



Chapters from Life of Tibetans

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Tibetan transliteration system used in this work is the commonly utilized “Extended Wylie Transliteration Scheme” (E.W.T.S.) proposed by The Tibetan & Himalayan Library (T.H.L.), which is based on previous original transliteration scheme designed by Turrell Wylie. All the transliterations are written in italics directly in the text or in (round brackets). Proper names are transcribed accordingly with the capital letters where necessary.

Some commonly known words (e.g. lama, yidam etc.) are used throughout the text without any special formatting mentioned above, including some of the Sanskrit terms (e.g. bodhisattva, siddhi etc.). In the case of transcribing the words of Sanskrit origin, but written down in Tibetan script, we willingly deviate from the E.W.T.S. by using the “International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration” (I.A.S.T.). This applies especially to the anusvāra, visarga, long vowels etc.

All citations are based on the “Chicago Manual of Style 16th edition”. Book and journal titles within the text are written in italics. For Tibetan texts, their corresponding ID number from Buddhist Digital Resource Center (BDRC, formerly TBRC) is also included, if possible. Throughout the whole e-book we have used the curly quotation marks (“ ”) and apostrophes ('). When any precise formulations were taken from their sources, they are clearly distinguished.

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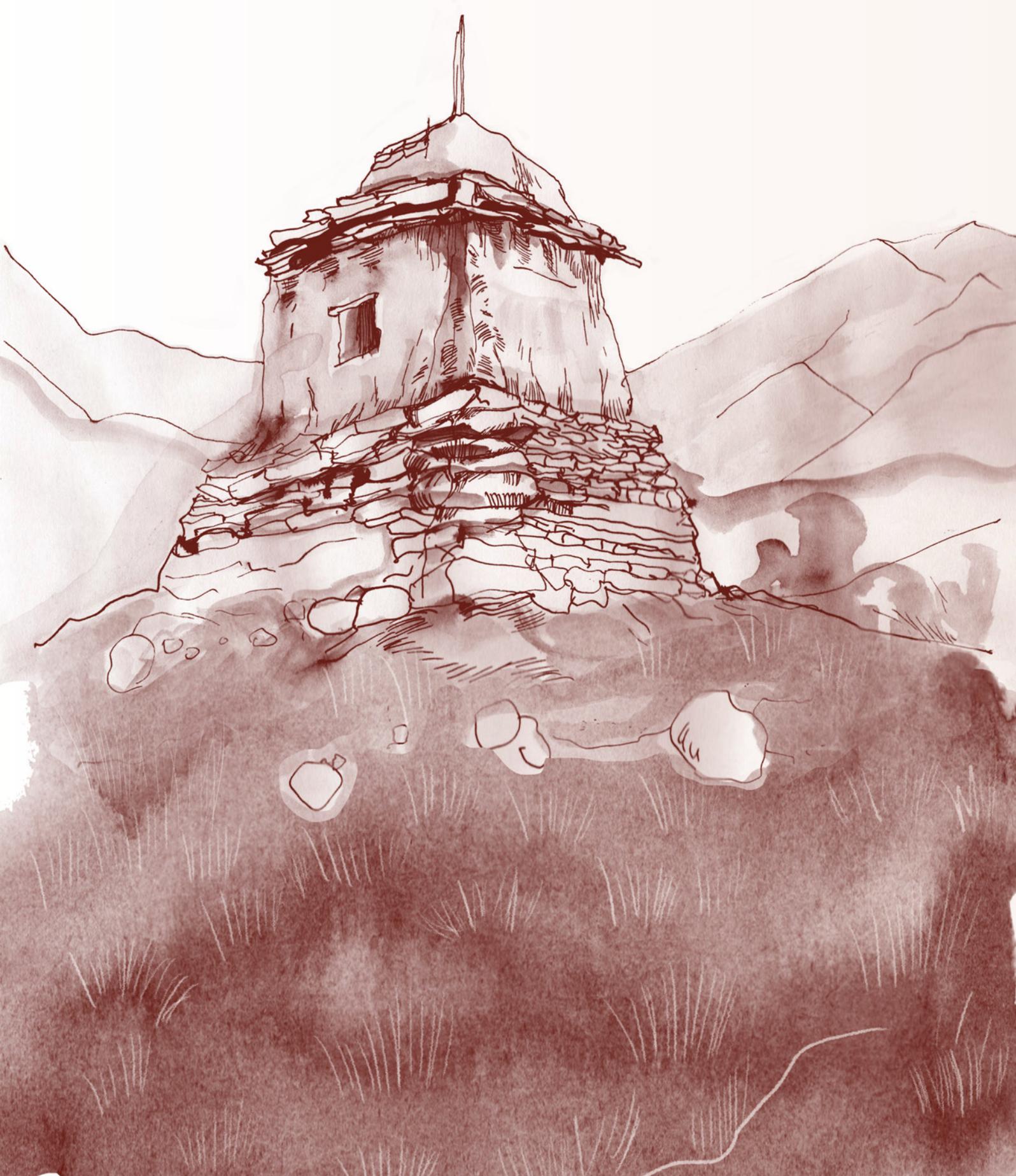
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1. Introduction

mi rig(s) 'dra yod na dgod kha slong/

zog rig(s) 'dra yod na gyod kha gtugs/

If race is the same, happiness will rise up,
if goods are the same, quarrel will appear.¹

lung ba re la chu re/

sa cha re la skad re/

Every valley has its river,
every place has its dialect.²

When taking courses on Tibetan studies at the Department of South and Central Asia at the Charles University we were mostly occupied by language, literature, history and religious traditions obviously so important for the Tibetan culture. We read Tibetan texts (predominantly religious) as well as modern Tibetan studies literature. Having done so, we could imagine how life of the Lhasa nobility in early 20th century looked like, and how the religious authorities like tulkus and abbots of big monasteries or prominent scholars lived and worked at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. We also heard about interesting individuals who had an extraordinary or remarkable fate like Gendün Chöphel or Bapa Phüntso

¹ Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from an undated book of proverbs published under BDRC Resource ID W2PD19118 (full book see [here](#)) on p. 24.

² Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from an undated book of proverbs published under BDRC Resource ID W2PD19118 (full book see [here](#)) on p. 118.

Wangye (e.g. Goldstein, Sherap and Siebersshuh 2004). Nevertheless, we were mostly interested in the “ordinary life”. Therefore, we sought an answer for the following question: How do (or did) the ordinary Tibetans live? Moreover, what can visitors expect when staying with the Tibetans? Our Czech colleagues from Indian studies may have read a popular book written by a prominent Czech indologist describing the entire life of a Hindu from one birth to another one (Preinhaelterová 1997). Nobody (including the author) says it is a perfect and a complete description of the Hindu society but it is possible (e.g. for a student who had not been to India yet) to get some basic insight what roughly could be expected when dealing with the Hindus and which rituals and ideas are connected to important moments of human life in India. If we try to find a similar book focused on the life of the Tibetans, i.e. the ethnographic³ description of the entire life of a person from his or her birth to their death, we have two choices:

The first choice is to read older books from well-known authors like White (1909), Shelton (1921), Bell (1924, 1928, 1931), Duncan⁴ (1964), Ekvall (1964), Norbu (1997) etc. Apart from that it is possible to read many memoirs (e.g. White 1909, Shelton 1912, O'Connor 1931, Williamson 1987 etc.) or travelogues (e.g. Rockhill 1894, Rijnhart 1904, Waddell 1905, Tucci 1935, Snellgrove 1961, Peissel 1967 etc.) by different authors dealing with the Tibetans. Most of them were written by three

3 Here I intentionally use the term ethnography because in this book we strive more for collecting facts and links concerning further reading than for interpretation or comparison with other cultures, or make case studies as social anthropologists usually do.

4 M. H. Duncan himself is an interesting personality. I found only one biography (see [here](#)) explaining who he was with more details than dates of birth and death and occupation.

groups of Europeans – officials (both civil and military), travellers (both scientists and adventurers) and missionaries⁵ (both catholic and evangelic). The problem with older literature is, however, the fact that it is based on contacts with a limited number of informants from specific social classes (e.g. mostly nobility or clergymen). They also reflect some views or motivations of their authors which were not purely focused on ethnography and nowadays may not be so obvious.⁶ Moreover, they in fact cover only chosen regions accessible to these explorers.⁷

The second choice are several case studies written by Western anthropologists (e.g. Aziz 1978, Ramble 2008 or Childs 2004) or currently by the Tibetans themselves (Norbu 1997 or Karmay 1998). But case studies are mostly focused on one particular locality or group of people or, alternatively, on one particular topic or problem.

For that reason, we decided to try to write this short e-book focused on a description of essential life periods and events in the life of the Tibetans. We hope that our e-book will be helpful mostly for students in courses focused on the Tibetan cultural matters like

5 Informed Czech readers probably heard about work of catholic missionaries like Ippolito Desideri or Évariste Régis Huc. An interesting source of remarks from Tibet are also members of the protestant mission in Batang like L.A. Shelton and his wife, or missionaries in Labrang like R. Ekvall.

6 For example, Duncan was as a missionary and a physician focussing on the problematic level of hygiene and healthcare which may awake reader's feelings that the Tibetan culture was rather primitive. Shelton (1912, 43) was a similar case. British authors connected to the Indian Civil Service were often mentioning Tibetan families or politicians who were in good relations with the British Diplomatic Mission to Lhasa and supportive to modernisation under the British counsel.

7 It concerns the central Tibet (*dBus gtsang*), some chosen parts of the eastern Tibet (mostly surrounding Lithang and Batang) and some Himalayan petty kingdoms (Ladakh, Sikkim, Bhutan).

“Introduction into Tibetan Culture” and “*Bod kyi rgyun shes*”⁸ and also for people with a deeper interest in gathering basic cultural facts concerning the Tibetans. But before we start, it is necessary to point out some problems connected to our efforts.

If we are interested in the life of the Tibetans, three questions necessarily come to our mind: a) What and where is Tibet?, b) Who are the Tibetans?, c) What do the Tibetans have in common (if anything at all)? Though these questions sound banally, it is not easy (maybe even not possible) to find satisfactory answers.⁹ When contemplating about some answers to the above said questions, we may start with the last one and seek what the people who are intuitively understood as the Tibetans and who live in the area intuitively labelled as Tibet have in common. We may suggest they have a common religion. But here seems to be a problem with defining what the Tibetan Buddhism means.¹⁰ Apart from that, those who insist that there is only one religion for all Tibetans, they should explain the variety of local and mountain deities (*yul lha*), water spirits (*klu*), owners of the places (*sa bdag* or *gzhi bdag*), clan deities (*pho lha*), house deities (*thab lha*), demons, protectors of doctrine (*chos skyong*), deities bound by an oath (*dam can*) etc., and also

8 For description of these courses in the Student Information System of the Charles University see:

[Introduction into Tibetan Culture A I,](#)
[Introduction into Tibetan Culture A II,](#)
[Tibetan Cultural Background \(in Tibetan\) I,](#)
[Tibetan Cultural Background \(in Tibetan\) II.](#)

9 As Hladíková (2013, 173) remarks, the definition of the nation an “an imagined community” is more than suitable for the Tibetans.

10 Nowadays it is called the Tibetan Buddhism (Samuel 2012, 2–3), formerly the term Lamaism was widely in use (e.g. Waddell 1895, vii–viii and 31–33).

various schools of the Tibetan Buddhism.¹¹ Another serious problem seems to appear when we try to explain the position of Bon. There are also some controversies or enmities like in the case of Shugden (for some details, see Mills 2009).¹² We may also point out some specific political features like the formal conversion of rulers of Ladakh to Islam in 1680s (Bray 2005, 12). Moreover, some other people like Mongols, Buryats or Kalmyks claim to be the Tibetan Buddhists, some of them formerly studied in Tibet or invited Tibetan scholars as well, yet they are not considered and they do not consider themselves being the Tibetans.¹³ Furthermore, it is possible to find many people who seem to be fully or partially tibetanized (mostly on the grounds of their religion) like the people of Kutang (Childs 2004, 21–22 and 78), the people of *Mi nyag* or *rGyal rong* but it may be questionable to claim whether they were or are the Tibetans or not.¹⁴

11 Many Tibetans tend to see themselves as followers of a particular school or lineage and therefore do not see the reason for any deeper interest in other lineages or schools. Of course, this trend changed somehow when the Tibetan exile and especially the 14th Dalai lama became globally well known. But on the other hand, even in the Tibetan exile were tensions like those between the Central Tibetan Administration and the Khampa guerrilla movement (Chu bzhi sgang drug) whose leaders were opposing the People's Liberation Army until 1970s (Dunham 2004, 407).

12 On the official websites of the 14th Dalai Lama in the section with his **messages**, there are more than 150 speeches and statements. Twenty-four of them are focused on explaining the situation around Shugden, which is more than twice the amount of statements concerning the world peace.

13 Another interesting case are the Tamangs from Nepal whose language is Western Bodish not Central Bodish as Tibetan. Tamangs are the Tibetan Buddhists but they do not consider themselves to be the Tibetans. We may compare this with the Gyalrong people whose language is more distant from Tibetan than Tamang but they consider themselves to be the Tibetans (Tournadre 2013, 4) and nomads in Gyalrong, yet they are speakers of one of the Amdo Tibetan dialects.

14 For another example of Tibetanization see Roche (2015a).

Another issue related to the common phenomenon may concern the language. The Tibetan language has an alarming number of dialects¹⁵ (Tournadre 2005, 18–23 or Vokurková 2008, 75), many of which are not mutually comprehensible. Moreover, Tibetan was in certain historical periods used as a lingua franca (e.g. Hill 2010, 112 or van Schaik 2011, 50) and it is even now used as a liturgical language which means that not only the Tibetans speak Tibetan. Of course, the “official” speech and the written characters are more or less common but sceptics may point out the Balti dialect (or the Balti language) which is since the 17th century written in Perso-Arabic characters the same way as Urdu (Backstrom 1992, 24). We can also find cases where the Tibetans from one region doubt or wonder whether other Tibetans speaking another dialect or following different customs and traditions are “the true Tibetans” (e.g. see Karma don ‘grub 2013, 48 or Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 34). Apart from that, the Tibetans lived in linguistically and culturally complicated regions (like Qinghai¹⁶ area or Himalayas¹⁷) where multilingualism was and still is not uncommon (e.g. see Tournadre 2003). Based on this fact we may ask whether the famous Sherpa or Sharpa (*Shar pa*) people are Tibetan. They speak a Tibetan dialect called *shar pa’i skad* which is classified as one of the Tsang (*gTsang*) dialect group, the Nepali people label them as Bhotia i.e. Tibetans, Furer-Haimendorf

15 Sometimes the term Tibetic languages may be preferred to the term Tibetan dialects (for details see Tournadre 2013, 1–2).

16 For problems of ethnicity in Qinghai see Roche (2015b). For example, how speakers of non-Tibetic languages in China might be classified as Tibetans and Tibetan is promoted as standard language for them see Roche (2017, 16).

17 For example, how complicated is the language situation in a single district of Nepal (Dolpa) and how arguable may be estimation of number of speakers see Choekhortsang (2017, 102–103). Apart from that Choekhortsang gives an example how might dialect influence a written language (Choekhortsang 2017, 102–104).

(1975) compares them to other similar groups of Tibetan dialects speakers, but they claim to be (and are globally known as) Sharpa. Moreover, some non-Sharpas involved in the local mountaineering business may speak Sharpa.¹⁸ Thus and therefore, if we proclaim all speakers of Tibetic languages to be one nation it might sometimes sound like, e.g., Polish people saying they are the same nation as Russians which neither of the two nations would appreciate.¹⁹ This could be reason why a standardization of spoken Tibetan (*spyi skad*) might have potential for linguistic discrimination and social conflict e.g. in the Tibetan exile because proclaiming one Tibetan dialect or Tibetic language being “The True Tibetan” would surely increase the tension between people from different regions.

When thinking about a common territory, it is necessary to remark that in the past the Tibetans felt to be a part of vaguely defined and changeable regional and cultural units²⁰ connected to the local lineages of rulers, monasteries, clan pasture territories etc. They would probably not agree to be the same nation until 1960s. As Richardson pointed out (1984, 1), there were no general agreements concerning the Tibet’s territorial limits. In addition to this fact, in some cases the influence in the area might be from another distant government or monastery. For example, the Derge and Nyarong were since 1870s under control of the Central

18 For details see Ethnologue.com.

19 For example, people of Bhutan claim that their language is not Tibetan (*bod skad*) but “a language of fortresses” (*rdzong kha*) or “Dragon (kingdom) language” (*'brug skad*). This point is strengthened with their own attempts of a language standardization.

20 An interesting example is the work of S. R. Schuler (2015, 11) who in fact created her own ethnic subgroup called Chumigwa (*Chu mig pa*) i.e. the same nominalization used to create ethnonyms consisted of inhabitants of villages surrounding Muktinath in the Mustang district Nepal. For her remarks on an indefinite identity see Schuler (2015, 12).

Tibetan government because of its intervention in the region in 1860s. Other Tibetan states or territories, like Ladakh, Bhutan, Mustang or Sikkim, were often in unfriendly relations with the Lhasa government which tried to overpower them (e.g. Rose 1997, 26).²¹ Nowadays, the territory is inhabited by Tibetans divided among five states (China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan), albeit none of them except Bhutan²² is ruled by the Tibetans. The most complex situation is probably in China where apart from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (*Bod rang skyong ljongs*) are many Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, Counties or Units of Government in Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan provinces.²³ Therefore, it is not easy to claim that the Tibetans have something like a common territory.

One can suggest that the uniting point for the Tibetans is their culture. But as we saw above, even in religion, which is probably the most standardized part of the Tibetan culture, there are many differences, problems, questions, tensions etc. When focusing on culture as a way of life (Hansen 1995, 17), we find many differences among Tibetan communities. For example, traditional female hairstyle from Ladakh or Mustang containing turquoises on a band tied to the head differs from airy frames worn in Tsang and from horny heavy structures from Lhasa or long braids extended with yak hair from the pastoral areas of Kham.²⁴ There exists also an

21 This probably continues in tension between Dalai lama and Bhutan until recent days.

22 But the citizens of Bhutan claim being Bhutanese (*'Brug mi*) and speaking Dzongkha (*Rdzong kha*). For further details see [Constitution of Bhutan](#).

23 Interesting maps were published by [THL](#) but some of them seem to be inaccessible now.

24 For comparison, see Shelton (1912, 112), *The Tibet Album* [here](#) and [here](#) or Bates and Harman (2014, 107–109).

incredible variety of hats, caps or turbans worn by the Tibetans. Other examples may be houses from Sikkim or Bhutan resisting the heavy monsoon rains; these houses differ from those located in high altitude desserts of Ladakh, Dolpo or Mustang which are very dissimilar to wooden log cabins²⁵ from some parts of Kham. On the other hand, many common habits or aspects of economy can be found among the Tibetans. An interesting reflexion of this fact can be found in Roemer (2008, 10) who speaks about Tibetan societies instead of *one* Tibetan society.

In the above-mentioned paragraphs, we inadvertently almost disapproved the recognition of the Tibetans as one of nationalities (*mínzú*) in the contemporary People's Republic of China (compare with Hladíková 2013, 173–174). The confusion described above led to many attempts defining and describing what Tibet is and who the Tibetans are, indeed, and to creating new terms. For example, Sir Charles Bell, the British representative in Lhasa, distinguished the political Tibet from the ethnographic Tibet (Bell 1924, 5 or Richardson 1984, 1). As the political Tibet he labelled the areas under the Tibetan rule²⁶ and as the ethnographic Tibet he understood those areas with a majority of the Tibetan race. This division should probably reflect the British view of southern slopes of the Himalaya as a part of sphere of the British influence and the Central Tibet as a buffer state between

25 See [here](#).

26 What exactly is the Tibetan rule is not defined because the influence of the Lhasa government was somewhat formal in many areas. For example, Bell (1924, 6) mentions that *Sde dge* was "under complete Tibetan rule" and *Nyag rong* was "in dispute" but the authority of the Lhasa government in these petty kingdoms was established only in 1870s and a representative of the Lhasa government in the region was settled in *Nyag rong*, not in *Sde dge*. Therefore we may speculate whether it is possible to talk about "complete rule" in these complicated and politically unstable.

the British Raj and other powerful empires. In Richardson (1984, 2), we can see a map based on these assumptions and it is obvious that this map represents this British view of Tibet. Of course, some Tibetans had their own view which led the famous Tibetan scholar Gendün Chöphel to start using the term Greater Tibet (Bod chen po; Samuel 2012, 187). This concept should include all culturally Tibetan territories including parts of Amdo or Kham formerly controlled by local rulers and subsequently by some Chinese warlords. Modern Western scholars sometimes tend to use the term Cultural Tibet (like Schaeffer, Kapstein and Tuttle 2013, 347). McKay (2003, 3) uses the terms Ethnic and Cultural Tibet. The above mentioned issues may be the reason why some well-known authors of books focused on Tibetan culture and history seem to avoid defining Tibet when writing about it (e.g. Stein 1972, 19; Kapstein 2006, 1–2; van Schaik 2011, xv–xvi). In other publications comparing and examining a chosen Tibetan cultural or religious phenomenon like deities is the definition of Tibet quite an extensive one (e.g. Blondeau 1998, 7). Another interesting term which is sometimes used is Tibet proper.²⁷ It is probably based on the term China proper (Winterbotham 1795, 36). But both terms may be vague²⁸ and they seem to assume that there is something like Tibet or China improper which would not be in agreement with opinions of many Tibetans or Chinese, either.

For the purpose of this publication we simply define the Tibetans as inhabitants of the Tibetosphere which is “the sphere of influence of the Tibetan language,

27 This term is used e.g. in online Encyclopaedia Britannica (for details see [here](#)).

28 For example see Shelton (1921, 295) who talks about border between China proper and Tibet.

culture and religion” (Tournadre 2013, 4) putting together as much information on this topic as we managed to gather. We are well aware of the fact that our short e-book may contain mistakes, misleading generalisations and issues which could be easily opposed by many arguments, nevertheless we still believe that our publication could be of help for those interested in it. We are convinced that it could motivate other students of Tibetology to think over and discuss these topics and to try to compare and correct our mistakes and to get at least some basic ideas for conversations with Tibetans about their culture when testing or particularizing facts from our publication. We will certainly appreciate if readers give us their feedback²⁹ so that we may – if it turns out to be useful – make corrections and extensions of this e-book.

29 For example, via our [Facebook](#).

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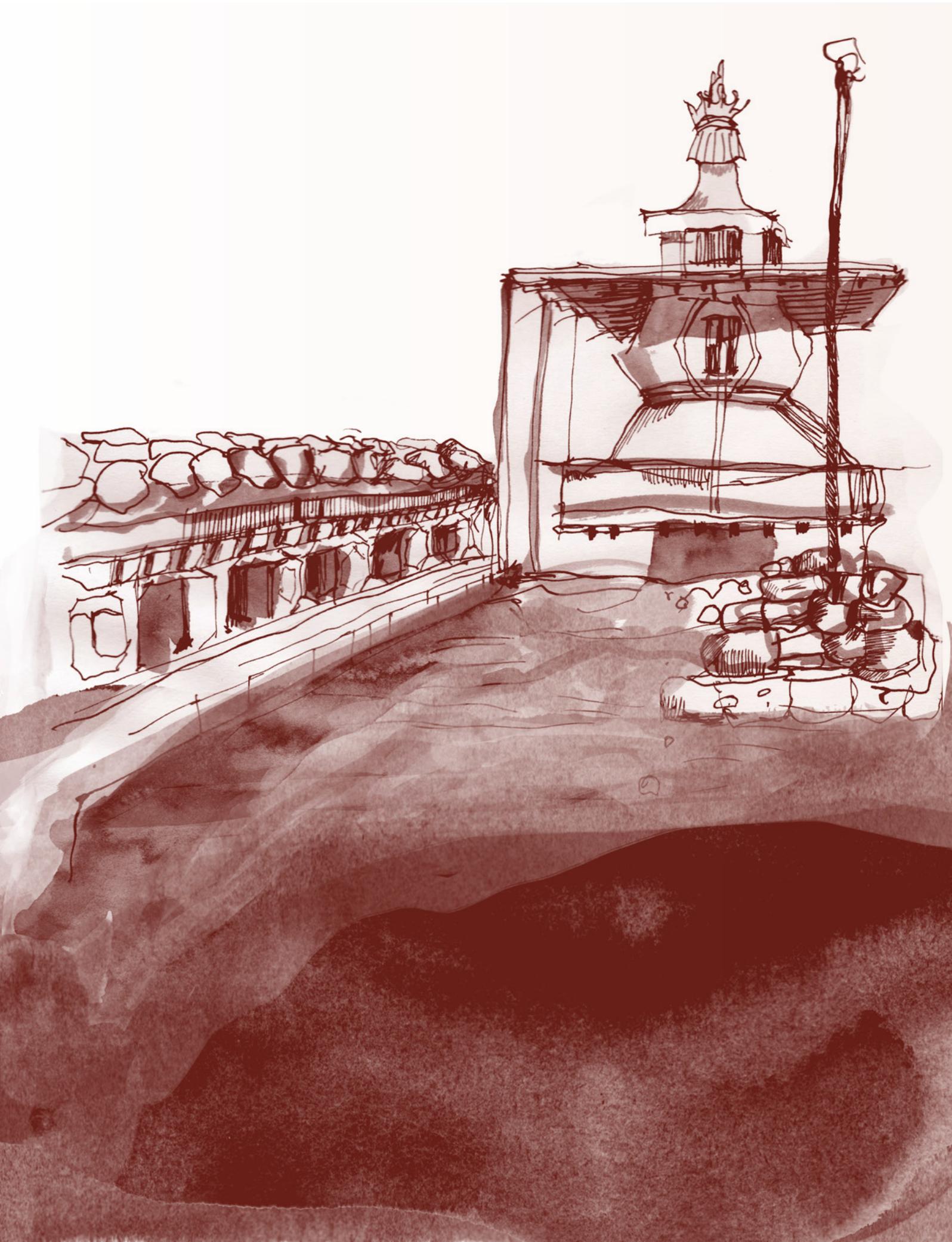
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2. Conception, pregnancy and childbirth



2. Conception, pregnancy and childbirth

bu skyes nas ming dang /

las bsgrubs nas gtam//

Child is named after birth,
work is apraised when finished.³⁰

According to Indian traditions accepted by the Tibetan Buddhism, a child arises when its consciousness (*rnam shes*) enters joined blood (*mngal khrag*) of a mother and semen (*khu ba*) of a father (e.g. Childs 2004, 38). The child grows in the mother's womb³¹ and in the 35th week all parts of the body are finished. In the 36th week, the desire to go out appears in child's mind. Thus and therefore, in the 37th week the child turns itself and in the 38th week he/she is born.³² It may be of interest to note that Tibetans traditionally count their age not from the birth but from the conception which means that a new born child is considered to be one year old. In some Tibetan communities, even people who are currently in their

³⁰ Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from Pemba (1996, 125).

³¹ For more detailed description see Norbu (1983, 15–29).

³² For traditional ideas about Tibetan embryology see Craig (2009, 152–153)

thirties do not know their own birthdate exactly (e.g. Karma dondrub 2013, 13).³³ If a married couple cannot have a baby in two years, rituals to their personal or local deity are performed. The deity of the womb (*mngal lha*) is important in this context. The goal of the ritual is to “open the path” (for a child) and it is based on butter offerings with ice.³⁴

Pregnancy is not showed off (e.g. Craig 2009, 148 or Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 35). Klu mo tshe ring speaks even about taboo (Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 50). Tshe bcu lha mo mentions the difficulties when a daughter discusses her pregnancy with her father (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 34).³⁵ The sex of the yet unborn child is guessed from mother’s dreams, the shape of her belly (Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 50–51, Norbu 1983, 27) or the discharge of blood (*gdung khrag*) before delivery³⁶ (Chophel 1983, 4). The pregnant woman often works as she did before (Duncan 1964, 83 or Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 55), only if a birth of a tulku (*sprul sku*) is expected, the woman should not work and a cleansing ritual (*khrus gsol*) should be introduced.³⁷ The pregnant woman is considered extremely sensitive to pollution (*grib*). E.g. Chophel

33 On the other hand, astrology is very popular and for a horoscope is the birthdate i.e. *skyes skar* (at least year and zodiac sign) important (for example of horoscope see Childs 2004, 46). It is also a matter of folk beliefs (like those from *Nyag rong*) that it considered to be inauspicious when a mother gives birth to her daughter with the same zodiac sign as her own (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 108). Childs (2004, 46) describes how the horoscopes in Nubri are made shortly after birth and kept till death.

34 Offerings in the shape of fish are used to make the labour easier (Craig 2009, 154).

35 In some Tibetan communities, even singing of love songs in the presence of female relatives is considered to be shameless (Tsering Bum 2013, 91).

36 If a discharge of blood appears, the child will be a boy.

37 For signs that child will be an important lama in *Nyag rong*, see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 106).

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(1983, 3) mentions the so-called “horse pollution” (*rta grib*) caused by a contact of the pregnant woman with the horse or even with its shadow. Apart from the *grib*, the gossip (*mi kha*) is dangerous, too. That is why the pregnant woman should not quarrel with other women and should not accept food from them (Chophel 1983, 4). In Nayag rong people say the pregnant female can spoil softening of the hide or dyeing of the cloths (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 110–111). The death of a pregnant woman is traditionally considered to be dangerous³⁸ and pregnant females or unborn children may require a special type of funeral (e.g. Das 1904, 290 and 331).³⁹

Childbirth is considered to be an unclean matter, therefore sometimes it did not take place in the house. Duncan mentions giving birth in the stable (Duncan 1964, 84). Craig’s informants gave birth in the house (Craig 2009, 149) but not close to the hearth.⁴⁰ For description of a birth in rural Amdo, see Mkha’ ‘gro tshe ring (2012, 10–11). In the Tewo county Gansu, a conifer branch should be hanging over the door when a woman in the house is giving birth to a child. This sign should prevent other people from entering the house (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 87).⁴¹ Some women gave birth during their work in the fields or when collecting

38 This concept is quite old among Tibetans as proves one of the ritual texts found in Gathang Bumpa stupa in 2006 (for further details see Berounský 2014, 22–23).

39 For remarks on burial of neonates see Ramble (1982, 343).

40 Hearth deity (*thab lha*) is believed to be offended easily by touching the hearth, burning inappropriate things, rests of food and so on. For worshiping *thab lha* during new year see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 100).

41 Blocking entrance to the building where something important (curing the ill person, performing rituals etc.) is happening is known from Mustang where a pile of stones or a fire is set in front of the house (e.g. Peissel 1967, 174). Shelton (1912, 48) mentions that a stranger can bring “devils” to the house of an ill person.

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wood. The woman at work is often helped by her mother or by her mother-in-law (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 35 or Bsod nams dom mtsho 2011, 7). In some regions, help is provided by an experienced woman with many children called *ma ma*⁴² (Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 52 or Karma dondrub 2013, 75).⁴³ In other regions even help from the father was acceptable (Peissel 1967, 223 or Craig 2009, 149), however, in certain regions the father should leave the house. Nevertheless, help from a widow⁴⁴ or from a woman whose new-born child died is considered to be inauspicious. After the birth, a navel cord was cut by knife or scissors and tied with yak hair or with a string (Duncan 1964, 84 or Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 56). Pieces of the mother's clothing and the naval cord are used for making amulets helping other women to get pregnant. The said items could also be buried in a given direction – regarding the season and the date. The baby should be washed according to local customs. Duncan (1964, 84) mentions that in Amdo children were not washed in the first half of the 20th century. Klu mo tshe ring (2011, 57) mentions that children in Rdo sbis⁴⁵ are washed very carefully. Sometimes saffron water for washing the child is mentioned. The new-born child is given an amulet. Locally (Kham) a piece of butter is given

42 An interesting moment is the fact that the word *ma ma* is used also in the so-called Old Tibetan Chronicle (**Pt 1287**) where the person choosing name for king Grigum Btsanpo (*Dri gum btsan po*) is called *ma ma Gro zha ma sKy'i brling ma*. In this story it is evident that the name was chosen to protect the ruler from danger but the mistaken choice caused many troubles when the name "entered his heart" (*thugs su yang zhugs*). For further details see Dotson (2015).

43 On the other hand, Craig (2009, 150) asserts that Tibetan has no history of formalized midwives which depends on what is meant by saying *formalized*.

44 For details, how a widow can bring bad luck see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 104) or Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 112).

45 See map [here](#).

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into the child's mouth. Elsewhere (e.g. in Dolpo), a syllable could be written on the tongue with milk.⁴⁶ Pollution caused by birth was eliminated by fumigation (*bang bsangs*) when using saffron and mustard seeds.⁴⁷ The mother is washed too (with milk, oil etc.). This being accomplished, other people could proceed to the mother. In some regions, imitations of an arrow (for a boy) or a spindle (for a girl) are hung in the tent or hidden close to the roof of the house.⁴⁸ The birth of the baby may be announced to the community e.g. in Rdo sbis with blowing a conch shell when the infant is a boy (Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 58). Some rituals connected to pregnancy and childbirth are called *bang tsol* and *tshe dbang* which bring a long life to the child (e.g. Childs 204, 41). An interesting folk belief, which is probably quite widespread in the Tibetan culture, is that the change of the sex of a new-born child (usually from a boy to a girl) can happen due to influence of some hostile supernatural beings (e.g. Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 112 or Huber 1999, 253 or Chopel 1983, 4).

The choice of the infant's name is an important issue and there are many local habits, traditions and customs connected to it. Sometimes the name should be chosen seven days after the birth. Otherwhile (Peissel 1967, 224) it happens on the third day.⁴⁹

46 It is expectable that this syllable will be *d+hIH* a short version of Manjusri mantra in hope that it will help the child to gain the art of speech and wisdom.

47 This probably varies to the region. Usage of conifer needles or juniper is expectable.

48 The arrow (*mda'*) and the spindle (*phang ma* or *phang shing*) are important symbols for man and woman in the Tibetan culture (Karmay 1998, 150–152 or Tucci 1980, 178).

49 Childs (2004, 46) mentions that in Nubri the name is given the third day after birth together with *tshe dbang*.

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An important religious authority can name the child⁵⁰ (e.g. Bsod nams dom mtsho 2011, 7) or the name was traditionally given by parents or by an elderly and respectable relative (e.g. grandfather, maternal uncle). The name giver could also be both, i.e. a cleric who is a relative of parents, like described in Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 193). Many people get their names in accordance to their birth day, that is why Dawa (*Zla ba*) could be born on Monday, Migmar (*Mig dmar*) on Tuesday etc. If a baby is born on the 8th, 15th or 30th day in the lunar month (these days are considered to be important), it is often reflected in his or her name.⁵¹ Even a total number of names and syllables in names locally varies. For example, people from Central Tibet (*dBus gtsang*), Western Tibet and Kham (*Khams*) usually have two disyllabic names (e.g. author of the article quoted here is called *Klu mo Tshe ring* which means a Nagini of the long life). On the other hand, many people from Amdo⁵² (*A mdo*) have often one disyllabic and one monosyllabic name like the famous Tibetan scholar and poet Dhöndrub Gyäl (*Don grub rGyal*) or the scholar in Tibetan studies Tsering Thar (*Tshe ring Thar*). There are even names given for a special reason or purpose. E.g. the first son in the family is sometimes called Norbu (*Nor*

50 When this is happening, it could take longer time to visit the lama so the child gets a name e.g. one month after his/her birth (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 38). Where a monastery is nearby, the child may be brought directly to the monastery to get the name like in Tewo (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 89). Some mothers can visit the monastery before the birth to get a name for their future baby (Rdo rje bkra shis 2016, 178–179).

51 E.g. names like *Tshe brgyad* (i.e. 8th day) or *Bco lnga tshe ring* (i.e. 15th day long life) or *Gnam khang* (Full moon) are given. Other days can be respected, too. One of the authors of AHP bears name *Tshe bcu lha mo* indicating she was born on the tenth day of the month (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 38).

52 For a case study focused on names in rural Amdo local school see Rdo rje bkra shis (2016). It contains – among other information – an interesting list of Chinese literature focused on Tibetan names and analysis of frequency and number of syllables in names.

bu) or Rinchen (*Rin chen*) which means a jewel or a gem.⁵³ Or, alternatively, when a family has more daughters and no son the last daughter could be named Putri (*Bu khrid*) i.e. “a son bringer” believing that this girl will bring a brother (Rdo rje bkra shis 2016, 184).⁵⁴ Many names can be used both for boys and girls (e.g. *Nyi ma*, *Zla ba*, *Tshe ring*, *Bsod nams*, *bKra shis*, *Tshe brtan*). Some names are understood to be more appropriate for males (*Rdo rje*, *Nor bu*), other for females (*Sgrol ma*, *Lha mo*).⁵⁵ Of course, it is possible to choose the name without applying these traditions and giving a name after an important personality (e.g. the 14th Dalai lama) is widespread. As in other countries ruled by Communists, in Amdo new names occurred like e.g. Red banner (*Dar dmar*) or Liberation (*Bcings grol*).⁵⁶ The name could also be changed for protection against bad luck or a stroke of an illness (for examples see Rdo rje bkra shis 2016, 198–199). Even names like Dogsh*t (*Khyi skyag*) are chosen when a child is endangered by supernatural entities (Chophel 1983, 8).⁵⁷ For other

53 A Czech reader may find this and some other details in a short article written by Kolmaš (1961).

54 Similar names which should influence the next child are called *ming khrid* or *ming ’dren*. Other examples are *Chog pa* which means “Enough” and should stop the line of girls born or *gSum chog* which means “Three (girls are) enough”. Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 183) mentions name *mTshams gcod* as a name for the last child.

55 For suffixes typical for female names see Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 188–189).

56 For details see Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 184).

57 Other variants could be e.g. *Khyi phrug* (Puppy) or *Khyi lud* (Dried dog sh*t). In Snellgrove (1967, 235) is described how child from prominent family was protected by threading dog hair through ear and naming *Khyi ku* i.e. Puppy. Apart from these Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 184) mentions name *Bu gug* i.e. Crooked boy. Ramble (2015, 568) mentions names Dogsh*t and Fido and later he writes about changing name pretending that child is an outcast. As in other cultures Tibetans are careful in praising children or making too much preparations before their birth like buying or making clothes etc. They believe these activities attracts the attention of harmful forces. Duncan mentioned that most children under three years did not have own clothes (Duncan 1964, 59).

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examples showing changing the name of a new-born baby see Mkha' 'gro tshe ring (2012, 11). Petting names (*gces ming*) are widely in use. For example, Dordor (*rDor rdor*) is a petting name for Dorje (see Rdo rje tshe brten 2013) or *rDo phrug* for Rdo rje Mtsho (Rdo rje bkra shis 2016, 182). As in European communities, people can have nicknames (*mtshang ming*) based on their physical or mental qualities.⁵⁸ Religious preferences could be of importance, too.⁵⁹ Many folk beliefs are connected to names. E.g. in *Nyag rong* is considered to be dangerous to answer someone calling person's name at night unless the calling is repeated three times (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 111).

Children and mainly infants are considered to be endangered by evil spirits. The role of a hostile spirit focused on children plays mostly *theurang* (*the'u rang*).⁶⁰ In the biography of Diki Tsering (Bde skyid tshe ring), the 14th dalailama's mother can be seen considering the death of four of her children as an attack of a malevolent spirit (Diki Tsering 2000, 42) whom she called *kyirong* and she described him quite similarly to *theurang*. On the other hand, *theurang* can be sometimes perceived as a "dwarfish creature" which can even play with the baby (Choephel 1983, 6). Due to

58 E.g. I heard about a limping man from Dolpo who was nicknamed *Zhabs bzang* which means "Wholesome limb" in honorific Tibetan. Childs (2004, 108) writes about a man staying childless although he changed his wife who was called *Mdzo* which is an infertile crossbreed of yak and cow. For other examples of nicknames like *rNa rko* which means "Flat nose" see Rdo rje bkra shis (2016, 182–183).

59 E.g. if someone is called *Yungdrung* (*g.Yung drung*; i.e. Swastika) he is probably Bonpo if Dorje (*Rdo rje*; i.e. Thunderbolt) he is likely Buddhist. Name *Blo bzang* or *Ngag dbang* are typical for *Gelug* devotees, *Ka rma* for Kagyu, *Kun dga'* or *'Jam dbyang* for Sakya and *U rgyan* for Nyingma. For example of changing name according to lineage of the local married *lamas* see Childs (2004, 66).

60 Mentioned are also *dre* and *gdon* (Klu mo tshe ring 2011, 59).

some sources, theurang is “cat like” (Tsering Bum 2013, 9 or Rka phug Rdo rje don ‘grub 2014, 57–59). Infants are usually not taken outside at night (Graig 2009, 149 or Chophel 1983, 5) and it is also considered to be very dangerous to frighten small children. Small and mischievous children wandering freely around the village can easily insult local spirits. For example, underground and water spirits called *klu* can be seriously offended by a child peeing on an inappropriate place and in revenge such a child can be punished with eczema.

Many authors (e.g. Childs 2004, 38 or Duncan 1964, 93 or Aziz 1978, 40 or Shelton 1921, 112) mention high mortality among infants but most of these statements are more of an estimation than hard data. This topic is on one hand a political issue and on the other hand it may be difficult to investigate some data because Tibetans consider talking about death as inauspicious (e.g. see Ma Rong 2011, 89) and in some areas even the name of a deceased person is not mentioned again after the burial (Tshes bcu lha mo 2013, 24). Nowadays it seems – thanks to the improvement of the healthcare – ever more women give birth to their children in hospitals (e.g. Craig 2009, 149).

An interesting cultural phenomenon seems to be the fact that mothers breastfeed their children for quite a long time. For example, Bell (1928, 196) mentions two or three years, Craig (2011, 156) writes about 26 months. Levine (1987, 291) mentions that there is no prescribed time for weaning and children are breastfed for quite a long time even repeatedly when they are older and their younger sibling dies. But in addition to breastfeeding, children are fed with tsampa and butter (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 38).

When someone is born, he or she becomes part of the kinship system so here may be the right place to describe it in brief. The Tibetan kinship terms are shown in Table 1. Here only two further remarks will be made to the kinship terms for the

maternal uncle and siblings. The term for maternal uncle (MB) is a *zhang*. In times of the Tibetan empire (i.e. from 7th to 9th century) the word *zhang* was probably used for clans of maternal relatives⁶¹ (to be more precise givers of the heir-bearing wife) of Tibetan emperors (Dotson 2004, 75). The same word *zhang* served as an honorific part in compound words *zhang lon/zhang blon* for dignitaries of the Tibetan empire (Dotson 2004, 94). On the other hand, in Proto-Tibeto-Burman the term *ku meaning the maternal uncle (Nagano 1994, 106) caused problems in Tibetan where *khu/a khu* means the paternal uncle (as all historical sources prove the case) and *zhang/a zhang* means the maternal uncle. Some solutions of this problem were offered by Benedict, Lévi-Strauss and Nagano (Nagano 1994, 110–112). Even nowadays the maternal uncle is an important person in the process of asking for the bride and wedding.

The term for a sibling with the same parents (i.e. B/S) is *pha gcig ma gcig* i.e. “(having) same father and mother”. A more general term in Standard Tibetan is *spun skya* (Tournadre 2003, 117) which does not distinguish brother and sister from cousin (i.e. MBD/MBS/FBD/FBS). Some Tibetans, when speaking English, tend to use the “cousin brother”. This confusion may be caused by the possibility of fraternal polyandry which erases differences between father and paternal uncle or between brother and cousin.

For kinship terminology in classical Tibetan see Bayer (1992, 157–159). For Tibetan terms from Amdo see Chenakhtsang (2015). An interesting description and notes to the Tibetan and Chinese kinship were made by Benedict (1942).

⁶¹ According to Richardson (1998, 16) there were four of them.

Table 1: Basic Kinship Terms in Standard Tibetan

Abbreviation	Description	English	Coll. Tibetan	Hon. Tibetan	High Hon. Tibetan
EGO	me	me	<i>nga</i>	–	–
S	son	son	<i>bu</i>	<i>stras</i>	–
D	daughter	daughter	<i>bu mo</i>	<i>stras mo</i>	–
M	mother	mother	<i>a ma</i>	<i>a ma lags</i>	<i>yum</i>
F	father	father	<i>a pha pa pha</i>	<i>pa lags</i>	<i>yab</i>
OS	older sister	older sister	<i>a lcag</i>	<i>a lcag lags</i>	–
OB	older brother	older brother	<i>co cog co co</i>	<i>co cog lags</i>	–
YS/YB	younger sister/ brother	younger sister/ brother	<i>'og ma</i>	<i>o lags</i>	–
C	cousin	cousin (or sibling / relative)	<i>spun skya</i>	<i>sku mched</i>	–
MB	mother's brother	maternal uncle	<i>a zhang</i>	–	–
MSH	mother's sister's husband	maternal uncle			
MBW	mother's brother's wife	maternal aunt	<i>sru mo</i>	–	–
MS	mother's sister	maternal aunt			
FB	father's brother	paternal uncle	<i>a khu</i>	–	–
FSH	father's sister's husband	paternal uncle			
FBW	father's brother's wife	paternal aunt	<i>a ne</i>	–	–
FS	father's sister	paternal aunt			
MF	mother's father	maternal grandfather ⁶²	<i>spo bo</i>	<i>spo lags</i>	–
FF	father's father	paternal grandfather			
MM	mother's mother	maternal grandmother	<i>rmo mo</i>	<i>rmo lags</i>	–
FM	father's mother	paternal grandmother			
SS / DS	son's son / daughter's son	grandson	<i>tsha bo</i>	<i>sku tsha</i>	–
SD / DD	son's daughter / daughter's daughter	granddaughter	<i>tsha mo</i>		
DH	daughter's husband	son in law ⁶³	<i>mag pa</i>	<i>sku bag</i>	–
SW	son's wife	daughter in law	<i>mna' ma bag ma</i>	–	–

⁶² For grandfather are more terms like *mes po* or a *mes* or a *mye*. Some of them are dialectical but the word *a mye* appears in many names of sacred mountains like *A mye rma chen* or *A mye dkar ldang*.

⁶³ In many regions this is term for husband married into family and can have pejorative connotations.

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3. Childhood, upbringing & children folklore



3. Childhood, upbringing & children folklore

thams cad dga' na dge ba yin/

pha ma dga' na drin lan yin/

Loving everyone is one's merit,
loving own parents is one's duty.⁶⁴

There is not much literature on Tibetan children and their childhood in general.⁶⁵ Older visitors of Tibet were not interested in this topic and newer anthropology and childhood studies are focussed on case studies of specific regions or groups.⁶⁶ Moreover, there is an influence of globalisation, modern educational systems and the fact that many Tibetans live in states and societies (mostly China, India and Nepal) where they are not a language majority. It is necessary to be multilingual for most of them and this brings also other cultural influences, choices, problems and opportu-

⁶⁴ Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from an undated book of proverbs published under BDRC Resource ID W2PD19118 (full book see [here](#)) on 100.

⁶⁵ Short chapters about Tibetan children can be found in Bell (1928, 196–207) and Duncan (1964, 120–127). Many memories of people born in 1980s and 1990s are to be found in Asian Highlands Perspectives but they are often so personal and local that they cannot give an answer to the question how the Tibetan childhood looks like in general.

⁶⁶ Like Biswas (2016, 133–146) who tried to study life of young monks in Ladakh.

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nities.⁶⁷ For example, some Tibetans may leave the PRC for education in India (Ancheta Arrabal 2015, 459).

Earlier, there was no official educational system except monasteries and schools with private teachers which were established by aristocrats (Bell 1928, 104)⁶⁸ for their own children, and a few experimental schools led by foreigners.⁶⁹ In farming or herding families in rural areas, children were led to help with farm and housework and the opportunities brought by education were in some regions underestimated even in 1990s.⁷⁰ Especially girls who can hardly get a government job were often discouraged from studies. Apart from that, in many regions compulsory education is not enforced consistently and mostly females stay at home helping their families to run farming and herding works (e.g. Tshes bcu lha mo 2013, 76–77). E.g. during harvest, it may be difficult for parents to get by without help of their children (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 76). For higher education, it may be necessary to pay tuition fees which can be a burden for poorer families (e.g. Rin chen rdo rje 2011, 125–127 or Karma Dondrub 2013, 101 or Rdo rje tshe brtan 2013, 90 or Tshe ring 'bum 2013, 56 or Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 153–155).

67 In many regions like Qinghai and Himalayas, there was the multilingual and multicultural society. Nowadays Chinese is preferred in education. For example, Kondro Tsering (2012, 46) recalls that he started Tibetan in the fourth grade.

68 E.g. Pa lha house at Drong tse had its own classroom (Bell 1928, 75).

69 E.g. there was a plan to establish an English school in Lhasa or Gyantse (Bell 1924, 159) and the school at Gyantse with an English headmaster was opened in 1921 (Bell 1928, 87). Beszterda (2014, 134–158) described education in Ladakh since 1860s with focus on schools led by the Moravian mission. In Batang there was a school led by the Foreign Christian Missionary Society (Shelton 1912, 82–96).

70 Even now, Tibetan children can be disadvantaged by low availability of preschool education in rural areas in the PRC (Ancheta Arrabal 2015, 458).

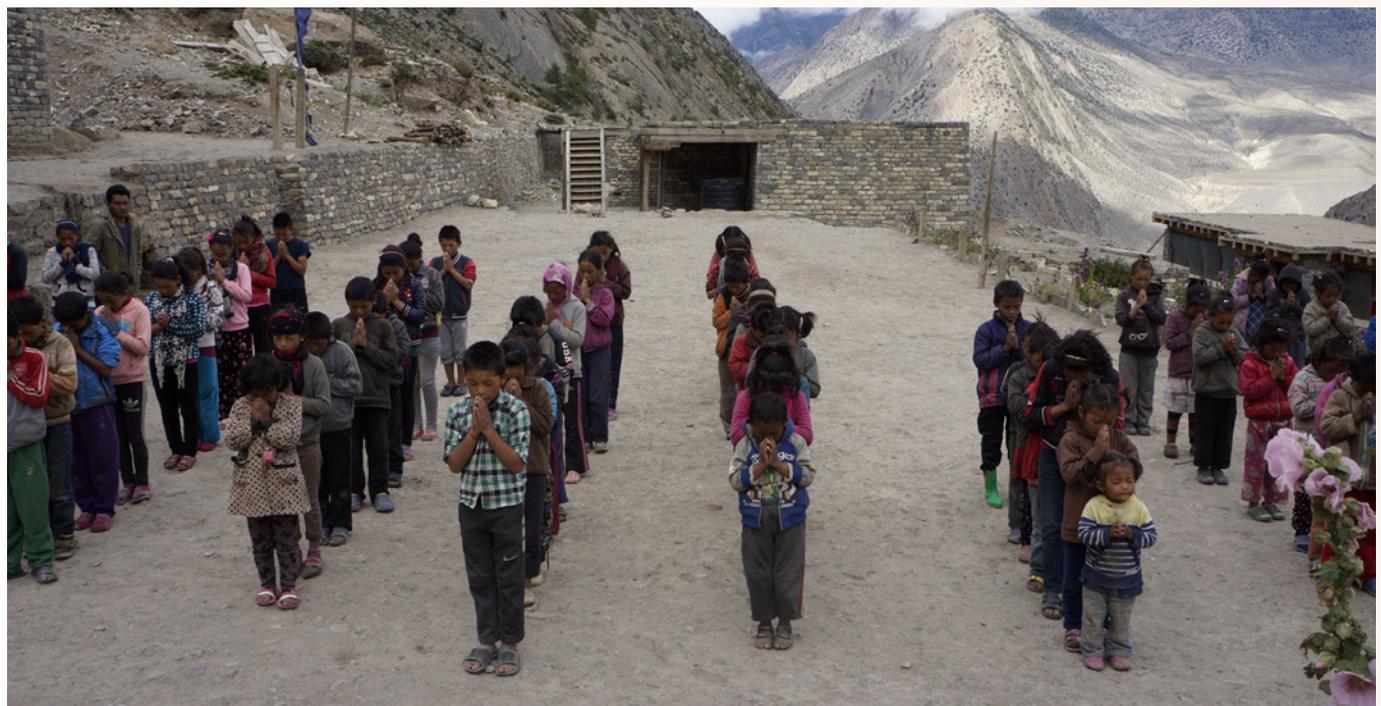
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On the other hand, the importance of education grows and new schools are being founded. Due to a sparse population in some areas, there is no other opportunity for many children to study but to stay in a boarding school ^{1.} ^{2.} ^{3.} (sometimes quite distant from their homes). This of course means that the traditional role of these children in their families somewhat disappears. Children may help their families during vacations (e.g. Rdo rje tshe brtan 2013, 100) or may stay in families of their relatives or friends residing closer to school (e.g. Karma Dondrub 2013, 81). Sometimes families move to be closer to school (e.g. Sonam Doomtso 2012, 6 and 72). From some accounts, it seems that physical punishment like beating is not uncommon in Tibetan schools in the PRC (Rin chen rdo rje 2011, 119 or Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 51) and there are even some proverbs connected with physical punishment during upbringing (Karma Dondrub 2013, 38).

Children have a traditional role in the work around the house or tent. ^{4.} Mostly (both among farmers and nomads) they are ordered to herd animals or to help older herders (e.g. Karma Dondrub 2013, 22–24 or Tshe ring 'bum 2013, 12–15). The main goal in nomad areas is to keep an eye on animals not to get lost and in farming areas to prevent a destruction of fields which leads to quarrels and is often fined. In nomad areas, children could watch over calves, which must be separated from their mothers before milking and are herded on another place. In farming communities (probably those closer to Chinese influence), children are herding pigs⁷¹ (Kondro Tsering 2012, 74–78). Other work typical for children is collecting fuel which can be dry wood in some areas but mainly it consists of animal drop-

71 As to my knowledge, not many Tibetans in Himalayas keep pigs and sometimes they consider pork as low-grade meat or they even proclaim that they do not like it at all.

1. Schoolchildren on the yard of boarding school's dormitory in Lubrak village, Lower Mustang.



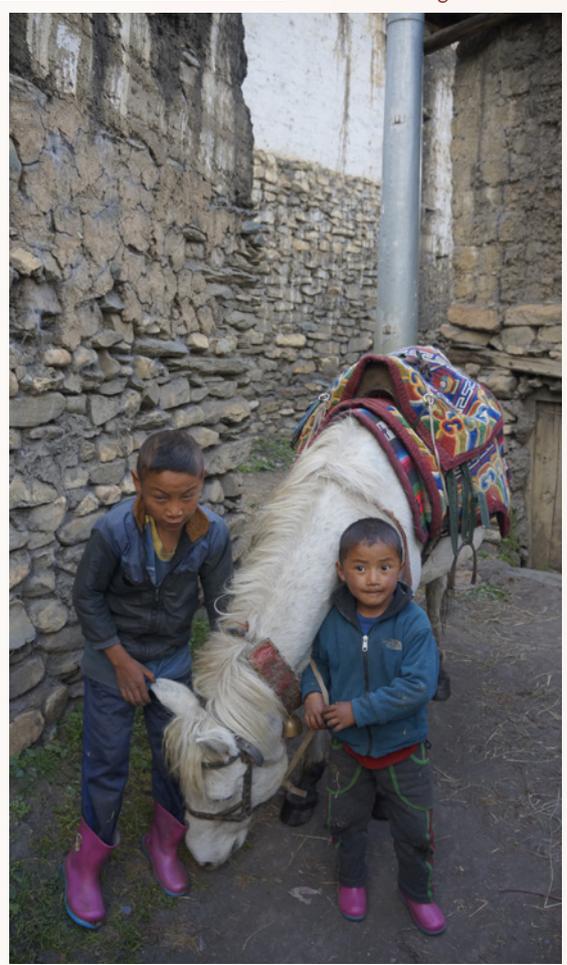
2. Boarding school's schoolyard with classrooms in Lubrak village, Lower Mustang.



4. Two boys taking care of a horse in Purang village, Lower Mustang.



3. Inside a classroom in Lubrak's school, Lower Mustang. (right)



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pings which are sometimes dry but sometimes must be dried after collecting⁷² (e.g. Sonam Doomtso 2011, 101 or Childs 2004, 70). Yak droppings are often (e.g. in Dolpo) slapped onto the wall of the house to dry up.

As other children, small Tibetans play many games. Among the most traditional belongs the wolf and sheep game (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 19) and the hide and seek game (Tsering Bum 2013, 16). An interesting game among nomad children is building bird nests (Sonam Doomtso 2011, 66). Children also like games of war and soldiers pretending using firearms, grenades etc. Rin chen rdo rje (2011, 105) mentions that especially a war between China and Japan is a popular topic for games.⁷³ Of course, football (*rkang rtse spo lo*) and other western sports and games (polo, pool) are very well known, too, and they are played with enthusiasm.⁷⁴ A Traditional or maybe an older game is *ag rdo* which is played with pebbles similarly to the game of the jacks. Another similar game, which is called *the ge* (or *sa sga* in Kham), is played with goat or sheep ankle bones similarly to the Mongolian shagai (шарай). A hand game similar to the rock-paper-scissors is played, too, but the shapes are called rock (*pha bong*), dagger (*ral gri*) and birdie (*bye'u*).

72 There are different terms for droppings. E.g. *lci ba* means wet yak droppings and *ong ba* means dry ones.

73 This is probably a Chinese influence. The war with Japan is interestingly reflected even in dice prayers (for details see Daisuke 2014, 260).

74 In the Tibetan exile, sports are supported by [Tibetan National Sports Association](#).

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Riddles are quite popular.⁷⁵ For examples see Rin chen rdo rje (2011, 76 and 130–131). Children were often giving riddles to each other and memorizing new ones.⁷⁶ Various songs and tongue twisters are present, too. For tongue twisters from Amdo see Blo rtan rdo rje (2009, 7–51). Proverbs (*gtam dpe*) were a part of traditional education or examples for children, too.⁷⁷

Storytelling is a popular entertainment as well. On the other hand, thanks to extending the TV coverage, internet and other modern technologies, children have more and more entertainments and the traditional topics like stories about Milarepa and Gesar (e.g. Kondro Tsering 2012, 17–18) are replaced by new ones. Kondro Tsering (2012, 95) recalls how the stories of king Gesar⁷⁸ faded in comparison with the Chinese TV series in 1990s. Quite popular stories are those concerning tricksters (*khram pa*). These are described in the chapter about amusements.

75 Here we are entering the field of folk oral literature and its genres which may cause some problems because there is no agreement about classification of the Tibetan folklore genres and motives. For our purpose, it may be helpful to mention “areas of folk literary forms” by Sørensen (2010, 152) who distinguishes folk-stories (*gtam rgyud, sgrung*), folk-songs (*glu gzhas, dmangs gzhas*) and folk sayings, maxims and idiomatic Saings (*gtam dpe, kha dpe, kha skad*).

76 Videos with examples of riddles can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

77 For *gtam dpe* from Golok see Pirie (2009). For examples of nomad proverbs see Karma Dondrub (2013, 37–38).

78 Gesar ruler of the Ling kingdom (*Gling rje ge sar*) is still very popular in both the Tibetan and Mongolian folklore. Mongols usually write his name Geser because of the vowel harmony in Mongolian. Many variants of the epic are still being performed by various artists and they are still being transcribed and published. For basic information about the epic see Samuel (1996, 358–367) or Karmay (1998, 465–488). An interesting summary of (mostly Chinese) research on the Gesar epic can be found at Li Liangrong (2001). For support and efforts to translate the epic into Chinese see Raine (2014, 65–86). For Gesar as oral literature see Fitzherbert (2009, 171–196).

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Almost all students from the Xining English Language Training Program who published their texts in the Asian Highlands Perspectives (e.g. Rin chen rdo rje 2011, Kondro Tsering 2012, Karma Dondrub 2013, Rdo rje tshe brtan 2013), claim that a pilgrimage (often with grandparents) was an important moment and an exhilarating experience of their childhood. They usually describe pilgrimages to nearby pilgrimage sites which are probably not so expensive, time consuming and which can be managed with small children.

Children are a simple target for malevolent forces and beings (Childs 2004, 42). For their protection various amulets are often used (e.g. Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 15). It may be for example a theurang mentioned above (for further example see Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 36) or a vampire (*sri*). One kind of a vampire (*chung sri*) killing small children and the methods of protection against it was described in detail by Ramble (2015, 555–570). It is also considered to be dangerous to frighten children at night Kondro Tsering (2012, 66). In order to confuse these malevolent powers, children could be in various situations smeared with soot (Childs 2004, 41), described as poor, naked and weak (for details see Kondro Tsering 2012, 68 or Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 34). After this description, the demon of illness will abandon the child to find a more promising victim. According to Lin-Shen Yu (2013, 11–12) there is a special group of fifteen daemons (*byis pa'i gdon chen bco Inga*) who do harm to the children mentioned in Tibetan ritual and medical texts. Czech reader can look into the Berounský's text (Berounský 2010, 29–30) describing how theurangs are chased away by protective drawings depicting a monkey.

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An interesting research could be that of the rites of passage during childhood. But the author of this chapter found only a few remarks on this topic. For example, one mentioned the custom of giving gifts to three-year-old children during the New Year in Nyag rong (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 102). It also seems to be the fact that the age of thirteen was traditionally an important milestone in one's life. Das (1904, 249) mentions that children under thirteen were not punishable for theft. Other rites of passage are connected to the coming of age. For examples see chapter 4 or Lhundrom (2011).

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4. Maturing, choice of the partner and wedding



4. Maturing, choice of the partner and wedding

rkyang pho hreng la chu mi rag

mi pho hreng mi tshe mi 'khyol//

A single ass doesn't get water

a single man doesn't complete his life.⁷⁹

Youths usually have to help their families with field or housework and care for animals. Nowadays many young people attend high schools or universities – in many cases to get a government job – but some of them have to quit to support their families (e.g. Tsering Bum 2013, 55–56). Many of these schools are boarding schools so these young people do not stay at home for quite a long period. Modern entertainments like visiting clubs or playing pool are not uncommon (for details see chapter about amusements). On the other hand, traditional entertainments like archery (Tsering Bum 2013, 86–93) or horse racing (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 102) remain quite popular. Singing and dancing is popular too and is also supported in the PRC where a cliché of singing and dancing member of the national minority in ethnic clothes is quite widespread.

⁷⁹ Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from Pemba (1996, 7).

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One example describing circle dances (*skor bro*)⁸⁰ from Nyag rong is described by Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 178–179).

Interesting moments are rites of passage between childhood and maturity but not much had been written about them and they can be quite variable according to the region. In some descriptions (Tshe dpal rdo rje and Rin chen rdo rje 2009, 15), the age of thirteen is quite important for both boys and girls. In rural Amdo, a ritual called *skra ston*⁸¹ is made when girls are coming-of-age. It can be performed at the age between thirteen and seventeen and it is also possible to perform it during the wedding day. The purpose of the ritual is to announce the girl's sexual maturity and her preparedness for marriage (Tshe dpal rdo rje and Rin chen rdo rje 2009, 25). The principle of the ritual is braiding the girl's hair to the same hairstyle as it is worn by adult women⁸² and to hold a feast with special songs, speeches⁸³ and gifts like ornaments (Tshe dpal rdo rje and Rin chen rdo rje 2009, 27). For detailed descriptions and links to videos from *skra ston*, see 'Brug mo skyid (2010, 151–217) or Tshes dpal rdo rje and Rin chen rdo rje (2009). On the other hand, Childs (2004, 100–101) describes the wedding itself as a transition ritual from adolescence to womanhood. In central Tibet the female's marital status is connected to wearing a apron (*pang gdan*). For details see Harris (2012, 880).

80 The term *skor bro* may be misspelt. Correct spelling seems to be *sgor bro*.

81 The meaning of the term *skra ston* is "hair ritual". The word *skra* means hair and the word *ston* means feast or banquet similarly to *bag ston* i.e. wedding party.

82 Hairstyle may show a marital status, too. For example, red threads are braided in the hair of a bride, a widow should have green ones (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 72).

83 In general speeches are very important part of Tibetan festivals (Thurston 2012, 51–54). For translation of a wedding speech, see Thurston and Caixiangduojie (2016).

4. Maturing, choice of the partner and wedding

Generally, Tibetan marriage is very variable. The three points about Tibetan marriage given by Ma Rong (2001, 85–86)⁸⁴ are so universal that they can be related marriage in every culture. Maybe the most interesting moment is that nearly all forms of marriage are or were present and practiced in the Cultural Tibet. Most marriages were probably monogamous, however, polyandry⁸⁵ was quite important in some regions. Polygyny seems to be prevailing only locally and in small communities (Ma Rong 2001, 83).⁸⁶

Basically, it is possible to distinguish two ways of establishing the traditional marriage which are arranged marriages (e.g. Kapstein 2006, 195 or Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 180) and marriages by abduction or elope (e.g. Rockhill 1895, 725 or Stein 1972, 107).⁸⁷ In fact, arranged marriages are not an affair of the couple in love but a matter of two families which are creating a new bond of their social network. Many marriages could be arranged when the bride and groom are still infants (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 180). Arranged marriages are common both among nomads (e.g. Norbu 1997, 62) and farmers (e.g. Childs 2004, 67). A marriage by abduction

84 In brief, Ma Rong says that Tibetans apply in-class marriage and both monogamy and polygamy are practiced (Ma Rong literary calls it monogamy, polyandry and polygamy because he addresses polygyny as polygamy) and there are regional variations. He also mentions Chinese works focused on Tibetan marriage (Ma Rong 2001, 80).

85 Nowadays, polyandry is illegal both in India (based on [Hindu Marriage Act](#)) and China (see [here](#)). In Bhutan, polyandrous marriage cannot be legally recognized (for details see [here](#))

86 Polygyny of Tibetan emperors in ca 600–850 was nothing unusual. For the position of women in the Imperial Period see Uebach (2005, 29–48).

87 In some areas (e.g. parts of Mustang), a bride can really be kidnapped but sometimes the couple escapes when their families do not agree with them to wed. It is also possible that the girl agrees to be kidnapped by a particular boy. For a case of a woman who had been kidnapped several times in Mustang, see Schuler (2015, 15). In the Eastern Tibet this tradition is not so widespread and an abduction may have fatal consequences (e.g. Rdo rje tshe brtan 2013, 91).

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can be a way and/or an opportunity how to change mind of those who disagree with a couple to marry or who arrange a different marriage for them.⁸⁸ Of course, regardless to the arrangements of parents, young men are trying to impress girls⁸⁹ and attempts to visit girls at night are not unusual (see e.g. Kondro Tsering 2012, 108). In fact, weddings are more mundane than religious matters (e.g. Kapstein 2006, 195 or Skorupski and Cech 1984, 14 or Duncan 1964, 86 or White 1894, 55). Karmay states that Buddhism has “no fundamental doctrine” for the marriage (Karmay 1998, 147). Therefore, home religion and, in the highest strata, also politics is more important for the families in question. It logically means that in various regions and different social strata habits related to wedding vary a lot.

In general, before taking steps for gaining a bride (*bag ma* or *mna' ma*), it is necessary to determine an exogamous group, i.e. a group of people who are not considered as relatives and thus they may become possible partners. The traditional idea of consubstantiality in Tibet is that from the semen of father the brain, spinal cord and bones come to being, from the blood of mother flesh and organs (Buffetrille 2004, 11). The Tibetan terms used in this context are bone (*rus*) and flesh (*sha*). In a certain number of generations, people with the same *rus* or *sha* are considered to be an exogamous group of relatives. There is a widespread opinion that the marriage is prohibited when the number of generations with a proven kinship status is seven on the father's side, however, such a number varies on the mother's side from region to region. Das (1904, 326) states the degree of consanguinity in

88 For an example how an arranged marriage or social status can be an obstacle for a non-arranged marriage see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 180).

89 For example, singing love songs is still very popular (Tsering Bum 2013, 100).

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Tibet was originally seven but at the time when he was staying in the Central Tibet it was reduced down to three or four. Childs (2004, 98) speaks about three generations on the maternal side. Buffetrille (2004, 11) who quotes Guigo (1986) states it is between five and seven generations on the maternal side. Among *Mi nyag*, relatives separated by at least three generations are suitable to marry (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 113). In this context the patrilineal kinship seems to be more important than the matrilineal one. On the other hand, Aziz (1978, 118) denies that the patrilineal descent is of a great value in the Tibetan society, however, with the exception of some highest or lowest groups and within some exogamous groups when seeking a mate. Interestingly, these rules do not prohibit the kin to share the same husband or wife in a polygamous marriage. It means is not impossible for a father and his son to share a wife (e.g. Aziz 1978, 182) etc. The wedding among exogamous groups of patrilineal and matrilineal relatives i.e. the incest (*nal*)⁹⁰ is considered to be a serious and a dangerous offence of deities which can bring troubles to the whole community (Buffetrille 2004, 13).

It is probably impossible to find some general marriage preferences among the Tibetans. Regionally, the cross-cousin marriage may be possible or preferred (Childs and Quintman 2012, 43). For instance, in Nubri, the cross-cousin marriage is called a *zhang a ni* marriage (Childs 2004, 98) which means that

90 This word could be problematic. Firstly, its spelling reads *variates* and, secondly, it seems to be a literary or a religious term used in specific contexts like, e.g. cleansing rituals. For details see Buffetrille (2004, 10–11). Tenzin (2008, 24) in his master's thesis dealing with marriage in the Central Tibet states the word *dme* can be used not only for defilement caused by murder in the family but also for incest.

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an ideal spouse for ego is MBD and an ideal groom FSS. It is also practised in Gyasumdo, Nepal (Mumford 1989, 39), but in some areas of Kham it was considered to be shameful (Duncan 1964, 90).⁹¹

As stated above, all marriage types occurred in Tibet i.e. both monogamy and polygamy (Ekvall 1968, 26). Polygamous Tibetan marriages could be polygynous, polyandrous or could have a form of polygynandry (Kapstein 2006, 194 or Levine and Silk 1997, 376 or Ma Rong 2001, 84). Tibetan polyandry is widely described (Rockhill 1891, 211 and Duncan 1964, 87 and Kapstein 2006, 197 or Crook and Osmaston 1994, 779 or Levine and Silk 1997, 385 and Goldstein 1978, 334). But the only observation which may be considered to be common for the Tibetan polygamy is a tendency to fraternity⁹² (Ma Rong 2001, 81) which means that in polygamous marriages are prevalently involved brothers who share a wife or sisters who share a husband. In some localities like *Brag 'go*, two men who are not brothers are allowed to share a wife (Tshes bcu lha mo 2013, 31). Ma Rong (2001, 82) insists unrelated males sharing a wife are rare. For examples focussing on two brothers sharing one wife and two sisters sharing one husband in *Bang smad* (township in *Dkar mdze* TAP), see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 180). However, the Tibetan polygamy is somewhat limited as for a number of participators. E.g. no more than two brothers are allowed to share one wife in Nubri (Childs 2004, 63).

91 On the other hand, there is a proverb from Kham saying that the daughter of boy's maternal uncle will become servant of her aunt (*a zhang bu mo ne ne lag g. yog/*).

92 This tendency is so strong that in some cases it is not clear whether the bride did not marry also husband's brother. For example, see Tshe bcu lha mo (2013, 73). Even the author of this chapter heard a story about a monk who, when visiting his home, was considered to be a co-husband of his brother's wife.

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Levirate was probably possible, too, which can be seen even in the Milarepa's story (Quintman 2012, 14).

The matter of locality, i.e. whether a married couple will live with the family of the groom, bride or whether they establish a new household is variable too and all possibilities are open – based on the situation of both families and local customs (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 23 and 209).⁹³ Childs (2011, 5) insists that the Tibetan society is prevalently patrilocal. Nevertheless, it is possible to find communities with prevailing matrilocality as in *Bang smad* (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 183). In other areas, the locality may be a matter of an agreement (or in some cases disagreement, for that matter) where the newly married couple will stay or whether they will set a new household (Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 64). In some regions, like Nubri, the locality is definitively set after the birth of the first Child (Childs 2004, 103). Although many environments populated by the Tibetans have very limited resources, establishing of new households (i.e. neolocality) is not uncommon. New households or rather households which split from their original ones may be identified on the basis of their names. In some areas it is considered degrading to be a matrilocally residing son-in-law (*mag pa*). For further information about *mag pa* see Aziz (1978, 126–127).

When it is clear who is not available to be married in order to avoid incest, the social status and family interests become important for accumulating the family's

⁹³ According to some authors, the oldest, the youngest or the only child is expected to stay at home to care for parents and the farmstead (compare Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 33 and Tsering Bum 2013, 19), that is why the issue of locality may differ.

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wealth and power (Stein 1972, 96).⁹⁴ In the other words, the family tries to win a good match which could be e.g. families of traditional leaders (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 183) or local religious authorities – if they are allowed to marry. It is possible to find social groups which are traditionally prevalently endogamous (Kapstein 2006, 198). For example, in *Bang smad* landowners and the landless did not intermarry even after their status was changed as a result of the Communist takeover (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 27) or, in Nubri, there are established exogamous clans (*rgyud pa*) which may work as caste-like groups (Childs 2004, 100).⁹⁵ On the other hand, there was a possibility of a certain social mobility (Goldstein 1989, 66). Marriage could also be an act of friendship and mutual respect when e.g. two old friends arranged for a marriage of their grandchildren (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 182). On the other hand, marriage could be used as a dispute settling mechanism where – after resolving the dispute – friendship restored among two families is sealed by an arranged marriage (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 182).⁹⁶

94 Traditionally, marriage was an important instrument of politics and many of the first historical references to Tibet are connected to alliance marriages of the king Songtsen Gampo (e.g. Beckwith 1987, 17). How marriage was used to stabilize the Tibetan Empire was described by Dotson (2004, 95) or Walter (2009, 27).

95 Among Tibetans living in the Indian spheres of influence are groups resembling Indian jāti. Some authors (like Grunfeld 1996, 16) mention castes among Tibetans. But Fűrér-Haimendorf differentiates orthodox caste system from caste-like features or caste-like groups (Fűrér-Haimendorf 1966, 1–2).

96 A good example of a wedding as a dispute settling mechanism can be found in the Tibetan modern literature in the novel *Jahzong* (Dzorge Guru 2013, 97–105).

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Generally, the family of the boy⁹⁷ is more active in the seeking which is a logical consequence of the prevailing patrilocality where parents who want to pass their household onto the younger generation and retire must secure a match for a son who is fated to inherit the said household and take care of his old parents.

The decision who could be a good match having been made, it is necessary to check whether horoscopes for the boy and the girl are compatible (e.g. Norbu 1997, 62 or Childs 2004, 101). This must be carried out by a professional astrologer (*rtsis pa*) and it is called *bag rtsis*⁹⁸ but rules for the preliminary check are generally known (Bell 1928, 179). Thus, the first step may be a tactful examination of the potential bride's or groom's birthdate or at least their birth sign. The detailed astrological calculations can also follow the negotiations among both families. A horoscope incompatibility of the couple is a problem but it may be overrun by arranging some proper rituals. When a family has no fixed idea about a potential match, it is possible to seek a matchmaker's (*smyan byed pa*) help. In *Bang smad* a matchmaker is a man in most cases but a woman is acceptable too. For his or her work see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 182).

If a family found the desired match and they suppose there is no obstacle in the horoscope of their offspring and in that of the intended match, it is possible to

97 More precisely, the family who want to obtain a new member who will leave her or his original home. In rural communities, it is also considered to an acquisition of a new labourer for the household (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, pp. 180–181). In Tibetan, there is a proverb saying *mna' ma g.yog mag pa glang* / (Phenba–Leo 2007, 101) which means that the bride who came into her husband's household is a servant and the groom who resides with the family of his wife is an ox. i.e. both are used (or maybe misused) as a source of labour.

98 For more details on *bag rtsis* see (Schuh 2012, 1480). Rockhill (1895, 725) speaks about *mthun rtsis*.

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begin open talks with her or his family. In many areas, it would be considered as inappropriate to ask for the bride or groom directly, therefore a middleman (*bar mi* or *slong mi*) must be chosen. The middleman who may often be a maternal uncle of the groom (Stein 1972, 107) visits the family of the potential match and he proposes the matter of marriage. When asking for the bride, it is common to bring homemade beer (*slong chang*) brewed for this purpose to the bride's family.⁹⁹ Nowadays, the groom's party can bring alcohol and cigarettes (G.yu 'brug and Stuart 2012, 142). This first visit is a beginning of some longer discussions about an arrangement of the marriage and also about an exchange of gifts. E.g. in the Central Tibet a certain amount of money for breastfeeding of the bride (*nu rin*)¹⁰⁰ and a new apron as a symbol of womanhood (Tenzin 2008, 31) is given to bride-to-be's mother. In Kham the dowry was such an important issue that the family of the groom tried to keep it even in case some problems in the marriage occurred (Duncan 1964, 87) and in some areas of the Cultural Tibet like Sikkim even the bride service was possible (Bell 1928, 184). Jewels were often given to the bride (Rockhill 1891, 229 or Bell 1928, 179 or Duncan 1964, 91). For example, in the Central Tibet, the bridegroom's party gave some turquoise (*bla g.yu*) to the bride's head-dress (Bell 1928, 180).

When both families approve the would-be wedding, the horoscopes for the couple are compatible, the issues of residence, dowry and property are settled, it is time to fix a date for the wedding ceremony. The date of the wedding is set up with an

⁹⁹ When asking for the bride in Mustang, a special beer flask must be used (Schuler 2015, 76).

¹⁰⁰ Das (1904, 322) mentions only *rin*. For details and examples see Tsering Bum (2013, 50) and Schuler (2015, 60).

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astrologer (for example from *Mi nyag* see Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 186). Generally, two aspects are important. Firstly, the date must be auspicious and, secondly, both families must have enough time for preparations¹⁰¹ and most of the family members who do some work or business outside the community have to get the opportunity to attend the wedding.¹⁰² This means that in many communities weddings are connected to other festivals when most family members are at home and enough refreshment is being prepared anyway. Ideal time for the wedding thus seems to be a Losar (*lo gsar*) i.e. celebrations of the New Year (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 181).¹⁰³ Moreover the relevant astrologer should specify such details as who should be a *bag rogs* (or *skyo rogs*) i.e. the bridesmaid, who should wash the bride's hair and who should help her to get properly dressed (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 187).¹⁰⁴

The wedding ceremony itself mostly focuses on a proper transport of the bride from her old house of the new one without causing any damage and bad luck or irritating supernatural beings like gods of both households¹⁰⁵ and local deities¹⁰⁶ and,

101 It is expected to invite the whole community i.e. the whole village which means there could be several hundreds of wedding guests.

102 There may be other reasons for postponing the wedding. For example, some Tibetans believe that wedding in certain age can bring misfortune. For males in *Mi nyag* it is when they are nineteen years old. For details see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 186).

103 On the other hand, in Mustang a good time for wedding is before the buckwheat harvest (Schuler 2015, 38).

104 For description of dressing the bride in *Brag 'go* see Tshe bcu lha mo (2013, 73).

105 E.g. bride must be introduced to gods of her new household.

106 Local deities may be seriously offended by incest (Buffetrille 2004, 13–14).

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of course, on celebrating this important moment (see e.g. Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 71–72).¹⁰⁷ The proper time for the bride to leave her home is set by an astrologer (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 197). In Tewa, the bride should circle the main pillar of her home before leaving (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 95 or Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 197). In general sending and receiving the bride is closely connected to the principle of prosperity (*g.yang*). This principle is essential for wellbeing of the family and the whole community, as well, and it must be regularly summoned.¹⁰⁸ With any part of household like a horse which is being sold or the bride who is being sent to her husband *g.yang* may leave (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 197 or Childs 2004, 102). This must be prevented by appropriate rituals. For instance the ritual called *g.yang grubs* is held in the house of the groom in *Mi nyag* before wedding (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 188).¹⁰⁹ Bell (1928, 186) calls this ritual *g.yang 'gug*. Apart from these rituals, parties are held in both houses and one or both parties are escorting the bride.¹¹⁰

The length of the whole wedding may vary but it usually lasts at least three days. Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 181) mentions at least two or three days (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 193–196) and he gives schedules for three-day and four-day wedding celebrations. Important moments of the wedding celebrations are eulogies given

107 For description of the wedding party in Tewa see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 93–96). The same author (2013, 93) mentions that even in neighbouring villages marriage customs may vary.

108 For calling of the *g.yang* in Bonpo village Lubrak (Klu brag) in Mustang see [here](#).

109 The same author mentions that *g.yang sgrub* takes place on the third day of the wedding too (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 204).

110 A simple transporting bride to the house of the groom is possible too (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 181).

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by representatives of both families (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 181 and 255–290).¹¹¹ Oath (*gnyen mna'*) is sworn not to break the arrangement of marriage (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 186). Special songs and dances may be performed (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 221–222 and 229–234 or Childs 2004, 101–102). As an example, I translated one wedding song from Mangra, Qinghai appealing bride to wake up and get dressed up to be ready for leaving her native home (for Tibetan original see Rta lo thar 2011, 73–74).

¹¹¹ As Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 212) describes there may be up to six speeches during the wedding. For example of a wedding speech listen [here](#). A video of a wedding speech may be seen [here](#).

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Girl, don't sleep, get up!	<i>bu mo ma nyal yar la longs//</i>
Get up and get married! ¹¹²	<i>yar la longs nga gnas la song//</i>
The swan is born on the motherrock	<i>bya ngang ba skyes skyes brag nas skyes//</i>
born on the rock it goes down to the lake.	<i>brag nas skyes te mtsho nas rgas//</i>
The girl is born in her homeland,	<i>bu mo skyes skyes yul nas skyes//</i>
born in her homeland she leaves her native house.	<i>yul nas skyes te gnas nas rgas//</i>
So, don't cry, don't cry, get up!	<i>da ma ngu /ma ngu yar la longs//</i>
Get up and get married!	<i>yar la longs nga gnas la song//</i>
How joyfully the sun is shining today,	<i>de ring nyi ma shar rtse mo la//</i>
mount on and set out for a journey!	<i>rkang yob la bzhag nas lam la chas//</i>
(Groom's home) is where you will grow old,	<i>gnas zer ba rang gi rgas yul yin//</i>
if you grow old there you will collect merits.	<i>yul de nas rgas na tshogs bsags yin//</i>
So, don't cry, don't cry, get up!	<i>da ma ngu /ma ngu yar la longs//</i>
Get up and get married!	<i>yar la longs nga gnas la song//</i>
Today is a lucky day,	<i>de ring bkra shis nyi ma la//</i>
take your fox hat on and set out for a journey!	<i>mgor wa mor gyon nas lam la chas//</i>
(Groom's home) is the place of your bed,	<i>gnas zer ba rang gi mal yul yin//</i>
if you are happy in that bed, it is good!	<i>mal de nas skyid na bde ba yin//</i>
So, don't cry, don't cry, get up!	<i>da ma ngu /ma ngu yar la longs//</i>
Get up and get married!	<i>yar la longs nga gnas la song//</i>
Today before sunrise,	<i>de ring nyi ma'i gong rol la//</i>
put your wool and fur on and set for a journey!	<i>gos tshar lwa gon nas lam la chas//</i>
(Groom's home) is the land of your happiness,	<i>gnas zer ba rang gi skyid yul yin//</i>
if you like that place it will be a great merit!	<i>yul de nas skyid na bsod nams che//</i>
So, don't cry, don't cry, get up!	<i>da ma ngu /ma ngu yar la longs//</i>
Get up and get married!	<i>yar la longs nga gnas la song//</i>

112 Instead of (your) place and (groom's) place (*gnas*), names of particular villages or houses should probably be added.

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In general, the basic pattern is such that representatives of the groom visit the house of the bride to fetch her and transport her to the groom's house. Das describes his experience (Das 1904, 323) which he acquired when he was staying in the Central Tibet: "It was usual that the groom's party stayed for three days in the bride's house before transporting her to the new home.¹¹³ At that time and place about twenty bridegroom's friends were doing this service." A very important object connected to wedding is the ritual arrow (*g.yang mda'*). For pictures of Tibetan marriage see Buffetrille (2013, 738–746) or the British Library's Wise Collection.¹¹⁴ For pictures of Mustangi wedding see Schuler (2015, 114–117).

Apart from marriage, informal unions are possible too. An illegitimate child is called *nyal bu* (Childs 2004, 50).¹¹⁵ But these unions do not constitute any hereditary rights for partners or their offspring (Ma Rong 2001, 82). In some areas, fidelity is not strictly expected but a divorce¹¹⁶ can be a rather difficult issue (Rockhill 1891, 231 or Bell 1928, 195 or Tshe bcu lha mo 2013, 74). Infidelity is allegedly not taken very seriously in some regions like Dingri (Aziz 1978, 179) or Nubri (Childs 2004, 109). Divorce is not unacceptable but it may cause problems mostly in wealthier families (Aziz 1978, 180–181) and there may be a social pressure to maintain the marriage (Kapstein 2006, 199 or Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 212), that is why everyone

113 For description of a bridegroom's party fetching the bride see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 94).

114 See plate 8. BL Add.Or.3037 [here](#).

115 The term *nyal bu* is probably misspelt. Correct spelling seems to be *nal bu* or *nyal lu*.

116 It may be a bit difficult to find a simple word for divorce. In Goldstein (1984, 87), one can find word *bza' tshang khag khag byas* which means literary to split a family or a couple. According to Schuler (2015, 64) the word *kha dal* is used for divorce in Mustang which corresponds with *kha bral* stated by Das (1902, 132).

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should either resist it or take the risk of a conflict with his affinal relatives. E.g. in Mustang divorce or separation may be problematic (Schuler 2015, 17) but one of the reasons for separation may be infertility (Childs 2004, 107). Formerly, divorce was administered through middlemen (Duncan 1964, 87) and wealthier families concluded contracts when a wedding took place in their society. These contracts or the relevant law can include fines to be paid for divorce (Das 1904, 325). Penalties for divorce occurred regionally (e.g. for Sikkim see Bell 1928, 195). On the other hand, some researchers insist that divorce was relatively easy (Stein 1972, 108). Barrenness was considered inauspicious and could be a reason for divorce (Duncan 1964, 90). Apart from that childless women were not allowed to help the bride during the wedding. Widows are bringing bad luck too (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 104).

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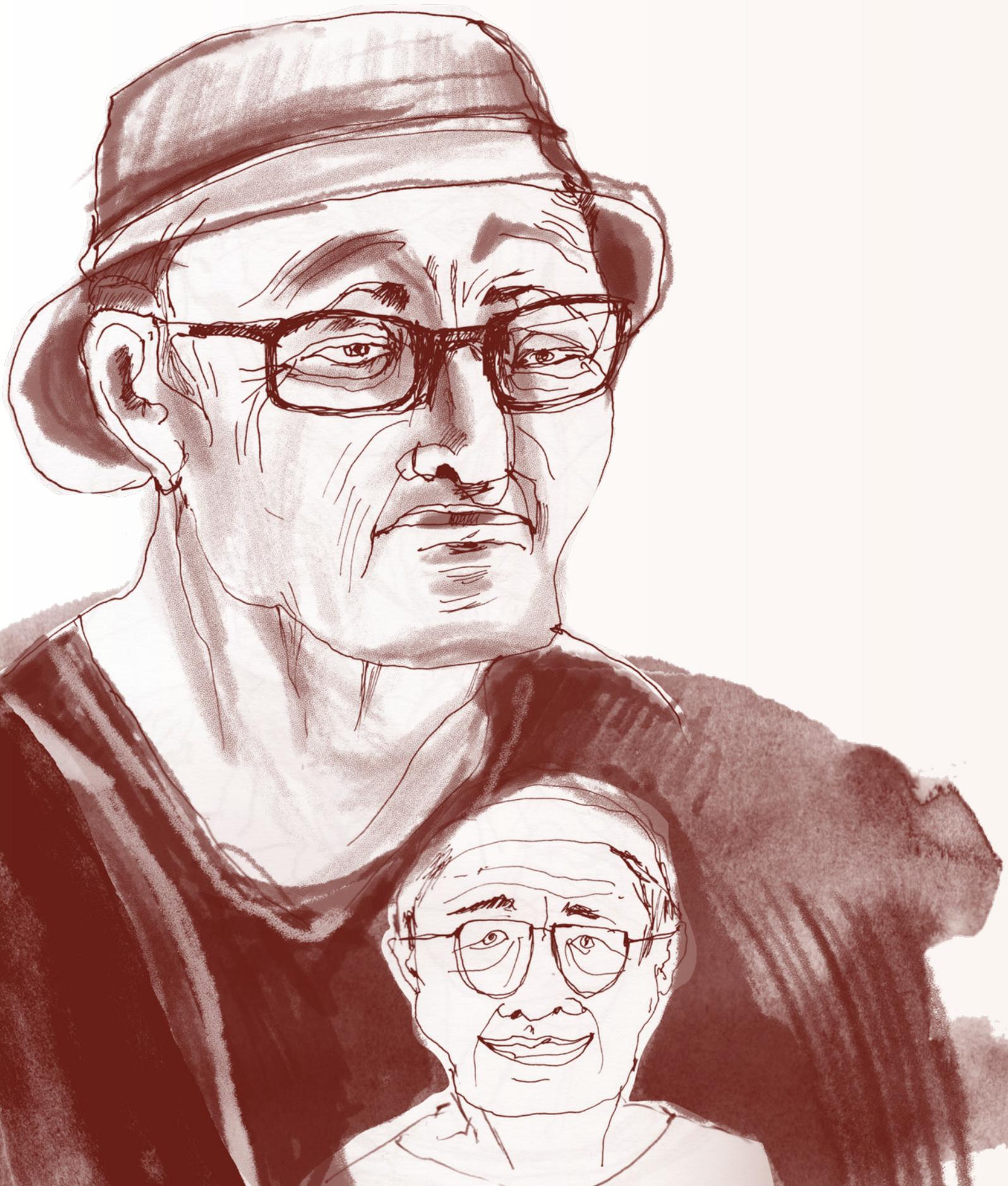
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5. Family Life

khang bzang rgyag pa las/

zhing bzang 'debs pa dga'//

One would rather plant a good field
than set a good house.¹¹⁷

Traditionally there are three basic modes of life of Tibetan families i.e. settled people who were originally peasants (*zhing pa* or *rong pa*),¹¹⁸ nomads¹¹⁹ (*'brog pa*) and semi-nomads (*sa ma 'brog*). There were also inhabitants of cities like businessmen (*tshong pa*) or craftsmen (*bzo pa*). But these people were a minority and often foreigners like the Nepalese trading community in Lhasa or e.g. butchers (*bshan pa*). The question whether Tibetans were originally nomads or settled people cannot be answered satisfactorily but it seems to be proven that in the oldest written history of Tibet there were local chieftains settled in fortresses (*mkhar*) and they defeated some kind of nomadic people.¹²⁰ On the other hand, the court of the Tibetan emperor (*btsan po*) changed its place in the 7th and 8th centuries regularly – according to the season of the year (Dotson 2009, 9). Another specific

¹¹⁷ Tibetan proverb (*gtam dpe*) from Pemba (1996, 22).

¹¹⁸ In some areas, the word *rong pa* means not only peasant but also non-Tibetan (Childs 2004, 34).

¹¹⁹ On the Tibetan nomads in detail see Jones and Nicolaisen (1996).

¹²⁰ For further details compare with Beckwith (1987, 16) or Whitfield (2015, 39) who are interpreting a metaphor from the so-called Old Tibetan Chronicle. For further details and link see note 41 in chapter 2.

issue that mattered were large aristocratic estates and families of wealthy businessmen where the economy and other processes were far more complicated.¹²¹

Apart from that many regions with special geographical setting had also their special ways of life and strategies for living. These were described e.g. for Mustang and its surroundings (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 132–222) where people make their living within a special combination of agriculture, transit trade (basically grain for salt and animals) and animal husbandry. For similar examples from Kinaur see Beszterda (2015, 241–261), for description of the agro-pastoral system in Dolpo see Bauer (2004, 19–42).

Sure enough, at present many Tibetans live a life of urban people or workers. For an example of a young Tibetan lady getting her job as a translator in a travel agency see Tshes bcu lha mo (2013, 158–162). Leaving villages for seasonal work like road construction is not unusual, either (e.g. G.yu 'brug and Stuart 2012, 57). Road construction was the kind of work which many Tibetan refugees to India were involved in during 1960s (e.g. Roemer 2008, 68). In some parts of Tibet, occasional earnings based on collecting products of nature are very frequent. The best known and probably the most rentable is collecting of the caterpillar fungus (*dbyar rtsa dgun 'bu*).¹²² Tourism like tracking and mountaineering in the Himalayas became an important source of living e.g. for Sherpas (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 84–92). Subsequently the nature conservation developed and provided some labour

121 Interesting remarks about Tibetan (mostly Lhasa) nobles could be found in Bell (1928, 64–108) or Carrasco (1959, 100–104 and 109–116).

122 For description of the caterpillar fungus business in Yushu see e.g. Gruschke (2011). Czech reader may appreciate the relevant article written by Ptáčková (2014).

opportunities for local people. Hunting and fishing were traditionally considered to be socially degrading sources of livelihood.¹²³

It may be worth to emphasize at this point that the division of the society into farmers and herders (or nomads) does not mean that these groups live separately or they are not in contact with each other. The opposite is often true and in many regions traditional trade and source exchange patterns were established among nomads and farmers. For example, farmers might collect animal droppings as fuel on herding places or nomads took care of animals belonging to farmers for a particular period of the year. Moreover, nomads do not wander accidentally but they often have at least a winter camp (*dgun sa*) and a summer camp (*dbyar sa*). They often visit a limited number of proven places where they expect to find a sufficient amount of pasture and water for their herds according to their actual need (Karma Dondrub 2013, 26). The borders between pastures are marked (often by structures called *lab rtse*)¹²⁴ and were often a source of quarrel or even battles among families or tribes (see e.g. Shelton 1912, 111). For description of nomad camps see e.g. Rin chen rdo rje (2011, 71).

Some people who feel to be nomads, might have houses to spend winter in (Sonam Doomtso 2011, 44) or there may be temporarily inhabited huts (*pu lu*) on certain pastures during the pastoral season. In recent years sed-

¹²³ For description of Hunting in Changtang see Huber (2012, 195–215).

¹²⁴ For description and photos of *lab rtse* and its construction in Qinghai see Tshe mdo (2009, 349–366).

entarization of nomads (e.g. Ptáčková 2016) is practiced in many areas as well as planting trees instead of fields for compensation to the owners of the land (Kondro Tsering 2012, 90).

Dwelling of the Tibetan family may vary substantially – according to the way of life and region. Houses of settled people in the Himalayan or Karakoram high altitude areas like Dolpo, Mustang, Ladakh or Zaskar are often placed in locations quite unsuitable for agriculture (e.g. on the slope).¹

If there was more place, country houses usually had a walled courtyard to protect the house itself and the cattle from being stolen. In some regions, houses are higher to serve as defensible fortresses in case of need. Famous are e.g. fortified star-shaped towers from Gyalrong. The supporting structure of Tibetan houses consists of circumfencing walls (*rtsig pa*), pillars (*ka ba*)¹²⁵, column head (*gzhu*), beam (*gdung*) and rafters (*lcam shing*). The walls were usually made of stone¹²⁶ or rammed earth and their dimensions are quite variable – this being subject to natural resources. In general, the key limiting factor is probably wood suitable for beams and pillars supporting floors and the roof but in some areas with richer sources of wood log houses could be found, too.

¹²⁵ For description of pillars and doors see Tucci (1966, illustration II and III).

¹²⁶ For description of a house bricked of stones without mortar in Kutang see Childs (2004, 22).

The house (*khang pa*)¹²⁷ could have one to several stories.¹²⁸ One-storey houses are more often used as stables or storages ^{2.} than places to live in. But e.g. in the Lubrak (*Klu brag*) village Mustang there is a one-storey house of a well-known local tantric (i.e. a man of importance whose skull is held in the village temple till nowadays) who had dwelled there. But in most cases, Tibetan houses have two or three storeys (*thog brtsegs*). The lowest storey serves as a stable and a place for keeping agricultural tools; also a toilet should be placed here. Nowadays it is not uncommon that a motorcycle is parked here. The middle storey serves as a dwelling space for the family, there is usually a kitchen¹²⁹ (*thab tshang* or *thab sa*) and a storeroom (*mdzod khang*) with provisions of food. In bigger Ladakhi houses, there might be special storerooms for barley (*bang khang*), dried meat (*sha khang*) or home-made beer (*chang khang*). For details see Kaplanian (1976, 12). In the highest place of the house, there should be a chapel ^{3.} (*lha khang* or *mchod khang*) which does not serve for religious purposes only. For example, elder members of the family or a respectable guest may be lodged there. The outfit of the chapel can be very variable – from a small altar to a fully equipped temple in old houses of wealthy aristocrats or dwelling places of local householder lamas (for examples see Bell 1928, 52 and 71). There are small windows or no windows at all

¹²⁷ The Tibetan word *khang pa* means both house and room in standard Tibetan (compare Tournaire and Dorje 2005, 98 and 227).

¹²⁸ Sometimes the number of storeys could be limited to prevent a competition with local temples or monasteries (e.g. Duncan 1964, 35). Even nowadays, there are some architectural elements in Bhutan permitted to be used only for multi-storeyed buildings, royal buildings, fortresses (*rdzong*) or monasteries. For details see Traditional Architecture Guidelines (1993, 37–40).

¹²⁹ The hearth (*thab*) is the most important part of a kitchen. Instead of iron plates, the Tibetan hearth has openings into which vessels are inserted.

1. Houes in Lubrak village, Lower Mustang. Typical are stacks of fire wood on the top of roofs and ladders made from notched poles.



2. One storeyed storerooms and stables in Lubrak village, Lower Mustang. Old poles stored near the walnut tree are proof of lack of timber in the region.

3. House in Lubrak village, Lower Mustang. Red part of the house is a chapel of a housholder lama.



(*sge'u khung* or *shel khra*) in the basement. In upper floors, windows may be bigger and a "sun lounge" (*shel khang*) may be situated in the corner of the house. Balconies (*rab gsal*) are present on many buildings, too. The roof is flat ^{4.} ^{5.} in the areas which are not influenced by monsoon rains. On the other hand, saddleback roofs with a space for drying agricultural products are typical for rainy areas like Bhutan and Sikkim. Even nowadays, using notched logs instead of stairways is not something unusual, but they are more and more used for ascending peripheral parts of the house like a roof. For more detailed descriptions of Tibetan houses see Bell (1928, 49), Kaplanian (1976) or Duncan (1964, 35–45). For description of the houses in Mi nyag made of stone (*rtsig khang*) and from rammed earth (*gyang khang*) see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 37). A description of Mustangi house can be read in Schuler (2015, 45). For photographs of structures see Duncan (1964, plate 8 and 9).¹³⁰ For ground plans of Zanskari houses see Crook and Osmaston (1994, 78). The house may be a source of name for the relevant family and some names of houses may signify that they were either newly established (*khang gsar*) or originated by separation from an older house of the same family (*zur khang*). The phenomenon of neighbourhood (*khyim mtshes*) where neighbours are obliged to help each other is widespread in Tibetan societies (e.g. Childs 2004, 17).

¹³⁰ For animation of Tibetan house construction see website of the [Tibet Heritage Fund](#).

4. Nowadays hoses made of PVC are used for draining the roof instead of gouged wooden poles. The man in the back is performing ritual called g.yang 'gug based on summoning of prosperity for the household. For description of this ritual see [link](#).



5. A roof made of corrugated iron may be together with plastic water tanks part of a "modern" house in Lower Mustang.

When the place for a house is being chosen it is important not to choose a place with a supernatural owner (*sa bdag*) or a place belonging to a *nāga*¹³¹ (*klu*). For an example depicting how to choose a place for a house and its protection see Bkra shis bzang po (2012, 38–39). Kaplanian (1976, 1) states that construction on such a place is to be avoided in Ladakh. On the other hand, some houses in Mustang may contain chapels for worshipping the nagas (*klu khang*). By all means it is important to consult the founding of the house with experts like a mason master (*rtsig dpon*) and above all with an astrologer (*rtsis pa*).¹³² Foundations of the house are made of stone and they are two to five feet deep.¹³³ On the foundations bricked or rammed walls are erected. Traditionally these were made of stone, mud bricks or rammed earth. When structures of rammed earth were tamped down, people (often female) sang special work songs. Nowadays, many houses are made of concrete, concrete blocks or bricks. Bell (1928, 39) states that in some months the construction of the house could be prohibited in the Central Tibet because the builder may carry out rituals to prevent rainfall which may be needed for crops at the same time. Apart from the principal house, subsidiary settlements for the family or its parts are available in some regions (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975, 7). It is interesting to see some attempts to maintain traditional construction in Bhutan where the Bhutanese Architectural guidelines were published by the Ministry of Labour

131 Tibetan word *klu* is often translated directly as *nāga* which may not be always accurate. According to older Tibetan beliefs *klu* were beings connected to the underground and to underground waters (e.g. Diemberger 2007, 273).

132 See e.g. Duncan (1964, 35).

133 For the picture of foundation see Kaplanian, whose work about Ladakhi house was originally published in Cambridge University Expedition Reports on Ladakh, 1977–1979 and nowadays is available here as an opensource [here](#).

and Human Settlements in 2014.¹³⁴ On the grounds of these guidelines typical architectural elements on particular buildings are required or banned.

Tents are widely used among Tibetans. Apart from tents used for parties, amusements or giving teachings which are used by settled people in summer (e.g. Bell 1928, 264–265 or Sís and Vaniš 1956, 65), Tibetan nomads use black yak hair tents (*sbra gur* or *sba gur*). These tents are unlike the Mongolian Yurt supported by poles¹³⁵ and tightened by ropes. Norbu (1997, 34) mentions twelve or sixteen poles.¹³⁶ Each tent has its male and female part (Norbu 1997, 23). Some vitally important points must be taken in consideration when a tent is pitched. Norbu (1997, 35) states that the door of the tent usually faces south and the female side of the tent is on the west. Before the tent is being pitched, the place must be ritually prepared. E.g. in *Yul shul*, a turtle is used for drawing a protective circle to appease the supernatural owner of the place (Karma Dondrub 2013, 27). Sometimes tents are not very comfortable and they can leak in a rainy weather (Sonam Doomtso 2011, 36). To prevent this, a low wall can be erected around the tent. When the tent is refurbished it is an opportunity for a small feast (Norbu 1997, 52). Similarly to houses, tents may content the coffer of prosperity called *g.yang sgam* (Norbu 1997, 35). Of course, Tibetans

134 These guidelines are very interesting for research focused on Tibetan architecture because they contain a vast terminology in Dzongkha.

135 Chopel (1986, 63) mentions an interesting technique of making tent poles from the skin of wild yak (*'brong*) used by Kham nomads.

136 Nadwi (2004, xi) even points at similarity between the Tibetan tent and tents used in Arabia. For detailed description of Tibetan tents see Karma Dondrub (2013, 19) or Tshes bcu lha mo (2013, 115). For riddles about Tibetan tents see Norbu (1997, 34) or Rin chen rdo rje (2011, 129).

buy and use modern tents as well. For pictures of traditional tents see Schäfer (1943, 99), Sís and Vaniš (1956, 45) or Bell (1928, 22–23) and Shelton (1912, 65).

The hearth of the Tibetan house  as well as of the tent is the stove (*thab* or *bod thab*) which traditionally does not have a hob but only holes for pots. In some regions *dzeto* (*tshe thab*), which is a low bricked platform heated by warm air from the stove, is used as a sleeping place (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 15 or Tsering Bum 2013, 8). For a description how a touch of the stove in a foreign house causes a headache and some consequent offering for hearth deity see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 34). Another important deity dwells in the central pillar of the house (*Bkra shis bzang po* 2012, 197).

Both houses and tents may be guarded by dogs (*khyi*). The main purpose is to give out a signal when a stranger is approaching and of course to discourage or attack thieves and robbers. Guard dogs are expected to be sharp which may result in an inconsiderate treatment (e.g. Kondro Tsering 2012, 79). One of popular poems ascribed to the 6th Dalai lama describes how a dog can signal who comes in and out (Sørensen 1990, 234). Especially nomad dogs i.e. mostly Tibetan mastiffs (*'brog khyi*) are known for their aggressiveness. Therefore, the instrument named *mgo skor* which is a pointed piece of iron on a leather belt can be used to spin above the head and hit the attacking dog. It became a redoubtable weapon used by brawlers (*Chos bstan rgyal* 2014, 148).

There are many chores to be done around the house and most of them are carried out by females.¹³⁷ Firstly, the housekeeping is obviously a job for a female. It is necessary to fetch water which is a job for a female, too (e.g. Kondro Tsering 2012, 106).¹³⁸ Cooking¹³⁹ is a female job as well as liquor brewing ^{7.} (Schuler 2015, 32). In some regions (e.g. Mustang), liquor brewing and running inns became a source of profit for those females who have to support themselves without help of a husband or family. The care for domestic animals when they stay in the household, i.e. feeding and providing fodder or cutting up and drying hay was a job for a female (Schuler 2015, 32 and 36) as well as milking (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 182).¹⁴⁰ That applies also to churning milk (Sonam Doomtso 2011, 45), making butter and cheese, spinning and making ropes (Karma Dondrub 2013, 36). Domestic animals are mostly yaks, cattle, sheep and goats. Female crossbreeds of yak and cow (*mdzo mo*) are kept for milk in farming communities. Apart from that, regionally poultry (for example from Amdo see Kondro Tsering 2012, 74) and pigs¹⁴¹ are bred. But in some regions pigs, fish and poultry are neither bred, nor eaten as their meat is

137 The work distribution between males and females may be regionally variable. For examples from Mustang see Schuler (Schuler 2015, 41).

138 As an example of fetching water for old parents as a daughter's duty in folklore see Karma Dondrub (2013, 14).

139 An interesting example can be found in the novel called *Jahzong* (Lcags gzong) by Dzorge Guru (2013, 44 and 81) where the main hero who is a young tribal leader from Amdo does not even warm up his cooled noodles and he has to ask his mother to do it for him.

140 For a description of milking and churning see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 100–101).

141 Pork may be even a traditional food for the Tibetan New Year (*lo gsar*) celebration. For details see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 117). For a description of exchanging pig bristles for red pepper in Ambo see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 118).

6. Outdoor Tibetan hearth from Lower Mustang. Typical are holes for pots instead of a cooktop.



7. Vessels and spindles in Lower Mustang household. Wooden bottles on the right side are used for liquor storing.

considered to be unclean.¹⁴² Weeding, cutting grass and irrigating are female jobs in Brag 'go (Tshes bcu lha mo 2013, 25). But in many regions with irrigation systems, irrigating depends on collective decisions and agreements, which means that irrigating and keeping everything along the guidelines as they had been agreed upon (e.g. no one is stealing water belonging to someone else's field) is a job for a male. Males guard the fields¹⁴³ and make decisions regarding ploughing (for example from Tewa see Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 97). Ploughing¹⁴⁴ is considered to be a male job (Bkra shis bzang po 2012, 182) similarly to other jobs (like transport or business) which require usage of riding or draught animals (Schuler 2015, 36). For a description of ploughing and sewing in Tewa, see (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 98). Harvesting and threshing is usually carried out by both sexes (probably due to a high need of labour during harvest) but winnowing is carried out by females (e.g. Schuler 2015, 33).¹⁴⁵ For pictures of the house and field jobs and utensils see Bell (1924, 10 and 1928, 40, 42–43), Crook and Osmaston (1994 103, 132), Sís and Vaniš (1956, 77–80). For the labour exchange system in Mustang see Schuler (2015, 35).

142 Not a long time ago, eating of poultry was believed to be disgusting in some Tibetan communities.

143 This job requires an authority because families whose livestock entered fields are fined (for example see Rdo rje tshe brten (2013, 97).

144 For ploughing as a job for males which is both a sinful and a dangerous task, see Childs (2004, 31).

145 For pictures of threshing and winnowing see Bel (1928, 42–43), for ploughing see Bell (1924, 11) or Duncan (1964, plate 14).

In Tibetan religion, killing is considered as a sinful act, however, on the other hand subsistence without meat consumption was barely possible in areas inhabited by Tibetans. That is why butchering animals became a problem. Also hunting, making weapons (which means in fact blacksmithing) and fishing was considered to be sinful i.e. degrading jobs. The best option was a situation when some people willing to do this “dirty” job were available. In nomad camps, there can be a camp butcher who is often a man from the poorest family (e.g. Karma Dondrub 2013, 57). When a “professional butcher” is not available, people have to butcher animals themselves (Tshes bcu lha mo 2013, 118). Doing this, they try to minimize any bad consequences. For example, they recite mantras or use the way of killing traditionally considered to be merciful. This sometimes means hanging or strangling animals. Kondro Tsering (2012, 78) describes how pigs are butchered that way. In Dolpo, when yaks are butchered, their snouts are tied by rope which causes them to suffocate. In Tewa, pigs are stabbed to death (Rdo rje tshe brten 2013, 118). For a description of slaughtering a pig by a family member who is not a butcher and lighting the lamp for pig at the family altar see Tsering Bum (2013, 69). Euphemisms about butchering of animals are in use. For example, Childs (2004, 27) describes how someone offered him to buy a part of a yak which “will fall of the cliff tomorrow.”

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6. Professions in Tibetan societies



6. Professions in Tibetan societies

Traditionally Tibetans practised in pre-1960 Tibet a thorough variety of professions, the most prominent have involved farming and nomadic merchants, which together make up the majority of Tibet's economy. It is notable that almost the entire Tibetan population consisted of farmers, pastoralist or samadrog (*sa ma 'brog*), a group that combined both agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihood. Besides these occupations, the next most significant sector were monks (Bell 1928, Stein 1972, Kapstein 2006). Finally, urban communities, despite being low in number, still make up a very significant part of the society. With little urban development pre-1960, there were only a small portion of those who belonged to urban occupations or communities such as clergy, landlords, merchants, craftsmen, physicians, pharmacists, soldiers, blacksmiths and then marginalized beggars. Alongside these lived a small number of civil servants, estate administrators, and nobles (Samuel 1993, Kapstein 2006). As I will try to show in the last chapter, these patterns have changed significantly since the Chinese occupation of Tibet (Kapstein 2006, Ptáčková and Zens 2017, MacDonald 2013).

Geoffrey Samuel, among other authors, has written beautifully about the colourful diversity of Tibetan societies. Samuel, in his book, the *Civilised Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Samuel 1993), argues that the actual picture of Tibet is misinterpreted by foreigners, who tend to think of Tibet as a firm centralized state with a strong hierarchical social structure. But the fact is premodern Tibet included a rich variety of social and political structures and it would be a mistake to make

generalizations to the contrary. I am convinced that Tibet's essential characteristic, which of course influences its professional make up, should be addressed in terms of its diversity rather than seen as some homogeneous society. Especially, in order to describe Tibetan professions, it may be useful to see first what type of communities have been evolving for centuries in Tibet. Therefore, I will more or less follow Geoffrey Saumel's description of Tibetan societies, as having four general kind of communities: the centralized agricultural, remote agricultural, herding communities and urban communities.

Agricultural communities

Even though in some areas the population was almost entirely rural, like in Changthang (lit. Northern Plain) and in the south and west of Amdo, according to Saumel "pastoralists proper" were in most parts of Tibet as a substantial minority. Other authors feel that Tibetan nomads are sometimes mistakenly perceived as archetypal Tibetans (Kapstein 2006) and that we in the West wrongly imagine Tibet as an inhospitable and freezing country (Stein 1972), where only the strongest survive. As Stein (1972) compares Tibet's latitude to that of Algeria and we can find meadows, hillside grasslands and forest all over the country. In Tibet exists not only a rich variety of natural conditions, but also a great diversity in terms of the communities that live in them. Despite the fact that Tibetans live in different communities and practiced a complex variety of professions, poor farmers have always played a key role at the base of Tibetan culture. For instance, the prime importance of agricultural is also indicated in the history of the early stages of development of Tibetan civilization. According to historical and legendary traditions, it was the fertile and rich forest-land of Southern Tibet where Tibetan civilization sprouted, not from the

vast Northern plain inhabited by nomads. Similarly, the significance of agriculture and the production of crops such as barley and its main byproduct *tsampa*, provides an ample example. The *tsampa* is the most widespread domestic product across the Tibetan world. It is made of roasted barley grains that are grounded into very a fine flour. It may be eaten directly by mixing it with tea and butter and it is a highly nutritious food and provides the body and mind with the energy needed to withstand the harsh Tibetan climate. The barley itself may be also used for production of various types of pasta, bread, dumplings and *chang*, a famous alcoholic beverage. Thus, the production of crops, especially barley, is inseparable from the Tibetan way of life.

Samuel distinguishes between two agricultural patterns: the centralized agricultural system and the remote agricultural system. The centralized agricultural system is located in the vicinity of the river systems which provides arable land to cultivate grains and other crops. Very often, these populous communities and estates, located near essential trade routes, were vital to establishing important trade centres.¹⁴⁶ Samuel (2006) points out there is a contrast between prosperous and populous agricultural areas, which have long participated in far-reaching trade, and remote smaller areas far from the centralized economy where agriculture is the sole sustenance. This contrast is observable through most of the Tibetan landscape, not only in the political/religious sphere of power in Lhasa but also in East Tibet, Ladakh and Bhutan. The essential principle of the centralized agricultural system is the estate system ruled by authorities, which have been described extensively

¹⁴⁶ Inter-regional trade has been described in detail by Fürer-Haimendorf's *Himalayan Traders* (Fürer-Haimendorf 1975).

by many authors (Carrasco 1959, Stain 1962, Samuel 1993, Kapstein 2006). The main difference between the centralized and remote agricultural communities is that the latter has traditionally been self-governing. The remote agricultural system was typical for regions with non-effective or absent political authority, where production of crops was low and long-distance trade routes missing. In the remote territories there was no estate system as we know it from central Tibet. Kapstein (2006) also states the role land played in Tibetan society is to some extent underestimated and there is no doubt that arable land in Tibet has played a crucial role in the country's cultural stability. The main political units were situated exclusively in prominent agricultural regions because they provided a reliable tax base for the state. Consequently, marginal agricultural areas have never been incorporated significantly into the state structure (Samuel 1993). This system gave farming households hereditary right to use land, which was the cornerstone principle of this type of society. On the other hand, households were obligated to pay tax (grain, money, and animals) and to be available for corvee labour, such as military service or animal transport, and required people to provide livestock to a feudal style landlord (Kapstein 2006).

Many scholars are opposed to Goldstein's translation of the generic term for all the people (*mi ser*) who participated in this system as "serf", which might be misunderstood as a "servant" in feudalism, a word that bears political overtones suggesting that *miser* were an impoverished part of population suppressed by feudalists (Kapstein 2006). In fact, many *miser* families were wealthier than the aristocrats themselves, and even though they had an economic obligation to landlord estates, they had the option to resettle from one particular estate system to another, or *mi-ser* could go to an area, where a similar estate system was not in place. "Vertical"

relationships played important role for Tibetans living within centralized agricultural system, but were not the only important relationships. Samuel (1996) argues that these “vertical” relationships were less significant than “horizontal” relationships like formalized friendship, trading-partners, kinships, pupil-lama relationship or simple friendship among neighbours, relatives, and friends. Thus, it would be a mistake to look at the society of Central Tibet as a hierarchy stratified in terms of the relationships between peasants and nobilities.

If we look at other communities with a centralized government outside the Lhasa’s sphere of power, we can observe a lot of similarities with only a few exceptions caused by historical circumstances or external cultural influences. A good example is the Ladakhi society where the estate system existed until 1947 and represented a case with people’s enormous dependence on the traditional Ladakhi aristocracy. Moreover, the society in Ladakh was influenced by an Indian model with four societal stratas – royalty, aristocracy, common people and marginalized groups, such as smiths, low-caste musicians, and itinerant minstrels (Samuel 1996). Another example of how Indian civilization heavily influenced social structure in Tibetan communities living on the Indian Subcontinent; this can be observed specifically in the Dolpo region (Bauer 2004). The agricultural communities lived also in the regions traditionally inhabited by nomads. These could be found in Amdo at the edges of the Tibetan Plateau and in areas around lake Kokonor. These regions were places of contact between Tibetans and others ethnic groups, like the Chinese and the Mongolians. As for other regions of Southern and Western Tibet, they were a melting pot where Hindus and Muslims of Kashmir used to meet with Tibetans (Samuel 1996).

Pastoral communities

The wide range of rural activities including both cultivation and the raising of livestock must be perceived as complementary to one another. We can assume that in some parts of Tibet, the nomadic way of life perhaps evolved in a natural process as an expansion of peasant activities, who had to graze their cattle further and further from their settlements. The societal patterns of pastoral/herding communities differ from the agricultural communities. Instead of the household, a key element of nomadic society are the "tentholds", encampments further organized into tribes and alliances. Nomads were usually not bound to an estate, but they were subject to centralized authority and the relationship to the estate could be tighter for some groups and looser for others. Though some herding communities were subject to tax duty to a particular authority, we can assume that all Tibetan nomads enjoyed great autonomy. Namely nomads from Amdo were famous for their independence, intractability and manliness.¹⁴⁷ Nevertheless, they were simultaneously supporters of religious masters with strong faith in their spiritual powers. Religious adherence to a particular schools or persons was a typical characteristic for most people living in a pastoral community in Tibet as well as a strong sense of independence. A Tibetan nomad's day to day life consists of tending and protecting one's livestock. It is clear that the herdsmen's own lives are fully dependent on the welfare of their cattle. Yet nomads in Tibet might have owned flocks in the thousands, but they could be impoverished in turn by severe weather, death of cattle due to un-

147 A detailed description of social organization and economy of pastoral communities is available especially in *Nomads of Eastern Tibet* (Thargyal 2007) or *Tibetan Nomads* (Schuyler and Nicolaisen 1996) as well as in *Fields on the Hoof: Nexus of Tibetan Nomadic Pastoralism* (Ekvall 1968).

predictable illness or fighting with other tribal groups. Kapstein says that nomadism was always precarious way of life and herdsmen were often forced to hunt, ambush caravans or attack agriculturalist and even to go begging in urban areas in order to survive (Samuel 1996, Kapstein 2006, Thargyal 2007).

Hostilities among tribal groups were a natural part of the nomadic way of life. When herding their flock to distant grazeland Tibetan pastoralists often fell into warfare with rival groups of nomads due to the trespassing of their territory. They not only fought because of territory, but as Tsering Shakya (Shakya 2015) explains, the complex web of conflicts was typical for inter-tribal relations particularly in Nagchu. Raiding or robbing (*jag rgya*) were common way to solve disputes among tribes, to get back unpaid loans or to recover stolen cattle. Robbing was not perceived as a negative act, rather it was a tradition deeply rooted in nomadic living. As Shakya puts it, this tradition was a survival strategy related to the culture of machismo and manliness as well to the culture of revenge (Shakya 2015).

It is widely believed in the West that nomads move upon the land by their own free will. In fact, their migratory patterns are determined by territorial rules and are dependent on the availability of fresh pasturized land. Often depending on other various circumstances such as the partition of a clan, overgrazing the land or fighting with another group, nomads might move their herds to a new territory as well. They move usually rather short distances, approximately 50 kilometers at a time, and depending on the region, from three to eight times a year. In terms of altitude, the migration might also be vertical. In winter, nomads very often move their flocks from higher to lower altitudes, but they do that also in the opposite direction, moving herds higher, where particular kinds of plants might be preserved even better than in the lower ground. The main

activities of peasants and nomads are determined by seasonal cycles. While in the summer seasonal chores are the most demanding and the work days are endlessly long, the winter season allows time for rest and other types of activities such as the practice of crafts, trade or pilgrimage in the case of peasant households (Schuyler and Nicolaise 1996, Kapstein 2006, Rigdzin and Thargyal 2007).

Urban professions

As for the urban pattern, medium-sized towns evolved directly from agricultural settlements situated along the river banks. These towns such as Lhasa, Gyantse, Shigatse, Leh, Dartsedo or Kandze included miscellaneous communities. The specific groups of people living in these towns were mostly low in number since there was little urbanization pre-1960 (Kapstein 2006). Within these townships were political authorities who helped ensure the security of merchants, but also craftsmen, physicians, pharmacists, soldiers, blacksmiths and other marginalized groups such as beggars. Other groups already mentioned in the introduction of this chapter include social civil servants, estate administrators, and nobles. Furthermore, apart from these groups there also used to be the presence of international communities such as Muslims from China and Newars from Nepal and Kashmir. These were mostly mercantile based communities trading with specific goods. A significant group of people living in monasteries created a special category of community that provided people both religious services and non-religious services such as mediation in disputes, the storage and trading of nomadic products, protection in times of tribal conflict or external danger (Bell 1928, Stein 1972, Samuel 1996, Kapstein 2006).

Tibetan society and professions today

The stratification of society in Tibet before 1959 is considered to be preindustrial. After the Chinese occupation and Dalai Lama's flight to India, Tibet went through a dramatic *change* from a modern to a post-modern phase (Kapstein 2006). Tibetan farmers and nomads used to be able to produce the majority of their necessities by themselves and the surplus of their production was *exchanged* or shared with other communities living in their vicinity. A family had to buy only those things which were not included in the barter economy. Today the traditional lifestyle is impossible, especially in exile due to the different climate and the new land not suitable for traditional Tibetan agriculture. After the exodus from Tibet, there was considerable effort by Dalai Lama to negotiate with the Indian government to settle all Tibetans in one place, which would help preserve the Tibetan culture. Nevertheless, Tibetans were given many smaller territories in different Indian states, mainly in Southern India, where the new settlements in most cases were founded on green subtropical plains. There is a considerable difference among Tibetans living in Indian settlements and of the Tibetan diasporas in the West today. While Tibetans living in closed communities are more likely to keep up traditions, Tibetans living abroad are more likely to be strongly influenced by their new surroundings and lose touch with their traditional lifestyle. Considering the way in which settlements were founded, we might thus think mutual isolation as the cause of family disintegration and the loss of traditional Tibetan culture. It is obvious that the most apparent consequences of living in exile, are those regarding traditional family structure under the influence of globalization. Living in exile is accompanied by decomposition of traditional cohesiveness of the family. Young people do

not live with their parents and grandparents and are more likely to live independently. Subsequently, the younger generations of Tibetans often choose to move to cities abroad.

Nowadays, Tibetans in tourist areas like Northern India or Nepal own restaurants, shops, hotels, massage salons or provide astrological services. Also, some of original agricultural settlements have expand their activities to include the production of handicrafts (often carpets or sweaters) that are eventually sold all over India via seasonal vendors, who come from various parts of the Indian subcontinent and sell these products to tourists or export them abroad. In this way the shift from agriculture to the service industry goes hand in hand with the loss of the traditional way of life in agriculturalist or pastoralist families. Yet, compared to the problems Tibetans are facing as refugees in India, this loss is probably not the main hardship. *McLeod Ganj* written by Pauline MacDonald (Mac Donald 2013), who witnessed everyday life of Tibetans in exile paints a difficult picture of true suffering for these refugees.

Nevertheless, the majority of Tibetan live in today's China, which is quickly transforming local culture, social life and local economies. The state development and social-engineering projects have wide-ranging influence on daily life. In the case of Amdo, the Chinese government runs projects such as the establishment of environmental protection zones which in turn results in the permanent settlement of the nomadic population. In the most extreme cases, as Ptáčková and Zens (Ptáčková and Zens 2017) state, this situation leads to economic impoverishment, as being deprived of their pastoralist way of life leads to cultural trauma and lost of community coherence. Cultural and religious life are also influenced nega-

tively. The settlement programs are accompanied by moving from the grasslands to the cities, where there are few job opportunities and huge social problems resulting occasionally in protests (Huatse and Gyal 2015) or in the worse cases self-immolation (Buffetrille and Robin 2012).

Summary

The professions I mainly focused on in this text were those of agriculturalists and pastoralists/herdsmen; saying it is better to think about all people of Tibet and their professions as an eco-system that stretches across all of Tibetan society. As we have seen in this chapter, not only in terms of social systems in different regions but also in terms of occupations there were various examples of diversity among them and as Samuel (1996) says: "No single region was typical of Tibet as a whole". The aim of this chapter was to describe general patterns that could bring the reader a better understanding of the Tibetan people's occupations pre-1959. I tried also to account for the impact living in exile has had on the traditional Tibetan lifestyle and on the massive *changes* contemporary Tibetans are undergoing in terms of culture and economy in today's China.

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7. Tibetans & their amusements



7. Tibetans & their amusements

Eight kinds of laugh¹⁴⁸

The threatening laugh: *ha ha*.

The joyous laugh: *hi hi*.

The flirtatious laugh: *he he*.

Six kinds of "Comic Sentiments"¹⁴⁹

Slight smile – *smita*

Smile – *hasita*

Gentle laughter – *vīhasita*

Laughter of ridicule – *upahasita*

Vulgar laughter – *apahasita*

Excessive laughter – *atīhasita*

¹⁴⁸ Tib. *gad mo brgyad*. Recently, Dan Martin posted on his blog brief post about "Six Degrees of Laughter" (Martin 2018) where he compiled short list of articles concerning the topic of humor in Buddhism. I decided to start this chapter by citing these four lines from his post mentioning the "eight laughs of heroes". Furthermore, Tibetans themselves often use a number of terms in this matter: *gad mo* for an ordinary laugh, *dgod pa* or *bzhad mo* for wilder laughter and *khrel gad* for scorning kind of laugh.

¹⁴⁹ Martin translates this as a "comedic mood" (Sans. *hāsya*; Tib. *gzhad gad*). According to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharat Muni (1951, vol. 1, p. 110), these six kinds are connected with three types of persons (superior, middling and inferior persons are laughing accordingly from the top of the list). Amusingly though, Martin does not find them in *Chos rnam kun btus*, the longest "numerical enumeration" of Buddhist terminology.

Games, i.e. rules-based social interactions with a risky plot and competitive twist, are perfect example of a popular form of amusements present in virtually all societies around the globe.¹⁵⁰ They bond the communities with enjoyment and provide an opportunity to see beyond the grey clouds of everydayness. A single game motive could be represented in many different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, it develops over time, so the final form may be, at the first glance, unrecognizable from its original appearance. Besides, one cannot forget the educational value of the games,¹⁵¹ as was proposed by J. A. Komenský in his treatise *Orbis Pictus* (1658) and later developed by J. Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1938).¹⁵² In fact, it does not matter whether we talk about folk amusements or some other form of art – all these cultural expressions expose the nature and mind-set of (in this case) Tibetans in certain way, therefore reflect the culturo-historical development in the context of space and time. Thus, the goal of this chapter is to highlight and briefly introduce some of the most popular “amusements” of the Tibetans.¹⁵³ Naturally, these could vary for the individual persons or be adjusted for different social environments. However, a sense of humour or certain cultural references (aka

150 For general anthropological introduction into the topic of children plays see Schwartzman (1976), where one can find many valuable sources. Nonetheless, Tibetan games have not yet been systematically described.

151 As D. Drokar says about Tibetan children playing *sho* (dice): “*blo sgo ‘byed thub pa*”, lit. “*The gates of (their) intellect could be opened (by playing it).*” (Drokar 2003).

152 Similar or related concepts are mentioned by numerous other authors such as H. Marcuse or F. Schiller. Playing games as a problem-solving practice is widely used for establishing a moral baseline within the cultural and social space of given area. Suggested further reading: *Religions in Play: Games, Rituals, and Virtual Worlds* (Bornet and Burger 2012). And for the topic of humour in the context of Tibetan diaspora in McLeod Ganj see Fassihi (2007).

153 For related posts about Tibetan entertainments see e.g. the website dancingyaks.com.

“the inside jokes”) are shared by majority of the Tibetans as well as perception of colours, understanding the symbols etc. And so, getting know the Tibetans by following their interests (and consequently spending some quality time amongst them) is really one of the key ways to understand them. For me, as a student of Tibetology, it wasn’t before my second field research in Tibetan diaspora when I finally realized that although the Tibetan culture is very distant and different from my own, their issues, interests, and amusements are (surprisingly) much alike those I am already familiar with.

“Going to the theatre means meeting all the other members of the community and spending a whole day from dawn to dusk with them. During this time many things other than the performance take place: picnics, dances performed by the spectators when the actors have finished, and all the possible meetings (...).”¹⁵⁴

Ache lhamo

Generally speaking, the so-called “performing arts” (*zlos gar rig gnas*) are usually classified amongst the five minor sciences¹⁵⁵ – poetry, astrology, dramatic arts (including music and dance), style (composition) and lexicology (metaphoric vocabulary). Although *ache lhamo* (*a lce lha mo/ a ce lha mo*), sometimes referred to only as “lhamo”, is usually being de-

¹⁵⁴ By A. Attisani (Donati and Matta 2009, 13).

¹⁵⁵ Hence following the Indian example. The major sciences are then logic, language, medicine, craft and philosophy. See Henrion-Dourcy (2017) for bibliographical introduction to the performing arts in general (where one can find a detailed schema of the five major sciences on p. 193) and Sangye (2017) for an interesting insight to a research conducted by the Tibetans themselves in PRC.

defined as “the Tibet’s traditional secular theatre”,¹⁵⁶ some may call it “Tibetan folk opera” too. As a combination of vocal and dance performances based upon epic stories of religious origin, it blends the line between secular vs. religious or drama vs. opera. The tradition of lhamo dances is being ascribed to the Thang-tong Gyalpo (*Thang stong rGyal po*), Tibetan scholar and bridge builder from the 14th/15th centuries.¹⁵⁷ It is, unsurprisingly, also connected to a legend of its origin, which has several available variants already described in secondary literature.

A brief, but useful introduction of lhamo is to be found in Colin Mackerras’ article.¹⁵⁸ Further helpful readings could be e.g. the critical compilation of available sources by Antonio Attisani, Snyder’s *Preliminary Study of the Lha mo* (1979) or some of the remarkable works by Isabelle Henrion-Dourcy. Pearlman’s *Tibetan Sacred Dance* (2002) is especially valuable for its countless presented images.¹⁵⁹

Lhamos are mostly based on the genre of religious hagiographical stories of liberation called namthar (*rnam thar*).¹⁶⁰ Therefore, the high-pitched vocalization used by the lhamo singers is called the same. The corpus of scripts traditionally used is not vast, however the repertoire is constantly expanding and nowadays

156 According to the tradition, the first performances used to be announced as follows: “And now the goddesses will appear and dance in front of you,” which would suggest that it is not as secular as some may say (see Donati and Matta 2009, 9).

157 Also known as *brTson ‘grus bZang po* aka “Builder of Iron Bridges”. See Gerner (2007).

158 See Mackerras (1999).

159 The first chapter of the Pearlman’s book was also an important source for the following part of this text, which is dedicated to cham dances.

160 For more detailed information about this genre see Cabezón and Jackson (1996).

includes even some more folk-inspired stories.¹⁶¹ Here is a list of those original namthars used as models for lhamos:

- *rGya bza' Bal bza'*
- *mKha' 'gro sNang sa 'Od 'bum*
- *mKha' 'gro ma 'Gro ba bZang mo*
- *Chos kyi rgyal po Dri med Kun ldan*
- *Chos rgyal Nor bzang*
- *gZugs kyi Nyi ma*
- *gCung po don yod dang don grub sku mched gnyes*
- *Grub dbang pad 'byung gi rnam sprul khye'u pad 'od pad ma 'od 'bar*
- *Dad pa brten pa*

Thanks to the numerous lhamo troupes,¹⁶² this tradition is still alive and the performances are on the programmes of many cultural events.¹⁶³ There are about nine main troupes in Tibet itself, every single one of them following different lineage. In addition to that, about nine more troupes are in exile. However, since the lineage of Kyormo Lungpa (*sKyor mo Lung pa*) was prevalent amongst the first performers of the "Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts"

161 These newly emerging plays as well as the Chinese themes tend to be considered boring by the Tibetan audience.

162 For the list of all currently active troupes and lineages see Fitzgerald (2014), 277.

163 Probably the best event for witnessing lhamo performances is Shoton (*zho ston*), the curd festival held in spring.

(TIPA),¹⁶⁴ all the exile groups are more or less influenced by it. Apart from the professionals, one can naturally see lots of amateurs too. Thus, the level of authenticity could vary.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, several state-sponsored lhamo troupes are active across the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and as a result, the issue of using them in the context of a propaganda has to be considered here as well.¹⁶⁶

Nowadays, the learning process of lhamo novices is rather simple. Troupe leaders (who have typically spent some time at the TIPA)¹⁶⁷ use handouts to teach the adepts. Then, the students use smartphones to record the moves for later references. According to the [TIPA's website](#), the basic course includes:

- *vocalization: voice training and aria singing*
- *text: basic story and narration*
- *choreography: hand and limb motion*
- *acting: facial expression and body exploits*
- *music: drum and cymbal*¹⁶⁸

164 Formerly known as the "Tibetan Music, Dance, and Drama Society" until 1981. In Lhasa (prior 1959), a group of musicians and performers called "Nangme Kyidug" (*Nang ma'i sKyid sdug*) used to fulfil similar mission as TIPA in Dharamsala does today.

165 See Wojahn (2016).

166 At the early stage of Chinese presence in Tibet and during the Cultural Revolution, only the plays featuring revolutionary stories were allowed. Starting from the eighties onwards, the classical motives of the plays were re-introduced again.

167 ...speaking about the troupes in exile of course.

168 See also Mackerras 1999.

Lhamo plays could take more than a day, being interrupted by short sketches during the breaks. Yet nowadays, mostly the shortened versions are performed, mixed from the most popular scenes of the well-known pieces. Moreover, implementation of certain current affairs is common due to the improvisations and adaptations by particular troupes. One shouldn't be surprised by the fact that there is no stage, hence the spectators are on the same level as the performers, lying or sitting around on the ground. Some of the performers wear flat masks,¹⁶⁹ some three-dimensional stiff masks of certain deities (usually similar to those used during cham dances – see later).¹⁶⁹

The usual set of characters appearing during most of the lhamos consists of *rngon pa* (hunters), *lha mo* (goddesses), and *rgya lu* (term used for the eldest male of ancient families from Zhigatse and Gyantse). Some of the characters and their performances are famous amongst the Tibetans, e.g. the Drekar's ('*Dre dkar*; '*Bras dkar*) comical speech given during the New Year's celebrations.¹⁷⁰

169 White masks tend to be associated with peaceful, compassionate characters and green masks are connected to Green Tāra. On the other hand, dark red masks, black and white masks and completely black masks represent malicious, wrathful, and unreliable aspects. Blue masks with ornaments usually belong to fishermen and hunters with rather wrathful persona. Yellow masks suggest virtues associated with sages or hermits. And red ones are worn by powerful and wise leaders. Further details are available e.g. in Snyder (1979).

170 There are several different Drekar's performances available on YouTube: [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).



1. Illustration of a typical lhamo performer wearing a flat mask.

Cham 2

By witnessing any cham (*'chams*),¹⁷¹ one can simply describe it as a combination of dance, religious music,¹⁷² and theatrical performances within the ritualistic framework of Tibetan monastic traditions, featuring masked dancers wearing colourful costumes, who represent (mainly) wrathful deities.¹⁷³ There is always present some sort of a narrative although sometimes hidden for an uneducated spectator. Chams could be, together with thangka paintings, considered as the most vibrant and well-known expression of Tibetan religious arts and an essential part of majority of the rituals and festivals.¹⁷⁴ Although

171 There are other similar terms in use highlighting different aspects of cham dances: *'bag 'cham* (mask dances), *rol 'cham* (dances accompanied by a lot of music) and *gar 'cham* (dances focused on arms' gesticulations). Apart from these, a related term *gar* is used for certain type of slightly different dances. It may be useful to mention here that the term *'cham* (or *'chams*) means not only "dance" (both verb and noun) but also "agree". Chams are sometimes also called "lama dances". See [this](#) article for more information.

172 I will dive into the issue of Tibetan music later in this chapter, but it is essential to have a little note here about what does it mean "religious music" in Tibet. As people in the West are familiar with church masses and various forms of Christian liturgical styles developed throughout the centuries, in Tibet, the role of religious music is of a different kind. This highly functional constellation of sounds is precisely written in so called neumes, which capture a pitch contour or rhythm rather than precise melody. Common link between a melody and harmony, together delivering pleasant experience for an audience – that is not the goal here. As an instrument (usually a drum, hand-bell, cymbal, conch-shell, number of different forms of the trumpets or reed instruments) is being played, specific part of a ritual text is being recited and a corresponding dance move and *mudrā* performed alongside, all together conveying a single meaning.

173 Their identification is based on the usual iconographical signs. E.g. Padmasambhava is usually depicted as a white-skinned man dressed in precious garments. In his right hand, he holds a *ḍamaru* and in the left one a mirror. Recommended online source for Tibetan iconography could be the web himalayanart.org. Otherwise, see for example the Lokesh Chandra's and Fredrick Bunce's *The Tibetan Iconography of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and other Deities: A Unique Pantheon* (2002).

174 Different cham dances have various meanings and appearances according to their purpose, tradition or location. They are usually performed annually (e.g. during Losar, Padmasabhava's birthday or sometimes as necessary due to a specific demand).



2. Paper mash mask used by the dancers during cham performances.

chams might get boring after a while due to their repetitiveness (dances could be performed throughout several days as a part of a single ritual unit), one has to appreciate the overall complexity requiring deeper study of “what’s going on” in the background. But even at the first glance it is evident that every single one of the elaborate moves, drum-strokes or blows of the horns is highly ceremonial and certainly not improvised.

There is still a lack of information about cham dances prior to the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet. Apparently, some sort of ritual dancing was present and executed even by the ancient Bon priests. However, such tradition was also not alien to the Tantric Buddhists of India.¹⁷⁵ Although cham was not originally considered as any sort of “amusement”,^{3.} as for today, we can safely say that when cham is being performed, ordinary people will come to see it mainly for the entertainment. It is an opportunity to chat and enjoy the spare time while taking pictures to share with friends and relatives. It is the 21st century in the end, isn’t it...

These ancient performances, accompanied by a recitation of mantras, have the general purpose of taking control of and transforming space,¹⁷⁶ destroying obstacles and thus subjugating evil forces.¹⁷⁷ As the specific purposes of particular rituals may vary, securing luck and prosperity, suppression of the evil or making prophecies for the upcoming year are the most common ones.

175 More on this and chams in general is to be found in Trávníček (2005, 2008).

176 Schrempf (1999).

177 Those are then locked into a repelling effigy called *dogpa* (*zlog pa*) as part of the ritual exorcism) Dogpas should not be confused with *mchod pa* (altar offerings), *gtor ma* (sacrificial dough cakes) and *nya bo* (Sans. *liṅga*; human-shaped effigy (from dough, sometimes also just a man figure painted on a piece of paper) which is being ritually killed after absorbing all the negative and evil forces).

As for the costumes and masks, one can usually find the following characters in almost all of the chams:

- black hat dancers (*zhwa nag*) in white robes (reminder of *dPal gyi rDo rje*)
- skeleton dancers with skull masks (*ging*, or *king ka ra*, *pho nya*, *keng rus*) ^{4.}
- sword dancers
- dharma protectors (*chos skyong*)
- three-eyed higher deities – mostly wrathful (*khro bo*), with a skull diadem¹⁷⁸
- lower-rank divinities wearing animal masks (of pigs, yaks, stags, birds, monkeys etc.)
- famous teachers, semi gods, warriors (*skyes pa*), “butchers” (*bshan pa*) or “cutters” (*gcod pa*)
- a comic buffoon (representing Hashang Mahāyāna),¹⁷⁹ an old bald or bearded man (so called Mitshering (*Mi tshe ring*), representing long life), and other accompanying characters played (usually) by some laymen or children ^{5.}

A few of the older masks are said to have certain magical qualities too – e.g. the one kept in Samye monastery called *bse 'bag smug chung* or that of the goddess Paldan Lhamo which is made of stone and kept in Jokhang.¹⁸⁰ When not in use, masks are usually being kept in trunks or hang from the beams wrapped in cloth. ^{6.}

Due to a significant complexity of the dance moves, a potential risk of displeasing

¹⁷⁸ Some of the most frequent deities are *gShin rje*, *gShin rje gshed*, *rTa mgrin* etc.

¹⁷⁹ For more information on this famous figure see e.g. [here](#).

¹⁸⁰ Typically, the masks used actively by the dancers are made of paper pulp with starch to save some weight. Wooden masks are carved for display purposes only.

3+4. Some of the costumes are not necessarily finely decorated, as is usually depicted or described in the books. On the upper picture, the dancer was simply chosen at the last moment, thus his costume is improvised. Second photo depicts the skeleton dancers in home made costumes (both photos are from Lubra village, Nepal).



5. Children collecting money during the break in between of the chams. Lubra village, Lower Mustang, Nepal.



6. Cham masks used by the dancers of Lubra village, Nepal. When not in use, they are suspended from the beams in the local temple.

the demons exists. That is why the dancers have to be first initiated and trained according to the dancing manuals (*'chams yig*), oral instructions, and direct observation. And, of course, the cham itself is traditionally supervised by a *'chams dpon* (for technical accuracy) and *rdo rje slob dpon* (for mystical legitimacy). Depending on the individual cham and monastery, the number of dancers varies greatly from three up to a hundred or so.¹⁸¹ Sometimes, the dances take place inside but more widespread are performances on some open-air spots, usually within the monasteries themselves. Consequently, most of the shows take place during the daytime.

One should also not overlook all the preparations nor other interesting signs indicating a cham in progress. Such indicators could be for example the so-called "banners of victory" (*rgyal mtshan*) with a trident on top, pointing towards the sky and various magic drawings or "dance circles" (*'chams skor*) on the surrounding ground. Even a presence of a fireplace where the boiling oil is being mixed with liquid usually poured from a skull cup (*thod pa*) and thus making an explosion with a lot of smoke could be a good clue. From great distance could be heard also the (gun-)shots or shrills. Furthermore, the temples are sometimes transformed into a "dressing rooms" for the dancers, separated by a curtain at the main door from the "stage" itself. In the end, the rituals accompanying the chams mostly culminate with "casting the sacrificial dough cakes" (*gtor rgyag*) outside the village.

181 During our field research in Lubra village (Nepal, 2016), three main dancers were switching masks and costumes throughout a week-long Bon ritual which included several chams. They were accompanied by many masked children entertaining the crowd during the breaks and a ritual specialist who had to interrupt his recitation, so he could put on another mask for a brief moment.

The sound of Tibet

Tibetan song genres could be divided in two main categories: religious and secular. Because this whole chapter should describe only the “fun part” of the Tibetan culture so to say, let’s focus on the latter. Although some authors enumerate five sub-genres of secular music (folk songs, dance songs, narrative songs, ache lhamo, and instrumental music), I personally think that such division is a little bit artificial in the context of Tibet. Instead, I would like to present just a simple list of (mostly) folk music sub-genres I have come across in various sources:¹⁸²

- *glu/ gzhas/ glu gzhas* = secular songs (generally) – varying in number of stanzas, each of four verses (six or seven syllables) featuring metaphorical expressions¹⁸³
- *dmangs glu/ dmangs gzhas* = folk songs sung on streets reflecting specific topics
- *las gzhas/ ngal rtsol gyi glu* = work songs¹⁸⁴
- *ar gzhas* = work songs sung during building new house aka the “brick layer’s songs”
- *bro gzhas* = dance songs of many sub-genres such as *nang ma* etc.¹⁸⁵
- *'brog glu* = nomadic songs
- *rgyal po'i glu* = old royal songs of two kinds – *mgur* and *mchid*

182 Ben Wu (1998) mentions numerous other genres (in Chinese language) alongside his overview of available sources on Tibetan music, notation styles and other topics concerning the performing arts.

183 For examples of folk songs go [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#).

184 Examples of work songs are [here](#), [here](#) or [here](#).

185 Majority of the Tibetan folk songs are accompanied by dancing.

- *'bangs kyi glu* = early popular songs influencing authors such as Milarepa, Drugpa Kunleg or the sixth Dalai Lama¹⁸⁶
- *chang gzhas* = pub songs
- *skor bzhas/ skor bro* = songs sung in a circle
- *ral pa* = gymnastic dances with drumming females
- *byis glu* = songs for children
- *gnyid 'gug pa'i glu* = lullabies
- *glu shags* = humorous dialogues sung as a form of competitions
- *la gzhas/ dga' gzhas* = love songs
- *kh rung glu/ kh rung sa'i glu* = marriage songs¹⁸⁷

Moreover, Ngawang Tenzin divide the “secular” music in two sub-categories: *nang ma* (indigenous “classical” music for aristocracy) and *stod gzhas* (popular songs mainly from Central Tibet developed around urban areas) in his short article entitled *On Tibetan Traditional Music* published in *Tibetan Arts in Transition: A Journey Through Theatre, Cinema, and Painting* (Donati and Matta 2009). Lama Jabb introduces in his article another popular genre called *sgra snyan rdung len*, which is characteristic for the use of Tibetan guitar (*sgra snyan*), strummed by the singer (*rdung len*) (hence the name).¹⁸⁸ Concerning some additional reading on this topic, **Ngawang Choephel** is one of the great ethnomusicologists (dealing primarily with folk music), who has to be mentioned here. Then, amongst the Western scholars,

¹⁸⁶ For more information about the songs of the sixth Dalai Lama see Sørensen (1990).

¹⁸⁷ See e.g. Tucci (1966) or [here](#).

¹⁸⁸ Jabb (2011).

Peter Crossley-Holland and Ter Ellingson are well-known researchers of the musical traditions of Tibet.

An example of traditional song called *bKra la shis pa* of the *nang ma* genre:

*bkra shis ldum ra'i nang la/
g.yang chags me tog 'khrungs bzhag//
snga dro'i zil pa ma yal/
nyin dgung sbrang char babs byung//*

In the garden of auspiciousness,
The flower of prosperity is born.
The morning dew has not yet vanished,
When the afternoon drizzle alights.

Since the sixties, new genres have gradually developed in Tibet, both original or imported.¹⁸⁹ These new song styles frequently served the Chinese propaganda up to the eighties when the first well-known Tibetan pop stars started to emerge. Speaking about them, Lobzang Palden Tawo is usually considered to be the pioneer of Tibetan pop music.¹⁹⁰ His friend, Nelung Tsering Tobden aka "Tomla" represents more traditional folk-styled singers.¹⁹¹ Tomla and an-

¹⁸⁹ Great source of Tibetan music, lyrics and videos is [this](#) YouTube channel.

¹⁹⁰ See one of his songs [here](#). Because he spent almost the whole life in Germany, one can clearly hear the influences of European eighties' music in his production. For an interview with him see [here](#) or [here](#).

¹⁹¹ Interviews with him are [here](#) and [here](#).

other famous singer, Jhola Techung,¹⁹² were both trained by TIPA in Dharamsala. Similarly, Tsering Gyurme or Phurbu T. Namgyal became very famous after training in TIPA first.¹⁹³ Amongst the female artists of Tibet, Dadon appears to be the most legendary one.¹⁹⁴

To name some examples of an early well-made Western-style Tibetan music, I simply have to mention my favourite Tibetan band ever – Rangzhen Shonu.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, names like Yungchen Lhamo, Techung or Nawang Khechong¹⁹⁶ are probably the most famous Tibetan artists in the West. And last but not least has to be mentioned Loten Namling, who is especially vibrant figure of Tibetan resistance in exile and great musician at the same time.¹⁹⁷

Nowadays, young generation is heavily influenced by Western rap and hip-hop music.¹⁹⁸ After rather clumsy beginnings of Tibetan production, several artists are truly worth listening. As some of these talents live in the West, they were

192 For interview with him click [here](#).

193 For more details and names see Morcom (2018) and Yamamoto (2017).

194 Her Wikipedia [page](#).

195 Their famous cassette is available on [YouTube](#). Later on, [Paljor Phurbatsang](#) started another band called [Yak band](#) based in Paris, which also gained huge popularity.

196 Interview with him is [here](#).

197 Interview with him is [here](#). For a sample of some of his many performances see [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#), [this](#) or this [documentary](#) about him. As you can see, he is not afraid of any kind of genre fusion.

198 Interesting post about Tibetan hip-hop subculture in to be found [here](#) (Deepak 2015). For more details about related hip-hop scene in Chengdu see Schmitz (2018) or Coonan (2018).

able to successfully merge both their cultural influences into an appealing and well-balanced fusion.

Regarding lyrics of the songs, they mostly cover the topics of:

- beauties of the nature in Tibet and mountains
- honouring the famous religious figures
- protest songs, freedom and oppression of Tibetans
- inspiring and cheering up songs
- love songs
- language and culture (didactic function)

This genre gained popularity especially after the release of a song called Made in Tibet in 2011, written by Swiss-based Tibetan rapper Karma Norbu aka Karma Emchi, better known as Shapaley.¹⁹⁹ This song actually turned into an encouragement for the Tibetans all around the world to stand up and make their own rap songs in Tibetan language.²⁰⁰ As a follow-up, whole “Made in Tibet” concept has turned into a merchandise of urban clothes.

It is obvious that quantity of musical production is not a problem here and thanks to the artists like ANU, the quality is gradually rising too. ANU’s breakthrough moment was a release of the track [‘Phur](#), followed by another hit – [rTse mo yin](#). Previously, he has introduced himself with the self-named song [A nu ring lugs](#). His 2018’s dance release called [dGa’ dga’](#) hasn’t gained much popularity (yet)

¹⁹⁹ Interview with him is [here](#). Fragments of his work (some of which is also non-musical) are also presented [here](#).

²⁰⁰ The participants in this let’s say “movement” are easily findable on YouTube under the keywords “made in Tibet”.

but his collaboration on the [Rap of Tibet \(1376\)](#) featuring TMJ, Dekyi Master, Eric Phuntsok, Uncle Buddhist and Young 13D Baby was a real sensation. Tenzin Seldon alias TibChick is another example of a skilful songwriter with great production. As the first Tibetan female rapper, her tracks [Fearless](#) or [Don't Test Me](#) gained instant popularity. To name some other popular rappers, we could not forget [Tenzin Seungyi](#), [Kunseng](#), [Tsering Gyurmey](#) or [Pemsi](#).

As Tenzin Dharpo mentions in his post: *"Social network and YouTube have given a whole new platform for Tibetan artists to showcase their talents and become Tibetan celebrities. From Yeshe Khando to Sonam Topden, from Kunsel to Tenzin Dolma, there is already a mini showbiz industry thriving right under our nose."*²⁰¹ From what I have witnessed, Tibetans themselves use YouTube keywords "Tibetan rap" to search for new releases to share on WeChat or event to play right in the clubs and bars. ^{7.}

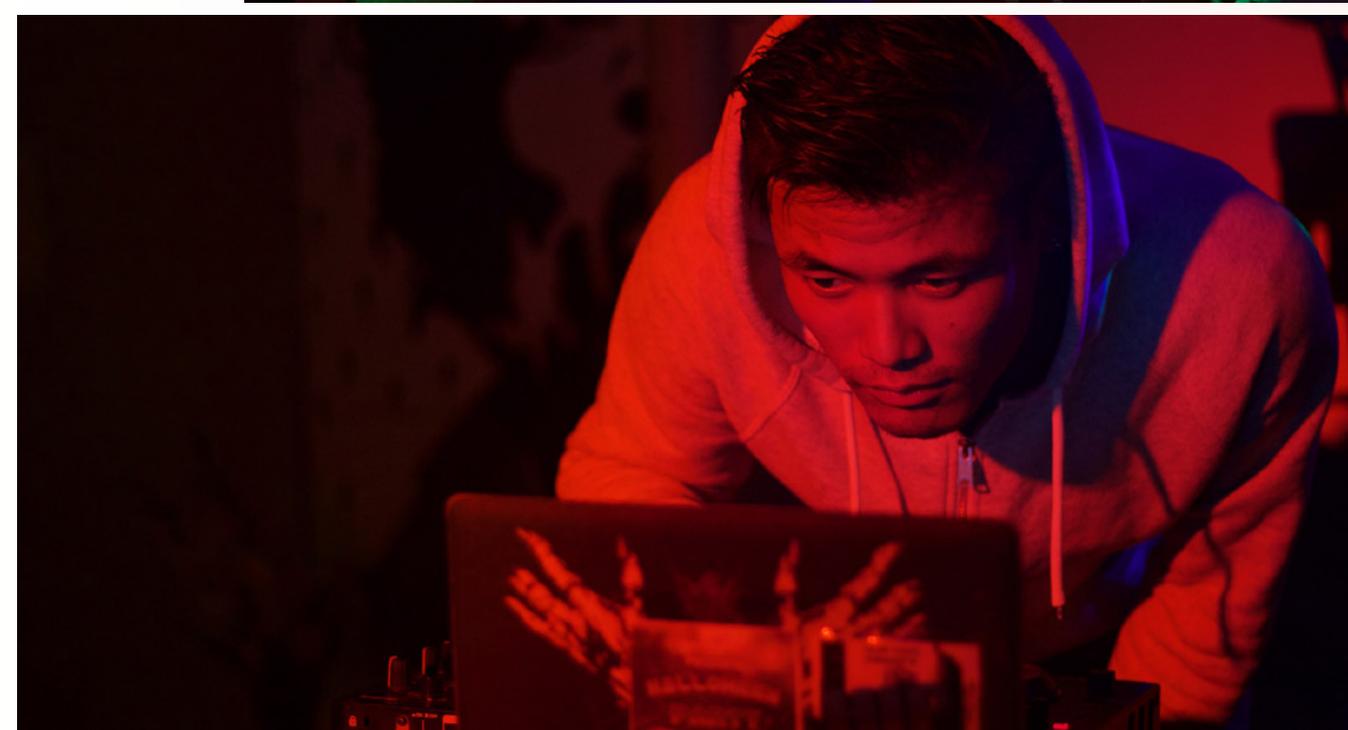
Besides hip-hop, one can find other popular genres of Western origin too. In McLeod Ganj, regular blues and rock sessions are held in one of the Cafés on Bhanagsu Rd. Among not so plentiful Tibetan bands, maybe the most well-known are JJI Exile Brothers,²⁰² [Melong](#) and Tamding Tseten with his band.²⁰³ Recently, even pop music started to be finely produced and so the artists like Sonam Tob-

²⁰¹ Dharpo (2018).

²⁰² Interview with one member of this band is available [here](#).

²⁰³ Interview with Tamding is [here](#). As he progressed in his art studies, he also started a social movement called "Tattooed for free Tibet".

7. One of the music clubs in Dharamsala (India) where regular hip-hop sessions are held by the Tibetan youths and (mostly) for the Tibetan youths.



den²⁰⁴ and many others gained some fame even among the “pickier” music fans. However, I have to admit that the overall quality of many Tibetan pop songs (and modern music in general) is not so extraordinary. Moreover, the pop songs produced in Tibet itself frequently follow Chinese musical schemes and usually does not bring creative lyrics or any especially memorable melodies. In most cases, the lyrics speak about Tibetan nature, Buddhism and love.²⁰⁵

Games and gamble

Gaming and gambling is an inseparable part of Tibetan culture from its earliest times. Amongst other popular games, sho (*sho/sho rtsed*) and bag (*sbag/sbags*) stand out. I have never met any Tibetan who would not know how to play these two. Bag,²⁰⁶ usually described as a domino or Tibetan version of mahjong, is not so much played nowadays though. Sho²⁰⁷ on the other hand, started to be popular even amongst the youths because it is considered to be a part of Tibetan cultural identity. It is thus promoted almost as a form of political statement. Sho is traditionally accompanied by distinctive shouting called “dice-prayers” (*sho bshad*) yelled by all involved players. Historical sources suggest that some form of sho has been played in the fifteenth century, but its origin could be even older (several

204 Interview with him is [here](#).

205 Like [here](#).

206 More about bag could be found in Wang (1997).

207 See Murakami (2014).

mentions are found also in the epic of King Gesar or legends about Milarepa's grandfather who was supposedly very fond of this game).²⁰⁸ Although sho could be played²⁰⁹ almost everywhere (even virtually on smartphones), it is considered to be inauspicious to play it (or gamble in general) during the Losar celebrations or in the period of forty-nine days after a death of a relative.²¹⁰

Recently, Chinese mahjong (*sbag*) and some Western card games (*shog sbag*; *tag se* (from hindi *tāśa*)) were introduced into the Tibet. Besides that, snooker and billiard ^{8.} are very popular both in exile and the Tibet. These should not be confused with another game called "gyiren"²¹¹ which is also known as a "Tibetan snooker". Despite its name, it more resembles some variation of a carrom²¹² (no cue is used). Last but not least, betting (*rgyan 'dzugs*) is very common amongst Tibetans of all.

Bear in mind that gambling, similarly to other games played by adults, is almost every time accompanied by drinking (sometimes a drinking game, often with elaborate rules on its own) and smoking, hence most

208 Ibid.

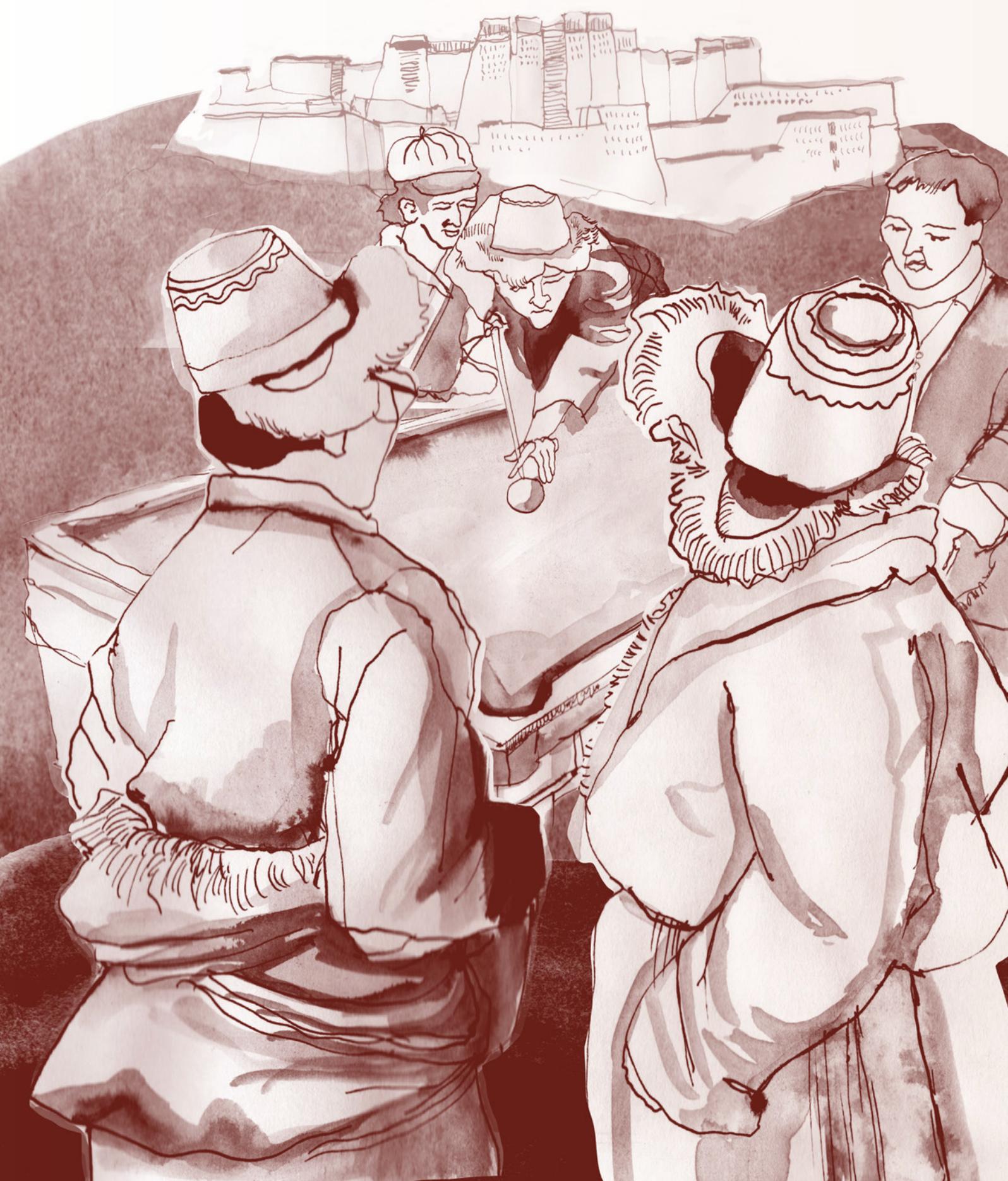
209 "Playing sho" has several terms in Tibetan: *sho rtse*, *sho rgyag* or *cho lo 'gyed*.

210 See for example Ramble (2009) or Murakami (2014).

211 I was not able to find the written form of this word.

212 See boardgamegeek.com for more information.

8. Tibetans wearing traditional clothes, playing outdoor billiard in front of Potala (Lhasa).



of the time one cannot see many women involved.²¹³ Moreover, a special “gambling sociolect” or unique vocabulary have developed, which is not easy to understand for laymen or outsider. Finally, it is said that certain theurangs (*the’u rang*)²¹⁴ could be involved when someone is lucky and wins often. Their forces can even manifest through the player himself.²¹⁵

Besides that, I have to point out that children’s games are plentiful in Tibetan culture too. My colleague Peter mentions some of the most popular ones in his chapter, and so I will not dive any deeper into it. Furthermore, numerous riddles (*lde’u*) are popular educational game of the nomads.²¹⁶ Finally, I will never forget a story told by my teacher of Classical Tibetan. He once described a situation in Tibetan cities after the boom of internet cafés which came from China in the nineties. Back then, a group of monks

213 Traditionally, Asian women should not participate in these kinds of things.

214 A malevolent deity of lower rank which is said to have magical powers to influence (among others) weather, illnesses or, in this context, dices.

215 Possession of people is not an alien concept for the Tibetans (e.g. the oracles) nor a presence of various beings in things like dices, rocks, etc. However, it is necessary to point out that possessing sentient beings is usually reserved (according the Buddhist tradition) only for higher-rank deities such as Palden Lhamo. Murakami (2014) further argues that women cannot play sho in Lhasa due to their sensitive connection with Palden Lhamo which is the guardian deity of Lhasa and Dalai Lama (this goddess is often mentioned as a fundamental deity for dice divination and dice in general). They could be possessed by her and thus overpower the other male players, who could be possessed (only) by theurangs. From this equation men could never come out as winners and so women can play sho only in the cities other than Lhasa. Such superstitions leave some unanswered questions concerning the relationship between the gambling (and games) and religion. Thus, the term *sho mo* (dice divination) containing the female particle *-mo* is considered not to be coincidental (see e.g. Róna Tas (1956)).

216 See Tournadre and Dorje (2003), 383.

once played some kind of a first-person shooter PC game at a local e-café. As they were encouraging one of their associate (also a monk), who was killing the virtual Nazis, they were shouting: “*me mda’ rgyag/ me mda’ rgyag/*” (“Shoot! Shoot!”). Such stories only illustrate how innocent fun could be perceived differently, depending on the specific performers and at the same time prove the universal need for fun by everyone.

Sports

In general, Tibetans are very competitive nation.²¹⁷ It is only logical then, that they enjoy all kind of sports, as the murals in the Potala palace²¹⁸ confirm (from the end of the seventeenth century). Dan Martin enumerates three triads of “Nine Different Games (of/for) Men” (*pho rtsal sna dgu*):

- Talking / oratorship (alias story telling)
- Letters / writing (possibly calligraphy or spelling)
- Calculating / calculations (arithmetical operations worked out in one’s head)
- Archery (purely men’s sport due to the symbolism of arrows; Bhutan’s national sport)
- Stone (lifting and carrying) (similar to the World’s Strongest Man competitions in West)
- Jumping (probably off some kind of a ramp)
- Foot racing / running

²¹⁷ For more games and sports of the Tibetans see Hummel and Brewster (1963).

²¹⁸ See Martin (2008) where he also compiles a short bibliography on this topic.

- Swimming (of various kinds)
- Wrestling (similar to the Greco-Roman style)

In old times, one of the best sportsmen of Tibet were *rdob rdob* monks,²¹⁹ whose physique was often even better that of an average hard-working man. Also, acrobatic sports were popular as could be seen on [this](#) old photo of a man sliding down the rope (*bya mkhan thag shur/ thag bzhur/ rgyal mkhar thag bzhur/ gnam bro thag rtsed/*). Besides, various other competitions were carried out by the tantrics, during which they were showing off their skills. One of those competitions describes Andrea Loseries-Leick when she writes about levitating monks – walled up in low muddy huts with their heads protruding from the openings in the “roofs” as an indication of actual levitation.²²⁰ Furthermore, common part of many festivals was (and still is) a [horse or yak racing](#) (*rta (g.yag) rgyugs*)²²¹ often combined with archery and other disciplines. Actually, horse racing and horsemanship (similar to the acrobats in circus) are so popular in Tibet, one can find a lot of special [horse festivals](#).

Therefore, when Brits introduced a polo to the Tibetans, it was basically pre-determined for instant success. Although football (soccer; *rkang rtsed po lo* – “polo played (by) legs”) was popular in Tibet for a long time, it wasn’t up until the 1998 when the first official football team was formed. Due to the political difficulties it is still not possible though to form a Tibetan national team.²²²

²¹⁹ Also written as *ldab ldob*. Excellent article about them was written by M. C. Goldstein (1964).

²²⁰ See Loseries-Leick (2008).

²²¹ You can compare it with [this](#) Vice report on Yak festival in Mongolia.

²²² See the movie called [“The Cup”](#) from 1999.

Festivals and celebrations

Naming all the main cultural festivals is, according to me, somehow useless here. For a list of Tibetan traditional festivals see [this](#) corresponding Wiki-entry. Please bear in mind that this list is just a general one and definitely not a comprehensive compendium of all the local festivals, holidays or other annual festivities or rituals held throughout the Tibetan-speaking region. For more information on the local traditions, one can find many useful information especially in various travelogues and diaries of the Westerners (published mostly during the twentieth century) or in recent anthropological studies, like those written by Charles Ramble. And so, in this chapter I would like to present just a few of the main Tibetan celebrations and include some common useful Tibetan terms.

Typical festival goes as follows: Tibetans put on their best clothes (*nam bza' yag shos gon*), go to the temples to make the offerings (*lha khang la mchod mjal la 'gro* or *mchod 'bul la 'gro* depending on the kind of the offering) and circumbulate around the sacred places (*skor ra rgyag*). Prostrations (*phyag 'tshal*) are done during the circumbulations or at the designated places. Prayer flags (*dar lcog*) are usually being hanged on the sacred or otherwise important places (in the exteriors only) and every other year are usually renewed, if damaged. This process is called *dar lcog btsugs*. Burning juniper (*bsang gtong*) accompanies lots of Tibetan rituals and the distinctive scent and smoke are clear signs that "something is going on here". Various kinds of butter offerings and sculptures are displayed (*mar kyi mchod pa dang sku 'dra sgrig gshom byed*) on the altars. If necessary, sacrificial dough offerings (*gtor ma*) are prepared. As stated earlier in the text, dancing chams (*'cham rgyag*) is another popular activity and sometimes also a necessary part of numerous celebrations. During the Yoghurt Festival (*zho ston*), lhamo is

always being performed (*lha mo 'khrab*). Drinking alcohol (especially *chang* and *arag* (*chang dang a rag 'thung*)) is also an indivisible part of majority of the events, together with immense banquets. For further reading (in Tibetan) see Khedup and Tsering (2002).

Inspiration by the Western (pop-)cultural themes is common even among the Tibetans, who adopted several kinds of festivals and other events. It is a fascinating combination of Tibetan tradition and cultural loans. Rock concerts, film festivals, Miss Tibet,²²³ Mr Tibet, or simple high school parades – Tibetans have them all. Almost every settlement or exile community has its own shows. In case of Dharamsala, most of them are happening on the main square of TIPA. The hosts, celebrities or winners are being offered *khatags* (*kha btags*) after their performances (in accordance with the custom). New Tibetan music hits and popular Western “summer songs” are played when young boys and girls dance traditional or modern choreographies. Lay people of all ages (and monks too!) enjoy all of these of events. Nevertheless, I have to point out, that I have never seen any nun attending such happenings.

223 [Here](#) is an example from 2017 showing **Miss Tibet** in traditional costumes. Some aspects of the newly emerged types of events convey certain controversions due to the cultural differences between the West and the East. For example, Bhagsunag waterfall near McLeod Ganj is a well-known tourist spot with a sacred place nearby. Consequently, filming a swimsuit showcase there caused disturbance throughout the Tibetan community (see [here](#)).

New forms of arts

As you may already know, Tibetans never fully developed a tradition of *belles-lettres*, as the Western nations did.²²⁴ Almost all artistic production was originally dedicated to practical objectives of religion, politics, administration or historical documentation.²²⁵ Shift towards more creative and independent art production started in Tibet later than in Europe or America – in the second half of the twentieth century, when Tibet was exposed first to the Chinese and then the global cultural influences. Consequently, new artists and authors have emerged and gradually introduced new art forms and genres to the Tibetan audience. Nowadays, after overcoming the shy beginnings, Tibetan art is vital and very potent field for deeper research.

I have already introduced new genres of popular music, so I will not discuss them here again. For your first contact with Tibetan painters I suggest a great introductory book from the Imago Mundi series called *Tibet: Made by Tibetans* (Benetton, Vanzo, and Miller 2015).²²⁶ Interesting source is definitely the PhD thesis *The Iconography of Contemporary Tibetan Art: Deconstruction, Reconstruction and Iconoclasm* (Ryan 2016). For further insight follow the work of (for example) Leigh Miller. Journals such as the Asian Art News and Art Asia Pacific are also worth reading. Various forms of contemporary Tibetan art are briefly introduced in *Tibetan Arts in Transition* (Donati

224 And the same could be said also about the art of painting and sculpturing.

225 An exception to this are e.g. the famous love songs of the sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso or several genres of poems and folk songs.

226 You can also find the paintings from Luciano Benetton's collection on the web.

and Matta 2009) including a cinema (Françoise Robin is one the most well-known scholars focused on this particular topic).²²⁷ Because many Tibetan films have some form of religious agenda, one might find a thesis called *Forging a Buddhist Cinema: Exploring Buddhism in Cinematic Representations of Tibetan Culture* (Harnden-Simpson 2011) helpful too. Furthermore, Chinese directors have cooperated with Tibetans on numerous movies, usually some love stories of huge length (up to four hours!) which I find quite boring to be honest. This cannot be said about to work of Pema Tseden, probably the best-known Tibetan director.²²⁸

Because writing a novel is much less expensive than producing a film, contemporary Tibetan writers create relatively large number of fresh stories and books (mainly in English and Chinese though). Tenzin Tsundue or Tsering Woeser are good examples of such. To name some of the most famous authors, Dhondup Gyal and Amdo Gendun Chopel have to be mentioned. Thanks to growing literacy, even writing in Tibetan is becoming more and more popular. There are also several journals and websites covering new Tibetan writings, one of which is *[Bod kyi rtsom rig dra ba](#)*. Due to the current situation in TAO, the writings mostly cover topics like social or political commentaries, Tibetan identity, and human rights, often with rather sentimental tone. Autobiographies and religious topics are also very popular.

²²⁷ Czech readers might find useful the website of “Flim festival of Tibetan films”, which even includes a small [database](#) of Tibetan films which have been screened.

²²⁸ For further reading about Tibetan film see the bibliography of this chapter.

This limited diversity of topics is not entirely fault of the authors but partially of the audience too. Artists are fettered by “Tibetan authenticity” which is something the audience expect and want from them. To ensure the success, they fulfil those wishes and deliver the desired content. Similar scheme could be applied to basically all forms of contemporary Tibetan art. Identity crisis, being in exile and having a homesickness are certainly the “current hot issues”. Many books and papers about these issues have already been published, so let me suggest a few scholars such as Vincanne Adams or Tracy Ann Stevens for your further reading.

And finally, I have to mention extremely popular and plentiful soap operas (those from Tibet resemble their Chinese examples and those from India naturally resembles the Bollywood production) and Chinese-styled Losar TV shows (see [YouTube](#) various examples). These TV galas are usually full of singing and dancing performances, story-telling, comical scenes, and [stand-up comedies](#) which are also to be found as shows on their own.

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8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year



8. Annual rituals: Losar (*lo gsar*) or Tibetan New Year

Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to Losar (*lo gsar*) or Tibetan New Year, one of many festivals celebrated by Tibetans. In general, Tibetan festivals (*dus chen*, a great day or a holy day) are closely related to astrology and religion – namely, to Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. This connection may be observed, for example, on festivals' dates which were traditionally selected from auspicious days of the Tibetan calendar. Many festivals are distinguished according to their religious holy days, astrological constellations, seasons and other lucky days for occasions like traveling, house renovations, and so forth. There are, for instance, four festivals of the Buddha's life that are celebrated throughout the year, harvest festivals that are held on first week of the eighth month (*khrooms*), pilgrim festivals held on seventh day of the seventh month (*gro bzhin*), etc. Dates of the festivals are then calculated from positions of the eight planets, functions of the five elements or influences of twelve zodiac signs. Furthermore, they are planned due to religious analogies to celestial realms (*lha yul*), deities of the eight classes of spirits and their powers. All these connections help to Tibetans to identify auspicious phenomena or potential disasters, which would have influenced their festivals and important events in their lives. Therefore, in brief, majority of Tibetan festivals are celebrated on astrologically and religiously auspicious days.

8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year

Tibetan Buddhists and Bonpos tend to believe that on days of the festivals, such as Losar, the four festivals of the Buddha's life, and others, every positive or negative deed is multiplied ten million times. Therefore, celebration of the festivals often includes religious behaviors that are motivated by such belief. For example, Tibetans go on pilgrimages ^{1.} ^{2.} to holy places, perform various ritual practices, such as the mandala offering (*maṅdal 'bul ba*), saving life of animals (*tshe thar*), cutting through the ego (*gchod*) mentally offering physical body and make smoke offering (*bsang mchod*). Many Tibetans also engage in multiple acts of generosity, such as donating money to ones in need – beggars, old people, wandering yogis, but also to monasteries, elementary schools, and other institutions. These ritual are believed to accumulate merits for doers and produce positive effects for others, which are multiplied many times as stated above. On 29th day of Tibetan lunar calendar, they make the ritual known as Gutor (*dgu gtor*) puja for eliminating obstacles, all negative deeds and unfortunate circumstances as the preparation for the upcoming New Year.

Losar: Tibetan New Year

Losar is perhaps the most universal festival that is celebrated by all Tibetan without concerns their religious, political, and social status. The festival is held during first three days in the first month of the Tibetan calendar. This time falls into the period between February and March according the Western calendar. In general, Losar is especially celebrated by food, drinks, music, dance [see here](#), staying with family, meeting with friends ^{3.}, and engaging in a religious practice. But before such celebration takes place, Tibetans clean and decorate their houses and apartments, cook plenty of traditional food, buy new clothing, book places in restaurants, and



1. Pilgrims visiting the bonpo monastery of Tri-ten Norbutse in Swayambhunath, Kathmandu, Nepal.

3. Losar as a family reunion.



2. Gutor puja- a mandala of wrathful deities.

2. The Gutor puja offering in the shape of the head of the wrathful deity Vajrakilaya.



8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year

so on, for several days ahead. In this regard, the most important parts of the house for many Tibetans is their kitchen, where a lot of food is prepared, a common place where they celebrate and then religious shines where are brought offerings, such as food, flowers, incenses and butter lamps. Therefore, at first, kitchen must be properly cleaned and prepared for cooking special meals for one's own family and guests before Losar. After first food is cooked and house is cleaned, the celebration shall begin on the first day of Tibetan calendar.

I had chance to celebrate Losar with Tibetans every year from 2009 to 2014. My companions were mostly Tibetan refugees, lays as well as monks, who escaped to Nepal during the Cultural Revolution and settled around the Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu. At that time, they were already a solid part of a Nepali society for decades, but they still kept their traditional customs of native Tibetans. They shared with me some of their customs during our talks, interviews and celebrations. The celebrations were held mainly at their family houses, traditional pubs and monasteries in the Kathmandu Valley. I visited several monasteries to observe Losar such as Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling of the Chokling (mChog gling) family, Shechen Monastery of the late Dilgo Khyentse (1910–1991; Dil mgo mKhyen brtse) or Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery in Swayambhunath. These are also the places where the Losar celebration that is described below took the place.

The stupa of Boudhanath (and Swayambhunath as well) is considered to be one of the most important pilgrimage places in Nepal, where many Buddhists come to pray and worship the Buddha. It is also a place where many Tibetans come to celebrate Losar. During their stay, they often visit monasteries and take part in the religious rituals which are inseparable part of the Losar celebration. In this way, many

8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year

Tibetans visit Tibetan sacred dances (*cham*) ^{4.} ^{5.} at the monasteries, hang prayer flags (*rlung rta*), socialize with family and friends and celebrate upcoming year with good food, drinks and music. To explain, monks have a minimal contact with lay people and they are often separated from ordinary live of lay Tibetans. They usually spend their time practicing Dharma in solitary places, such as retreat cabins, caves, cemeteries and wandering from place to place, and in monastic classrooms studying philosophy, poetry, rituals, and so on. Therefore, Losar brings an occasion for all Tibetans come together and cross their religious and social boundaries.

In this way, the celebrations held around the Boudhanath Stupa were always attended by thousands of people, some hundreds lay Buddhists, who arrived from many different villages of Nepal and occasionally, from Tibet and other foreign countries, as well as by hundreds monks from the monasteries and dozens of ascetic yogis, who came to visit their masters or pay respect to holy places. All of them also have an opportunity to eat some traditional Losar meals that were served at the monasteries, given to poor people around the stupa, sold at restaurants or cooked at homes.

Tibetan cuisine: Losar meals and sweets

I have been told of several recipes of Losar meals. These recipes are quite simple for preparation and they allow to every one or to every family, without differences on their social status and financial possibilities, cook traditional Losar meals. One of such typical meals is a soup served with small dumplings inside a broth prepared from buffalo or yak meat and diverse vegetable, such as radishes, beans, green or chili peppers, etc. The dumplings are filled with ground meat, but also, as it may



4. A bird-like wrathful deity. A number of wrathful deities have retinue figures with animal heads such as are found in the various tantras of the Buddhist and Bon traditions.

5. Ritual purification at Triten Norbutse.



4. Tibetans watching the Tibetan sacred dances in Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling, Kathmandu.

8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year

sound awkward for the first time, with pieces of wood, wool, paper and chili. Yet eating such soup becomes a kind of prediction of qualities of the upcoming year – i.e. finding a hard piece of wood in the dumpling indicated difficult year to come, spicy dumpling with a lot of chili or black pepper indicated a sensual year, a piece of wool indicates easy going year without any troubles and a piece of paper indicates intellectual activities such as learning new things, studying, and so on. This dish is not exclusive for lay cuisine, but it may be served at monasteries as well. It is a bit difficult to prepare, but monks appreciate such entertainment, as other Tibetans, and they are willing to help with the preparation. After the “prophesy” meal is served, all Losar participants have fun and they enjoy eating it.

Other traditional meal that Tibetans cook for the Losar celebrations includes *momo* or dumplings filled with ground meat.⁶ A common type of ground meat is ground meat of yak, if Tibetans are living in Tibet or Himalayan areas as mentioned earlier, but many other dumplings are prepared from buffalo or chicken. I have witnessed that some Tibetans mixed the ground meat with fat of lamb to have a specific taste, then with parsley, garlic, onions, salt and spices. The mixture of ingredients is formed into meatballs which are then put into pastry and steamed at the end. The steamed momos are usually eaten with a chili source or a mixture of various spices and oil. As part of the dish may also be served a soup which was prepared from the liquid of the steam and cooked together with some vegetables.

A Tibetan woman once told me that Tibetans in general do not like sweets. But during the Losar celebration prepare and eat *kabsey* (*kha bzas*)⁷, a traditional deep-fried pasty cookie. They are different types of kabsey – huge ones in the shape of a donkey ear (*bong bu a mchog* or *khug gog*) that are places as offering

6. Momos.



7. Donkey ears.

8. Annual Rituals: Losar (*lo gsar*) or Tibetan New Year

to all Buddhas and deities on the altars, big and small braids of pastry covered with sugar called *mugdong* (*smug gdong*), crispy circles or tiny kabsey made only for eating with a cup of salty butter tea. Kabsey recipes are very simple and easy to make. There are many recipes of kabsey and here is one of them for an illustration:

You will need 4 cups of flour, ½ cup of sunflower oil, 1/3 cup of sugar and 1 cup of milk. All ingredients should be properly mixed for making a dough. The dough is rolled to 3 mm thin layer from which are cut strips of pastry. The strips are cut, open and twisted in the center in the way they would create a traditional kabsey shape (see picture). Then the strips are deep fried in hot oil until they have become of golden brown color. Once fried, they need to get cold and afterwards, may be server for the Losar party.²²⁹

After the Losar breakfast, Tibetans go to make some personal religious practice at the *kora* (circumambulation) of the stupa or go participate, actively or passively, in group rituals held at the monasteries. One of such group rituals held at the monasteries is the sacred lama dance. This ritual is a close for active participation, but many Tibetans come to watch it as a social event and public entertainment. Yet, the lama dance is, in its core, a sacred Vajrayāna practice, which may also include some a/historical events to remember, for instance, deeds of Buddhist or Bonpo saints.

²²⁹ For the food preparation watch this [youtube video](#) by Lobsang Wangdu.

Lama dance: Tibetan sacred dance

The sacred dance or lama dance (*cham*) is performed on the first day of Losar. During such dance, lamas (*bla ma*) and monks wear sacred masks (*'bag*)^{8.} of various deities which represent cosmological forces of Vajrayāna Buddhism. The monks are transformed into various deities by wearing special costumes, jewel ornaments and attributes as well as visualizing themselves as particular deities. The monks may play roles of *dharmapālas* or the Buddhist Dharma protectors (*chos skyong*), opposing forces of Bon and Chinese Chan, Buddhist saints, Tibetan animals, such as snow lion^{9.}, yak^{10.} and so forth (*Helffer 1980: 106*). The dance, therefore, may celebrate many a/historical events such as the birth and deeds of Indian sage Padmasambhava, who propagated Buddhism in Tibet and subdued local forces of Bon, the supremacy of Indian Buddhism over Chinese Chan, which was propagated by Ha-shang Moheyan, who was defended by Indian philosopher Kamalashila (740–795), and so forth.²³⁰ All actors then dance inside magical circle or *mandala* (*dkyil 'khor*) which may symbolizes sacred lands such as divine palaces, but also worldly realms, such as Tibet, or undergrounds in which live demons and evil spirits. The opposing forces are subdued by the Dharma protectors to serve to Buddha's teaching and propagators of ingenuine Dharma are cast out by Buddhist masters. However, aside of such social celebrations, the dance is also a Vajrayāna practice, namely the deity yoga (*lha'i rnal 'byor*) involving self-transformation into

²³⁰ The role of Ha-shang Moheyan appears also in the Tibetan New Year dance of Bon which is performed at the Triten Norbutse Bon monastery in Kathmandu. However, the Bon dance does not contain a role of Kamalashila.

8. The secret dance held at Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling Monastery.



9. Tibetan monks with the snow lion costume in the bonpo monastery of Triten Norbutse.



10. Tibetan monks with the yak costume in the bonpo monastery of Triten Norbutse.



a particular deity through visualization, dance, chanting and at the end, realizing the state of emptiness (*stong nyid*). I will describe below one part of the sacred dance that involves such a Vajrayāna practice during the Losar celebration held at Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling Monastery.

First of all, the magical circle or mandala is drawn before the main shrine of monastery. Then starts playing metal horns (*dung chen*), cymbals (*sbug tshal*) and drums (*rnga*) announcing that the lama dance shall begin (Helffer 1980: 106). The door of the shrine opens and a group ¹¹ of monks in yellow heads and traditional robes appear carrying incense burners and musical instruments while purifying place and playing music. After them come dancers who wear ¹² black hats (*zhwa nag*) with a skull ornament and flames on the top. The black hat lamas are dressed in ceremonial robe decorated with dragons, skulls, thunderbolts (*rdo rje*) and face of a wrathful deity – the Great Black One, Mahākāla. They hold a ritual dagger (*phru ba*) in the right hand and a small cup from human skull (*thod pa*) in the left hand. As they dance, all negative forces and obstacles are subdued and purified (Helffer 1980: 106).

Afterwards, the field protectors (*zhing skyong*) come on the scene to dance. ¹³ These protectors are non-human forces who own a particular place or land. They are more powerful than local deities of a place (*sa dag*), but weaker than *dharmapālas*. They are a kind of worldly protectors such as the Bon deity Dorje Legpa (*rdor rje legs pa*), guardian kings of the directions (*phyogs skyong*), spirits of planets (*gza'*) and so forth. The dancers wear masks of animals – various birds, canines, monkey, deer, bull and heads of demons. ¹⁴ They hold daggers and ritual cake offering (*gtor ma*) in the right hand and skull cup in the left hand.

The next part of dance starts with bringing the effigy of a human ¹⁵ (*liṅga; nya bo*) made of dough and used in the killing ritual of final part of a feast called in the secret mantra terminology *liberation offering* (*bsgral mchod*). It is the final offering of feast gathering or *gaṇachakra* (*tshogs 'khor*) that refers to secret gatherings of tantrikas who carry out a particular ritual of Vajrayāna. It is a very demanding ritual, in which one must visualize him/herself as a deity that emanates from one's own heart to execute the effigy. The effigy symbolizes human ego, which will be transformed and offered to Buddhas. Therefore, the chief master, who is wearing the black head, mirror armor (*me long*) and costume with ornaments of the wrathful Mahākāla ¹⁶, comes to symbolically kill the effigy while four skeletons dance around him. ¹⁷

The black headed lama's secret ritual *killer Ging* (*sgrol ging*) belongs to the methods of the Vajrayāna path, in particular, to Mahāyoga or the Great yoga (*rnal 'byor chen po*). This ritual is a deity meditation during which one transforms into a deity appropriate to the situation. The meditation consists of two stages – stage of development (*skyed rim*) and competition (*rdzog rim*). The tantrika who desires to perform such ritual and thus engage in the competition stage must build on foundation of the development stage. To explain, the development stage is transformation of impure appearances – such as our world with beings, into pure ones – such as divine realms with enlightened beings, and meditation on the mandala of deities. Then the completion stage is conceptual meditation on channels, subtle winds and vital essence, and non-conceptual meditation on the samadhi of suchness. The tantrika, ideally, aims to dissolve ego and therefore, he must realize wisdom of emptiness.

11. A group of monks caring incense burners and musical instruments while purifying place and playing music.



12. Black hat lamas.



13. The field protectors.



14. A group of monks caring incense burners and musical instruments while purifying place and playing music.



15. The demon of ego represented by a human effigy made of dough which has been colored red.



16. The chief vajra master Chokling Rinpoche.



17. The dance of skeletons.

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In order to realize such wisdom, the tantrika has to understand all external objects as not being truly existent in the way how they appear. All objects should appear to him as empty or devoid of any inherent existence. After understanding that, tantrika's spontaneous presence should arise as appearance and emptiness. Only then, the meditation of development stage takes form of the deity that spontaneously arose from conceptual construct and fabrication of tantrika's own mind stream and became equivalent to the wisdom of emptiness. The result of ritual then comes in dependence on capacity of every practitioner.

The tantra *Embodiment of Realization* states²³¹:

"Practitioner with high capacity recognizes uncontrived self-originated primordial clarity, spontaneous presence and complete purity free of elaborations as the essence of the deity. Practitioner with medium capacity recognizes the self-originating energy of compassion that is uncompounded and devoid of defining characteristics as luminous deity with pure channels and elements. Practitioner with low capacity recognizes all apparent forms as male and female deities visualized from the non-conceptual state like a fish is leaping from the water. Having

231 dgongs 'dus las dbang po rab kyis ma bcos rang byung ye gsal lhun grub spros bral rnam par dag pa lha'ingo bor shes/ 'bring gis 'dus byas mtshan ma can ma yin par thugs rje rang byung gi rtsal rtsa kham dag pa gsal 'tsher gyi lhar shes/ tha mas gzugs snang thams cad lha dang lha mi mi rtog pa'i ngang chu las nya 'phar ba'i tshul can dang / dad dam dag pas mngon byang lnga dang ting 'dzin gsum gyi sgo nas gsal bar bskyed ces dang / pad sdong brtsegs pa'i rgyud las kyang / dbang po rab 'bring tha ma so so la gsum re dbye ba la dgu phrug sogs kyi sgo nas rgyas par gsungs pa rnam kyang gzhung de dag las rtogs par bya'o/ See Notes for the Development Stage by Tsele Natsok Rangdrol (b. 1608; rTse le sNa tshogs Rang grol), ff. 19.

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pure faith and samaya, the visualization arises clearly by means of the five of manifestation and the three samadhis.”

After the ritual is performed, the human effigy is placed in the middle of the mandala. Then two stags and two bulls with swords ^{18.} appear and perform their dance. At end of the dance, they cut the effigy to small pieces as a symbolic was of the destruction of ego and enemies of the Dharma. Then, according the tradition and monasteries, are performed concluding rituals or other parts of the dance, such as the birth and deeds of Padmasambhava or Kamalashila’s winning over Ha-shang Moheyan. At the end, monks take a huge dough offering ^{19.}, which they prepared earlier, off the main shrine and through it out of the monastery’s yard into (or in front of) dry fire wood. The chief black headed lama conducts a concluding ritual ^{20.} [see here](#) and shoots with an arrow at the *torma* offering, which was shaped into the face of a demon. Afterwards, the *torma* is burned in the fire place [see here](#) and sacred dance of Losar ends.

Lungta: Tibetan prayer flags

Hanging prayer flags is another Tibetan custom related to the celebration of Losar. Lungta ^{21.} (*rlung rta*) literally means *wild horse* or *that which rides the wind* is five colored prayer flag that is hanged in a set by Tibetans on the first day of New Year (Norbu 1995: 68–70). According to Tibetans’ beliefs, lungtas have power to purify the four elements air, earth, fire and water. The four elements are symbolized by sacred animals such as a tiger, a lion, an eagle or *garuda* and a dragon, which are drew at the four corners of the flag. To explain, the tiger who is living inside jungle symbolizes the *wood* or *air* element; the snow lion that lives in the mountains sym-

18. ____

19. A huge dough offering at the Shechen monastery in Kathman-du.



20. The chief black headed lama conducts a concluding ritual.



21. Lungtas of Tibetan prayer flags.



8. Annual Rituals: Losar (lo gsar) or Tibetan New Year

bolizes the earth element; the eagle with horns that emanates lightening symbolizes the fire element; and the dragon that lives in sea stays for the water element (Norbu 1995: 69). In addition to that, the four elements are governed by the fifth element – sky or space (*klong*). The fifth element is symbolized by a horse that is at the center of the flag. The horse is caring the flaming jewel (*nor bu me 'bar*) or wish-fulfilling jewel (*yid bzhin nor bu*) that grants all wishes and dispels all obscurations (Norbu 1995: 69). Therefore, Tibetans have a custom to hang lungtas for the upcoming new year in order to bring home fortune, have personal wishes fulfilled and all misfortune dispelled.

The prayer flags ²² are usually hang at home around house, on balcony of a flat, at pilgrimage places, such as stupas, meditation caves of saints or their birth places and places of their great deeds, peaks of mountains or just very high on trees that they could be moved by the wind. The process of hanging may be ritualized as well. The flags may be blessed by a ritual for purifying and empowering them. Such ritual is often carried out at monasteries as a part of a bigger ceremony. In other cases, the flags may be blessed with a short ritual or prayer at the place where they are intended to be placed. Afterwards, the prayer flags, which have been connected with a cord in the order of elements starting with the element of the upcoming year, are hanged at the place. In the process of hanging, the flags should not touch the ground as Tibetans believe that they would become impure and would need to be purified during the ritual again. As soon as the flags are in the air, the wind moves them and they are believed to bring fortune for the upcoming New Year.

22. The prayer flags are hang at the pilgrimage places of Parping and Boudhanath.



Conclusion

Losar of Tibetan New Year is most popular and spread Tibetan festival. This great day is celebrated among all Tibetans without any differences in their social, religious and financial status. Losar is celebrated by rich and poor, lays, ascetics and monks, Buddhists and Bonpos ²³, those born and living in Tibetans and these from abroad, etc. All of them keep some traditional customs related not only to Losar, but mainly to their culture and beliefs of Tibetans. The majority of festivals, and Losar in particular, are closely relate to Tibetan astrology and religion – Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. This relation was demonstrated on parts of the Losar festival, namely on sacred dances held at the various monasteries and on the tradition of hanging prayer flags *which ride the wind*.

Although the lama dance is a serious Vajrayāna ritual, for many visitors it is a social entertainment with beautiful costumes and masks, thrilling dance and loud music. On other side, the dance may be a/historical reminder of the birth and great deeds of Padmasambhava and his winning over opposing, yet local forces of the previous beliefs, Bon and even Chinese Chan. This part of dance makes from the sacred ritual a kind of social entertainment for lay people and their families. This indicates an unequal distribution of meaning between monastic performers of the dance and lay audience (Marco 1994: 140). In the similar way, one can see the custom of hanging prayer flags, which may be put at their places after a complicated ceremony held at the monastery or after a short prayer that may be chanted by any of lay people. Also this part of Losar's customs shows a flexibility and universality, in which the celebration of festival is carried out. And lastly, but showed first, Losar has always been celebrated with traditional Tibetan food cooked that is cooked for everybody to please them and bring a good mood for celebrating this holy day of Tibetans.



23. Bonpos of the Tritten Norbutse monastery.

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9. Tibetan orality

Considerable share of Tibetan literature²³² used to be transmitted orally due to numerous reasons like harsh climate conditions, nomadic lifestyle, illiteracy, lack of paper, costs of reprinting/rewriting, and, in case of certain teachings, also due to their esoteric nature.²³³ Story-telling is regularly accompanied by singing, thus creating a distinctive genre, remotely similar to our musicals. Although radio, internet, newspapers, magazines, and TV have already spread throughout the Asia, oral transmitting and story-telling are still a vital part of Tibetan culture.²³⁴ For further reading on this topic, I highly recommend Lama Jabb's *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation*.²³⁵

Tibetan language is, and was from its early documented beginnings, very fond of idiomatic aphorisms, as we can see even today in both colloquial and literary language. Because the terminology has not yet been settled, there is still some confusion in defying the proverbial categories of Tibetan **orality**, like the

232 The trend of recording stories and writing down all the oral traditions of Tibet is of recent origin. Several projects are being run mostly by Western universities and initiatives. Almost all of what we would call Tibetan *belles-lettres* was transmitted mainly orally up to the second half of twentieth century, when this concept was firstly adopted by Tibetan authors. Hence the number of authors of written secular literature prior to the sixties is very low and from those few, majority were educated clerics (e.g. the sixth Dalai Lama). For information about the oldest Tibetan written literature see [this](#) (in Czech).

233 Thus, monks are initiated to receive the secret instructions usually in privacy, establishing a "lama-disciple" relationship. This transmission of certain teaching is similar to "permission from the authority to study such material" and it is called *lung* in Tibetan.

234 Folk stories (or at least the motives) are nowadays frequently turned into soap operas too.

235 Jabb (2015). Interesting source of (not only Tibetan) oral literature is also the *Oral Tradition Journal*. For more examples see also [this](#) website.

numerous overlapping genres (e.g. the proverbs within the folk songs etc.). Sometimes, several terms have one meaning too. Nevertheless, it is possible to briefly describe all the terms in use and give a few examples, just to be familiar with them.²³⁶

- *gtam dpe*²³⁷ = proverbs of didactic and gnomic nature arranged in verses (ranging from one up to more than ten) of three up to fifteen syllables; sometimes used as a superordinate term for all the following genres
- *kha dpe* = proverbs sometimes conveying more particular or regional meaning than *gtam dpe*
- *zer srol* = customary sayings
- *gling sgrung/ sgrung dpe* = longer *gtam dpe* of many stanzas traditionally from Gesar Epic
- *dpe chos* = didactic short fables elucidating certain aspects of Buddhist doctrine
- *gtam dpe 'bru bzhi ma/ dpe chos 'bru bzhi ma* = quadrisyllabic phraseologisms and idioms
- *khad/ khed/ gab tshig/ lde'u* = enigmas and riddles²³⁸
- *kha mtshar/ ku re'i gtam/ rgod gtam/ dgod gtam* = jokes and anecdotes
- *sho bshad* = "dice-prayers" shout out loud during playing *sho*²³⁹

236 Thus, in the list below I present not only proverbs but all kinds of oral genres I have found across the secondary sources. By presenting all these terms in this overview I attempt to illustrate the diversity of Tibetan oral tradition.

237 Twitter account [@TibetanProverb](#) offers a huge list of proverbs, posting them regularly translated into English. For more information on Tibetan proverbs see Sørensen and Erhard 2013, 298–302.

238 Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find much information about them. The difference between *khed* and *lde'u* is explained in detail in the article of Dbang grags and Yar 'gro (1995).

239 For their collection and description see Drokar (2003).

- *sgrung* = stories
- *dmangs sgrung* = folk stories
- *dpa' sgrung* = epic stories of heroic nature (Gesar etc.)
- *gtam rgyud* = oral narratives
- *smrang/ rabs* = mythical narratives about the origin of various things
- *mgur*²⁴⁰ = poetical songs of religious nature (influenced by Indian literature) developed especially during the period of later diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet from *glu* songs; analogous to Indian *vajragīti* genre
- *nyams mgur* = "songs of a (religious) experience"; similar to *Indiandōhās*
- *snyan ngag* = ornate poetry, "speech (agreeable) to the ear"; heavily influenced by Indian *kāvya* poetry
- *ka phreng/ ka rtsom/ ka bshad* = poems where each line starts with a letter in alphabetical order
- *sa bstod* = oratory praising the landmarks²⁴¹
- *bshad pa* = speech discourses
- *legs bshad/ lugs* = songs of advice; a scholastic genre of aphorisms influenced by Indian literature (they are not of folk origin)²⁴²
- *kha ta* = longer advices
- *bslab bya* = counselling pithy advices
- *gna' gtam/ gtam rnying pa* = old sayings

240 More on *mgur* genre is to be found in Martin (2018).

241 See Thurston (2012).

242 However, Jackson sees their origin within the genre of '*bangs kyi glu* (see Cabezón and Jackson 1996).

Examples of various proverbs, sayings, and riddles

<p>1. <i>che ba ro/ chung ba rno/</i></p>	<p>(If it is) big, (it is) a corpse (and if it is) small, (it is) sharp.</p>
<p>2. <i>mgo la skes pa'i ra co mig la zug/</i></p>	<p>The horn that grew on (your) head pokes (your) eyes.</p>
<p>3. <i>bzung na lag pa 'tshig</i> <i>btan na rdza ma chag/</i></p>	<p>Hold on and (your) hand will burn, let go and the pot will break.</p>
<p>4. <i>sha rdog sgang la mar rdog rgyag/</i></p> <p><i>a khu 'grog pa'i skyid shas la/</i></p> <p><i>sha rdog bzas na sngags pa'i</i></p> <p><i>dge phrug byed/</i></p> <p><i>sngags pa so med can gyi dge phrung byed/</i></p>	<p><i>A chunk of butter is piled on</i> <i>a chunk of meat,</i></p> <p><i>How happy uncle nomad looks!</i></p> <p><i>If you want to eat meat, become</i> <i>a yogi's disciple.</i></p> <p><i>Become a toothless yogi's disciple²⁴³</i></p>
<p>5. <i>khams phrug la rtсед mo ma rtse/</i></p> <p><i>rliг thang sbar rdzog rgyag yong/</i></p>	<p><i>Don't play with a Kham boy!</i></p> <p><i>(He) will grab your balls!²⁴⁴</i></p>
<p>6. <i>gdong pa khug med kyi gnyen las/</i></p> <p><i>ngo tsa khrel yod kyi dgra dga'/</i></p>	<p>It's better to know an enemy who feels shame and modesty, than having a relative</p>

²⁴³ *sho bshad.*

²⁴⁴ Typical *sho bshad.*

<p>7. <i>spen phung 'og gi zho snyal ba/ zer ba de ga re red/ klad pa/</i></p>	<p>What is yoghurt fermenting under a bush of penpa grass? The brain.</p>
<p>8. <i>rgod thang dkar snying la rje bo brag dmar ro rig na 'gro la khad/ dgung sngon po rig na 'phur la khad/ bya khyod tsho'i sems de nyis 'gal red/ nga nyis 'gal bya zig dgos don med/ rogs chung lo snying la rje bo/ rogs nged tsho rig na rtse la khad/ khyim chung ma rig na 'gro la khad/ rogs khyod tsho'i sems de nyis 'ga' red/ nga nyis 'ga' rogs zig dgos don med/</i></p>	<p>You pretty, poor vulture, You try to land when you see the red cliff, You try to fly away when you see the blue sky, You bird, your mind is two-sided, I don't need such a duplicitous bird. You pretty, poor lover, You try to "play" when you see me, You try to sneak away when you see your wife, You lover, your mind is two-sided I don't need such a duplicitous lover.²⁴⁵</p>
<p>9. <i>pha bong gnyis kyi khri steng na/ klu bstan rgyal po khri la bzhugs/ mgo na sta res rgyab shul yod/ ske na thag pa drud shul yod/</i></p>	<p>Atop the throne of two boulders, The wrathful nāga King is enthroned. There, on its head is a slit, left by an ax, There, around his neck, is a rub left by a rope.²⁴⁶</p>

²⁴⁵ Taken from Rdo rje, Stuart, and Roche (2009).

²⁴⁶ Ibid. Metaphorical description of male's reproductive organ.

Swindlers and other tricksters (*khram pa*)

Maybe the best-known Tibetan trickster is Akhu Tonpa (*A khu bsTan pa/ A khu sTon pa*),²⁴⁷ a clever swindler disrespecting religious and feudal authorities and advocating for those in need.²⁴⁸ The term “*a khu*” means “paternal uncle” (or a familiar respected older person in general) which should imply together with “*ston pa*” (“teacher”) his credibility and suggest certain didactic function of his stories. This character is basically the ideal role-model for “an ordinary working-class man” oppressed by the “wicked landlords and religious figures”. Thus, after collecting about three hundred Akhu Tonpa stories, Chinese communists published a book in 1980 containing forty-eight of them, making him a communist ideal.²⁴⁹ That being said, there are sexual motives in some of the Akhu Tonpa stories as well. Because of this aspect, telling such stories is forbidden in certain areas of TAR and also in some households where live small children.

Nevertheless, Uncle Tonpa is not the only famous trickster.²⁵⁰ Most of the Tibetans are familiar with Nyichö Zangpo (*Nyi chos bZang po*) too. In many of his stories, he tricks the king named Nedong Gyalpo (*sNe gdong rGyal po*). The following translation is an example of such story. Moreover, it may be helpful for illustrating the Tibetan sense of humour which tends to be straight-forward and usually targets taboo topics by reflecting various social issues.²⁵¹

247 The first spelling is actually wrong – a sarcastic reference to Tonpa Shenrab Miwö.

248 Yet I would not compare him to Robin Hood.

249 See Sørensen and Erhard (2013).

250 See Hladíková (2009).

251 William Hynes directly sees the tricksters as a logical by-product of social order (Hynes 1993).

White sh*t from the sky

When the king became aware of Nyichö Zangpo's custom of adding salt to (his) tea during the first day of Losar, the naked Nyichö Zangpo was arrested (during) one evening on the upper floor of (his) house. (On) that evening, coldness made Nyichö Zangpo sh*t (himself) with diarrhoea. (Then, he) stuck twigs with some intervals in between them (right) to the centre of the rounded diarrhoea. Next morning, the diarrhoea froze in a way that the twigs were frozen perpendicular to the centre of the frozen lump of diarrhoea. At that time, the king was sitting on (his) balcony²⁵² and the sun was beating down. In the meantime, Nyichö Zangpo took the frozen lump of diarrhoea with the nails stuck into (it) and gently threw it onto the king's lap, (while) being hidden. The king thought in his mind: *"Oh, what a curiosity! What is this item? How did this dazzling-nailed (thing) fall down from the sky?"* and called the servants in front of him. Thus, he asked (them): *"What is this thing? Do you know?"*

(And) the servants said: *"We don't know. It is really a (strange) item. (But) Nyichö Zangpo is upstairs, so if (you) ask (him), he will definitely be able to know (what this is)."*

Thereupon, the king set Nyichö Zangpo free, summoned him, (and) ask (the following question): *"Nyichö Zangpo, do you know what this thing is?"*

And Nyichö Zangpo said in astonishment: *"As for this, it is an exceptionally auspicious thing and it fell down from the sky."*

252 The text says "under" but I assume "on" would be more fitting in this context.

*White sh*t from the sky having a handle made of nails, very auspiciously
fell down to the king's lap. If one says that the king's mouth will eat some of it,
the king's power and possessions will expand, and from
that, there will be also a little given to me."*

The king said: "If it is so, because The Precious One admitted to reward (me) after I will eat a bit, It's inappropriate to give you." (He) ate a small piece from the side of the frozen lump of diarrhoea and kept the whole box of treasures.

gnam skyag dkar po/

nyi chos bzang pos lo gsar tshes gcig nyin ja la tshwa rgyag phyogs byas tshul rgyal pos shes nas nyi chos bzang po dmar hreng mar thog khang nang du nub gcig bzang btson la bzhag de nub nyi chos bzang po 'khyags nas rnyang ma shor/ nyi chos bzang pos rnyang ma sgor mo de'i dkyil du sen tshags gcig btsugs nas bzhag sang zhogs rnyang ma de 'khyags thebs nas sen tshags de rnyang ma 'khyags gong de'i dkyil du 'drong por 'khyags thebs yod/ skabs der rgyal po mda' g.yab kyi 'og tu rkub bkyag byas nas nyi ma sro bzhin yod/ de dang bstun nas nyi chos bzang pos rnyang ma 'khyags gong de'i sen tshags nas 'jus te ga ler rgyal po'i pang du dbyugs nas gab ste bsdad/ rgyal po'i bsam par/ a ya mtshan/ dngos po 'di gang yin nam/ 'od chem chem sen tshags yod pa 'di gnam nas gang 'dra byas te zags pa yin nam snyam ste 'khor g.yog rnams mdun du bos nas dngos po 'di gang red/ khyod tshos shes sam zhes dris par/

'khor g.yog tshos dngos 'brel dngos po 'di khyad mtshar po zhig 'dug pas nga tshos ngo mi shes/ thog khang du nyi chos bzang po yod pas khong la skad cha dris na tan tan shes thub ces zhus/

*des na rgyal pos nyi chos bzang po glod nas mdun du bos te nyi chos bzang po/
khyod kyis dngos po 'di gang yin min shes sam zhes dris par/*

*nyi chos bzang pos ha las mdog ngang 'di ni ha cang bkra shis pa'i dngos po zhig
yin pa dang nam mkha' nas zags pa zhig yin pas/*

gnam skyag dkar po sen tshags yu ba can//

rgyal po'i pang du zags pa shin tu legs//

'di nas rgyal po'i zhal la gsol zer na//

rgyal po'i mnga' thang longs spyod rgyas par gyur//

'di nas nga la'ang tog tsam gsol ras zhu zhes bshad//

*rgyal pos de 'dra yin na dkon mchog gis gngang ba'i dngos grub yin pas ngas tog
tsam za ba las khyod la ster ba mi 'os so zhes zer nas rgyal pos rnyang ma 'khyags
gong de'i zur nas tog tsam bzas rjes g.yang sgam nang du bsdus so//*

Among other swindlers, a *skya min ser min*²⁵³ duo of Atsi Chiungo (A tsi Byi'u mgo) and Tonpa Shenrab (sTon pa gShen rab) stands out. Although they carry out the duties of monks, their goal is nothing but money and great feasts. They rob poor and vulnerable people but never participate in any type of sexual activities, thus

253 "Not (doing) crops, nor (wearing) a monk's robe" is a sort of religious practitioner in between a genuine monk and layman. While living in a village, the *skya min ser mins* execute various religious services required by the locals, usually in exchange for certain reward. Due to the nature of such livelihood, their nickname bears some impolite connotations suggesting that "the individual is in violation of dharma" (hence the saying: *skya min ser min sangs rgyas bstan pa'i dgra bo*). Nevertheless, this term is certainly not a synonym for *ser khyim pa* (a kind of a "semi-monk"), neither is interchangeable with *dbon ser gzugs* nor *grwa gzugs*.

not deceive their celibacy. By abusing monks' powers and status, they are certainly more swindlers than tricksters. The obvious parallel between *sTon pa Shes rab* and *sTon pa gShen rab Mi bo*²⁵⁴ is intentional. From the swindlers' duo, it is Tonpa Sherab who is being regularly tricked by the "cleverer" Atsi Chiungo.

In opposition to these two frauds is Dugpa Kunle (*'Brug pa Kun legs*). An actual historical person. A monk whose sexual adventures and other profane activities²⁵⁵ became legendary thanks to his second biography called aptly *Dirty Biography* (*bTsog rnam*). Probably the most famous Tibetan liar is Dzun Khrolo (*rDzun Khro lo*) thanks to a saying "*Khro lo rdzun ma byas/*" (Don't ring the bell!). People use it to stop others from exaggerating or lying. In the end, I would like to mention other famous characters such as Dansal (*Dran gsal*), Gyumangan Pundug (*sGyu ma mkhan sPun drug*) or gyalpo bumo (*rgyal po bu mo*) aka the king's daughter. Names and stories may vary depending on the individual regions or oral traditions.²⁵⁶

Tongue twisters

Tongue twisters (*lce rtsal/ ngag sbyang rtsom rig/ kha bshad*) are "composed of a cluster of words and phrases that have a succession of similar consonantal sounds that makes the voice move up and down rhythmically and repeatedly".²⁵⁷ They are

²⁵⁴ Legendary founder, or maybe better a carrier, of Bon into Tibet. See Bellezza (2010) for the biography and [here](#) for further notes.

²⁵⁵ All meant to awake lay people from the illusory reality.

²⁵⁶ Great source of folk stories, books for children, and other Tibetan books is the publisher [Sherig Parkhang](#).

²⁵⁷ rDo rje, Blo rtan, Ch. K. Stuart, and G. Roche (2009), 25.

often used by children as a decision-making solution (like who will be the bad guy and who the good guy in an upcoming game), enjoyed as a competition on its own, and also used as a learning technique to improve the mother tongue skills. As you may have noticed already, some of the Tibetan oral folklore has sexual or otherwise “offensive” content. Consequently, such tongue twisters are not being said in the households or around the relatives, especially the children. Due to variability in pronunciation across the dialects, tongue twisters also vary geographically.

Epic stories – Gesar

Gesar²⁵⁸ is probably the most famous of all the heroes from Central Asia.²⁵⁹ The epos has been already written down a few times²⁶⁰ and is studied by many researchers like S. G. FitzHerbert.²⁶¹ Although the core of the story is more or less fix, the whole corpus is not closed.²⁶² Despite the fact, that the professional storytellers (soldiers of Gesar’s army in their past lives; *’bab sgrung*, *sgrung pa* or *sgrung mkhan* in Tibetan) are decreasing in number, the corpus is still being expanded by

258 Gesar of Ling (*gLing Ge sar*) is also known as a *’Dzam bu’i gLing seng chen rgyal po* (“Great lion king of the world Ling”) or *Nor bu dgra ’dul* (“The precious conqueror of enemies”).

259 Gesar oral tradition is even part of [UNESCO](#) cultural heritage.

260 The first printed versions in Tibetan started to appear during the eighteenth century.

261 See also Lianrong (2001) and Raine (2014).

262 The core part consists of “... *Lha gling*, *’Khrungs gling*, *rTa rgyud*, *bDud ’dul*, *Hor gling* and *China episodes*, along with perhaps some form of cosmogonic prelude (the *Srid pa’i le’u*.” (Samuel 2005). For different scheme see Cabezón and Jackson (1996).

additional episodes and verses.²⁶³ Therefore, the process is not about creating new stories “out of the blue sky” but remembering their memories from past lives.²⁶⁴ But as some scholars suggest, certain parts might be of written origin.²⁶⁵ The main plot may be summarized as follows:

<p>1. <i>glang ngu dkar po'i rmig pa dmar ro chung/ rmig pa dmar po'i glang ngu dkar ro che/ glang ngu dmar po'i rmig pa dkar ro chung/ rmig pa dkar po'i glang ngu dmar ro che/</i></p>	<p>White bulls' red hooves are small, Red-hoofed white bulls are big. Red bull's white hooves are small, White-hoofed red bulls are big.</p>
<p>2. <i>a khu rgyal po tshang gi mna' ma gi gnya' gi gnyer ma gi nags na shig zig yod gi/</i></p>	<p>In the fold of uncle king's family's daughter-in-law's neck, there's a louse.*</p>
<p>3. <i>'ug pa 'ong na 'ng gu'ang 'ong/</i></p>	<p>If the owl comes, the pigeon will come too.</p>

* The hidden joke is based on the similarity between *nya ma* (vagina) and *gnyer ma* (fold). Several Tibetan tongue twisters are archived [here](#) by the World Oral Literature Project. For beginners in Tibetan, I recommend [this](#) YouTube video.

263 This makes it the longest story ever created by men and also extremely hard to capture all the local variants.

264 It is important to mention here the Gesar's connection with Buddhism. Some sources see Gesar as the 25th rigdan of Shambhala named Dagpo Khorlocan (*Drag po 'Khor lo can*) also known as Rudra Chakrin alias *'Jam dpal dbyang (Mañjuśrī)*. Furthermore, the way bards remember their past lives bears some similarities with practices of the tertons (*gter ston*).

265 See Herrmann (1990).

"King Ge-sar has a miraculous birth, a despised and neglected childhood, and then becomes ruler and wins his (first) wife 'Brug-mo through a series of marvelous feats. In subsequent episodes, he defends his people against various external aggressors, human and superhuman.²⁶⁶ Instead of dying a normal death he departs into a hidden realm from which he may return at some time in the future to save his people from their enemies."²⁶⁷

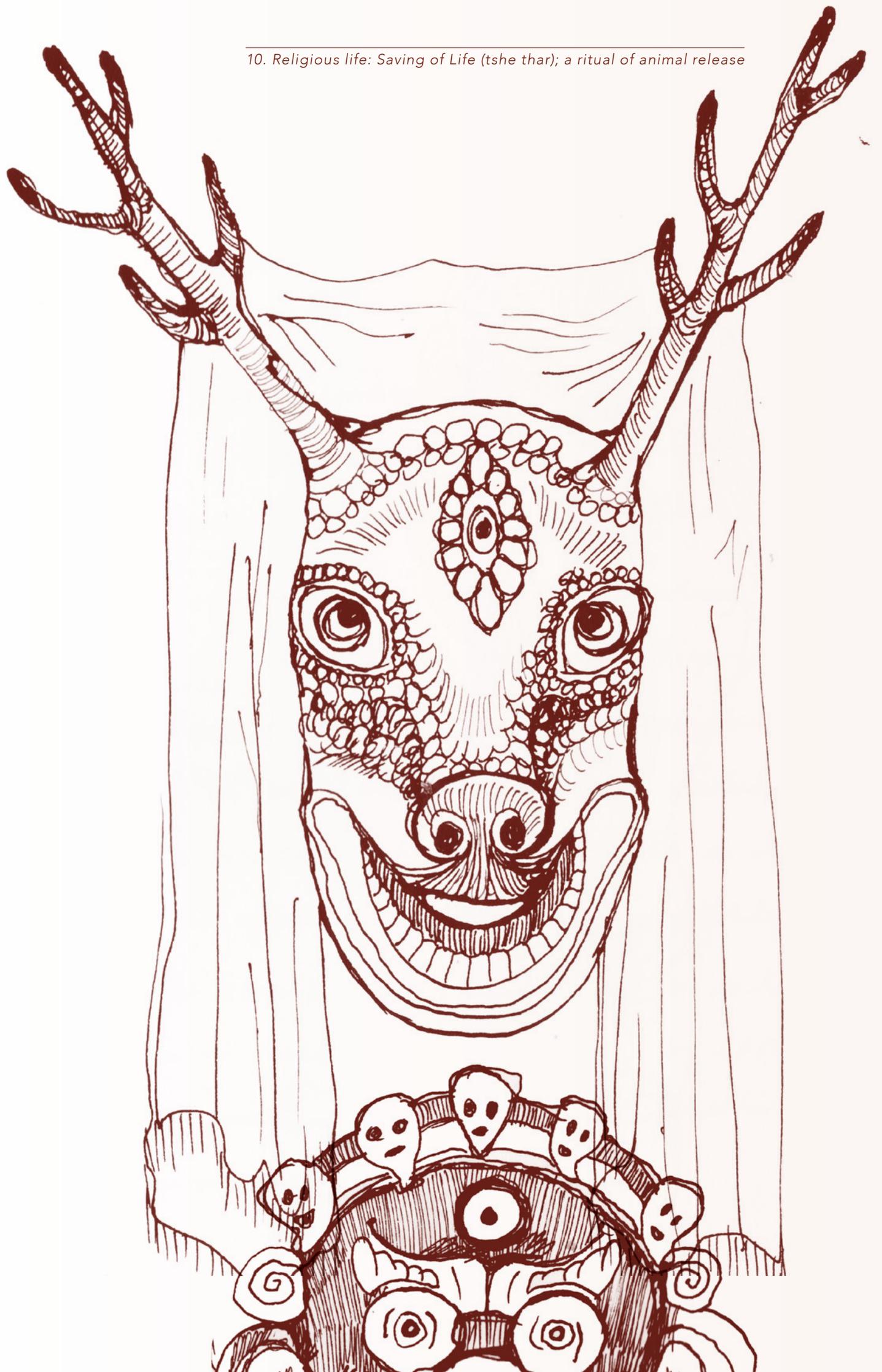
266 Due to long-time presence of Buddhism in Tibet, the original leitmotif is mostly covered under thick coat of Buddhist influences. Hence those aggressors tend to be non-Buddhists and overall result of his actions is triumph of dharma.

267 Samuel (2005).

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10. Religious life: Saving of Life (tshe thar); a ritual of animal release



10. Religious life: Saving of Life (*tshe thar*); a ritual of animal release

Introduction

This chapter will investigate into one of many rituals found in Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. In general, rituals or ceremonial procedures occupy a dominant place within religious, social and political life of Tibetans. They are known by the Tibetan term *cho ga* that refers to a religious ceremony (and written manuals or guidebooks) that consists of a series of actions performed according to a particular order. The term *cho ga* is, therefore, translated into English as ritual, liturgy or ceremony in more general sense. Nevertheless, in religious texts, Tibetans often apply other terms to ritual whilst implying its particular type. For example, the term *zhabs brtan* refers to a ritual, but also means a prayer; the term *phyag len* is the honorific form of *lag len* referring to a ritual practice, but means practice that was taken into personal experience; or the term *sgrub pa* as the translation of Sanskrit term *sādhana* referring to a ritual practice, but also to a stage of accomplishment.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁸ More information about rituals are included in the following literature: Jose Ignacio Cabezón, *Tibetan Ritual*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Robert Sharf, "Ritual" in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism* edited by Donald Lopez (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2005), etc.

10. Religious life: Saving of Life (*tshe thar*); a ritual of animal release

However, there are many rituals, but the one which will be described below is the ritual called animal release or saving of life (*tshe thar*).

Animals have been long time a part of religious worship and ritual practice of Tibetans. They appear in art, literature, songs, myths and symbols of Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. In both traditions, animals play various roles and for instance, they are frequently used to personify various tantric deities or embody their qualities. The deities, in form of animal-headed figures or animals alone, are utilized during ritual dances, meditative practices or spiritual empowerments. Their function is to recall myths, transform ordinary time, place and personal characteristics into supernatural conditions. In this way, deities and, in a parallel manner, particular "spirit" animals are considered to be a sacred and untouchable. Some Tibetans develop a deep respect towards animals, such as birds, deer, etc., which often results in dietary restrictions prohibiting their consumption and harm. Apart of it, animals are also seen as an object of compassion and means to achieve the state of Buddhahood. This compassionate approach towards animals is a central idea of the *tshe thar*.

What is *tshe thar*?

The *tshe thar* or *saving of life* is a formal practice that involves rescuing animals from life threatening conditions or/and liberating them from their captivities. For this reason, the ritual is also known as *animal release*. In general, the act of saving animals by setting them free is performed in several stages according to a particular order. Animals are usually purchased from their owners in the first place. They are bought particularly from slaughterhouses, animal farms or households,

10. Religious life: Saving of Life (*tshe thar*); a ritual of animal release

where animals are used for meat and dairy production, field work, animal raising, breeding and so on (Smith 1999: 51). Afterwards, the process of saving takes form of a religious ritual which involves recitation and/or singing of prayers, presenting offerings to supernatural beings, such as Buddhas (*sangs rgyas*) Bodhisattvas (*byang chub sems dpa*), et al., giving special substances (*bcud len*) to the animals and bestowing upon them blessing. Finally, the consecrated animals are formally released to their natural environments or put in their new homes where they live until their naturally occurring death.

The *tshe thar* ritual became popular among people of all social classes and religious groups of Tibetans. It is commonly performed by monks and laypeople, who are following the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhists as well as Bon. The ritual is thus widely spread in Asia among Tibetans, particularly in Tibet, Nepal, China and India, but also among Tibetan communities in West. Animal release is mainly carry out during religious festivals such as the four important events in the Buddha's life,²⁶⁹ and many others (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 182). Tibetans believe that any ritual that is performed during auspicious days will multiply their positive deeds and they will gain an increased power to accomplish its purpose. In such way, the *tshe thar* ritual is

269 The four festivals or four great days that correspond to important events in the Buddha's life (*Sangs rgyas kyi dus chen bzi*) are: 1. Festival of Miracles (*chos 'phrul dus chen*) celebrated on the full moon of the first Tibetan lunar month; 2. Festival of Vaishakha (*sa ga zla ba dus chen*) held on the full moon of the fourth Tibetan lunar month; 3. Turning the Dharma Wheel (*chos 'khor dus chen*) held on the fourth day of the sixth Tibetan lunar month; and 4. Festival of Descent from Heaven (*lha bads dus chen*) celebrated on the 22nd day of the ninth Tibetan lunar month.

10. *Religious life: Saving of Life (tshe thar); a ritual of animal release*

also believed to purify many bad deeds and accumulate merits to those people who participate during the ritual as well as to animals that are released.

The ritual employs altruistic concepts of empathy, compassion and non-violence. These concepts are occupying central themes in the ethics code of Buddhism (as well as Bon) that became dominant belief to Tibetans. The Buddhist concept of compassion (*snying rje*) is defined by the mind that wishes that other beings could have unsatisfactory situation, such as pain, fear, sickness, and any physical and mental struggles, whatever they might be, cleared away and pacified. Therefore, there are traditionally taught many levels of compassion toward its object. In particular, the *tshe thar* ritual brings benefits for others, such as saving other's life, freeing animals from their captivity, providing them better shelter, better living and future. On the other hand, the ritual also brings benefits to oneself, which are traditionally known as two accumulations (*tshogs gnyis*) of merit (*bsod nams*) and wisdom (*ye shes*). According to Buddhism, these two accumulations are necessary to gather in order of attaining the Buddhahood in the same way, as it is traditionally said, just as a bird needs two wings to fly. Then, merits that originate from the good deeds, such as generosity and compassion, are to be accumulated whilst the bad deeds, such as killing and harming others, must be abandoned. This concept is fundamental to Buddhist ethics that overturns egoistic mind into compassionate mind that is endowed with empathy, kindness, tolerance, help to others, and finally, has ability to realize the selflessness (*bdag med*), the crucial concept in early Buddhism (Harvey 1995: 111–112).

Saving of life in early Buddhist texts

The origins of the *tshe thar* ritual are unclear and uncertain nowadays, yet its principal concepts began to take a shape centuries ago in India. The early Buddhism formulated the basic code of Buddhist ethics expressed in a systematic manner of the so-called *Five Precepts* (Pāli: *pañcasīlāni*). These precepts teach ordained and lay Buddhist community abstaining from harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. The first precept is called *avihimsa* (Pāli: *avihiṃsā*) meaning “no harm” or “non-violence” (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 183). This precept thus teaches abstinence from harming, violence and killing sentient beings. Such ethical approach appears already in the Pāli Canon, where the Buddha describes the Five Precepts as gifts toward oneself and others in the following manner:

“Now, there are these five gifts (...) Which five?”

There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings.

In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression.

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This is the first gift, the first great gift — original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning — that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & priests...”²⁷⁰

The ethics code of *ahimsa* forbids monks and laymen to injure and kill other living beings. By abstaining from one’s own erroneous conduct, such harming and taking of life, all sentient beings are liberated from danger, fear, oppression, harm and suffering. This approach of the no-harm conduct closely resembles main principles of the *tshe thar* ritual – saving life of others, bringing benefit to oneself and others, etc. However, the ethics precept of *ahimsa* does not fully embraces all thoughts which are behind the ritual itself. The *ahimsa* seems rather to restrict wrong conduct of the doer than tell him/her to benefit others. The concept of *ahimsa* may be therefore seen as an initial idea that could potentially give rise to its reformulation in later Buddhist thought. Secondly, the act of renouncing violence is rather a promise committing one to a prescribed code than a ceremonial course of actions typical for a ritual or a formal practice. As no rituals of *tshe thar* are indicated among texts of Indian Buddhism, one may propose that the ritual could have had Tibetan ceremonial origins based classical texts of Indian Buddhism.

The first text is found in the collection of monastic rules *Basket of Discipline (Vinaya Pitaka)* of the Sarvastivada tradition (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 183). This text contains instructions for monks to filter small insects from the water container in order to

²⁷⁰ “Cunda Kammaruputta Sutta” translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight. 1997. An 10.176.

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release them back to river (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 183). Here are monks instructed to protect lives of insects by removing them from the water container where they were found to be trapped and by returning them back to their natural environment. Another text, the early Mahāyāna work *Sūtra of Golden Light (Suvarṇabhasottamasūtra)*²⁷¹ describes a story of Jalavahana, an Indian man who saved 10,000 fishes inside a drying pond. He used a help of elephants to bring more water to the fish pond and this in his way, saved their lives (Emmerick 1970: 78–81). Also this text displays an active attitude regarding saving life of others that differs from the *ahimsa* precept that keeps a passive rule of no harming others. The active behavior is closely related to the central concept of the Mahāyāna Buddhism known as *bodhicitta* or compassionate mind.

Mahāyāna ideas behind the *tshe thar* ritual

The animal release contains several characteristics relate to the doctrine of the Mahāyāna Buddhism. Traditionally, this ritual includes the practice of cultivation of compassionate mind (or mind of enlightenment; *bodhicitta*; *byang chub kyi sems*) and accumulation of merits. In this context, the *tshe thar* ritual aims to free animals from various kind of suffering, such as fear, pain and death, and bring them well-being, prolong their lives and establish a cause for attaining the state of enlightenment. According to Buddhist tradition, Tibetan believe that all sentient being are equal, because they are claimed to possess the Buddha nature (*tathāgatagarbha*; *de gshegs snying po*). Therefore, all being desire be free of suffering and finally, attain the state of enlightenment - Buddhahood.

²⁷¹ Tib. *Phag pa gser 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo*.

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In order to attain such realization, the participants cultivate compassion towards welfare of all sentient beings. They believe that an altruistic aspiration which arose within an ordinary mind has power to bring oneself and others to the state of enlightenment. According to the Mahāyāna tradition, as said earlier, all sentient beings are having the cause of enlightened (*rgyud; bde bar gsheg pa'i snying po*) or a seed of the Buddha since the beginning of time. This seed of the Buddha is their innate nature that makes all being of the existence, i.e. beings of the six realms – gods, demigods, humans, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings, equal. In this way, one may develop cultivate compassion to other common concept of Mahāyāna presenting that all sentient being were once our own parents whose kindness should be returned to them.²⁷² Therefore, many Tibetans liberate animals from their worldly suffering, such as fear, pain and death as well as from their bad rebirth in the six realms of the existence. It is believed that the future place of their rebirth depend on the quantity of accumulated merits and good karma.

The merits are understood as a key factor that influences quality of life, its lengths, but also the future place of rebirth with one's inborn characteristics. This means that more merits equals a better chance for a good and long life, fortunate rebirth or attaining full liberation for suffering – enlightenment. Therefore, in general, Tibetans believe that rebirth in the human realm is very fortune for attaining the enlightenment, or the liberation from continuous rebirth, and help also others. In this way, they incorporate the altruistic principle of *bodhicitta* into the *tshe thar* ritual

²⁷² See the practice of four immeasurables (*tshad med bzhi*) involving four kind of meditation on equanimity, love compassion and joy. This practice is a part of Buddhist and Bon preliminary meditations (*sngon 'dro*) commonly known and practice among majority of Tibetans.

while generating belief that freeing a captive animals brings is an act of compassion that on one side saves the life of being and on the other, bring them closer to better living conditions, eventually to the state of enlightenment.

How are the animals released?

The *tshe thar* ritual or saving of life is mainly associated with animal release nowadays.²⁷³ In general, animals are mostly purchased from their owners in the first place. They are bought particularly from slaughterhouses, animal farms or households, where they are used for meat production, field work, animal raising, breeding and products of milk, eggs, wool, and so on (Shiu and Stokes 2008: 189). Afterwards, the purchased animals are ritually released either to their natural environments or put in their new homes where they live until their naturally occurring death. This process of liberation takes form of a ritual which involves recitation and/or singing of prayers, playing musical instruments, offering flowers, incenses and ritual cakes, giving special substances to the animals and bestowing upon them blessing. ^{1.}

Animal release may be either an elaborated public ceremony, a short individual practice consisting of few prayers or a very short act during which an individual(s) pronounce silently a short mantra empowering the animals' release. The elaborated rituals are often provided and organized by monastic institutions or religious lay communities for public participation during the ceremony. These institutions organize all necessary parts of the ceremony including fund raising, buying ani-

²⁷³ Henry Shiu and Leah Stokes emphasize that *saving of lives* and *animal release* are two related activities, but they should not be interchanged.



1. The goat release by the Bonpo monks at the Bonpo monastery of Triten Norbutse in Kathmandu, Nepal.



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mals, their transportation, place of staying, food and water, preparation of the ceremony, etc. The ceremony is performed by a special group of monks or laity skilled in ritual practices often led by the monastery abbots or the lay community leaders. The smaller scale *tshe thar* rituals are performed within a family, relatives, household or a small group by individuals led by their spiritual teacher (*bla ma*). These rituals are shorter and simpler, number of animals is smaller and not advertised or public. The shortest rituals are individual, often sudden and unplanned in dependence on circumstances. In this way, the animal release may be performed when small animals such as insects, earthworms, snakes, frogs, etc. are removed from places where they may be harmed or killed, for example off sidewalks, roads, water pounds, agricultural fields, and so on. The act is often accompanied with a mantra such as *om mani padme hum*, any other words of power which are believed by Tibetans to bring blessing upon the saved animal.

Ritual: The Amrita of love by Ju Mipham²⁷⁴

“The essence mantra of Avalokiteśvara:

Om mani pedmey hung hri

And teach the meaning of profound interdependence

with the following verses:

Each and every phenomena arises from a cause,

274 This a part of text that was translated at the request of the great khenpo of Pukang Göñ, Sherab Sangpo, by Tsultrim Shönu (Cortland Dahl) for use on the sacred day of Lhabab Tüchen, 2006. The full version is accesible on-line at [Lotsawa House](http://LotsawaHouse.com).

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And these causes the Tathāgata has taught.
 That which brings an end to these causes
 Was taught by the Great Mendicant as well.

Engage in no negativity whatsoever,
 Practice virtue, perfect and complete,
 And thoroughly tame your own mind –
 These are the teachings of the Buddha.

Next, recite the following mantra *om namo bagawatay*, etc. and imagine that all these creatures have triumphed over all that has put their life in danger and that they attain the siddhi of power over longevity in all their lives. Next, place blessed substances in their mouths and transform everything into emptiness by reciting the following mantra:

Om sobhawa shuddho sarva dharmah sobhawa shuddho hang

Out of this state of emptiness, the body, aggregates, elements, and sense fields of the animals that are the focal point of the practice transform into the nature of the great bliss of complete purity, becoming an inconceivable cloud-like mass of offerings.”

Commercial enterprise and modification of the ecosystem

The *tshe thar* rituals became very popular among Buddhists, but they are also used for commercial purposes. A vast number of animals are captured merely for the

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purpose of being released. The trades with wild animal are often supported by large monasteries which yearly purchase hundreds and thousands of wild animals and may collect donations for purchasing animals and preparing their release. For example, some monasteries may purchase hundred thousands of fishes for their release. On the other hand, trappers also sell a small number of animals such as birds, turtles, frogs to individuals on public markets, places of religious worship or nearby monasteries. These minor purchases also support the trade with wild animals, their trapping, captivity, injuries and death. The traders with small animals may be seen around the sided of pilgrimages, such as Boudhanath, Swayambhunath in Kathmandu, and so forth.

In this way, the *tshe thar* ritual promotes to some extend also animal trapping which brings harm particularly to wild animals. The wild animals trapped for the rituals suffer from being captured, transported and keep in captivities until they are sold and released. The trapped animals are packed in cages, exposed to sun, dehydration, absence of feeding, etc. Many of them dies for illness, suffocation or injuries (Law 1994: 325–6). Those who are finally purchased for the ceremony and afterwards, released to their natural environment are often weak and disoriented, they may become easy target for the predators or transmit diseases. The animals are also often released to the wrong natural environments causing their death or collapse of the local ecosystems. For example, fishes which were captured in ponds are released to rivers, domestic animals are released to wild nature, etc (Mack 2000: 689–710).

Conclusion

I have, in this brief chapter, attempted to describe how *tshe thar* or saving of life rituals are understood and applied by Tibetans nowadays. As analysis showed, first ideas of *tshe thar* might be found in the early collections of monastic rules and Mahāyāna works, which had a significant impact on the formation and understanding of the ritual. Such an understanding might develop a consideration about the value of *tshe thar* ritual in the light of its positive and negative results nowadays. Some animals are saved from suffering, but others are harmed for commercial purposes that are often carried out in the name of religion, compassion and help. Therefore, what would need to be examined and reflected on is the extent to which the *tshe thar* rituals actually help living beings, save them from harm and suffering. This would be actually the necessary fruition to ripen from such rituals and valid result according to Buddhist doctrine and to many Tibetans.

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11. Death and afterlife

This chapter aims to provide readers with a basic outline of current Tibetan beliefs related to death and the afterlife. Firstly, I will introduce basic facts about the prehistorical period. Then we will turn our attention to the pre-Buddhist period and old Tibetan religious beliefs when concepts of death and the act of dying were drastically different from those of Buddhism. Secondly, I will shift to the period following by the fall of the Tibetan empire and discuss the emergence of a new understanding of death among Tibetans. After this period (post-11th century) pre-Buddhist form of Bon developed a systematic cult which nonetheless assimilated Buddhist concept of ethics and salvation while stressing on its own history and tradition at the same time. Thirdly, I will explore the Buddhist concept of the intermediate state which shaped Tibetan Buddhism significantly. We will also turn our attention to concepts of hell or other regions in which a person may visit on his or her journey after death.

Pre-historical period

So far there have been hundreds of tombs discovered in Tibet to date, the oldest being the Neolithic underground tombs found approximately 5 kilometers from Lhasa dated somewhere between 1700–1100 BCE. Interestingly there have not been any discoveries of animal remains, which would suggest that the ritual slaughter of animals was not popular at the time. Moreover, other tombs have been found in Upper Mustang. These “group tombs” can be divided into three archeological periods with the first phase beginning 1000–450 BCE, the second in 400–50 BCE and the third in 3.–7. CE (Berounský 2014). The first discovery of animal remains was

found during the second period with a total of 13 different specimens. Besides artifacts and goods commonly found in the previous period such as ceramics, there were also mummified heads of goats and horses. In the third period, the number of animal sacrifices rose significantly. In total, there were 41 cases of animal remains discovered. Regardless of the location of the graves, they often shared similar characteristics such as the goods or the sacrificed animals themselves. In Western Tibet, the tombs discovered had wooden coffins and mummified faces covered with gold or silver masks. Between the period of the 7th and 9th century there was a shift in the shapes of tombs. We can observe the emergence of burial mounds, which symbolized the king's power. Again, in these tombs, there were coffins and other goods found (Ibid.).

Pre-Buddhist period

The general perception of death and knowledge about the afterlife in the pre-Buddhist period in Tibet are a rather undiscovered phenomena. In general, before the 11th century, much of Bon's pre-history religion is relatively unknown and prior to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet, the actual nature of the religion remains lost and currently, there is no pre-existing text that would provide us with this knowledge (Karmay 1972, Karmay 2007, Berounský 2014). According to Berounský, such a text will probably never be found and, moreover, the variability of traditions found in Tibet, indicates an attempt to describe all of these traditions in the limited space the author has available here would be an ill-advised project (Berounský 2014). Even though there is an observable line which connects pre-Buddhist traditions to and Buddhism, it would be very risky to evaluate their interdependence. It is clear that Bon's basic concepts changed dramatically under the influence of

Buddhism. The rituals conducted pre-11th century involved animal and maybe human sacrifice would have violated the core values of Buddhist's which maintains the belief that humans should value the welfare of sentient beings (Ibid.).

Bonpos opposed some of the other fundamentals of Buddhism such as the belief that the Buddha Śakyamuni is the supreme teacher. Their cosmic Buddha *sTon pa gShen rab* (The Teacher, Supreme *gShen*), who came somewhere from the west of Tibet, lived according to Bonpos long before Buddha Śakyamuni. He preached supreme Bon in the land of Zhang Zhung and the teaching was introduced into Tibet from there.²⁷⁵ The powerful empire of *Srong btsan sGam po* lasted from 7th till mid-9th century. It is safe to assume that elder religion's beliefs coexisted simultaneously with Buddhism in the imperial court, but the rulers of central Tibet preferred to propagate Buddhism which lead to the suppression of the Bon religion. As a result, Bon ceased to exist except in villages and Bonpos were ignored by the majority of Buddhists in Tibet and the religion survived solely with the support of local family lineages (Karmay 1972, Karmay 2007). However, the post-11th century Bonpos developed a systematic cult of *Ston pa gShen rab* and a profound mythological system similar to that of the Nyingamapas and the Padmasambhava.

Even though our knowledge about pre-11th century Bonpos is limited, we can observe that there are shared phenomena through Tibet regarding funerary rites. As Berounský (2014) suggests, one of these examples is the need of leading dead on a

275 A full discussion about the actual place of origin of *sTon pa gshen rab* is provided by Samten G. Karmay's *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon* at pp. xxvii–xxxi (Karmay 1972) and Per Kvaerne's chapter in *Bon: The Magic World, The Indigenous Religion of Tibet* (Karmay and Watt 2007).

precarious journey beyond the grave to a rather unspecified land of final destination, which, as we shall see, is an important feature of the pre-Buddhist tradition as well as the current day Tibetan Buddhism and religion of Bon. The priests played a crucial role in this practice. The Bon religion used to be an organization of priests, who were not Buddhists and one of their primary functions was to conduct the king's post-mortem rituals at the aforementioned mentioned burial mounds (Kvaerne 1985).

The first Tibetan funerary ritual is connected with the death of Tibetan king *Gri gum bTsan po*, whose body was placed in the tomb. This practice was unusual for the time because prior to the death of *Gri gum btsan po*, Tibetan kings were believed to be semi-divine beings who ascended to heaven via a mythic rope without leaving their bodies on the earth. In fact, *Gri gum btsan po* was the first king whose body remained on the earth. For this reason, the Bonpos from Zhang Zhung were requested to perform funerary rites and the king's body was placed inside the tomb for the first time in Tibetan history. This is what the legend says, but the validity of this story is uncertain (Ibid.). In fact, Tibetan kings were traditionally buried which is evidenced by the Yarlung Valley where the remains of large funerary mounds can be found. Even though Buddhism became the dominant religion in the 8th century, the practice of burying of kings was still prevalent in the 9th century irrespective of whether the members of the royal family were Buddhist. Also, the kings' funerals were accompanied by extravagant offerings of food, treasure, animal sacrifices and other complex rituals performed by *gshen* and *bonpo* priests (Ibid.).

Funerary rites were significant because Tibetans believed that the path to the realm of death was full of difficulties and thus the dead person needed help from the realm of living beings. Sacrificed animals played a central role in the ritual since

they were believed to lead the deceased person on the precarious path to the “land of joy”, where human beings and animals lived joyful lives after death. Another important function suggested by Kvaerne is that the animals could serve as a “ransom” to spirits whose sole purpose was to provide obstacles to the dead person. In retrospect, the sacrificed animals might have served as necessary substance for surviving in the realm of the dead. It was commonly believed that the deceased individual needed various objects beyond the grave such as clothes, jewels or food (Ibid.). It is interesting to note that these rituals can be found in textual collections associated with illness and they are similar to those dealing with death (Ibid.).

It is notable that the Bon rituals may advert help side step inauspicious destinies, illness and other obstacles. In this regard, the most important source of information is a narrative about the life of *sTon pa gShen rab* in a text translated by Kvaerne (Ibid.) called *gZer mig*, where his ritual actions lead to the final liberation of another person. Kvaerne (Ibid.) suggests that this was how Bonpos legitimized these ceremonies after absorbing Buddhism since the concepts of ultimate liberation are different in *gZer mig* than in the older manuscripts from Dunhuang which describes the funerals of kings, but the notion of a final liberation is missing.²⁷⁶

276 For a description of the contemporary bonpo ritual from Lubra village readers can see Charles Ramble’s work “Status and death: mortuary rites and attitudes to the body in a Tibetan village” (Ramble 1983) and for further reading also the compilation on the Buddhist funerary practices of Margaret. Quoin (2010) in her *Tibetan Rituals of Death*, which provides an extensive description of various rituals connected to death.

An assimilation of beliefs in Buddhist period

The extensive process of the assimilation of both the pre-Buddhist and Buddhist tantric traditions started when Bonpos began to organize their monastic life. Objecting the former funerary rites, Buddhists partly adopted the ancient terminology of the pre-Buddhist religion but linked it to the Buddhist core values. In this way, Buddhists removed the original elements so that by the 10th or 11th century the primordial faith was gradually neglected by the Tibetans. This is to say that this task was accomplished by interpreting all traditional beliefs as Buddhists in their nature. Nevertheless, some aspects remained preserved with most of the same meaning. However, by the 11th century it is very difficult to find differences between adherents of Bon and chos (*dharma*), the terms here refer to the Buddhist's doctrine (*bstan pa*) (Karmay 1972, Karmay and Watt 2007). Kvaerne (1985) argues that it is for example obvious from the Bonpo version of the Wheel of Existence that is constructed in similar way as Buddhist version.

The Tibetan pre-Buddhist religion assimilated into the structure of Buddhist beliefs, but tantric teachings formed the most significant aspect of Tibetan Buddhism after the fall of the Tibetan empire in the 9th century. Especially the second stage of the so-called "later diffusion of Buddhism" (*phyi dar*), remarkably contributed to the development of Tibetan Buddhism. In the political vacuum, after the fall of the Tibetan royal family by the end of the 9th century and later on, various teachings preached by Buddhist tantric masters spread throughout Tibet and we can observe that the practice of building monumental tombs for kings gradually vanished (Berounský 2014). But according to the authors of *Sources of Tibetan*

Traditions (Schaeffer, et. al. 2013)²⁷⁷ it was in between the 13th and the 16th century when we can observe a shift towards formalized theological debates on death and a subsequently an emergent death literature. This literary tradition concerned can be divided into four types: tantric exegesis, prayer, narrative and practical manuals (Ibid.). The first two works deals with issues concerning bardo (sa. *antarabhāva*, tib. *bar do*)²⁷⁸. The third might contain stories about men and women, referred to as *delok* (lit., passed away and returned), who experience travel through demonic spheres and returned to life. These texts emphasize core aspects of Buddhist philosophy and teach about suffering and impermanence, karmic law, and also the importance of good deeds in life for acquiring better rebirth. The fourth type concerns the practical aspects of body disposal, such as embalming or mortuary practice or forging the relics of saints.²⁷⁹

Hells and afterlife

In this next section, we will turn our attention to the perception of hells which are a common phenomena for almost all cultures and ancient civilizations. As we shall see they are common for India, Tibet and also for China. A brief historic account of the Indian Buddhist tradition regarding hells traces this concept back to the Vedic period, asserts Berounský in his introduction to *The Tibetan Version of the*

²⁷⁷ See chapter 14 Writings on Death and Dying, pp. 446–467.

²⁷⁸ The bardo will be described further in the text.

²⁷⁹ For descriptions of both practices see pp. 463–467 (Schaeffer, et. al. 2013), for more details regarding mortuary rites for holy persons see also Qouin (2010) and Ramble (1983) for Bonpo version of the practice.

Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Quest for Chinese Influence on the Tibetan Perception of the Afterlife. The author provides the reader with a systematic outline of textual traditions relating the numerous hells that flourished in India from ancient times (Berounský 2012). He traces the origin and evolution of Indo-Aryan civilization since Vedic time and concludes that Buddhism and other Hindu traditions shared comparable hells in common but that these ideas changed into different intricate interpretations. Buddhism naturally comes with different perception of hells in various writings. What is important, is that the Tibetan discourse on hell originates from Indian Buddhist as well as Vedic and Puranic textual resources (Ibid.)

The most detailed description of the varied hells is offered in the text of the *Mahāvastu* which dates back somewhere between the 2nd century BCE and the 4th century CE. Also, Vasubandhus' work *Abhidharmakośa*, a compendium of Buddhist beliefs on hell, played a key role in transmitting these beliefs. Vasubandhu compiles the text in a scholarly way from cosmological perspective which is organized as a complex mathematical model, where the movements of living beings are quantified by numerical codes. And significantly, as Berounský explains: *"The layers of the heavens are at the same time degrees of meditative absorptions, while the hells are linked to an impure consciousness"*. This is an important idea we should compare to core the Buddhist concepts. Causality from the Buddhist perspective sees a person on a "personal continuum" (*sa. santāna*) as endlessly connected in the cycle of suffering (*saṃsāra*) including life, bardo and death. And according to the teaching of *Bar do thos grol* living, dying and death are also intermediate states of being, but there is no strict border which we can define. Aside from *nirvāṇa* everything is suffer-

ing and liberation in Buddhism is defined as a state of mind unobstructed by impurities. If according to the Vasubandhu's work, hells are linked to an impure consciousness, we have room to debate whether hells are something that exist only in the afterlife. The same question arises with the notion of heavens as defined as "meditational absorption". Human minds contain impurities and degrees of enlightenment every moment of our lives. Following this, there is good reason to think about the concept of hells, heavens, gods, and demons in Buddhist realms as about a metaphor to describe a world of living beings.

We can only guess what the hells of early Buddhists and old Tibetans have in common. In the case of the non-Buddhist Tibetan who believed the world was full of dangerous demons and death caused mainly by these demons, the main purpose of funerary rituals was to prevent the deceased person from coming back in the form of a demon himself and to lead him safely through a series of regions inhabited by demons and lost souls. According to Berounský (2014), various texts are analogous on the theoretical level and similar motifs are found also in other texts. Valuable illustration of the actual nature of these regions is provided in the narrative *rNel dri 'dul ba'i thabs*, a text without the strong influence of Buddhism, which is date back to the 11th century. The text describes how a dead woman enters a demonic sphere of the deceased which is dedicated for those who died prematurely due to contamination of the *dri* demons. Interestingly, the word *dri can* stands also for the form of pollution²⁸⁰ The text aims to purify her by means of ritual, where purifying means purging her body of demon *dri* who caused her death. Conducted

²⁸⁰ For further details see Berounský 2014, 22–23.

by ritual specialist, the result of the ritual should be the transformation of the deceased women into a pure being known as *sman* as she journeys to the realms of the dead.

An account on *Bar do thos grol* and intermediate state in both Indian and Tibetan sources

To understand the Buddhist view on death, we have to search Indian Buddhist texts, which record a death tradition long before Buddhism reached the Tibetan Plateau. It is understood, however, that not even in the India Buddhist funeral rituals were established properly. The main scripture of funerary rites was a tantric text *Sarvadurgati parísodhana tantra*, which does mention the leading of the dead to an afterlife. By this time Indian Buddhism was opposed to the many schools of the early Buddhist tradition which propagated the idea of the intermediate state.²⁸¹ Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* examined the polemics on the intermediate state in detail and become an authoritative scripture interpreting bar do for the whole of Tibet as well as most of Eastern Asia (Berounský 2014).

In the West, the perception of death, dying and an intermediate state is considerably influenced by tantric text *Bar do thos grol* (*Liberation in bar do through listening*), which represents the point of view of Nyingma. This particular tradition contends that the so-called "Tibetan book of the Dead" was brought to Tibet

281 The reader can find a thorough description of the intermediate state in *Death, dying and Intermediate state of Tibetan Buddhism* (Rinbochey and Hopkins 1985) and in Henk Blezer's chapter *Imagining the Beyond, beyond imagination* (Blezer 2007), or in the introduction in Kolmaš's *Bar do thös grol* (Kolmaš 1991).

by Padmasambhava in 7th century, but our popular Western understanding of the putatively true nature of old Tibetan wisdom is derived from a xylograph from 19th century. Cuevas (2003) in detail explains the process by which text was shaped from its unknown origins until today. In fact, this text is only a part of ritual text cycle connected with peaceful and wrathful deities (*zhi khro*) known under the name *Teachings of self-liberating experiencing of peaceful and wrathful deities (Zab chos zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol)*. As Cuevas argues there are many other texts of a similar nature found also in other traditions.

The term bardo is more than an intermediate state in which the deceased spends time in between death and new life. The concept of bardo is originally from India and the word itself means "in between" (*bar*) of "two" (*do*). In the words of Josef Kolmaš, we should understand the concept "as a philosophical and physical category which can be understood both spatially, as a bigger or smaller space or gap in between of any two things and temporarily as a longer or shorter break or interval in between of any of two events or states. In fact, everything that we perceive around us in space and time contains this feature of something in between of something" (Kolmaš 1991). The tantric teachings distinguish seven types of bardo. Namely

- *skye gnas bar do* or "state of place or process of birth",
- *skye shi bar do* or "state in between birth and death" (human lifespan),
- *rmi lam bar do* or "state of dreaming",
- *bsam gtan bar do* or "state of contemplation or focused mind",
- *'chi kha'i bar do* or "state in the moment of death",

- *chos nyid bar do* or “state of true nature of phenomenon”, and finally
- *srid pa'i bar do* or “state of creation” immediately followed by the first of just outlined intermediate states.

Only *'Chi kha'i bar do*, *Chos nyid bar do* and *Srid pa'i bar do* are a subject of the scriptures describing the afterlife, which according to many texts lasts a total last 49 days. There is a considerable dichotomy in the way how we can address all the intermediate states as they can be both an opportunity or obstacle depending on one's own capability to deal with them (Blezer 2007). Thus, each of them is a critical moment rooted in between the previous and forthcoming state. The ultimate goal of tantric practice, and thus of *Bar do thos grol* as well, is to lead the adept to final liberation (*grol*) and in this regard, as Kolmaš (1991) suggests, the teaching of *Bar do thos grol* could be also seen as a guideline for life rather than for precarious journey in the intermediate state. Death can in this sense be perceived as an opportunity with special characteristics that allows for potential liberation as other intermediate states.

Summary

Ancient Tibetan religious beliefs continue to survive until today. We can see that the major roles in old Tibetan rituals were played by priests and animals who accompanied the deceased person beyond the grave toward his or her precarious journey. After a person died, the deceased entered the afterlife and traveled to realms which are in various texts described as dangerous and inhabited by demons. After the successful journey of the dead, he or she should have reached a “realm of gods”, which is not specified in detail. Rituals were performed for the

dead person in order to offer him or her protection and also to protect all living humans beings against demons that inhabit the afterlife. In addition, the rituals were important because they prevented the dead from coming back in the form of a demon.

The older religious beliefs of Bon were later incorporated in to Buddhism and vice versa. Thus, both religions contain features from one another. Bon remained loyal to its primordial mythology with sTong pa gShen rabs but assimilated Mahayana's core values at the same time. Buddhism on the other hand, incorporated various features of the old religion into its structures such as Bon's rich pantheon gods and semi-divine beings which conquered the older elements of Tibetan Buddhist beliefs. Furthermore, the confluence of tantric thought flowed between both religions as they evolved.

The most important element here is that there is a strong emphasis in today's Tibetan Buddhism on the leading of the dead on a precarious journey, regardless of whether we speak literally about hells or intermediate states. It is feared the dead might literally become deceived by various imaginary forms manifesting themselves in the bardo or afterlife realms. This could, in turn, lead to inauspicious rebirths or being reborn in a demonic form. Whether we are speaking about old Tibetan religious beliefs or current day Tibetan Buddhism, we find this concern as a centerpiece of both systems.

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