

LADAKH

Culture, History, and Development
between Himalaya and Karakoram

*Edited by Martijn van Beek,
Kristoffer Brix Bertelsen and Poul Pedersen*



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and Poul Pedersen*

*For Henry Osmaston
Ladakh scholar and founder of the IALS.
Geographer, forester, farmer, friend.
Always inspiring.*



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Mountain Deities Among the Nomadic Community of Kharnak (Eastern Ladakh)

Pascale Dollfus

The place and the people¹

The nomadic community of Kharnak² is located on the Chang-thang plateau of eastern Ladakh, bound to the north by the Karakoram range and to the east by the Tibetan Plateau. It is one of three nomadic communities living on the south bank of the Indus River at an average elevation of 4,350m along with the Rupshu-pa and the Korzok-pa.³ In the region where the Kharnak-pa live, there is no lake. The main streams fluctuate considerably in volume in different seasons and are completely frozen in winter. The landscape is mountainous, bare and rugged. Except for a few patches of grassy land confined to the immediate vicinity of springs, vegetation is scarce and is dominated by woody tussock plants. The climate is extreme with great diurnal variations, a harsh winter with heavy snowfall and temperatures fal-

1. Research was financed by UPR 299 (CNRS) to which I belong. It was conducted within the framework of a Franco-Austrian co-operation programme undertaken in 1992 between anthropologists and Tibetologists belonging to the Institute of Ethnology of Vienna University and to three units of the CNRS (URA 1229, UMR 116, UPR 299) under the direction of A.M. Blondeau, A. Gingrich and E. Steinkellner.
2. The inquiries on which this paper is based were mostly conducted during 1996, although some of the facts were collected during two previous stays.
3. The suffix *pa* added to the end of place names indicates a person who comes from that place. Kharnak, written in Tibetan script *mkhar nag* (lit. 'Black Castle'), refers to a ruined fort located on a high spur above one of the nomad's encampments. Rupshu is said to have derived its name from *ru shod* translated either as 'Abundance of Cattle' indicating the sole livelihood of the inhabitants, or as 'Good Bone' referring to its founder. Korzok (*dkor rdzogs/dkor mdzod*) is the name of a monastery (*dkor*: wealth, *rdzogs*: completion or *mdzod*: depository) located in a small village on the shore of the Tshomoriri Lake. Among these three groups, the Rupshu-pa are the only ones who do not practise agriculture and continue to live in tents during the entire year. (See Ahmed 1996: 73-74).

ling to -35°C ; a brief summer, which is pleasantly warm and dry, but with sudden storms.

The community adheres to well-defined territories and within these territories follows a pattern of strict rotation. The migrational patterns are imperative for the survival of the nomadic community whose total income and much of the food domestically consumed is derived solely from herds of sheep, goats and yaks. The livestock are not fed any specially sown fodder plants or grain and survive by grazing on range forage. Because there are no areas where grass grows in winter, the nomads have no reason to migrate very far in one year and minimise travel between the five main encampments, within one-to-two day's walk.

Along with this migration system, the nomads also split their herds to take advantage of the capacity of various grazing grounds and to accommodate the different needs of their livestock. For example, in May sheep and goats leave for satellite camps in Sangtha and Lungmoche (Fig. 1), staffed by family members or hired shepherds. Yaks and horses are set free to roam the high pastures in a series of adjacent valleys. Only the milking 'bri (female yak), she-goats and ewes are kept in the main encampment, Ldad,⁴ which is divided between two localities Dango and Shehyen about 1.5 km apart. The animals are taken out daily to graze.

Since each nomad family expects to live on the same site year after year, the main or secondary encampments contain a number of 'improvements'. For example, each household has a rectangular pit 80 to 100 centimetres deep over which it pitches its tent, a windbreak wall, a small storehouse built of mud bricks or of stones, as well as pens and shelters to house sheep and goats, and sometimes a watermill to grind the barley grown on small patches of land near Lung and Samartse. In Ldad encampments, where the nomads spend five months every year in spring and late autumn, the wealthiest households have constructed small one-room dwellings which are considered more comfortable than tents.

According to the census carried out by L.N.P. (Leh Nutrition Project) in 1993, the community consisted of 67 families with a total population of 363. But since this date more than 25 families have migrated to Choglamsar near Leh in search of educational and medical facilities. There are no low caste artisans (*rigs ngan*), musicians or blacksmiths, nor members of high status,

4. Ldad is mentioned under Kharnak or Kharna in the *Gazetteer* (1992: 491) as follows: 'Lat $33^{\circ}42'$. Long $77^{\circ}20'$ Elev. ?, a small village situated in the Upper Kharnak valley, close to the Yar la.'

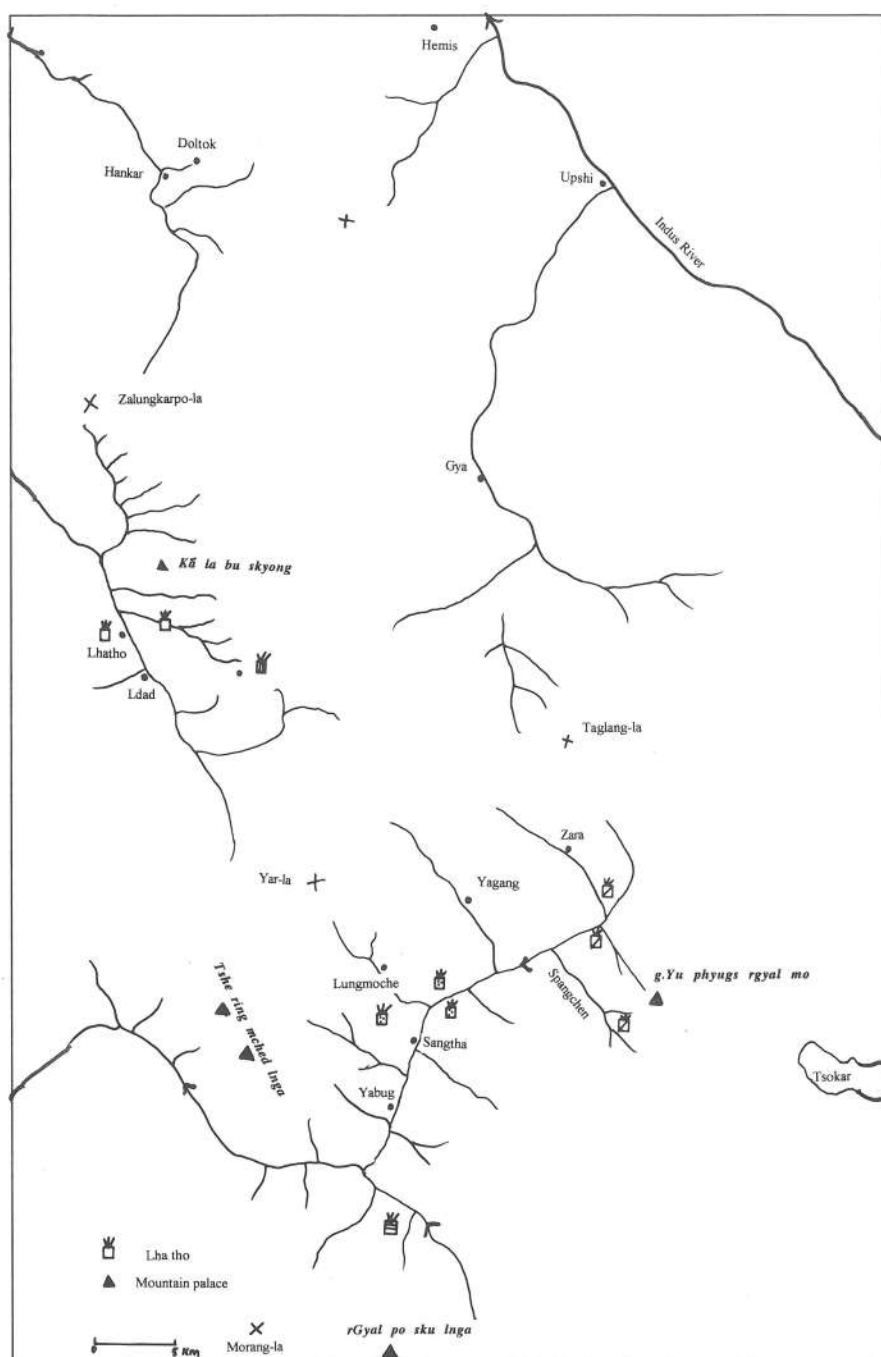


Fig. 1. Location of the mountain deities and the geographical names mentioned in the article.

petty kings (*jo, rgyal po*) or aristocrats (*sku drag*)⁵. The Kharnak-pa speak of themselves as belonging to a single *yul*, a term describing a territory inhabited by a collectivity and constituting a defined geographic reality.⁶ The population — as elsewhere in Ladakh — is divided into *grong pa* (households)⁷ which consist of *khang pa/khang chen* or main houses and *khang chung* or off-shoot houses⁸. But unlike peasants' households, they do not have a housename (*khang pa'i ming/grong pa'i ming*), the name by which a person is referred to in public contexts in Ladakh and Zangskar.

The individuality of a Kharnak nomad is defined by his personal name, suffixed if necessary by his father's name and/or his spouse's name and by the name of the *pha spun* ship. In fact, one also belongs on the patrilineal side to one of the six *pha spun* units, whose members define themselves as sharing the same god *pha lha* (or *phu lha*) and help each other especially at funerals. The *pha lha* sits on a bundle of wooden arrows located inside the tent. By contrast, in the Indus valley or in Zangskar the deity has a shrine which is a small four cornered structure resembling a little house.⁹ Among the Kharnak-pa, the residential dimension of Ladakhi contemporary *pha spun* emphasised by different authors¹⁰ seems irrelevant. When families move far away (for example to Choglamsar) they do not withdraw from their *pha spun* group to join another.

All the Kharnak-pa are Buddhist. They belong to the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa order to which Ldad *dgon pa*, the only monastery situated in the Kharnak area, is affiliated as a Hemis *dgon lag* (lit. 'branch'). It is said that King Sengge rNam rgyal (c.1614-42) presented the whole valley as a land grant for the upkeep of the monasteries under the main 'Brug pa monastery of Hemis built by sTag tshang ras pa under the King's patronage.¹¹

5. There are no *mon* or *beda*, professional musicians of low status, anywhere in the Markha valley nor in Zangskar.

6. In Central Ladakh the term *yul* is usually translated as 'village'.

7. The use of the term 'household' to refer to the inhabitants of a tent may seem strange, however I use it to avoid the neologism 'tenthold'.

8. If these units, representative of sedentary Tibetan society, are commonly used at a local level by nomads of Rupshu to describe their own organisation, this is not the case of pastoral groups studied by Clarke (1992) in northern Tibet.

9. In Zangskar, these *lha tho* are placed in the household shrine room (Crook 1996: 504-505); in the Indus valley they are located on the roofs of houses or outside on a spur in the village vicinity, and often several families may use the same one.

10. See in particular Brauen 1980; Dollfus 1989.



Fig. 2. The monastery of Ldad.

The Kharnak community includes a high percentage of celibate nuns and priests. The former live either with their family or in a hermitage known as mTshams khang located at Yagang (4500m). It comprises a dozen low stone dwellings built very close together. The priests, who call themselves 'lamas' (*bla ma*), are generally *grong pa'i grwa pa*, 'household priests'. They are married for the most part, and live the life of householders, with all that implies.¹² While they do not slaughter animals, they do perform tanning, ear-brand cuttings, moxibustion to cure weak horses, and even ploughing when they own arable land. They dress in the *log pa gon chas*, the nomad's basic garment: a long-sleeved, belted robe with the full fleece facing inside, and except for special ceremonies, do not wear anything distinctive. Theoretically, all of them belong to Hemis monastery, but most have never visited it. They do not belong to priestly lineages but have been trained locally by senior monks or nuns. None of them are posted at village temples in response to the liturgical needs of the laity as is usually the rule elsewhere in Ladakh. On the other hand, the caretaker (*dkon gnyer*) in charge of the monastery of Ldad is a native of Kharnak. The monastery is located several hundred meters above Shehyen in a desolate spot at the foot of some rugged peaks whose harsh shapes are softened by the winter snow.¹³ It is built of mud-brick on a square base, with store-rooms and living quarters for monks (today in decay) surrounding the temples (Fig. 2). Although there are no ancient historical records, people said that it was founded by a 'lama', native of Kharnak, at the beginning of the 18th century on a site blessed by Rin chen bZang po (958-1055), the 'Great Translator'.

The great territorial god and his mountain palace

Bound to the east by the Upshi-Manali road, to the south by the Zangskar range and to the west by the mountains rising above the Markha valley, the territory inhabited by the Kharnak-pa is geographically well delineated. The

11. sTag tshang ras pa ngag dbang rgya mtsho (1574-1651) was an outstanding member of the 'Brug pa order. In 1624 he built the imposing bDe chen rnam rgyal monastery as his residence at Wam le in eastern Ladakh. See Petech 1977: 35 ff.

12. I have never heard them spoken of as *ser khyim pa*, 'yellow (i.e. priest-like) householder', a term used in some parts of Tibet to designate secular clergy.

13. Fraser gives a short description of this monastery in *Himalayan Expedition 1977 Report*. 1979: 96.

entire area is placed under the protection of several local deities referred as *yul lha* (lit. 'deity of a local territory'), or as *yul sa* (lit. 'local land').¹⁴ These deities are clearly associated with snow-capped summits or remarkably shaped peaks known as their 'palace' (*pho brang*) and rule over the territories on which these mountains stand.¹⁵ They have been given specific names and special shrines (*lha tho*)¹⁶ facing their mountain palaces. These 'houses' built by the nomads for their local territorial gods range from small heaps of stones surmounted by twigs with prayer flags to large cubical structures topped with an assortment of branches and arrows tied with a ceremonial scarf or a white sash. They are not erected on a spur, but near busy trails. Each passer-by will add a stone — preferably white — or a 'wind horse' (*rlung rta*) as a gesture of offering. Like many deities and *numina*, mountain gods are ambivalent. How the gods act depends on people's behaviour towards them. They are regularly worshipped — individually or collectively — by the nomads to ensure their benevolence and their help so that prosperity increases and disease spares the cattle. Obviously this occurs even regularly when they are reputed to be very fierce and capable (*drag po*). This is the case of Kāla bu skyong who reigns over the valley watered by a southern tributary of the Zangskar River where Ldad is situated. This great territorial god (*yul lha chen po*) is not only regarded as a mighty protector, but also fervently worshipped as a 'Giver of sons' (*bu sal mkhan*) and for this reason colloquially referred to as 'Kā la - Guardian of sons' (Kā la bu srung) or 'Kā la [giving ?] little boys' (Kā la bu chung).

14. *Yul sa* has the same meaning as *yul lha* in Zangskar and in several Tibetan enclaves of northern Nepal, and it is also attested in bonpo ritual texts (see Riaboff 1996: 26; Karmay 1996: 66-67). As Karmay pointed out: 'The expression [*yul lha*] is often translated by "the god of the country" or "dieu du pays". However, in my opinion, the term *yul* in *yul lha* has the connotation of "local territory" in the sense of a defined locality and not simply "country" as it can often mean'; and later on: 'The process in which the term *yul sa*, "local land", has come to mean "deity of the local territory" as that of *yul lha*, further proves the fact that the concept of the *yul lha* type deity was originally connected with the territorial divisions of the polity of the early clanic society.'

15. As in Tibet where the *yul lha* always seems to be a mountain, more precisely the 'mountain god' of the community which lives at its foot, but unlike Central Ladakh or Zangskar where the *yul lha*, the protector of each village is not (or only occasionally) associated with it. On the subject, see *Reflections of the mountain*, 13 essays on the history and social meaning of the mountain cult in Tibet and the Himalaya edited by A.M. Blondeau and E. Steinkellner.

16. The term *lha tho* is derived from *lha* ('god') and *tho, tho yor* ('cairn').



Fig. 3. The mask of Kā la bu skyong.

The name Kā la evokes *mGon po* ('the Protector', skt. *Mahākāla*), one of the main protective deities of Tibetan Buddhism. However that may be, Kā la bu skyong does not appear in the 72 or 75 forms of the god itemised in the Tibetan texts.¹⁷ Moreover, not one Kharnak-pa refers to him as such. Incidentally, Kā la bu skyong is one of the rare, mundane god ('*jig rten pa*) represented in iconographic form and described in writing. A mask of him (*zhal 'bag*) is kept inside the main temple of Ldad along with old weapons (bows, arrows and matchlock rifles). It shows the god with a fierce aspect,

17. On the group of the *mGon po*, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 38-67. Further on the author states: 'The seventy five *mGon po*: among Tibetan priests one also encounters the opinion, that by this expression not always the various forms of *Mahākāla* are meant, but that this term is a collective appellation of the following six groups of supernatural beings, whose total number, too, makes, seventy-five: *lHa chen brgyad*, "the eight great gods" (...); *Klu chen brgyad*, "the eight great *nāgas*" (...); *gZa' chen brgyad*, "the eight great planetary gods" (...); *rGyu skar nyi shu rtsa brgyad*, "the twenty-eight lunar mansions" (...); *Phyogs skyong bcu*, "the ten *lokāpalas*" (...), *rJe yi mgur lha bcu gsum*, a group of ancient deities which we mentioned in the chapter on the mountain gods'. (op. cit. 265).



Fig. 4. The mountain palace of Kā la bu skyong.

with three faces in different colours (white, blue and red), each possessed by the typical wrathful expression: three protruding eyes and a wide-open mouth contorted by an angry smile (Fig. 3). Furthermore he is depicted in some detail in the 'Golden Libation to the territorial god Kā la bu skyong', a prayer read at the time of the annual worship of the god. The so-called *yul lha'i Kā la bu skyong gser skyems* text is composed of six sheets tied with a ribbon. This booklet is not, however, an original document, but a handwritten copy in standard formal characters (*dbu can*) on the pages of an exercise book. It has no colophon and no date. There is no explanation of the location for the ritual, nor any indication of who should perform it. It is just said that the celebrant has 'to recite the prayer filled with wonder' (*rmad 'byung dgyes pa brjod dgos*).

First Kā la bu skyong is called upon in his peaceful form 'in order to benefit sentient beings in the degenerate age', then invoked 'in his wrathful form in order to subdue evils':

Your unique face radiates lights just as ten hundred autumn moons.
 Your two hands hold a vase of immortal life and a rosary.
 You sit cross-legged in the diamond-posture on a cushion of moon and lotus.
 You possess the ornaments, the dresses, and the primary and secondary marks of the peaceful [deities].
 You hold the Book of the Perfection of Wisdom¹⁸ to guide the sentient beings
 On your face, the lustre of a blossomed smile, sign of compassion.
 You possess the superior knowledge perfectly cleansed of the defilement, which is the divine ornament. (...) ¹⁹
 Knowing without obstruction both *sutra* and *tantra*,
 the nine vehicles clearly appear in the depth of your mind.
 Endowed with the five fore-knowledges, you reveal prophecies. (...)
 You have three heads, six hands, two feet and stand up with arrogance.
 Your right head is white, left red and middle dark blue.
 You eat all the malevolent enemies *dgra* and obstacle-creating demons *dgegs* [*bgegs*]²⁰
 In your three right hands, you hold a iron-hook, a sling-rope and a golden knife.

18. The so-called *Shes rab po ti* is the Prajñāparāmitā, the Perfection of Wisdom Treatise.

19. Omissions are mine. I would like to thank Koncho k Namgyal who assisted me with the Tibetan/Ladakhi/English translation.

20. On the *dgra lha* and *bgegs*, hindering demons who throw obstacles, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975; Beyer 1996.

In your three left hands, you seize a chain of iron, a bell and you drink blood in a skull.

You are adorned with snakes, precious jewels and five dry skulls.

You know the posture of the nine dances and your majesty blaze up as a fire.

You wear the skins of an elephant, a tiger and a man

You know the six hand-gestures and you wear a crown of fresh heads.

You show immeasurable miracles to perform all the desires.

Having completely destroyed the obstacles and enemies of the Doctrine, you dispatch the powerful messengers of lightening and hail.

Standing up in the final fire of the cosmic area.

Kā la bu skyong has his palace (*pho brang*) on a steep, rocky, perfectly triangular black peak, located on the right bank of the aforementioned Zangskar tributary (Fig. 4). His main shrine²¹ is situated below Ldad at an elevation of 4,150 meters in a locality simply called Lhatho (i.e., 'the shrine', 'the altar'). It is a solid square construction of imposing dimensions (about four meters high) made of stones cemented together with a mixture of clay and water, and surmounted by a large bunch of juniper branches and arrows tied up with white, coarse woollen ropes. The erected structure is itself included in a large complex comprising a huge stone prayerwall 140 m², two chortens, some little niches with delicately engraved slates and six flag-poles (*dar chen*) (Fig. 5).

The *dGe-rtsa* ceremony

The god is collectively worshipped once a year in late May or early June just before the departure of the nomads to the summer encampments on the other side of the Yar-la pass. The ritual takes place on the fifteenth day of the fourth Tibetan month during one of the main social and religious events for Kharnak-pa called *dGe rtsa* (lit. 'the root of virtue') and intended to generate merit. The *dGe rtsa* ceremony is held in the temple of Ldad and lasts five days. It brings together people scattered in different camps and involves all the native lamas of Kharnak. They were 13 in 1996. That year none of the nuns attended the ceremony because they were performing the fasting rite (*smyung gnas*) in the hermitage of Yagang during the same period.

21. Most of the mountain gods worshipped by the Kharnak-pa have two or more *lha tho*, erected on both sides of the valley or on both slopes of the deities' mountain palaces.



Fig. 5. The altar dedicated to Kā la bu skyong at Lhatho.

Five lay stewards (*gnyer pa*) are appointed every year in rotation (*res*) among *khang chen* householders to prepare and carry out the ceremony. They are responsible for collecting contributions from each main house. Each household has to give one pound of butter, five *bati* barley (1 *bati* = 1.9 kg), a condensed-milk tin full of dried cheese (*chur ra*) and some *le na*, the fine undercoat of pashmina goats, which if sold in the Leh market will allow the purchase of additional goods such as tea, rice, spices, mustard oil for butter lamps, ceremonial scarves and cotton for prayer flags. Moreover, the *gnyer pa*'s households have to provide one goat or one sheep for meat.

On the tenth day of the fourth Tibetan month, late in the afternoon, monks and lay *gnyer pa* meet in the monastery. They thoroughly sweep the main temple, unroll the painted scrolls kept on shelves, clean and fill dozens and dozens of butter-lamps and store the supplies in the kitchen rooms nearby. Then the lamas place various offerings and different kinds of sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma*)²² on the altar. The following days (11th, 12th, 13th and 14th) they

22. On *gtor ma* (shape, symbolism of the ornaments and functions), see Büttler 1996.

perform religious ceremonies (*sku rim*) and chant scriptures in the temple. About ten men known as the *chos sil mkhan skya bo* (lit. 'lay readers of sacred texts') assist them in the second task, reading the sacred books outside in the courtyard.

The 15th is a very great day commemorating the Enlightenment of the Lord Buddha as well as his death and attainment of *nirvana*. On this auspicious day the people of Kharnak come in large numbers to visit the temple. The first women arrive at the gate of the monastery around 11 a.m. They are dressed up in their finery, which includes red woollen shawls decorated with simple but striking designs, sheepskin cloaks, rectangular in shape, the outside layer made of brightly coloured cloth, and the Tibetan-style leather and embroidered felt boot. They also wear the head-dress of Ladakh (*pe rag*), comprising numerous pieces of turquoise sewn onto a wide strip of leather and felt. Before entering they briefly circumambulate the site. Afterwards they perform prostrations, recite prayers, light butter lamps and make offerings inside the main temple. This 'great time' (*dus chen*) provides the ideal occasion to have a set of 'wind-horse' prints consecrated, since the appropriate auspicious conditions have already been generated. It is also an opportunity to commission the reading of scriptures to secure prosperity and luck for one's household. Some people give 20 rupees, others one 100 or more. As Ramble²³ points out:

Although there is no material evidence for the greater merit which he acquires over a small investor — someone who donates one hundred rupees does not have ten times more butter-lamps lit for him than a man who gives ten rupees, nor is there any sense in which a corresponding quantity of *gtor ma* and other paraphernalia 'belong' to him — it is understood that his more substantial contribution earns him a proportionately larger share of the merit generated by the ritual.

Before returning home the pilgrims sit in the courtyard and eat some rice soup (*'bras thug*) to which meat and dried cheese are added; it is served to them by the stewards. The men come separately to pay their respects to the temples. Those literate enough participate in the reading of the scriptures and at incidental meals served during intervals.

While some *gnyer pa* give food to pilgrims, lay-readers and lamas, others whitewash the temple walls and the mast support in the courtyard, the

23. 1984: 332.

chortens and the prayer-wheel housing built in the vicinity. Finally they renew the big banners and the prayer-flags hung over the roof of the temple.

The renewal of the altar of Kā la bu skyong

At the same time, a local lama and his assistant, a man chosen from the lay stewards in charge of the *dge rtsa* ceremony, are performing the annual renewal of the altar of Kā la bu skyong which is a one-hour's walk from the monastery. Leading a donkey laden with juniper twigs, food, prayer flags, banners, yak tails, and ritual objects (such as a mirror, a flask, a bell, a thunderbolt and offering bowls), the two men reach the shrine at Lhatho around 11 a.m. Once the *gnyer pa* has arrived, he lights a fire and fetches some water to boil tea and *pa ba* (flour of roasted barley and peas cooked slowly in water). Some juniper leaves with *g/bsur*, a powdery mixture of butter and flour, is burnt to render the ritual suitable. Meanwhile, the lama fills four big yak horns adorning the shrine with beer offerings and decorates their brims with lumps of butter, an edible product which is regarded as an auspicious and supreme food. Next he starts preparing the altar with 'the full garland of the outer-offerings' (offering water, foot-bath, flowers, incense, a lamp, perfume and food), several ritual cakes (*gtor ma*) moulded out of roasted barley-flour and water, and small pieces of meat. These *gtor ma* are simple cones of dough, left white,²⁴ with only a few decorations of butter (sun, moon, and squiggle). Some represent a deity, others serve as an offering to one.

The first group consists of: Jag men (*alias* Jag pa me len),²⁵ a protective deity of the 'Brug pa order; Padmasambhava with his retinue; and the 'Lord of the place' or *gzhi bdag* (lit. 'owner of the base'), in so far as the name of Kā la bu skyong is not clearly expressed. The second group comprises food cakes (*zhal zas*) and round, white 'offering-morsels' (*bshos bu*). Later on the lama mixes some more flour, but this time with beer in order to make a large and cone-shaped cake known as *tshogs*. It represents an assemblage of food offerings and will be distributed at the end of the day to all villagers as blessed food. Having carried out these arrangements, the priest takes off his

24. The colour of the main body of the *gtor ma* varies with the deity. White is usually associated with peaceful deities, red with wrathful deities.

25. Jag pa me len, well-known in Bhutan under the name dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len, is said to have been subdued by the seventh hierarch of the 'Brug pa school when he visited the region of Thimphu. He is one of the chief mountain deities of the country. For more on this god, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 242; Pommaret 1996: 44.



Fig. 6. The lama performing the cult to Kā la bu skyong.

cap and covers his *snam bu gon byas* — the woollen homespun coat worn by all villagers in Ladakh — with the red stole of Buddhist monks. Then he begins to read the texts described below and performs appropriate rituals. The so-called *bsangs dpe bkra shis re skyong* is a common ritual text of the 'Brug pa tradition. It sets the framework for the fumigation ritual (*bsangs*)²⁶ in which the 'Golden Libation' (*gser skyems*) specifically dedicated to Kā la bu skyong is included. The god and his retinue are invited to accept the 'golden beverage' and the 'healing nectar' offered to them. The text evokes the desired results to be gained through offerings and prayers: to have all one's wishes fulfilled. More precisely, it enumerates the granting of the powerful attainment of immortality which confers the power under life, the powerful attainment of unceasing wealth, the powerful attainment of cattle and the powerful attainment which fulfils all wishes. It ends with the call to

26. On the significance of the *bsang* ritual, 'a purification ritual in relation to men and men's social and religious duties towards their local deities', see Karmay 1995.

crush to dust every hindrance inflicting damage on the religion of Buddha, and to thrust all kinds of diseases, afflictions, and evil spirits on enemies:

Reduce to a speck of dust within a minute
and whatever they are the obstacles
who harm the Buddha's Doctrine and the Community
Raise their conscious mind to the unborn *dharmādhātu*,
Dismiss on enemies the *ma mo*²⁷ and all kind of diseases and epidemics
Dismiss on enemies the 404 kinds of illness
Dismiss on enemies the 360 *bdon* [*gdon*] demons
Dismiss on enemies the 80,000 obstacle-creating demons *dgegs* [*bgegs*]
Dismiss on enemies the 81 bad omens (*ltas ngan*)
Dismiss on enemies all the terrible accidents.
May the wishes of the *yogi* be fulfilled'.

All this is recited in the first person by the lama who acts as a mediator between the community and the divine world (Fig. 6).

A new ritual arrow (*mda'* 'dzar), carved of wood, 60 centimeters long, bound with ceremonial scarves and dotted with small pieces of auspicious butter (*yar*), is placed in the bundle on top of the altar along with a big branch of juniper gathered in the deep gorge downstream. As Karmay (1994: 117) points out: 'The arrow is a man's symbol and the ritual gesture of planting it in the cairn places each man who does so under the mountain divinity's protection'. The ritual continues with purification by water (*khrus*) and by fumigation (*bsangs*). It concludes with the general offerings to the gods (*tshogs*) and the dedication of prayer flags. Later on, after a break during which they eat some *pa ba* with meat stock, the two men hang new yak tails and banners on flag poles, and sew dozens of 'wind-horses' onto the ropes stretched in between. All these objects have been given by the villagers (*yul pa*) for whose benefit the ritual is celebrated, but who do not attend. In fact in 1996, only three men (apart from the celebrant and his assistant) were present to plant an arrow — their arrow — in the *lha tho*.

Ki ki so so lha rgyal lo! This powerful shout proclaiming the victory of the gods over the demons marks the end of the ritual. The men swallow a last

27. *ma mo* are a class of ancient Tibetan goddesses depicted as ugly and ferocious females. They are being held responsible for epidemics called *dal yams*. Nebesky-Wojtkowitz 1975: 269-73.



Fig. 7. The altar dedicated to the Tshe ring mched lnga facing their mountain palace.

cup of tea, collect their paraphernalia and return to Ldad, where they arrive around 4 p.m. in time to partake of a bowl of rice soup with the last pilgrims of the day, the shepherds just back from the pasture. At Lhatho, the crows and ravens, locally nicknamed *gtor rgyas*, those which delight in *gtor ma*, rush at the remains of the offerings left on the altar or scattered around. Their arrival in great numbers is regarded as an auspicious sign (*bkra shis rtags*), a widespread view held among peoples of Tibetan culture. In Ringmo (Dolpo, Nepal) for example, 'it is said that during or after the ritual birds will come for a few days to pick up the remains of the offerings. If they fail to come, this means that the *yul lha* is dissatisfied and the ritual should be repeated'.²⁸

28. Hazod 1996: 97. Hazod also points out that, 'in Tibet birds are often considered to be messengers of the mountain gods and have also played a role as "setters of omen" in divination since ancient times'.

Tshe ring mched lnga, rGyal po sku lnga and g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo

As previously noted Kā la bu skyong is not the only territorial god revered in Kharnak. In fact, the inhabitants also worship Tshe ring mched lnga, rGyal po sku lnga and g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo; each *yul lha* is linked with a specific mountain and a relevant territory. Unfortunately, I have not witnessed any cult to them. Consequently, what follows is based only upon what people have told me.

By contrast to Kā la bu skyong, both Tshe ring mched lnga and rGyal po sku lnga are well-known groups of deities, venerated throughout Tibet and among peoples of Tibetan culture beyond its border. The Tshe ring mched lnga, the 'five long-lived sisters', are among the numerous deities belonging to the train of dPal ldan dmag zor remati. As Nebesky-Wojkowitz states:²⁹

[they] are ancient Tibetan deities who are said to have been defeated by Padma-sambhava. They were then, having been bound by an oath, incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.

According to various sources the Tshe ring mched lnga are located either on the massif of Jo mo Tshe ring ma or La phyi gangs on the border of Nepal and Tibet; or on the summit of a mountain named A 'bur sbar lung in the A myes rma chen range in north-eastern Tibet. In addition, bKra shis tshe ring ma, the most important of the five sisters, is also said to have her abode on Mount Jo mo lHa ri in north-western Bhutan.³⁰

In Kharnak, the five goddesses reside on a very impressive massif rising above the bed of the Zara River (fig. 7). When people speak of the Tshe ring mched lnga, they only describe the leader's group. Tshe ring ma is said to be very powerful. She is dressed in white and rides on a white lioness with a turquoise mane. She has two hands. In her right hand she holds a thunderbolt, in her left, a flask full of *amrita*. The above description is in accordance with the iconographic compendium known as the *Rin 'byung* and various bKa' rgyud pa works.³¹

The five long-lived sisters' main shrine is built between Yagang and Sangtha opposite their mountain palace on the right bank of the stream. It is similar in size and intricate structure to the altar dedicated to Kā la bu

29. 1975: 177.

30. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 177; Huber 1997: 241, Pommaret 1996: 51, Buffetrille 1997: 108.

31. Quoted by Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 177 ff.

I beg the powerful attainment which guarantees the success
of every kind of business.

Despite my questions, I obtained very little information on rGyal po sku lnga and g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo. Curiously, these territorial gods are commonly judged (on what basis?) less efficient than Kā la bu skyong and the Tshe ring mched lnga, and therefore less attractive. Their shrines are not distinct from the votive cairns erected on mountain tops and passes to the anonymous *lha*: those piles of stones in which two or three branches are inserted bearing flags. Furthermore, while everyone knows which mountain is their respective residence, no informant was able to remember the date of the great communal cult (if any) or to provide me any specific *gser skyems* or *gsol kha* (prayers).

rGyal po sku lnga's palace and shrine are both located above Yabug on the way to the Morang-la pass leading to south-eastern Zangskar. In spite of the collective name which could be translated as 'the five gods (or kings) of the body', rGyal po sku lnga is revered as a sole god. People describe him as a male conqueror dressed like a king. In Tibetan Buddhism, the group of the sKu lnga is led by 'King' Pe har or dPe dkar, who is one of the most important religious protectors in Tibet; its origin and the spelling of its name are debatable.⁴⁰

g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo, the 'Turquoise Cattle Queen', as far as this spelling is correct,⁴¹ resides on a snowy summit culminating at 6000 metres above sea level. Her abode, a trapezoidal-shaped mountain which dominates Sherol and Spangchen, is known as her tent or *gur*⁴² (Fig. 8). The deity is worshipped during the fifth and the sixth month, when nomads camp in the surroundings.

Further research is necessary. Nevertheless, though my data are incomplete and sometimes very scarce, I would like to outline the features of the 'territorial god' (*yul lha*) in Kharnak and contrast them with what is known elsewhere in Ladakh and in the rest of the Tibetan world.

By contrast to Central Ladakh and to some extent Zangskar, where the *yul lha*, the protector of each village is exceptionally associated with a mountain;

40. It would require a great deal of space to examine all the material on Pe har and his companions. See among others Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 94-133; Spanien 1977-78: 1143; Tucci, 1949, 2: 736

41. The spelling of the name is not uniform.

42. Note that the Kharnak-pa always refer to the yak hair tents in which they live as *re bo* or *ri bo* and never as *gur*.

territorial gods in Kharnak are believed to reside on mountains known as their palace or their tent; and thus may be considered as mountain deities.

They share, like most local deities, a volatile temper, which people often compare with that of a child, moody and greedy. That is why, as Pommaret⁴³ clearly emphasised, 'yearly worship is necessary to renew the personal relationship between a person or a community and the deity, placate its fierce aspect and ensure the protection of its benevolent aspect'.⁴⁴

Obviously the nomads on their own do not address the deities with the words written in the invocations quoted above, nevertheless, the aims they pursue are identical. They can be summarised as follows: protecting men and cattle from disease, sudden calamities and dispute, securing welfare and happiness, and in the specific case of Kā la bu skyong, bestowing a child.

As it happens throughout the Tibetan area, only men take part in the ritual at the *lha tho*. When a woman has a request to make she prays to the god at home, and if necessary she sends one of her relatives, a man, to plant a dedicated arrow in the cairn.

Mountain deities not only behave as humans, but are even described as anthropomorphous and never with the heads of fearful animals as is the case for some deities in the Buddhist Pantheon. Some are males, others females. Some are individuals, others constitute a group of deities. Some are famous *chos skyong* or 'protectors of the religion' previously subdued by Padmasambhava or any other great religious master, others are, up to now, unknown in the Tibetan literature available. But none of these deities is regarded as an 'ancestor'. No genealogy links the territorial gods to a specific lineage or household. In addition, no relationship (kinship or vassalage) is said to exist among the four *yul lha* of Kharnak, as attested elsewhere, for example in Dolpo (Nepal) where three brothers rule over three neighbouring valleys, the elder being described as the king of the *yul lha* of the whole area.⁴⁵

However, the mountain deities reigning on Kharnak territories are not equal. A hierarchy exists, which is expressed by the size of the house built by the nomads to lodge them, the care with which the so-called *lha tho* are tended, and the fear and the devotion they inspire. But this hierarchy is not

43. 1996: 53.

44. This ambivalent aspect has already been commented upon by Tibetologists and anthropologists, see among others, Tucci 1980: 721 and for ethnographic data Dollfus 1996: 10; Schicklgruber 1996: 121.

45. Hazod 1996: 93.



Fig. 8. The mountain tent of g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo.

based upon criteria such as gender, local or foreign origin, absence or presence of vassals, etc. it is based on the efficacy which the nomads recognise they have. In this way, for reasons still obscure to me, Kā la bu skyong and the group of the Tshe ring mched lnga are locally classified as great *yul lha* and are unanimously said to be fierce, clever and capable, whereas rGyal po sku lnga and g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo are stigmatised as minor *yul lha*.

Today, only a handful of men attend the annual *yul lha* celebration, which is in fact performed for the benefit of the whole community and in many other Tibetan areas is attended by all householders. Moreover, no songs and dances, horse races, nor archery contests, which are characteristic of the meeting of men and gods, conclude it.⁴⁶ Certainly the date of the annual cult is still closely linked with the rhythm of seasonal migrations, but the exact day is chosen in accordance with the Buddhist calendar. Thus in each month, the 8th, the 10th and the 15th are specially devoted to religious observance for the bKa' rgyud pa, and the 15th of the fourth Tibetan month is perhaps the holiest day of the Buddhist calendar. Furthermore, no *lha bdag* (lit. 'master of the god' or 'divine master'),⁴⁷ nor any man with particular genealogical descent is required to carry out the ritual. The celebrant could be any local lama, insofar as he is able to conduct the ceremony.

At this stage of the investigation, due to a lack of historical testimony, I cannot put forward an hypothesis on what the mountain deities cult could have been before (especially in the case of g.Yu phyugs rgyal mo), but Karmay's ideas are certainly interesting 'as time passed, with the influence of Buddhism the early character of a warlike ritual of the mountain cult associated with the political centralisation of territories has been transformed into an ordinary lamaistic offering where the only reason for the existence of the mountain deities is to protect the interests of the people as benefactors (*yon bdag*) of the Buddhist clergy (*mchod gnas*)'.⁴⁸ However, if this is the case, it raises numerous questions with regard to what was indeed the situation of the nomads who, because of their peripheral location and their distinctive lifestyle, were believed to have been isolated from the centralisation process which took place elsewhere in the Kingdom of Ladakh during the rNam rgyal dynasty (c. 1470-1846).

46. These contests, songs and dances are attested in many places during the course of mountain cults.

47. The term *lha bdag* or *lha bdag pa* used in Ladakh as in Lahul, where it designates the hereditary officiant of the cult of the village deity, is also attested to in ancient Tibetan texts of fumigation rituals (*bsangs*). See Karmay 1994: 177-78.

48. Karmay 1996: 70.

It would also be worth determining more accurately the relationships between the Kharnak-pa and the people living in the bordering areas beyond Taglang-la, Morang-la and Zalungkarpo-la passes, with whom they still maintain close economic and matrimonial ties; and who moreover worship the same deities (i.e. Kā la bu skyong, rGyal po sku lnga and Tshe ring mched lnga) as *yul lha* or as *pha lha*.⁴⁹

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49. In the Markha valley, according to Fraser, the name of the *yul lha* for Hankar and Kaya settlements is 'Kurgyal' (sKu rgyal shortly for rGyal po sku lnga), for Markha, Omlung and Doltok it is "Tshering chenga" (Tshe ring mched lnga). Moreover Kurgyal is the name of the *pha lha/pho lha* of a *pha spun* gathering households of Markha, Omlung and Hankar. In Zangskar, rGya po sku lnga is one of the *yul lha* of Zangla and Padum and 'Ka la pi skyong/shong' (Kā la bu skyong?) has a *lha tho* in Pishu (Riaboff, personal communication).

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