

ESTATE AND DEITIES: A RITUAL FROM CENTRAL BHUTAN.  
THE *BSKANG GSO* OF O RGYAN CHOS GLING<sup>1</sup>

FRANÇOISE POMMARET

INTRODUCTION

The O rgyan chos gling estate in the Stang valley of Bum thang (central Bhutan) is associated with great Tibetan masters. Klong chen rab 'byams (1308-1363) meditated here and it was one of the residences of Rdo rje gling pa (1346-1405).<sup>2</sup> The family that owns the estate, and has done for generations, considers itself as one of his blood descendants.

In the 19th century, the estate and the family became powerful and prosperous. The head of the lineage Mtsho skyes rdo rje, alias Dbang chen, became the governor (*dpon slob*) of Tongsa dzong (Krong gsar Chos 'khor rab brtan rtse rdzong) and the *de facto* leader of Bhutan.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the marital alliances between the Rdo rje gling pa lineage and the descendants of Padma gling pa (1450-1521), the other great lay-practitioner and treasure discoverer of Bumthang, increased the religious prestige of the O rgyan chos gling family. Thus, Ye shes, the daughter of Mtsho skyes rdo rje, married 'Phrin las, the son of Gtam zhing chos rje.<sup>4</sup> Their son O rgyan rdo rje became the Bya dkar rdzong dpon, that is to say the head of the Bumthang district, and between 1900 and 1902 he rebuilt the family residence, which had been damaged by

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is part of a series that will be published in the years to come on the estate of O rgyan chos gling. A book destined to a wider audience will also be published at a later stage with Kunzang Choden.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Kunzang Choden and her family, who enthusiastically helped me with the research on their estate, as well as all the villagers of O rgyan chos gling. Please see also Kunzang Choden's article in this volume.

This fieldwork, which is spread over several years, would not be possible without the financial assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, via the French Embassy in Delhi, which supports my History and Social Sciences programme with the University of Bhutan. All photographs are by Françoise Pommaret.

<sup>2</sup> For Rdo rje gling pa's activities in Bhutan, see Karmay 2000.

<sup>3</sup> I will not elaborate here on the history of Bhutan in the 19th century. See Aris 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Descendant of Padma gling pa (1450-1521).

the 1897 earthquake. His paternal uncle was the 8th Pad gling *Gsung sprul* Kun bzang bstan pa'i nyi ma (1843-1891) and his son was Thub rtan dpal 'bar, the 9th Pad gling *Thug sras* (1906-1939).<sup>5</sup>

Today the estate is still in the hands of the same family, which belongs to the *chos rgyud gdung rgyud* class. In Bhutan, traditionally, families do not have names, but the collective term of *chos rgyud gdung rgyud* is applied to the social strata to which families who have both a religious and noble lineage belong. This position in a traditional feudal society implied a certain number of rights and duties that still survive today in spite of major social and economic changes in the country. Since the 1960s, without any formal or spoken agreement, the villagers and the *chos rje* family,<sup>6</sup> conscious of their respective leverage powers, have manoeuvred within their socio-religious and economic spaces. They constantly negotiate compromises between the traditional and the modern socio-political structures, progressing by consensus rather than confrontation.

Testimonies of the feudal and religious set-up typical of central Bhutan come to light during the annual festival of the *bskang gso*, which takes place in the autumn in O rgyan chos gling, from the 8th to the 10th day of the 9th month. In this paper a presentation of the ritual will serve as a background to explore, in the context of central Bhutan, elements of the social and religious organisation at the estate when the performance of the *bskang gso* ritual takes place.

#### O RGYAN CHOS GLING: A SHORT PRESENTATION

At the top of a hillock with a commanding view of the Stang valley, O rgyan chos gling is composed of a large manor and twenty houses, which form the village (Figure 1). Before the abolition of serfdom in 1953 and the 3rd King's (1928-1972) land reorganisation in the mid-1950s, the village was inhabited by serfs who worked for the very large

<sup>5</sup> On the relations between the Bumthang noble families and the reincarnated lamas of the Pad gling lineages, see Pommaret, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> In Bhutan the title *chos rje* is given to descendants of a prestigious lay-practitioner and it also implies generally the possession of a temple and of an estate (*gzhis ka*). It therefore may also carry an economic connotation, depending on the size of the estate, and before the advent of the monarchy, a local political power. In today's Bhutan, the title *chos rje* is still prestigious and is the term by which the O rgyan chos gling family is referred.

*chos rje* estate. Most of them stayed on after the abolition of their low status. They farm their land, own some cattle and still work occasionally for the *chos rje* family for daily wages.<sup>7</sup> Even prior to the 1950s, several Tibetans came down from Lho brag to O rgyan chos gling and married with local people, but, in fact, the practice of intermarriage with people from this region of Tibet may go back to a much more distant past.

The manor is one of the finest examples of civil architecture in Bhutan and as a *chos rje* family residence it is referred to by the term *sngags tshang*, although in this case it is also called a *rdzong*. At the centre of the manor is a tower (*dbu rtse*), which faces east and which is used for grain storage, as well as having residential spaces and a temple dedicated to Amitayus on the top floor.<sup>8</sup> In the courtyard on the north side of the central tower there is a small pavilion that was used by dancers and musicians when there was a *tshes bcu* festival; it is today converted into rooms for family guests. Still on the north side and opening to the south is a large two-storeyed building called the *Jokhang*: on the ground floor is a large Tara temple and a room containing a large prayer-wheel; on the first floor there is a small temple to Vajrasattva and a large temple to the Jo bo, as well as a *mgon khang* dedicated to Mgon po Ma ning and the local deities of O rgyan chos gling. The courtyard contains several chorten and a large *klu khang*. The whole complex is enclosed by a high wall, which, on the east and south sides, supports residential quarters and storerooms, the *shag skor*. The main entrance to the complex is on the east side and faces the village. On the north-eastern side, just outside the wall between the manor and the village, stands a tall prayer-flag, the *lha dar*, which is the focal point for a large part of the ritual.

#### THE *BSKANG GSO* RITUAL

The liturgical aspect of the ritual will not be examined in too much detail in this paper. Here I would like to examine the ritual as a community event linked to the territory and revealing socio-religious structures. Life in O rgyan chos gling is shaped by numerous rituals but the

<sup>7</sup> The socio-economic situation of O rgyan chos gling will be examined in another paper, which will also deal with the rank order and etiquette.

<sup>8</sup> Since May 2001, the central tower has been converted by the family into a museum depicting the life in a noble house before the 1960s.



*bskang gso* is the most important of all as it brings together, inside the manor, the *chos rje* family and the villagers in a long and complex ceremony, the organisation of which is the responsibility and duty of the *chos rje* family. Nowadays the ritual called *bskang gso* has become complex. In fact, it combines two ceremonies that existed separately before the 1970s, but during subsequent years, for socio-economic reasons, the lay-practitioners were disbanded, the power of O rgyan chos gling declined and the two ceremonies had to be merged into one, held from the 8th to the 10th day of the 9th month. Prior to this period, there was a *tshes bcu* ceremony with masked dances in the 9th month, and a *bskang gso* in the 10th month.<sup>9</sup> The blending of these two rituals into one explains why it was, at the beginning, very hard to comprehend the ritual.<sup>10</sup>

The *bskang gso* (a short form of the expression *thugs dam bskang ba nyams pa gso ba*) is generally described as a ritual of propitiation dedicated to tutelary deities and is not a ritual that finds its origin in India.<sup>11</sup> A. Spanien-Macdonald elaborated on its meaning and her definition applies perfectly to our ritual as we will see: “Réaliser les vœux de la divinité par les offrandes et renouveler le serment (établi jadis par un lama du passé et le dieu).”<sup>12</sup> The syllable *so* is important as it belongs to the semantic group meaning “to feed, to restore, to come back to life”.<sup>13</sup>

Although the date of the ritual’s introduction in O rgyan chos gling is not known, the texts used during the liturgy are by Rdo rje gling pa. The two main texts are the *Bla ma bka’ ’dus rin chen gter spungs kyi las byang*, which, in the past, was read at the *tshes bcu* ceremony, and the *Dpal Mgon po Ma ning srog gi shu tri’i las byang*, which was read at the *bskang gso* ritual.

<sup>9</sup> At the occasion of the *bskang gso* a yak was sacrificed but the custom was stopped by a member of the family, lama Nus ldan, in the 1950s when he came back from Smin grol gling in Tibet.

<sup>10</sup> It is known that a *bskang ba* is sometimes a part of a more elaborate ceremony, see Canzio 1988: 162.

<sup>11</sup> Riccardo Canzio writes, “Les *bskang-ba* ou les *bskang gso* sont des rituels apparemment typiques de la religion tibétaine; on ne trouve pas de rites similaires dans le bouddhisme indien. Ils s’adressent aux *dam-can*, les divinités locales soumises par des arts magiques et réinstallées comme protectrices et gardiennes de la religion. Nous avons affaire ici à des entités appartenant au fonds mythologique pré-bouddhique” (1988: 159).

<sup>12</sup> Spanien-Macdonald (1991-1992).

<sup>13</sup> Stein 1971: 484.

In O rgyan chos gling the *bskang gso* is dedicated to Mahākāla Mgon po Ma ning who was the protective deity of Rdo rje gling pa and became his descendants' deity. He is called *chos srung* by the people. On the same occasion, all the deities of O rgyan chos gling that are considered to be part of the retinue of Mgon po Ma ning are also worshipped and presented with offerings. Short texts dedicated to them and composed by Rdo rje gling pa and his descendants are included in the recitation. Some of these deities, such as Sku bla mkha' ri and Jo bo bla bdag, came from Tibet with Rdo rje gling pa and other lamas. Others, however, are indigenous, such as Shar btsan who came from eastern Bhutan with a wife for the lord in the 19th century, or Skyes bu lung btsan, the deity of Bumthang Chos 'khor who was incorporated because of O rgyan Rdo rje, who was the Bya dkar *dzong dpon* in the early 20th century. Indrabhūti is especially revered because he is the deity of the territory (*gnas po*) of O rgyan chos gling. All are now considered to be local deities and at the same time make up the 'khor or 'entourage' of Mgon po Ma ning; their offering cakes (*gtor ma*) are placed symmetrically on each side of the *gtor ma* of Mgon po on the altar.<sup>14</sup>

I will not elaborate here on the deities but I must mention that Mgon po Ma ning and the deities in his entourage are perceived in O rgyan chos gling as its protectors, with a clear hierarchical rank, but are also considered to be deities of the territory. For the people, the large number of ravens in O rgyan chos gling is a sure sign of the protection of Mgon po, as they are associated with this deity. The line distinguishing between protectors and local deities is, in the context of O rgyan chos gling, blurred as Balikci notes it for the cult to Kang chen mdzod Inga in Sikkim.<sup>15</sup>

The religious ceremony is performed by ten to fifteen lay-practitioners, to whom must be added the family and the villagers who also play an important role. The fact that most of the lay-practitioners come either from village families or are related to them adds to the social cohesion and allows an easy interaction.

<sup>14</sup> These deities are Ekajati, Gza', Srog bdud, Dam can (= Rdo rje legs pa in this case), Lha mo, Nam sras, Rgyal po (= Pe dkar in this case), Sku bla mkha' ri, *Gnas po* Indrabhūti, Jo bo la bdag, Dgon dkar klu dud Grags pa rgyal mtshan, Bstan ma bcu gnyis.

<sup>15</sup> Balikci-Denjongpa 2002: 20, 22, 33.

The lay-practitioners belong to the different religious categories that are found in Bhutan. Most of them are called *sgom chen*, the term for lay-practitioners in Bhutan, from the village or the surrounding areas. Ordained monks, called *dge slong* in Bhutan, also come if they are available. Finally, Pad gling Thugs sras rin po che, who is a *dge slong*, usually presides over the ritual. All belong to the Rnying ma school, except the *dbu mdzad*, who is an ex-monk (called *dge bskrad* in Dzongkha) of the 'Brug pa school. All the practitioners are paid by the *chos rje* family, which also provides food for them, except for the 2nd day of the ritual when the lunch is provided by the villagers.

The ritual appears as a juxtaposition of events and ceremonies that take place inside the Jo bo lha khang and outside near the prayer flag, and in the courtyard. When events take place outside, the religious ceremony inside the temple stops. The *chos rje* family and the villagers view the ritual as a structured ceremony and the most important event of local life. It must be carried out as correctly as possible so that the deities are propitiated. The presence of a reincarnate lama is recommended and highly regarded. Great attention is paid to the order of events and to the strict execution of the liturgy (recitation of the texts, musical parts, offerings, blessings).

However, in reality, while every event happens in the end as it should according to the 'tradition' and the "actors know their part", it is preceded and paralleled 'backstage' by utter disorganisation: there are years when for some reason the lay-practitioners may not be available, or the *rin po che* has gone away, the texts are not in order and the young lay-practitioners are desperately looking for the right passages to read; the musicians do not follow the same musical tradition; it rains and the outside events have to be shortened or moved inside the temple;<sup>16</sup> meat is not available for the offerings and the meals, even though meat and entrails are essential, especially for Mgon po's offerings, and it has to be brought all the way from Thimphu; the man who performs the dance to Mgon po has to go away on official duty, without mentioning the omens that may appear during the ritual and which have to be interpreted as positively as possible.

Therefore, until each element of the *bskang gso* is effectively—and seemingly miraculously—accomplished, there is a flurry of activities,

<sup>16</sup> This happened in October 1999, when there was a typhoon on Bangladesh, it rained continuously for three days.



tempers are frayed, and this is compounded by the large amount of alcohol (*a rag*) consumed by both men and women, including most of the lay-practitioners who perform the ritual. The feeling of relief of all parties when the three days are over is obvious: “Everything went well so the deities will bless O rgyan chos gling for the year to come.” The elements of the ritual, the scenario, have been correctly carried out so that the deities are content and this is what really matters.

It is the observance of the code or scenario that gives the ritual value and efficiency. Inside the framework of the scenario, the script itself is being written by the actors and can be changed or evolved according to external circumstances or the influence of a lama. This ritual could therefore be defined as a ‘fluid codification’. There could be different ways to describe the ritual, in a chronological order for example. But after witnessing the full process three times, I have come to the conclusion that its description would be best arrived at if it is presented according to the places where the activities take place. It establishes a kind of continuum in the ritual, while a simple ‘day-wise’ presentation would add to its complexity and would not bring out its specificities.

### *1. Ceremonies inside the Jo bo lha khang*

The lay-practitioners sit in two rows perpendicular to the altar; some of them are musicians (four oboes, four drums, four bone trumpets, one conch). The *rin po che*, the *rdo rje slob dpon*, the *dbu mdzad* holding the cymbals, and the musicians playing the long trumpets sit with their backs to the window and face the altar, an arrangement that is different from many central Tibetan temples (Figure 6). The sacristan is called the *mchod dpon* and he is a lay-practitioner from the village of O rgyan chos gling who carries out his duty very seriously. He has to co-ordinate the ceremony, perform parts of it, and also help the young lay-practitioners find the right page of the texts when they are lost.

The altar (Figure 3) is stacked with *gtor ma*, which have been prepared by three or four lay-practitioners the day before in the Vajrasattva *lha khang* as well as on the landing of the first floor. There are two rows of *gtor ma*: the upper one consists of three elaborate *gtor ma* made according to the *bla ma bka' 'dus* that represent the *yi dam*, the *bla ma* and the *mkha' 'gro*; the lower row has a large *gtor ma* of Mgon po Ma ning in the centre and, on each side, eleven smaller *gtor ma* represent-

ing the protective deities of O rgyan chos gling, each different from the other and well-identified.<sup>17</sup> On the side of the altar, near the arrow of good fortune (*mda' dar*), there is a large *gtor ma* adorned with animal *tsakali*. This is the *dbang gtor* of Mgon po Ma ning, the one that is filled by the ritual with the power of the deity. Dozens of smaller cakes, which are food for the deities and called simply *bag tshogs* are placed in front of the larger cakes.

On each of the three days the ceremony is the same, that is to say, repeated, and on the evening of the third day it is held on a grander scale. The repetition of the ceremony for three days brings more merit and blessing. In the 1970s it had been reduced to one day by *Drag shos* O rgyan dbang 'dus, but after his death in 1988, *Drag shos* O rgyan rig 'dzin (*alias* Denma), his nephew and co-owner of the estate, reintroduced the three-day ceremony in 1990.

The ceremony starts before dawn, at about 4 a.m. The lay-practitioners read the *Bla ma bka' 'dus* text and stop just before the food offering (*tshogs*) sequence. Around 9 a.m., they have a twenty-minute rest. They then resume the ceremony, performing what they call the *chos srung* (Ma ning) *bskang gso* and they must reach the passage regarding Indrabhūti, the *gnas polgzhi bdag* of O rgyan chos gling, at lunch time, which is about 12:30 p.m.

The lay-practitioners are the first to take their lunch in the courtyard and they sit in two rows facing each other and in a strict order. In the afternoon, the ceremony consists of offering food to the deities. It is a long sequence because, for economic reasons, the food offerings are made at the same time for the *tshes bcu* ritual with the *bla ma bka' 'dus* text, and for the *bskang gso* with the Mgon po chos srung text. This probably explains why there is no separate food-offering sequence in the morning. The ceremony concludes around 4:30 p.m. with the taking of the food offerings (*dngos grub*) and a recitation of the *bkra shis smon lam* text.

<sup>17</sup> This set-up is common in the Tibetan world. See, for example, Balikci 2002: 27-8, "Looking at the Nesol altar and its inherent hierarchy, the top row represents the tantric deities who stands for Buddhism's highest and purest form which from the villagers' point of view is best understood and dealt with by the learned lamas of the monasteries and the Tibetan rinpoches. The second row of *torma* for the local deities and protectors of Sikkim as a whole are associate with the village lamas since they are the most important and tangible high deities of the land from a Sikkimese villager's perspective."



In the evening, the sacristan brings plates of *dn̄gos grub* offerings to the *chos rje* family. The family takes part of it and then sends the rest to the helpers working in the people's kitchen and cooking for the lay-practitioners. These helpers come from the village and are fed and paid for their services.

On the third day, the ceremony in the temple starts at 1 a.m. because most of the liturgy has to be completed by lunch time, as in the afternoon important elements of the ritual take place in the courtyard.

The ending of the ceremony takes place once the afternoon events in the courtyard are over and lasts from 5 to 7 p.m. It is the *grand finale* of the invocation to Mgon po (*spyān 'dren*), to which everybody in the village tries to come, including the children, and the temple is packed with over one hundred people. The *chos rje* family and their friends or visitors sit on carpets along the eastern wall of the temple, their backs to the *mgon khang*. People from the village sit or stand at the back of the altar, and along the western wall. The sacristan has hardly any space to move about and the brightly lit candles are at risk of being knocked off by people who have had too much to drink.

The ritual resumes at the *dn̄gos grub* sequence. First, everybody offers money to the large wrathful sacrificial cake called Mgon po *bskul gtor*, but before placing the banknote on the plate, people rub it on themselves in order to get rid of all the negative influences and obstacles (*bar chad*) of the year. Once the money is collected, the sacristan sets this *gtor ma* alight and then takes it outside the temple. Then, from all the deities' *gtor ma* on the altar, he takes out only the one representing the Bstan ma *bcu gnyis*.

The sacristan offers scented water (*bdud rtsi*) and alcohol to everybody. This is followed by a prayer for the blessing of a *kapāla* bowl full of scented water and a *kapāla* filled with small pills (*tshe ril dn̄gos grub*). They have been consecrated by the lama presiding over the ritual and distributed to each participant.

Then, the sacristan gives the elaborate food offerings on plates, which have been placed on the altar since the morning, to the lay-practitioners and to each member of the family while the simple food offerings are distributed to the people. The food offerings are not eaten right there and then, but just nibbled at. The people pack the food in a piece of cloth to take back home as blessings for those who could not attend, especially small children and old people. Tea and saffron rice (*'bras*

*sriŀ*) are given to the lay-practitioners, the family and all the people present in the temple. This is followed by alcohol(*a rag*).

Towards the end of the ritual, the *chos rje* family distributes envelopes containing the ritual fees to all the lay-practitioners. The amount of payment is strictly determined by order: the *Rdo rje slob dpon* receives twice what a simple lay-practitioner gets, the choir master one and a half times, and the lama *rin po che* six times as much.

The end of the ritual is signalled by the whole assembly saying the prayer of good auspices (*bkra shis smon lam*), punctuated by rice grains thrown into the air. While the lay-practitioners start to fold their books and pack their instruments, the womenfolk sing religious songs (*mgur*) in the temple. During all this part of the ritual, the atmosphere is solemn and dark. It is night but the temple is lit by hundreds of butter lamps and the lay-practitioners are chanting the liturgy to the accompaniment of all the instruments. The music is deafening and reverberates throughout the village. It is a moment when each participant feels the presence of Mgon po Ma ning. They are intimately linked to the protective deity and to each other as a community belonging to the O rgyan chos gling territory. For the villagers, it is the moment when the ancient allegiance to the *chos rje* family and to their protective deity is renewed. It is through the religious will and economic well-being of the *chos rje* family that the ceremony, which will bring them the protection of the deity, can be performed. For the *chos rje* family, it is a moment when they renew their personal allegiance to Mgon po and the ceremony confers prestige upon them: it demonstrates their religious importance and their socio-economic status to the villagers; it proves their sense of duty towards the inhabitants of the territory by pleasing Mgon po for the benefit of all; it also allows them to redistribute wealth for the well-being of the territory through the offerings, the food, the alcohol and the cash money distributed to the lay-practitioners and to the villagers helping during the ritual.

The economic importance and value of rituals have in the past often been neglected; in the case of O rgyan chos gling, the ritual would be misrepresented if this aspect was not mentioned, if only briefly.

*2. Outdoor events: changing the flag, the procession and the ceremony dedicated to Mgon po*

The first and second days of the ritual are dedicated to the changing of the flags on the roofs, but especially the tall *lha dar* dedicated to Mgon po Ma ning, just outside the manor (Figure 2). It is a major undertaking as the pole (*dar shing*) is more than 30 metres high and a source of, at the same time, great concern and amusement for everybody. It is also the time when the community comes together and when the ancient social categories are revealed.

*First day*

About 9 o'clock in the morning, twenty men arrive from the village and are served tea and snacks. They sit along the central tower. They are the ones who will take down the *lha dar*. Around 10:30 a.m., they move outside the manor and start removing the big stones that form the base and the foundation of the flag-pole. In the meantime, women villagers arrive and position themselves, holding thick ropes, which are used to take down the flag-pole. The ropes are made of rattan and are brought all the way from the region of Skur stod where O rgyan chos ling has land. The ropes are tied to the flag-pole by the head of all the estate workers (*la rgyab*) or somebody who has climbing skills!

There is a row of about ten women on the roof of the building nearest the flag (on the south side), a row in the courtyard (west side), a row in the pasture (east side), and a row of men folk holding the pole with crossed boards on the north side where the weight of the flag-pole is the most difficult to manage. At 11 a.m., once all the stones are cleared, the flag-pole is brought down with great care, held back by the ropes and supported by beams. Two men with a big double-faced cylindrical drum and a gong give the signals while another man shouts \*'shag', 'come'. He is traditionally the *la rgyab*. Nowadays members of the *chos rje* family participate and join any row, but in the olden days they only watched from the windows.

As mentioned earlier, the ritual stops in the temple when the flag-pole is ready to be taken down. Six lay-practitioners climb onto the Jo bo lha khang roof with their musical instruments (*dung*, *rgya gling* and *rol mo*). Wearing special yellow hats (*rtse zhwa*), they play while the



flag-pole goes down. It takes about twenty to thirty minutes to bring the pole to the ground.

Once the pole is on the ground, the flag is detached from it and later burnt. In the afternoon the ceremony carries on in the temple. Near the pole an old man weaves a new bamboo ornament for the top of the pole, other men prepare small poles for the flags that will go on the roofs of the manor, and two clean the long pole with a plane. All the flags are rectangular and of different colours, except the small flag for Mgon po, which is triangular, black and decorated with an eye and a skull. Called *ru dar*, it will be placed on the roof of the *mgon khang*. All the small flags, except the triangular flag of Mgon po, which is put in the *mgon khang*, are placed in front of the main altar for the night. The flags correspond to the deities that are in the *mgon khang* and include Indrabhūti and Sku bla mkha' ri. Inside the manor, the work has started has started on the new 30-metre-long flag. The four auspicious animals are printed from block prints and painted: tiger, snow lion, dragon and garuda, then Avalokishtesvara with eleven heads, and lastly prayers.

### *Second day*

The new bamboo ornament and the flag are fixed to the pole with small wooden nails. The flag is now hoisted in the late morning of the second day (Figure 2).<sup>18</sup> It is the same ceremony as the day before except that erecting the flag-pole is a more difficult task. It takes more than half an hour, with a lot of shouting and pulling. Everybody is placed in the same way as the first day. In the end, the flag-pole should be straight, if not, it is a bad omen for the whole territory. The pole is then secured with the stones, which are placed at its base.

Once the flag is hoisted, a short ceremony of consecration (*rab gnas*) is performed by the lama after lunch. This ceremony can also be performed on the third day. A fire for the fumigation (*bsangs*) with pine branches is lit near the flag. The consecration ends with the ceremony of the *mar chang*, the offering of butter and alcohol to Mgon po.<sup>19</sup> A

<sup>18</sup> The flag was hoisted on the 3rd day of the ritual until the late 1980s when Kro dga' ba rinpoche, a well-know Rnying ma pa lama came from Darjeeling and declared that that day was not auspicious for such an activity as it was a 'ba den khra bo' day in the calendar.

<sup>19</sup> On the *mar chang* ceremony, extremely common in Bhutan and performed in almost all instances as an offering and blessing, see the cremonial manuals: *Sgrigs lam rnam gzhag gi deb ther nor bu'i 'phreng ba* (1999: 205-9); and *Sgrig lam rnam gzhag lag len* (1999: 14-9 and 159-60).

bamboo twig decorated with colourful ribbons is presented to the lama, who blesses it, and then it is stuck at the base of the flag-pole. Called *rab gnas dar shing*, it is dedicated to the deities of O rgyan chos gling in the retinue of Mgon po. Men then shout in Bumthangkha “*Tai ya hi, hi, hi*” the equivalent of the Tibetan “*Ki so so*”. The barley flour that was used during the consecration ritual is placed on the head, the forehead or the neck of everybody, especially the children, as a blessing for long life.

In the afternoon of the same day, seemingly without any further ceremony, the small flags are placed on all the roofs of the manor and Mgon po’s black flag above the *mgon khang*. That evening, helmets, shields, guns and some standards are taken out of the *mgon khang* and placed in front of the altar. The men who will wear these costumes on the third day are considered the servants (*‘changkhab’/ phyag sgar pa*) of the O rgyan chos gling deities. They are villagers who volunteer to take up this role and whose parents have worked for the manor. That evening, on each of the deities’ cakes, the sacristan places a little piece of dried meat.

### *Third day*

There is no outdoor morning activities on the third day but lunch is served early, about 11 o’clock, and the lay-practitioners who started the ceremony in the temple around 1:30 a.m. have finished it.

Around midday, animals arrive: a bull, a cow, a yak and a *’bri* led by the O rgyan chos gling cattle herder’s family, horses and some sheep (Figure 4). Slowly the courtyard fills up with villagers carrying roosters and hens, and O rgyan chos gling mastiffs wear a thick collar made of red yak wool. A small yellow or red ribbon, called *rtan gso srung mdud* (or *\*tenso run ma* in Bumthangkha, “thread for renewing the support”) is attached to the hair or feathers of each animal: it is the mark of its dedication to Mgon po.

The lama presiding over the ritual and the head of the O rgyan chos gling family, accompanied by musicians, go up to the family’s private chapel in the *shag skor* and bring back a box that contains a hat believed to be that of Rdo rje gling pa. When they cross the courtyard to go back to the temple, villagers line up to be blessed on their head with the hat.

While this was taking place, male villagers have gone up into the temple and changed into their warrior outfits. There must be at least eleven, but if there are more of them, they get only parts of costumes. They are headed by a general (*dmag dpon*) who holds the *btsan dar*, a pole with a flag made of multiple ribbons, and wears a thick red wool hat while the warriors wear helmets. As soon as the warriors have gone down to the courtyard, the lama wearing Rdo rje gling pa's hat stands on the throne and, while performing the ritual, watches the events in the courtyard through the window.

In the courtyard, a fire for the fumigation (*bsangs*) is lit. Two horses have been prepared with their best saddles and ornaments: a white mule for *lha mo*, a black stallion with a star mark on the face and on the right leg for Mgon po.<sup>20</sup> Offerings of alcohol are made before them to request the deities to come and ride them. The warriors position themselves in two rows perpendicular to the temple and are surrounded by the villagers. The sacristan, in the middle, first purifies the ground. Then he conducts a ceremony dedicated to Mgon po, centered around the large *gtor ma* decorated with *tsakali*, which is the Mgon po *dbang gtor*. A libation (*gser skyems*) is offered and then a ceremonial offering of alcohol and a prayer empower the flag by the deity (*mar chang*). The *mar chang* is intended to please the protective deities in general and Mgon po in particular, so that people "have peace and good harvest, increased productivity of grain and healthy cattle, and every other auspicious accomplishment. May all wishes be fulfilled."<sup>21</sup> Finally, the *dbang gtor* is taken out of the courtyard by the sacristan and thrown out of the manor. This ceremony is therefore an offering to the deity who then gives his blessing and empowerment to the warriors.

It is followed immediately by the procession around the temple. This is called *rtan gso*, "renewing the support," which implies that it is intended to restore the link with Mgon po for another year. The procession follows this order: lay musicians with double-faced cylindrical drums and a gong, the two horses, the warriors, the yaks and then all the other animals led or carried by the people, then the rest of the villagers, especially those who had babies born that year so that they get blessings from the deities. There are three rounds of the temple and each time the horses and warriors reach the front of the temple, every-

<sup>20</sup> There is also a ram for Dam can Rdo rje legs pa.

<sup>21</sup> *Sgrig lam rnam gzhag lag len* (1999: 159).



body shouts. Until the 1980s, the warriors used to shoot matchlocks, small canons, and guns into the air but this is no longer done nowadays, apparently because the gun powder or bullets are no longer available!

As soon as the procession is over, the warriors resume the same position in two lines and the villagers sit and watch. The general performs a very solemn dance (Figure 5),<sup>22</sup> the steps of which are associated with subjugation or war. He jumps while brandishing his sword and uttering a song that invokes Mgon po. Suddenly, he runs out of the courtyard waving his sword. Then he comes back very calm, and bows down to the temple where Mgon po resides. At the end of this ritual dance his attendant cleans the sword blade on his sleeve before helping him to put it back in the scabbard. Although he is not in a trance, the general himself believes that Mgon po has come and helped him vanquish the enemies, which is quite obvious from the gesture of cleaning the blade when he comes back from outside the manor.

Two lay-practitioners on the roof announce the end of the whole sequence with their long trumpets. It is now time for everybody to go up inside the temple and participate in the last part of the ceremony, which has been described earlier.

#### THE RITUAL AS SOCIAL REVEALER AND IDENTITY MARKER

Beyond the description of the *bskang gso* ritual, I would now like to make some comments that may help in the understanding of the significance of the ritual. The timing of the *bkang gso* in the agricultural year, after the harvest and at the time the cattle migrate to the sub-tropical pastures before the onset of winter, points, of course, to a kind of thanksgiving ceremony. This type of ritual is found all over the Tibetan world under different names.<sup>23</sup> However, if some of the sequences that have been described here are familiar to many scholars of the Tibetan world, their combination is unique to O rgyan chos gling, as each local ritual is unique in the sense that it is dependent on a convergence of local factors. This convergence creates the ritual's specificity in a certain context and becomes a kind of identity marker for the ritual.

<sup>22</sup> This dance is classified as a '*bod 'cham*' in Bhutan, that is a dance by laymen but with a religious meaning.

<sup>23</sup> See Balikci 2002 : 14, who mentions a *bskang gso* ceremony performed among the Lhopo of Sikkim after the harvest.

In O rgyan chos gling, the ritual is neither a monastic ritual nor a domestic one, but presents characteristics of both. Although sponsored mostly by the *chos rje* family, the ritual is not only for the family well-being but also for that of the villagers, the focal point being the propitiation of the protective deity Mgon po. One may argue that the villagers used to be dependent on the family and therefore it was beneficial for the family in the context of a feudal set-up. Plus, today the villagers contribute to the food for the lay-practitioners on the second day. However, it is also true that nowadays no economic reason obliges the family to continue to hold such a grand and expensive ritual. One has to go deeper into the socio-religious organisation and history of the valley to find the explanation.

When the flag is taken down and hoisted up, each family of the village sends at least one representative. There is an old belief that holding the ropes of the *lha dar* cleanses of all the negative influences of the year. The villagers are grouped according to their ancient social status. Thus the women who are on the roof were the servants of the *chos rje* family, and those who are in the pasture were weavers and close servants of the ladies of the *chos rje* family (Bumthangkha: *\*thagma* and *\*armo*). They belonged to the 'drap' (*grwa pa*) category which meant their work for the estate was a tax but they owned their land and house. Those in the courtyard belonged to the 'zap' (*bza' pa*) category of serfs.<sup>24</sup> They owned nothing, came in the morning to get their food for their three meals and then went to work on the estate. The men, who also belonged to these two social categories, were stable boys (*a drung*), cattle and pig herders, water carriers and close servants of the male members of the *chos rje* family.

Although today nobody is obliged to come to the flag ritual and no mention is made of the previous social status, each family nevertheless makes a point of sending a representative, male or female, who automatically knows where he/she should stand. Therefore this ritual goes

<sup>24</sup> (1) The etymology of *\*'drap'*, as it was explained to me, is simply *grwa pa*, 'monk', which seems strange, but as most of these 'drap' were hereditary workers tied to the *chos rje* of central Bhutan, then it is perhaps not so surprising that they were termed 'monks', even though they were ordinary laymen. The form *grwa pa* is contracted in Dzongkha, as usual, to a single syllable *grwap*.

(2) The word *\*'zap'* is perhaps easier to explain. I was told the etymology is *bza' pa*, that is "one who eats [the master's food]". See also Kunzang Choden's article.

Could both categories be considered "serfs" in Western terminology? This is an issue that I will not deal with here.

beyond the socio-economic obligation that I described earlier and to which it could be reduced—for example, in a Marxist perspective. It also demonstrates the strength of belief in the subtle territorial link between the villagers, the *chos rje* family and the deity, which has survived through major socio-economic changes.

This community awareness in the importance of the ritual for its well-being as well as the renewal of allegiances can also be understood through other events than the main ceremony. For example, after the dinner on the last day, the lay-practitioners come up to the kitchen of the *chos rje* family and perform a dance while singing a song to the glory of Rdo rje gling pa and his lineage. This ceremony is called the *Bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan* and the song, the *O rgyan chos gling chos brgyud gdung brgyud gzhas*.<sup>25</sup> All are offered alcohol and snacks.

Also, at the beginning of the fieldwork on the ritual in the 1990s, I was quite surprised to note that this *bskang gso* ritual was not attended by people from other villages in the Stang valley. I was used to the festivals in the *dzongs* where everybody comes from all over the valley, but in the Stang valley, even though people knew about the *bskang gso*, they did not come to attend. I then realised that people did not consider this festival as one that could be watched or briefly attended. It was a festival in which one must participate because it concerned them. For the other villages in the valley, even if they had economic links with O rgyan chos gling in the past, today they would not consider themselves part of its territory and would consider the *bskang gso* as a private function.

After enquiring into which villages around O rgyan chos gling participate, I found out that although some villages were very close, their inhabitants were not present at the ritual and only two villages considered themselves as the same territory and people (*yul gcig, mi gcig*) as O rgyan chos gling: \*Gamling, half an hour's walk down the hill on the western side, and \*Binzibi and its annex \*Shobrang, one and a half hours to the north. I had no time to research the exact ties of these two villages to O rgyan chos gling but they appear to have been populated by people coming from O rgyan chos gling.

A small incident reinforced this hypothesis: recently: outsiders offered gifts to O rgyan chos gling villagers but forgot—simply because

<sup>25</sup> This dance is very similar to the dance called *chos gzhas*, performed at the 'Brug pa tshes bcu to the glory of the Zhabs drung and the 'Brug pa.



they did not know—the other villagers, who were furious and complained they too ‘belonged’ to O rgyan chos gling.

If the ritual reveals the ancient structure with a stratified society based on residence, it also casts light on the territorial divisions of the Stang valley, since villagers considered themselves as direct dependencies of O rgyan chos gling. As the name *bskang gso* indicates, the ritual is an occasion to renew the alliance and the allegiance between the villagers, the *chos rje* family and the main deity with his retinue of lesser deities. It operates on two complementary planes: the deities to which the ritual is dedicated are a link between the *chos rje* family and the villagers and it is the ritual to these common deities that reveals the social coherence and the identity of the territory. As in a household ritual, it provides, through the list of deities worshipped, information on the migrations and alliances of the *chos rje* family; as in a community ritual, it gives the blessings of the same deities to all the households. The prosperity of the *chos rje* household is a guarantee of the prosperity of the villagers. It is interesting to note that in the 1970s when the household was going through difficult times, the villagers did not want to come for the *bskang gso*, as if these difficult times could be interpreted as a sign of anger on the part of Mgon po and the other deities and the villagers were afraid of bringing this anger upon themselves.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally, this study raises the question of the legitimacy of the *chos rje* household to wield power or influence. Economic, religious and political powers were all held together in the same hands in the context of the ancient society as the ritual clearly demonstrates. These powers were given to an ‘elected’ family by the deity because he was pleased. The moment the deity was not pleased—and often it was not because of the behaviour of one member of the household—he withdrew his protection and calamities fell upon the family and, by extension, on the villagers.

In this context, Mgon po really plays the role of a local deity and the good fortune (*g.yang*) of the family is linked to him. It is from this privileged link to the deity, brought by Rdo rje gling pa, the ancestor of the lineage, that the O rgyan chos gling family has legitimacy as *chos rje* to this day and therefore has the right as well as the duty to carry out the

ritual. The importance of a privileged link to a deity, whatever name it may take and in either a Buddhist or non-Buddhist context, has always been a source of the legitimacy of power in the Tibetan world.<sup>26</sup> One of the reasons for the fall of the Tibetan royal dynasty was that the kings no longer believed in the principles that were the sources of their power and legitimacy. The proper execution of appropriate rituals is paramount to the upholding of this link or contract between the two parties.

The ritual reveals the layers of tightly knit relations between religion, politics and the economy in a community of central Bhutan. As in many parts of the Tibetan world, the ritual is important for the identity of the territory and the renewal of allegiances between the protective deity and the *chos rje* family, and between this family and the villagers. It is a thread back to the founder of the lineage and a stamp of authentication for the family, a covenant of well-being for the villagers and it gives to all the feeling of belonging to the same territory, protected by Mgon po Ma ning.

O rgyan chos gling is, to the best of my knowledge, is one of the few, if not the only, estates in the Tibetan and Himalayan world that has survived as the property of the same religious and noble family for five centuries. It has produced statesmen as well as reincarnated lamas, and has adapted to the socio-agrarian reforms of the 1950s in Bhutan and to the development policies of the government. At the same time, it maintains that which produces or provides its cohesion, what we could call its essence, the ritual that is the interface between the different aspects of this small society.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aris, M. 1994. *The Raven Crown*. London: Serindia.
- Balikci-Denjongpa, A. 2002. Kangchen dzö nga: secular and Buddhist perceptions of the mountain deity of Sikkim among the Lhopos. *Bulletin of Tibetology* 38(2), November 2002, 5-38.
- Canzio, R. 1988. Etude d'une cérémonie de propitiation Bonpo – le Nag-zhig bskang-ba: structure et exécution. In A.M. Blondeau and K. Schipper (eds) *Essais sur le Rituel*. Bibliothèque de l'EPHE Science Religieuses, vol. XCII. Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 159-72.
- Karmay, S. and P. Sagant 1999. *Les Neuf Forces de l'Homme: Récits des Confins du Tibet*. Nanterre: Société d'Ethnologie.
- 2000. Dorje Lingpa and his rediscovery of the *Gold Needle* in Bhutan. *Journal of Bhutan Studies* 2(2), Winter 2000, 1-34.

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Karmay and Sagant 1998 and Walsh 1906.

- Pommaret, F. 2003. Historical and religious relations between Lhodrak (Southern Tibet) and Bumthang (Bhutan) from the 18th to the early 20th centuries: preliminary data. In A. McKay (ed.) *Tibet and Her Neighbours. Proceedings of the History of Tibet Conference, St Andrews University 2001*. London : Hansjörg Mayer, 91-106.
- Spanien-Macdonald, A. 1992. Remarques sur le rituel dédié à Pehar. Année 1991-1992. *Annuaire de l'Ecole Pratique des Hautes études*, 4e section, Paris, 251-2.
- Rgyal po'i gzim dpon Rdo rje rgyal mtshan 1999. *Sgrigs lam rnam gzhag gi deb ther nor bu'i 'phreng ba*. Thimphu.
- National Library 1999. *Driglam Namzhag (Bhutanese Etiquette: a Manual) (Sgrig lam rnam gzhag lag len)*. Thimphu: National Library.
- Rdo rje gling pa 1976-1980. *Bla ma bka' 'dus rin chen gter spungs kyi las byang*. Paro: Ngodrup and Sherab Drimay.
- n.d. *Rdo rje gling pa'i 'dod cha*. Reproduced in Kunzang Tobgyel 1984. *Texts of the Rdo rje gling pa Tradition from Bhutan*, vol. 14. Thimphu: Druk Sherig Press.
- Stein, R. 1971. Du récit au rituel dans les manuscrits tibétains de Touen-Houang. *Etudes Tibétaines*. Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve, 479-547.
- Walsh, E.H. 1906. An old form of elective government in the Chumbi Valley. *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 2(7), 303-8.