unplugs the jar must cover his face with a white cloth to keep the beer from being sullied by his breath.

The very first use of the beer is related to the future prosperity of the village. To the left of the altar, on the ground, stands a clay pot of a size and shape called *rdza ma *driu*. On the altar itself is a bowl made from the cranium of a lama named bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma, a prominent member of Lubra's Glo-bo chos-tsong clan, who died about a century ago. Inside the bowl, clearly visible on the bone, is a miraculously-manifested white letter A. The skull and the clay pot are both filled with “first-offering beer” to the brim by the Stewards. On top of the beer a layer of melted butter is then poured. This cools to form a hard lid a few millimetres thick.

The two containers are covered with *kha btags* and left undisturbed until the 20th day. The butter disks are then removed from the surface of the two vessels and examined by the senior priests. From the contours of the uneven under-surface of the butter an expert eye can read the auspices (*rtags pa*) concerning the quality of the wheat and buckwheat harvest in the coming year, the health of the livestock, the risks to groups of people in the community (pregnant women, children, the elderly and so on), and the likelihood of natural hazards.

To return to the 15th day: after the divinatory vessels have been filled, the remaining *phud chang* is served to the priests in the temple. Significantly - and exceptionally - the beer is served not by the Stewards but by the Dance-masters.

Another important “side-ritual” involving beer that is performed on a number of occasions during the festival is the *g-yang rdzas*, a term which may be glossed as “requisites for the propensity to good fortune”. The central feature of this rite is the *g-yang rdzas* itself: this is a brass drinking-bowl, full of beer, and decorated around its rim with butter-ornaments. The design of this ornamentation differs for each of the several performances, but the main motif is always the *bya ru*, the

“bird-horns” associated with the *khyung*, the mythological eagle sacred to the Bonpos.

gYang rdzas are performed by different groups of people - such as the Stewards and the Housemistresses - over the course of the *mDos rgyab*. One performance is described in some detail below.

7. Ritualised joking

A distinctive aspect of the “secular ritual” associated with the festival is the formal joking that takes place at certain occasions. Insofar as they are ritualised, the occasions are by no means spontaneous, but they do allow the protagonists opportunities for the display of sharp-witted repartee. Literacy in Tibetan society commands a sort of solemn respect; among unlettered villagers, however, eloquence and cunning are the hallmark of recognisable brilliance, a type of intelligence that is pitted against - and usually gets the better of - bookish learning in many folktales.

A few examples of this sort of jousting may be cited. On the night of the 15th, after the first *g-yang rdzas* has been performed, there is an interlude known as *zhal 'debs* in which the Stewards go from one priest to the next with a large pan of beer. This is the first occasion on which the priests will have drunk any of the *sngo chang* prepared by the Stewards, and the gist of the exchange is that the latter must overcome the feigned unwillingness of the priests to drink. The joke operates on several levels. One level is the straightforward rivalry between the kitchen and the temple: the priests' reluctance implies that the Stewards are incapable of producing good beer. The priests also express their coyness by assuming the role of Tibetan lamas, and the puritanical attitude the latter sometimes display towards the bibulous proclivities of Himalayan highlanders. The anxieties of the priests are caricatured by the desire to be reassured that the beer really is “the blessing (*byin rlabs*) of bKra-shis rgyal-mtshan”, the founder of Lubra. The implication is underlined by the fact the language in which the exchanges are carried on is Central Tibetan, and not the very different local dialect. The Stewards, in turn, attempt to persuade their guests of the excellent qualities of their beer, and following the reticence they encounter even make as if to pour it into the conches and trumpets lying on the low tables in front of the priests.

Once the Stewards have managed to persuade the priests to taste the beer, the latter drink three large cups without any further persuasion.

Throughout the festival there is an ongoing opposition between the kitchen and the Housemistresses, which is in many respects just an extension of the idiom of sexually suggestive banter that informs much of the everyday interaction between men and women. On the 18th day, the two youngest Housemistresses don their ceremonial garb - a shawl worn over their normal daily clothes, and the **shule* (a

long felt strip bearing large turquoises, corals, as well as gold and silver ornaments, worn along the middle of the head and down the back) - and visit the kitchen and the temple to beg for, respectively, beer and oil. In the first case they have to “persuade” the Stewards to give them three measures of beer in a special copper jug¹⁵). They then enter the temple and request the senior Dance-master to provide them with oil. A great deal of humorous insistence and refusal is exchanged before the Dance-master grudgingly parts with three small flasks (**phulu*, a special measure) of oil.

The Housemistresses use the oil to fry disks of bread (*khu ra*) in one of the estates, according to a roster that applies for women’s gatherings. A minimum of three hundred pieces are made. (The wheat-flour used does not come from the general contributions of grain, but from part of the yield of a communally-owned field, named Arkazhing.) The two youngest Housemistresses take several pieces of bread and take them back to the kitchen and temple, where they give them to the Stewards and Dance-masters in exchange for more oil and beer, accompanied by a great deal of bargaining. When they have left, the two Dance-masters visit the Housemistresses with a basket to count out and collect the three hundred pieces of bread they require for redistribution in the temple at a later stage, mainly for the final *tshogs*. This is yet another occasion for formalised joking between the two parties. The importance of these seemingly marginal episodes for the festive atmosphere of the *mdos rgyab* should not be underestimated: each group will later comment on the rhetorical skills that the other has demonstrated in the course of the exchanges.

The humorous interludes in the *mdos rgyab* include a certain amount of slapstick, largely for the entertainment of the public. Some performances would be recognisable to anyone who is familiar with other examples of *'cham* in the Bon or Buddhist traditions. On the afternoon of the 19th day, shortly before the *sbyin sreg* fire ritual, and the disposal of the *mdos* and the *glud* at the boundary of the settlement, *'cham* is performed in the courtyard between the temple and the kitchen, with all the Lubragpas and numerous visitors from other villagers as spectators. The cast of dancers includes several well-known figures who provide light entertainment: the monkey and the rabbit; the two deer; Hwashang and his small flock of children, who are menaced by the brigand Jag-pa me-len and saved by the intervention of a goddess, and so on.

It is clear, however, that certain other entertaining interpolations in the *mDos rgyab* are drawn from the collective experience, as well as the mythology, of Lubra. A few examples may be considered here.

On the sixteenth night, the *'cham* dancing inside the temple is interrupted by two characters, poorly dressed in tattered robes, wearing masks with wretched features and carrying staffs and begging bowls. These stand in front of the priests and the crowd of women and children clustered inside the door, performing parodies of Tibetan songs, and begging for alms in Central Tibetan dialect. Some

members of the crowd give them beer and tsampa, which inevitably leads to an inebriated flour-fight. The next character to enter is Lama Dzuki (Bla-ma Jogi), naked except for a loincloth, smeared in ash, carrying a pair of iron tongs and a gourd, and wearing a mask representing an Indian sadhu. He, too, moves among the people in the temple, begging in Hindi, making obscene gestures with his tongs and asking for the way to Muktinath. Now both these characters - Tibetan mendicants and Indian pilgrims - are more or less familiar figures in Lubra. The Hindu shrine of Muktinath is located in the valley immediately to the north, and Indian pilgrims periodically miss the trail and find themselves in Lubra.

Contrary to the case of, say, Central Tibet, New Year (the term “Lo-gsar” is not even used in Southern Mustang) is not a particularly important occasion, and much of the symbolism of cyclic renewal is evident on the occasion of the *mdos rgyab* itself. One aspect of this theme is the re-enactment of the founding of the village. In the historical outline of Lubra presented above it was said that the founding lineage, the Ya-ngal, had come to an end but that the estate and all its property had been inherited by an illegitimate boy. The latter lineage is now in its fifth generation, and it is the present heir who plays a key role in certain procedures connected with the subjugation of the earth and the repulsion of evil. When two “black-hat” dancers join the other characters on the 18th day, this priest, named Tshul-khrims, is invariably one of them: the main activity of the black-hat dancers is, of course, the “taming of the earth” (*sa 'dul*). We have already seen that a part of Lubra’s priestly heritage is represented on the altar in the form of the skull of the Lama bsTan-'dzin nyi-ma. To go back to a much earlier phase in the legend of the village, it will be remembered that when Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan, the father of Lubra’s founder, was on his way to meet his lama Rong rTog-med zhig-po, one of his distinguishing features was the *phur pa* that was worn through his belt. A large *phur pa* that is said to be the very same one, now in the possession of Tshul-khrims, stands on the altar during the *mdos rgyab* ceremony. When the *mdos* and the *glud* are taken to the edge of the village on the 19th evening and destroyed, Tshul-khrims flings a series of “bombs” (*zor*) in the direction of the enemies, and then performs a “repulsion” (*zlog pa*) by brandishing this dagger. The main *genius loci* of Lubra was the demon sKye-rang skrag-med, whom the founder of the village defeated in a battle and bound with an oath to protect the Bon religion and the community. As the village protector, sKye-rang skrag-med is present during the ceremony: a *gtor ma*, representing him, stands on an iron tripod on the altar; on the afternoon of the 19th, when dancers representing the four main Bon protectors (*bon skyong*) appear in the courtyard, they are assisted in the task of killing and dismembering a *glud* effigy by a fifth dancer wearing the mask of sKye-rang skrag-med.

Mention has already been made of the opposition between the respectively “sacred” and “profane” spaces of the temple and the kitchen. In a particularly interesting dramatic episode, this opposition is explicitly associated with the

mythic antagonism between the founder-lama and the autochthonous place gods. On the evening of the 18th, the *'cham* dancers from the temple “invade” the kitchen. The dancers comprise: the unmasked senior Lama; the two *sa 'dul* “black-hats”; Khro-bo gTso-mchog mkha'-'gying, represented by the senior Dance-master, appropriately masked; the younger Dance-master, unmasked; up to four (if the number of villagers present permits) “offering goddesses” (*mchod pa'i lha mo*) and an unmasked drummer. After circling the interior of the temple for a while (in an anticlockwise direction) the drummer then leads the group into the kitchen. Inside the kitchen they encounter the Stewards and the Cook who are wearing masks from the temple's collection of props: they represent the place-gods, *gzhi bdag*, and are addressed aggressively by the temple party, who demand to know who they are and where they are from. The dancers pick up handfuls of rice from a bowl placed on the stove, and fling it at the place-gods, exclaiming *phat!* They then recite a short prayer before leaving the kitchen to take their seats in the courtyard, where they await the next phase of the proceedings. The kitchen staff remove their masks and hang them on the wall over the beer-jars. On top of one of the jars is placed one of the small copper plates used by the dancers, a *phur pa* and a sprig of juniper. On the wall behind the jar the mask of Khro-bo himself is set. This arrangement signifies the successful subjugation of the earth-spirits.

The two Stewards and their wives - whom we may for the sake of convenience call the Stewardesses - then emerge from the kitchen with two *g-yang rdzas*, a bowl of rice and a flask of beer. The *g-yang rdzas* are presented by the Stewards to each of the priests (one passes along each of two rows), who sings a verse of a devotional song (*mchod glu*), flicks some of the beer into his mouth and lets it move on to the next priest. Perhaps we can see in this particular *g-yang rdzas* a dramatisation of the reverence that the defeated demon sKye-rang skrag-med and his cohorts are said to have shown for Lubra's founder:

The demon sKye-rang skrag-med and the local genii offered the lama the nectar of three springs, the flowers of three summers and the harvest-fruits of three autumns, and they spoke these words: “O Yogi, whose knowledge and understanding are pure from the beginning, unseparated from the meaning of your unwavering meditation, the cloud of fortified enjoyment-offerings, pray remain in a condition of detached inactivity. O Yogi, who performed Production and Completion in the past, with your own body in the mandala of your tutelary god, bestow your blessing on the five nectars which are the object of desire, and pray accept these [offerings] in order that we may be given both fine and ordinary spiritual powers. O pure Yogi of the three teachings, not divorced from the rules of excellent conduct, pray accept these clean, lovely and attractive offerings as propitiation to exhort us to virtue” (*Ya ngal gdung rabs* fols. 39b-40a).

The dancing then recommences inside the temple. To the right of the altar, on a low table at the base of the lama's throne, is set a triangular clay container (*hom khung*) containing a folded sheet of paper bearing the print of a demon (*ling ga*) daubed with the heart-blood of a yak. This is one of several manifestations of "the enemy" that is to be destroyed. Inside the *hom khung* is a butterlamp or a candle, representing the life of the enemy. During the phase of the '*cham*' that now follows, the dancers make threatening passes at the container with the destructive attributes (*phyag mtshan*) they carry. At this point the masked divinities are joined in the collective effort against the enemy by the kitchen staff, wearing turbans and carrying their own distinctive attributes: the Stewards brandish their beer-ladles and the cook his wooden spatula. They circle the floor in step with the other dancers, making threatening gestures with their implements until, at last, the flame of the enemy is extinguished by a thrust of Khro-bo's dagger.

We have seen that the kitchen staff play the role of place gods; there appears to be a reciprocal piece of role-playing on the following day when the four Bon protectors and sKye-rang skrag-med dance in the courtyard. The attributes that the Bon protectors hold are as follows: Srid-pa rgyal-mo: a *phur pa*; Mi-bdud: a *phur pa*; A-bse: a *rin chen* (a laminate of several metals that are grated, with an attached file, as ingredients of certain ritual mixtures); rGyal-po Nyi-pang-sad: a *phur pa*. sKye-rang skrag-med's attribute is the *phud skyogs*, the small ladle that is used for making libations of beer at the altar.

8. The annual transfer of stewardship

We may conclude this account by drawing attention to the operation the *mDos rgyab* as a focal point for other cyclic activities in the village. We should not take the view that these other events have been "tacked on" to the *mDos rgyab*; seen from the perspective of village religion, all the performances summarised here are components of an elaborate complex associated with destruction and renewal. I shall confine myself to a description of just one of these rites: the ceremony for the transfer of authority from the outgoing Stewards - who are also the headmen of the community - to the new incumbents. The selection itself is made simply according to the sequence of the village roster. The ceremony is performed on the night on the 20th, and involves some complex choreography and beer-symbolism.

The arrangement of the seating is as follows. Perpendicular to the altar are two rows of seats and low tables: the "right row" (*g-yas gral*), which is to the right as one faces the altar, and the "left row" (*g-yon gral*). On a throne to the right of the altar, and therefore at the head of the right row, sits the Lama, who, at the present time, is a resident non-native reincarnation. The senior, literate priests are seated mainly in the right row. The left row comprises mainly non-literate priests, but

includes a more shifting occupancy on this occasion. Behind the left row, along the left wall, sit the Housemistresses.

The incoming Stewards must be consecrated before the old ones retire. Rituals attending the annual transfer of headmanship in Mustang vary considerably from village to village, but there seems to be a universal principle that communities should not be left technically leaderless even for a few minutes.

By the pillar at the lower end of the left row are two large pans of beer. One is *sngo chang* of the variety known as **yalong martsa*, and is yellowish in colour. In the context of this ceremony, this beer is named **yang gyab* (perhaps *g-yang rgyab*?). The other contains sieve-mashed beer, **tsemo*, made of rice, and is white. It stands on an iron tripod wound about with white wool or, failing that, white *kha btags*, to conceal the inauspicious blackness of the iron. This white beer is called A-bse, after the Bon protector of that name. A small amount of butter from the hardened butter-lids of the two divinatory vessels (which have been removed earlier in the day) are scraped into the two pans as a blessing.

Four *g-yang rdzas* are prepared: two for the outgoing Stewards and Stewardesses, and two for their incoming counterparts. The butter decorations – made with butter ornaments of both the *khro bo* and *zhi ba gtor ma* blended together – are different in each case. In the past – as stipulated in the register – four large wooden bowls were used. When I first witnessed this ceremony in 1981 two of the bowls were still in use. These, too, are now cracked and unusable, but they must nevertheless be put on display during the ceremony.

The senior incoming Steward takes a seat in the left row. The senior Dance-master, wearing the **ertig*, the striped shawl of tantric priests, over his shoulders, and on his head a *dkar zhwa*, the “white hat” of the Bonpos, approaches him carrying a large lump of slate. He stikes the wooden floor with the rock three times, then holds in front of the Steward a *g-yang rdzas* bowl, while the Dance-master’s assistant presents a ceremonial wooden flask of beer. With the small ladle (*phud skyogs*) the Steward takes three helpings of beer from the flask and pours it into the *g-yang rdzas*. (The beer in the *g-yang rdzas* is the yellow **yang gyab*.) At the same time, the younger Dance-master and an assistant approach the senior incoming Stewardess and and carry out the same procedure with a different rock and *g-yang rdzas*. After the Steward and Stewardess have poured the beer from the flask into the *g-yang rdzas* they each sing: the men sing a verse from the type of song called *mchod glu* (“offering song”), which consists essentially of praises to places, gods and saints sacred to the Bon tradition. One verse may serve as an example:

bde chen rgyal po kun bzang rgyal ba 'dus /
mi brjed gzungs ldan shes rab smra ba'i seng /
'dzam gling bon gyi gtsug rgyan mnyam med pa /
shes rab rgyal mtshan zhabs la gsol ba 'debs /

Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa is the king of great peace;
 sMra-ba'i seng-ge is the wisdom that has the *dharani* of non-forgetting;
 Homage to the feet of Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan,
 The unrivalled crown-ornament of Bon in the world!

Kun-bzang rgyal-ba 'dus-pa is the divinity who is represented by the benign (*zhi ba*) *gtor ma* on the altar. sMra-ba'i seng-ge corresponds both functionally and iconographically to the Buddhist Mañjuśrī, while mNyam-med Shes-rab rgyal-mtshan is the well-known Bon reformer who straddled the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

The women sing *g-yang rdzas* songs, which are musically more complex (and, it must be said, more beautiful), and concerned with more “profane” themes. One of the verses runs as follows:

spang kha sngo thing ches song /
'bri mo dang ra bsgrigs song /
'bri mar ser po ma na /
bya ru btsugs pa mi 'dug /

The bright-green pasture stretches far;
 The corrals of the yak-cows are neatly arrayed;
 The bird-horns that are set [on the *g-yang rdzas* bowl]
 Are of nothing less than yellow yak-cow butter.

(“*Ma na*” in the third line is the local dialect form for the more familiar *ma gtogs* or *ma zad*.) The Steward begins his song only slightly before the Stewardess, so most of the two songs are sung simultaneously. The Steward rises first and goes to the Lama, preceded by the Dance-master and followed by the latter’s assistant. The butter decorations on the *gtor ma* of the two *yi dam* include motifs called *gser gyi nyi zla*, “golden suns and moons”; these consist of superimposed disks of butter, diminishing in size as they ascend and coloured (from base to apex) white, red, white and black. A number of these have been removed from the *gtor ma* and set on a plate by the Lama. The latter moistens one of these in the beer of the *g-yang rdzas* and presses it onto the Steward’s head. The Steward then returns to his place, while the Stewardess receives a similar anointment by the lama.

When he is seated again, the Steward makes the following gestures with the beer: three ladlefuls from the flask to the *g-yang rdzas*; three from the *g-yang rdzas* cast into the air; three from the *g-yang rdzas* into his own drinking cup; three from the wooden flask into the *g-yang rdzas*. The Stewardess makes the same actions with her own beer.

The same procedure is then followed for the junior incoming Steward and Stewardess. The Housemistresses then serve the beer to the assembled community,

with calls of “*Yang gyab bzhes!” - “drink *yang gyab!” Then comes the turn of the outgoing Stewards and their wives. The sequence of events is broadly similar, but with the following differences. A-bse (white rice beer), not *yang gyab, is served; when the Dance-masters strike the rock on the ground they call out “*Thar ro, thar ro!*” - “be liberated [from your duties]!” And when the Housemistresses serve the beer to the gathering afterwards they announce it with “A-bse bzhes!”

Conclusion

The description of Lubra’s *mdos rgyab* ceremony given here has made no attempt to be exhaustive, even in discussing the “secular” activities that are so richly interwoven with the liturgical rite. The main aim of the approach adopted here has been to suggest a perspective from which Lamaist ceremonies may be viewed in a village context in order to arrive at a clearer understanding of what religion may signify for ordinary Tibetans. There is a prevailing attitude – which is not confined to early travellers to Tibet – that what passes for religion in villages is just Buddhism or Bon bereft of any redeeming sophistication: turning prayer-wheels, performing circumambulations and prostrations, repeating mantras. Giving due consideration to the social and institutional framework of Lamaist ceremonies, as well as to the apparently banal lay activities that seem to clutter these occasions like so much noise, may reveal an order of complexity that would tell us a great deal about the nature of religion in Tibetan society.

Notes

- 1) The half-estate is a recent addition to the roster, occasioned by the splitting of a household under complex circumstances. The fact that it is a half-estate is manifested largely in an annual alternation between full rights and duties and none at all. Thus if it has a place on the irrigation roster this year and enjoys full water rights, next year it will have no water at all and must use the water left over at the end of the day by other estates.
- 2) The orthography suggested here is provisional: the term occurs in numerous different forms in the documents.
- 3) The romanised transliterations of Tibetan passages cited below present an “improved” reading of the original, with the idiosyncratic spellings that have been replaced inserted afterwards in square brackets [...]. At certain points the original text reproduces local dialect terms or Nepali words for which there is no standard Tibetan spelling. In such cases, as well as instances where the significance of the text is uncertain, the syllables in question have been underlined. Syllables in brackets {...} are words that should be omitted for a better reading. No attempt has been made to “correct” divergences from standard grammar.

- 4) The monetary system employed in the register of temple contributions predates decimalisation. The units are the rupee (*ḍngul*, but occasionally *sgor mo* and *a las*), the half-rupee (*ṭam* or *tram*), the *anna* (*a na*) and the pie or *paisa* (*spe sags*, *pa'i sa*, etc.). Their values are as follows:

R 1 = 2 *ṭam* = 24 *anna* = 96 pice

In spite of the efforts of various rulers to standardise volumetric measures in Mustang, considerable variation is still to be encountered from one village to another. The following values are those which pertain in Lubra:

- a. The *muthi*, a Nepali term which has come to replace the Tibetan form *phul*. It means “handful” and refers to the amount of grain which can be held in the hand with the tips of the fingers touching the palm.
 - b. The uncommon **kwok* or **changdong*, which is generally referred to imply as the **drudra chung ba*, (“lesser **drudra*”), and which is equal to eight *muthi*.
 - c. The true **drudra* or **drudra kha bcad*. **Drudra* may signify *'bru dra* (lit. “grain ladle”); however, since in neighbouring villages there is a similar measure called *zhidra* (Tib. *bzhi dra*), equal to a quarter of a *zo ba* (see below), it is possible that Lubra’s **drudra* was originally one sixth of a *zo ba*, and should therefore be spelt *drug dra*. In any event, because of the uncertainty of their etymology, the terms **drudra* and **changdong* are rendered above in these roughly phonetic forms.
 Note: Except in the tables, words that are presented in this way in the text are preceded by an asterisk, to signify that the spelling is not meant to indicate a Tibetan orthography.
Kha bcad (lit. “mouth-cut”) signifies that the grain in the measure is levelled at the opening with a sweep of the hand, whereas with the **drudra changdong* there is an obvious rim. The **drudra kha bcad* (to which the term **drudra* invariably refers) contains ten *muthi*, and is slightly smaller than the Nepalese *mana*.
 - d. The *zo ba*, somewhat smaller than the Nepalese *pathi*, is equal to four **drudra*.
 - e. The *'bo khal*, equal to twenty *zo ba*.
 - f. The *se khal*, which is the equivalent of thirty *zo ba*. Large quantities of grain are generally expressed in terms of *'bo khal* rather than *se khal*.
- 5) *Ke mi'i* represents the Nepali term *Kami*, “blacksmith”.
- 6) The term for buckwheat, *rgya bra*, is locally pronounced “*gyabre*”.
- 7) The word rendered in the text as *pogs lab* denotes an occasion that is locally pronounced *poblag*. It refers to a ceremony carried out well after the *mDos rgyab* to mark the last in a series of rites - the most important of which is described below - surrounding the transfer of authority from the old to the new Stewards. The etymology that I have tentatively suggested here is a compound of two verbs, *spo ba*, “to change” and *r lab(s) pa*, “to remove”. The latter verb, which Jaeschke cites as a questionable definition from Schlagintweit, does not appear in the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*; another possibility is *brlags*, from *rlog pa*, “to overthrow”.

- 8) Although local documents give several spellings for the village of Dangkardzong, such as Dang-dkar-rdzong, Dang-gar-rdzong *inter al.*, the name frequently appears in this abbreviated form Dang-rdzong.
- 9) An unusual spelling of the village Khyenga, which has no authoritative Tibetan form but is usually rendered Khying-ga, mKhyen-ga *inter al.* in local documents.
- 10) There is no apparent reason why the dByar-ston summer festival should be linked so explicitly with sGom-phug, a small cave temple above Lubra that is associated with the founder of the village. On the fourth day of the festival a brief ceremony takes place at this site, and it is possible that the temple once played a more significant part in the summer festivities.
- 11) In fact this section is now obsolete, for the two Stewards now receive only Rs 4 each in token payment.
- 12) It is possible that *gshe 'brug* is an error for *zhi khro*, in which case the sentence might mean something like: “[There should be] four large *g-yang* [*rdzas* vessels ornamented with] the decorative butter from the *zhi ba* and *khro bo* [*gtor ma*]”.
- 13) *Phyed rgyad* (for *brgyad*, and later spelt *che brgyad*) is apparently meant to represent *cha brgyad*, “one-eighth” (of a rupee), although the context suggests that the sum in question is rather a quarter, i.e., half a *tam*.
- 14) The deadline refers to the elaborate pattern of butter sculptures which form the façade of the two main *yi dam*, in their benign (*zhi ba*) and wrathful (*khro bo*) aspects, that occupy the highest level on the altar. This indicates the night of the fourteenth day of the month.
- 15) Not just any container may be used. The ceremonial dispensing of beer is done from three long-spouted copper jugs called **dzaog* (probably *rdza khog*). The largest is used exclusively for the priests; the middle one for the Housemistresses, and the smallest for *shing chang*, “wood-beer”, the allocation of beer that the Stewards give in exchange for the 10 kg. of firewood that must be provided on the 15th day by every villager aged between 13 and 60.

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