

YUL AND YUL LHA:
THE TERRITORY AND ITS DEITY IN BHUTAN

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This paper was written in December 1999 for the Franco-Austrian Seminar on "Myth, territoriality and ritual in Tibetan areas" which took place in Vienna (Austria). Today, it is published as it was at that time without any amendments or updates. It is a reflection on the *yul lha*, the "deity of the territory" in Bhutan, from material which I have collected over the years, but more precisely during fieldwork from 1996 to 1999. Some of it has already been published elsewhere,¹ but the focus was then on the categories of local deities and their function. Therefore, this paper does not dwell on the different categories of local deities, or the classification of the *yul lha*, as these issues have already been addressed, if not satisfactorily.²

While adding new material, this paper aims at giving an overall view of the deity of the territory in relation to his or her space and people that inhabit it. I will first examine the connotations of the word *yul* (Dzongkha: *g.yul/g.yus*)³ and try to place it in the Bhutanese context; in the second part, I will present the close links between the *yul lha* and the territory from four perspectives: kinship, area of control, power and rituals.

1. THE TERM *YUL*

In the West, it is the standard practice to translate *yul* as "territory". In Bhutan, while this translation certainly applies, *yul* also means "village" and "home".⁴ It is explained as meaning "native place" (*skyes*

I would like to thank Kunzang Choden for her information and comments.

¹ Pommaret 1994; 1996; 1998; and 2004.

² Pommaret 1996: 39-56.

³ The spelling of the words is given in classical Tibetan. When the Dzongkha spelling is used, the word will be preceded by Dz. The words in other non-written languages of Bhutan will be preceded by *.

⁴ This meaning is also found elsewhere in Tibet and the Himalayas, for instance in the Shar khog region of A mdo. Personal communication from Samten Karmay, August 1999.

sa ; hon. 'khrung yul).⁵ The word *lung pa*, whose Dzongkha form is *lunm* and which is widely used, at least in Central Tibet, is seldom used here, and is replaced by the term *yul*. Sometimes the word used in Dzongkha is *g.yul kha* (new Dzongkha spelling).⁶ One would therefore ask: "Where do you come from?", "What is your birth place?" (*Chö yu kati le mo?* or *Chö yuka kati le mo?*) The word with the new Dzongkha spelling of *g.yul*, translated as "village", is also found in the *Dzongkha-English Dictionary Topic-based Approach* (Rinchhen Khandu 1998: 287).

This equation territory/village can be explained by the fact that a village as we understand it in the West is relatively rare in Bhutan. For example, the title and function of *rgap* (Dz.) (Tib. *rgad po*), translated into English as "village headman", refers in fact to the headman looking after a group of several clusters of houses which is now referred to by the administrative term *rged 'og* (Dz.).

The classical term *grong*, which means village, is used in Bhutanese texts written in classical Tibetan, such as the Code of Laws, *bKa' khrims*, dating from 1729 (Aris 1986: 111b-154, 113b-158), and is noted in one of the Dzongkha dictionaries (*Dzongkha Dictionary*, Department of Education 1993: 54), but *grong* is not used in the colloquial language. It is a written administrative word. However, to designate a cluster of houses coming under one name and being part of a *yul*, the Dzongkha word *g.yul tshan* is prevalent all over the country while the word *grong gsep* (Tib. *grong gseb*) is used mostly in the western region. In Bumthangkha, the language spoken in the central regions, the word **krongtshan* (Tib. *grong tshan?*) is used, while in Tshangla, the language of the eastern region, the word **dung* is the colloquial term for village.

The terminology which tries to cover fluid concepts does not appear to be really fixed and the issue is rendered more complex by the different Dzongkha spellings that are encountered. Today, in the *Dzongkha Dictionary* published by the Dzongkha Development Commission, under the entry *g.yus*, one finds *grong gsep* as an equivalent (1993: 494).

A "village" was traditionally composed of several clusters of houses, sometimes a distance of one hour's walk from each other. It was, in fact, an area coming under one general name, and each cluster

⁵ Department of Education, *Dzongkha Dictionary*, Thimphu, 1993: 289.

⁶ Also written *g.yus kha* in van Driem 1998: 351, 435 and in the *Dzongkha Dictionary* published by the Dzongkha Development Commission 1993: 103, 494.

of houses (Dz. *grong gsep*) had its own name. A *yul* is therefore quite similar to the now outdated connotation of the French word "pays", meaning not the country but the region of origin, and found in the old colloquial expression "on est pays", "we are from the same region/village". In the Bhutanese conception of living space, one could therefore say that the reference unit is the *yul*.

Yet, if the term *yul*⁷ implies an inhabited settlement, it also includes the mountains and any part of the landscape where human activities take place. Contrary to certain regions of Asia where there is a clear differentiation between domesticated and wild spaces, in Bhutan the *yul* as territory does not infer this restrictive notion. It would therefore include inhabited settlements, fields, pasture lands, forests that are used by the people and necessary to their daily life as well as *ri*, mountains. Mountains may or may not be the residence of the *yul lha*, the deity of the territory, or may be the deity himself or herself.⁸ These five elements of the Bhutanese landscape make up a territory. When the monsoon is late at the end of June or the beginning of July, bringing drought at the time when the rice is due to be transplanted, a ceremony of "encircling the fields" (*zhing skor*), such as the one described by Ramble in Mustang takes place (1995: 88). This ceremony is not performed on an annual basis and does not encompass the whole territory (*yul*) but only the fields as usual.

In the popular representation of the *yul*, a territory is defined by the people living on it, and its borders are delimited by the people's conception of where their local deity's power and influence stops.

Of course, the territory is also the product of diverse historical circumstances and, in particular, can be linked to clan structures closely related to the local deity. Unfortunately, in Bhutan, the clan structure has all but disappeared, and sources which might prove that the local deity was a clan's deity have yet to come to light. On the basis of the *rGyal rigs*, a 17th century text (Aris 1986: 12-85), Aris showed that clans existed at least in Eastern Bhutan, and traced their common ancestor to the Tibetan prince gTsang ma (Aris 1979: 94-110; 1986: 25-47). This historical ancestry may explain why there is, so far, no evidence that the Eastern Bhutanese clans (*rus*) had a deity that they would consider their ancestor. Moreover, the clans found in the historiography do not refer to clans of the common people who lived in a territory and about whom very little is known, but only to the

⁷ For practical purposes, I will use the classical spelling.

⁸ On these aspects, cf. Pommaret 1996: 39-56. Although the majority of *yul lha* are male, some are female.

ruling clans, called *rus* or more often referred to by the honorific term *gdung*. The term *gdung* became the title for the petty rulers of the central and South-central region of Bum thang and Kheng. The clans mentioned in the *rGyal rigs* are clearly the ruling clans and the *rGyal rigs* retraces the history of the rulers, not of the ordinary people.

For the ruling clans of Central Bhutan, divine ancestry is sometimes involved but so far there is no textual or tangible evidence that the deity became the *yul lha* of the whole territory. For example, in the case of Bum thang the *rGyal rigs* says:

Now I shall speak about the history of the origins of the gDung [families] of the four districts of Bum thang. Now then, in previous times after the few subjects who came in company with King Khyi kha ra thod had, in the absence of a lord-chief, contended and quarrelled, they searched for a unanimously chosen chief. Since there was no royal family [among them belonging to] a great clan, they did not find a chief and so they worshipped and supplicated the God of Heaven 'Od de gung rgyal.⁹ 'Od de gung rgyal enjoined saying: "The divine son Gu se lang ling,¹⁰ having grasped the divine *rmu* cord, will descend to U ra", and he melted into the light. After he [Gu se lang ling] had resided in the womb of bSod nams dpal 'dren, a woman who possessed the marks of a *dākinī* of Gnosis, in order that he may be born as if by a miracle, a voice from space declared: "Oh! This boy is a divine son and for many generations [his descendants] will come to act as lord-chiefs".¹¹

⁹ 'Od de gung rgyal is a very-well known mountain-deity (*phyva*) in Tibet as he is considered the ancestor of the Tibetan kings. Cf. Tucci 1980: 730; Karmay 1996: 61.

The eponymous mountain (69,998m) is situated in 'Ol kha about sixty kilometers to the east of rTsed thang and close to the town of Zangs ri on the north bank of the gTsang po. This deity's name appears in mythological accounts in Bhutan, and one may ask whether this reveals a possible place of origin for some of the people who came from Tibet, or if it is simply the attribution of a myth of origin to a prestigious deity.

¹⁰ Gu se lang ling does not appear in the list provided by Karmay (1996), nor in Tucci (1980), which does not mean that he is not listed in another yet unknown text. It might also be a local variation.

¹¹ Aris 1986: 46-47. *rGyal rigs* folios 32 a-b: *Da ni bum thang sde bzhi'i gdung rnams kyi chad khungs 'byung tshul kyang brjod par bya'o/ de nas sngon rgyal po khyi kha ra thod dang mnyam po yong ba'i mi ser 'thor bu re yod pa rnams rje dpon med par 'khrugs cing brtsod pa las/ khong rang rnams kha mthun gyi rje dpon 'tshol*

Therefore, unless new sources, textual or oral, surface, it can first be said that when the clans are mentioned, they refer only to the ruling clans of a territory and do not concern the general community; second, that the deity of a particular ruling clan neither appears to have become the *yul lha* of the territory, nor is recognised consciously as the ancestor of the community.¹²

As for the relationship between *skyes lha* and *yul lha*, which needs to be briefly touched upon in this context, it is becoming increasingly clear that if a person is born within the family's territory, his or her *yul lha* and *skyes lha* will be the same deity. Given the stable structure of the rural Bhutanese society of the past, this makes sense. But if the person is born outside the family territory, his or her *skyes lha* will be the deity of his or her birthplace, while his or her *yul lha* will still be the deity of the family territory. With the increasing mobility of the society in the past ten years, a new concept has appeared: the *hom sa* (Dz.), that is the place where one grows up, which may be different from the birth-place. It will be interesting to note which deity is worshipped.

In Bhutan, at least in Bum thang and Paro, *skyes lha* and *yul lha* do not therefore automatically mean two different deities, but two different roles given to the same deity controlling a given territory. As for the term *gzhi bdag* ("master of the ground"), it is often equated with the term *yul lha*.¹³

For practical purposes I will use only the term *yul lha* in this article, while keeping in mind that it can be replaced according to the locality by *gzhi bdag*, *gnas bdag*, *gnas po*, and even *gter bdag*. Several terms are used in the colloquial language and the term *yul lha*, although understood, is often confined to ritual texts. If asked about the *yul lha* of the area, the villager will reply but will automatically revert to the local term.

This apparent dichotomy in terminology could be explained by the strong local particularities and the fact that ritual texts were written in

ba'i rus chen rgyal rigs med pas rje dpon ma rnyed par/gnam lha 'o de gung rgyal mchod cing gsol ba btab pas/ 'o de gung rgyal gvis bka' bsgos nas/ lha'i bu gu se lang ling lha'i rmu thag la 'jus nas/ u ra la bab po 'od du zhun nas/ bu med ye shes kyi mkha' 'gro'i mishan dang ldan pa bsod nams dpal 'dren gyi lhums su bzhugs nas rdzus skye lta bur 'khrungs pa'i phyir/ bar snang gi sgra las/ 'o bu 'di ni lha'i bu yin pa'i gdung rabs mang po'i bar du rje dpon byed par 'gyur ro zer ha'i sgra/

¹² On the *pho lha* of the "first clan" who became the *yul lha* of the community, cf. Hazod 1996: 94 and Schicklgruber 1996: 123.

¹³ As is the case in A mdo. Cf. Karmay 1996: 67.

classical Tibetan by clerics for whom the reference was the Tibetan corpus of texts. It would be interesting to know if this lexical difference can also be found in remote areas of Tibet.

For example, the term *gnas po* (Dz. *gnasp*) is very common and can be equated with *yul lha* in the colloquial language. To my knowledge, the use of the word with this particular connotation has yet to be recorded in Tibet, but is found in Mustang (Ramble 1996: 144). *gNas po*, of course, means "host", which reflects the deity's ownership of the place, and the inhabitants are therefore considered as his or her guests. This implies that, as in every society, host and guest have duties towards each other and have to respect a certain code of conduct so that the cohabitation can be harmonious.

If each territory has its deity, each cluster of houses on the territory also has a minor deity. It is also called *gnas po* or *gnas bdag* and is represented as the main deity's emanation, servant or part of his entourage.

For example, the Hum ral mgon po who is the *yul lha* of the area around the fortress of Paro, is the *gnas po* of the fortress, but he is called the Ja'o nep (Dz. *Brag 'og gnasp*) by the villagers, who consider him as an emanation of the Hum ral mgon po.¹⁴ dMug btsan is the powerful *yul lha* of part of the upper Tongsa region, but the fortress itself is protected by a *gnas bdag* called Ga rab dbang phyug to whom a shrine is erected inside the fortress.

2. THE TERRITORY AND ITS DEITY

An examination of the links between a specific territory and its deity can include many different aspects; these include, for example, myths and history, studied recently for the Tibetan dynasty by Karmay, and in Southern Tibet and Northern Nepal by Diemberger and Hazod.¹⁵

The present paper deals with four of these aspects that seem to be most relevant to Bhutanese society: kinship relationships, area of control, power, and rituals.

As seen elsewhere,¹⁶ the deity of the territory, *yul lha* or *gnas po/gnas mo* can be male or female, but the frequency of female deities

¹⁴ On these deities, Cf. Pommaret 2002 and 2003.

¹⁵ Karmay 1996: 59-71 and 1994: 408-429; Diemberger 1998: 43-55; Hazod 1998: 57-78.

¹⁶ Pommaret 1996 and 2004.

of the territory in Bhutan may differ significantly from other Tibetan areas, although this point needs to be researched.¹⁷

Kinship

The local deity is clearly linked to a territory and if he or she is not explicitly considered as the ancestor of the people living on the territory,¹⁸ the term by which the deity is addressed shows that there is a sense of bond, of kinship between the people and him or her. The terms *Apa/Ap*, ("father"), *A rgyas* (Dzongkha) or *Me me* (Tshangla) ("grandfather"), and *Ama* ("mother"),¹⁹ are used in the colloquial language to refer to the deity of the territory. They are more terms of endearment rather than kinship terms as such, but underline the closeness between the people and their *yul lha*. To give a few examples, dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len in northern Thimphu, 'Od 'dod pa in northern Paro, Khyung bdud in Haa, Ra brag in dBang 'dus pho brag, and Yazap/Yasab (Yab zap?) in sTod sbe sa are referred to as "Ap dGe bsnyen", "Ap 'Od 'dod pa", "Ap Khyung bdud", "Ap Radap" and "Ap Yazap". Sometimes they are also called A jo, ("elder brother"). The upper Tongsa district is the territory of a deity, residing on the mountain above Bon sbis, who is addressed as A rgyas dMug btsan, and the people of Kha gling in Eastern Bhutan call their deity Me me Drang ling. Jo mo sKu mkhar, the deity of Sag gteng, is called Ama Jomo ("Lady elder sister"); mTsho sman rgyal mo, the deity of 'Bu li in Kheng, is also called Ama mtsho sman.

The term *Apa/Ap* may also connote "father", since, according to popular belief, the deity often fathers children in his territory. These children are always by women who belong to the deity's territory, and their male offspring are declared the deity's sons because of their fierce temper or unusual strength. The people from Haa are feared because they are said to have inherited the temper of Khyung bdud, but also because this deity can curse people who antagonise his sons.

Pala and Pila, the ancestors of the royal family of Bhutan, who came from the north-eastern region of sKur stod, were believed to be the sons of the deity of the territory who passed on to them his strength

¹⁷ Ramble notes that the *yul lha* of Bon ri in Kong po is Yu 'od sman btsun also called Bon ri Ama (1997: 174-176).

¹⁸ Karmay 1996: 59-70

¹⁹ In this particular case, the terms mean "Father" and "Mother", but depending on the region and the context, the meaning of these terms can be respectively "husband" and "aunt".

and power. Similarly, in Tibet, in the 'Dan khog region of Khams, if a man was tall and strong, he was believed to be the son of gNyan chen thang lha.²⁰

One myth about the origin of the noble families (gDung and rJe) of Central and South-central Bhutan tells the story of a woman bearing a child by Gu se lang ling, the divine son of 'Od de gung rgyal. Gu se lang ling had become the *lha btsan* of the Mukulung region (Aris 1986: 50-53).

The sexual encounter between the deity and the women of his *yul* is vividly symbolised and ritualised in O rgyan chos gling in sTang, Bum thang, where the local deity, called Indrabhuti, was offered a cake (*tshogs*) in the shape of a vulva and called by the now rarely used term *tshogs ama* or "mother offering".²¹

A *yul lha* may often be married to a *mtsho sman* living in a lake, but would never marry a lake deity outside his territory. If the *yul lha* is the *mtsho sman*, as in the case of 'Bu li (Pommaret 2004), she is married to the *btsan*, deity of the rock, but once again not outside the territory.

This couple formed by a lake and a rock or a mountain - whichever of the two is the deity of the territory -, is one of the constant cultural traits of the Tibetan world.²² The theme of a lake deity marrying a man is well-known in folk literature.²³ Sexual encounters between a *mtsho sman* and a man can also produce an offspring such as in the case of Seng ge nam rgyal, the powerful 'Bu li dpon po, who lived at the end of the 19th century (Rigden and Pelgen 1999: 40).

It is clear that for the people of a particular area, the men are, metaphorically or otherwise, the sons of the *yul lha*. In the same way, because they are under the protection of Tshe ring ma who is their *yul lha*, the girls from the upper Paro Valley are said to be very pretty because they are considered this deity's daughters.

This sense of belonging to the *yul lha* is therefore expressed in terms such as "father", as already mentioned, but it can also take subtler forms such as the marriage practice peculiar to sTang in Bum

²⁰ Personal communication. Sras mo Chime Wangmo, July 1999.

²¹ I will not elaborate here on the sexual symbols present in many local Bhutanese rituals, especially in the eastern region. Cf. Pelgen 2000: 671-683.

²² Cf. among others, Bellezza 1997.

²³ Kinley Wangmo 1997: 90-95: "Lengo Dago", a serialised cartoon published in the weekly newspaper *Kuensel* in 1999. See also Macdonald 1972: 39.

thang.²⁴ In this area, it is common for a girl to become pregnant before making a relationship official. The girl is then obliged to declare that she is pregnant and name the child's father because failing to do so will bring calamities upon the area. The community then considers the couple impure and that a marriage and purification ceremony called *gTsang ma* ("pure") must be performed to remove the pollution (*sgrib*) and avoid them bringing disaster upon their households and themselves.²⁵

The fumigation ritual (*bsang*²⁶) is first performed for the hearth deity (*thab lha*), in the kitchen, then outside the house for the deity of the territory (*yl lha*) and the birth deity (*skyes lha*). If the boy recognises the child as his, he sits with the girl and is offered a cup of arak. But when he wants to drink, the cup is withdrawn and villagers scold him for having done something so reprehensible. This is repeated three times and only then the boy and girl are allowed to drink from the same cup, a gesture that officialises the marriage.

In case the boy refuses to recognise the baby, the girl must find a "substitute" (*tshab*) who is willing, for payment, to act as a husband for the time of the ceremony. If she cannot find anybody to accept this role, she must have a ransom effigy (*glud*) made and this ransom effigy, the substitute, is thrown away after the ceremony. If the girl has children from other men, she must repeat the ceremony each time.

The extent to which a girl must go to restore the social order and remove the pollution seen to be caused by her action is highly unusual in Bhutan. It certainly reveals the importance given to the local deities in this particular region. The whole ceremony is obviously aimed at removing the pollution from the territory so that the birth deity (*skyes lha*) and the deity of the territory (*yl lha*) do not get angry and inflict calamities upon the community. However, in a country where for a girl to be pregnant out of wedlock is generally accepted, this ceremony from sTang seems to go beyond the act of purification and needs to be researched further. If it were simply a cleansing ceremony, a fumigation ritual should be enough. The importance of the presence of a husband - either real or substitute - highlights, among other things, the ambiguous role of the deity of the territory: at the same time "father" of all the members of the community and potential sexual

²⁴ Personal communications from Kunzang Choden, October 1998 and August 1999.

²⁵ Brauen (1994: 116) speaks of a "Beer drinking" ceremony which has the same purpose in the village of Thangbi, in the Chos 'khor valley of Bum thang.

²⁶ I have chosen the spelling *bsang* rather than *bsangs*.

partner of the women. In either role, the deity would have to make sure that the child is not fathered by a stranger - always a portent of danger - or even by a demon likely to harm the community through the girl and the child. This may explain the importance given to the husband and to the kinship link between the deity of the territory and the women of his community.

In sTang, the sense of belonging to the deity of the territory is very strong. I was told the story of a young couple, both from sTang but living in Thimphu, who had a baby but had not gone through the proper ceremony in their village. They were so frightened of some impending disaster that they came back to sTang for the *gTsang ma* ceremony.

Another example of this special relationship between the community and the deity of its territory is the annual worship of Ama Jomo, called Jo mo gsol kha in the Eastern Sag gteng region. Every summer in the 8th month, the whole community goes up the mountain where Ama Jomo resides. On that particular day, once people enter her domain,

all barriers are lowered when it comes to sharing salacious jokes. Most Brokpa jokes are sexual, and crudely so, but under normal circumstances such jokes would never be shared by individuals between whom sexual relations would constitute incest. About two kilometers away from Ama Jomo Phodrang, every pilgrim goes through the motion of "hanging his or her embarrassment" on the stump. Having done this, no daughter should feel inhibited from sharing crude jokes with her father, uncle or brother. The entire day is spent making jokes, drinking, dancing and horse-racing. When the pilgrims return from Ama Jomo's Phodrang and cross the boundary of the tree stump, normal relationships are resumed - crude jokes are shared only by those between whom sexual relations are not forbidden by incest prohibitions (Wangmo 1990: 143).

This custom could be understood as a sign that all the people are equal before the deity of the territory and consider themselves her children. Whatever the explanation may be, it shows that a special

relationship exists between the deity and her people, which transcends the social norms and behaviours.²⁷

Control of space and residence

People have a very clear idea of the space - the territory - ruled by the *yul lha* and they can even indicate its exact limits. There might not be any man-made physical mark in the landscape, but certain points in the landscape, especially mountains or rocky outcrops, mark the boundaries between two territories, and long prayer-flags (*dar lcog*) or even gates made of wood, like those which formally existed in Sag teng and La g.yag, are often erected on the "border".

The *yul lha* can live on a mountain, in a rock, or in a grove. His residence is usually referred to by the term "palace" (*pho brang*) and is considered "sacred". A soul-lake (*bla mtsho*) may be attributed to him, such as 'Od dod pa's soul-lake in the upper Paro valley; he also has a grove in the forest which is considered his playground.

The shrine dedicated to the deity is a small square construction made of stones with a slanted roof and can be called *gnas khang*, *btsan khang*, or *la btsas*²⁸ in Eastern Bhutan, although this last term generally refers to a stone cairn at the top of a pass. It is generally built on the spot of the deity's residence, or not far from a cluster of houses. Prayer-flags are usually erected next to it. The "palace" and the shrine should not be disturbed, otherwise calamities will plague the community, as in the case of the shrine of Brag dmar dpal bzang, the deity of Rukubji, described by Dujardin (1997: 78-81). It is also known that in the mid-1990s the feeder road from gSum 'phrang to Shing mkhar in the Ura region of Bum thang was lengthened in order to avoid passing through, and therefore disturbing, a rocky area which was the palace of the territory deity.

In most regions, the deity of the territory is also represented inside the local Buddhist temple, either in the chapel for the fierce protectors (*mgon khang*), or in a special shrine placed at the side of the main altar. It can be just a mask or a painting, but it is frequently a kind of effigy attired in accordance with the deity's iconography – either a fierce-looking general in armour, or a figure clad in white brocade with a flat rigid hat called *A mdo phying zhva* ("felt hat from A mdo"). It is very often surrounded by weapons and shields, offered after a

²⁷ Cf. Buffetrille 1996, vol.II: 350, and forthcoming (Oslo) concerning the pilgrimage to Kha ba dkar po.

²⁸ On this term in Tibet Cf. Karmay 2000.

victory against enemies. The chapel for the fierce protectors is usually off-limits to women, except if the *yul lha* is female.

Contrary to what has been assumed, the *yul lha* does not always stay on his or her territory but travels about as Buffetrille notes regarding the Reb gong area in A mdo (Buffetrille 2002).

I have also been told that in the 'Dan khog region of Khams, the sudden breaking-up of the ice at the end of winter meant that dGe bsnyen, the *yul lha*, was travelling back to his place.²⁹

This seems to imply that in some cases, the deities of the territory migrate at certain times of the year, a belief that is also found in Bhutan. Brag/Drags pa dmar btsan, the deity of the Dur territory in Bum thang, migrates in winter to warmer regions, and the high pastures are closed until he returns.³⁰ In Kha gling (Eastern Bhutan), where people used to migrate in winter to the Assam-Bhutan border to graze their sheep and trade, Drang ling, the deity of the territory, leaves the lake that is his palace high up in the mountain, and in the 11th month migrates to the warmth of the south. When he comes back in the 2nd month, people welcome him with alcohol and butter, and present the cattle to him as he doubles as a deity of cattle and wealth (*nor lha*).

In some places another type of migration is associated with members of a family who leave the area. In O rgyan chos gling (sTang, Bum thang), the family has numerous deities to worship, eight of them being *klu*, worshipped especially by women. These deities (*yul lha* and *klu*) travelled with the persons who came to marry into the religious nobility family (*chos rje*) of O rgyan chos gling.³¹ When the names of all these deities are recited during the annual ritual, it is possible to trace the territories of origin of family members, and this can be assimilated to a "geneco-geographical" chart.

As this is an aspect of the subject that I discovered recently, I have not yet carried out a proper study of the travelling deities of the territory. However, I am under the impression that at least in Bhutan,

²⁹ Personal communication from Sras mo Chime Wangmo, July 1999.

³⁰ Several anthropologists have noted this. Among others, cf. Diemberger 1996: 223.

³¹ Personal Communication from Kunzang Choden, October 1998. She also told me as an example that Jo mo, the important female local deity from Eastern Bhutan, is worshipped in O rgyan chos gling because in the middle of the 19th century, sGrol ma, who became the wife of the dPon slob mTsho skyes rdo rje, came from the eastern region of bKra shis g.yang rtse and brought her deity with her.

these migrating *yul lha* belong mostly to areas where cattle migrations take place, but this has to be confirmed by further research.

On the other hand, it is said that the people of rTsa mang in Mon sgar district who migrated to Kheng (Zhal sgang district) at the end of the 19th century, still go back every year to rTsa mang to perform the rituals for their deity (Rigden and Pelgen 1999: 25).

Adjacent or historically linked territories were often ruled by deities of the territory who were brothers. Five *yul lha* of the Paro and Haa Valleys in western Bhutan are said to be brothers: 'Od 'dod pa, Jo bo brag skyes, Khyung bdud and Bya rog btsan (Schicklgruber 1997: 159-175). Brag/Drags pa dmar btsan, the *yul lha* of Dur in the upper Chos 'khor valley of Bum thang, is said to have nine brothers who live on the ridges surrounding Dur, but he appears to be the main deity of the territory.

An absolute and ambivalent power

One of the most important and well-known roles of the *yul lha* is the protection of his or her territory and its well-being and fertility. This includes not only human beings but also cattle and the whole landscape, and implies a strong notion of ownership. The *yul lha* has to preserve the integrity of the territory against enemies, and this is why he is often also considered, as the warrior-deity, the *dgra lha*, and is depicted as a warrior with armour and helmet. We know of the case of Khyung bdud defending the region of Haa against the Tibetan invaders (Pommaret 1996: 47).

Even kinship does not prevent the *yul lha* from fighting with their siblings for their own territories.³² Numerous stories regarding the rivalry between Jo bo Brag skyes and Khyung bdud, and between Khyung bdud and dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len bear testimony to this (Pommaret 1996: 46). The rivalry often concerns the welfare and the

³² A delightful story which took place in Tibet is told in the short account of mChog gyur gling pa's life by Ogyen Tobgyal Rinpoche (1988: 18). mChog gling crossed the territory of a deity called Samten Khangsar (bSam gtan khang gsar) and subdued him. The deity came to see him. After he left, the lama said that the deity had complained in such terms: " 'Heading towards Lhasa you made cleansing offerings to Nyenchen Thanglha and the others but gave me nothing. As I am also important I created this obstacle. Nyenchen Thanglha and I are the same, accepting the orders of Guru rin po che in the same way'. Chokling answered: 'You are not the same. Shall I call Nyenchen Thanglha right now?'. 'Please do not say that' replied Samten Kangsar."

prosperity of the deity's territory, such as the water dispute between Haa and Paro.

Sometimes this rivalry can turn vicious and we find *yul lha* harbouring fierce enmity towards each other. In Dur, one of the *yul lha* cut the other's arm with a stone from his slingshot. In Eastern Bhutan, the *yul lha* ³³ of sGra med rtse was jealous of the *yul lha* of Yon phul la, the two places facing each other, each on a mountain ridge separated by a deep river valley. The *yul lha* of sGra med rtse challenged Yon phul la's *yul lha* to a game of stone throwing. He won and seized all the wealth of Yon phul la, including, in particular, the cattle.

Archery is a bond between people from the same territory who compete against adjacent territories, and here again the deity of the territory is involved. Participation in archery is widespread to the point of obsession, and a match usually takes place after the ceremonial offerings to the deity of the territory. It is clearly linked to the *yul lha*, but one may ask whether it is not because he can also be the *pho lha*, the male deity. In the traditional context, ³⁴ archery is an all-male game and women are forbidden to touch the bows and arrows. Before a match against another territory, the archers go and sleep in a house where no women are allowed, and together with the astrologer (Dz. *rtsip* / Tib. *rtsi pa*), they perform rituals dedicated to the *yul lha* / *pho lha* most of the night, invoking his protection and help to defeat their adversaries, even resorting to magical means. ³⁵ As in the case of war, the *yul lha* must protect the men of his territory and fight side by side with them. An interesting case is a female deity (*mo lha*) who is also a water deity (*mtsho sman*) worshipped by archers from one area of Thimphu, and this needs to be further researched. ³⁶ A journalist from the national newspaper vividly reports about the desecration of the deity's shrine:

³³ In eastern Bhutan, the *yul lha* is often called *gter bdag*.

³⁴ Since 1982, Bhutan has had an Olympic archery team that includes women, but the context is so different from the traditional set-up that the admission of women was never an issue.

³⁵ The archers may also sleep in the *mgon khang* in order to obtain the protective deities' empowerment.

³⁶ Cf. Kuensel Saturday May 5th, 2001, "The Jashi Mom chorten in Changzamtog: revered as well as desecrated". By Ugyen Penjore.

Losing an archery match has often led to wrathful scenes at the playing arena. But not until last week have some dared to vent their anger on the deity they had invoked in order to win. The real loser in last week's archery semi-finals between Chang geog and the Finance Ministry happened to be the Jashi Mom chorten in Changzamtog. The chorten, known for its supernatural spells, was found at the end of the day smeared with human excrement. It is hard to say who did that exactly, whether someone from the losing team in a fit of anger over the Molha's (the chorten's female deity) failure to help, or a winning member to inflame and distract her from supporting the opponent team which had sought her help. It could be either way. While the chorten's Konyer (caretaker), Ap Pema, suspects the archers the most, he does not rule out the mischief of the children in the locality. Inhabitants in Chang Bangdu are inclined to believe that the sacrilegious deed was the act of the desperate archers. Within Thimphu, the chorten's Molha is highly regarded for her power to enervate the opponent's vitality at games. Her intervention is much sought after by archers, footballers, basketballers and even boxers. "The spells of the deity, Molha, is believed to be very powerful and always comes true", says Ap Pema. Only except this time. The chorten's history remains a mystery but, as far as Dophu (an old-timer) remembers, people in and around Thimphu always did come to seek its help whenever there happened to be big matches. While some archers believe that the Molha grants her favours on a "first come first serve basis", some believe that her powers cease to be effective if one crosses a river or a stream. According to a regular visitor to the chorten, Jashi Mom chorten is also known for her generosity in granting wishes. "The Molha flirts with every man coming to seek her help and tries to please everybody equally," the visitor said. But the wishes are fulfilled on one condition: the archery range should not be located across the river from the chorten.

Weird as it may sound, many archers also believe that the Molha greatly favours the team which has the player with the biggest male organ. The man is usually sent to seek her favours. Ap Pema recalls an incident where a soldier who had this reputation was hired purposely to seek her help. However, Ap Pema believes that the chorten is losing its power,

especially after it was vandalized by robbers a few years ago. With such strong beliefs in the divinity of local deities, archers can be very apprehensive about winning and losing a game."

However, when archery is practised in the context of a propitiation ritual of the *yul lha*, it lacks this competitive or aggressive inter-territorial edge, and it is rather seen as homage to please the deity. It is also a way to find out which man in the territory has the favour of the *yul lha*, as the winner sees his prestige and influence considerably enhanced. This recalls the ritual hunt and horse-race described in the Shar wa society of A mdo, or in Dolpo (Karmay and Sagant 1999; Schicklgruber 1998: 106).

Belief in the deity's power is far from disappearing. In a golf tournament, which took place in Haa in May 1999, the winner, Major Gurung, posted in Haa as a Royal Bhutan Army officer, thanked Ap Khyung bdud. The Veteran's Cup winner was also from Haa and the weekly newspaper, *Kuensel*, dated May 8th, 1999, headlined the article "Haa Golf: Was Ap Chhundu involved?"

The *yul lha* can also "offer" his territory and the people living in it as a sign of submission to a powerful lama, thus giving the latter political legitimacy over the territory (Pommaret 2002). The Hum ral mgon po of Paro "prostrating himself completely in front of the *Zhabs drung* [Ngag dbang mam rgyal], offered him as his subjects all the areas which are crossed by the Paro river from top to bottom" (*lHo'i chos 'byung*, folio 42b). A lord has to placate and propitiate the *yul lha* if he wants to rule a new territory without any problem. A similar process has been noted by Karmay regarding the Tibetan kings' annexation of local deities: "If one local chief annexes neighbouring territory, he seems also to adopt the local deity of the annexed territory for propitiation in order to safeguard his annexation" (Karmay 1996: 63). The links between the deity of a territory and political power in Bhutan is a topic in itself and will be examined elsewhere. Here I simply want to stress the sense of ownership that the *yul lha* has over a given territory.

The deity of the territory has to be kept happy because he or she looks after the water supply -- going to such lengths as to try to steal water from another territory (Pommaret 1996: 46) if necessary, but drying up a lake or bringing other disasters if angered (Pommaret 2004). In 1996, the bursting of a glacial lake in the northern region of Lug nag nang and the ensuing flash flood were attributed by the people

to the anger of the deity of the territory. In the Shar pa region of the upper Paro valley, 'Od dod pa is seen to control the flow of the river towards Paro and has a small shrine near the river, to which people make offerings to prevent floods.

In the south-western jungle region of sTag ti chu which is crossed by the road linking the capital to the Indian border, some people attribute frequent car accidents to the wrath of a powerful local deity (called here *gnas po*) to whom people used to sacrifice animals on a large flat stone high on the mountain. As these stopped, it is believed that the deity is taking revenge in this way.

Cattle, in particular, are the subject of the care or the wrath of the *yul lha* who often doubles as a deity of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*), such as Tshe ring ma. Within the herd, yaks or sheep consecrated to the *yul lha* wear red tufts of wool on their ears and usually walk at the head of the herd when it moves. The literature provides examples of yaks, among other animals, consecrated to the local deities such as the *lha g.yag*, mentioned in the Tibetan manuscript translated by Macdonald under the title "Histoires du Vetala d'or XIX" (1972: 29-33).

As already noted above, in some areas such as Dur in Bum thang, the grazing periods are controlled by the *yul lha*, as one cannot go to the high pastures unless the deity has returned from his winter migration. Disease among the cattle is attributed to the anger of the *yul lha* caused by a breach of social norms, or by pollution, such as that mentioned earlier. The female water-deity (*mtsho sman*), who is the *yul lha* of Kheng 'Bu li in South-central Bhutan, caused the death of all the cattle of the house in which she was residing because she was displeased (Pommaret 2004). The importance of the deity of the territory as lord of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*) is well symbolised by the fact that a deity in a high region is often mounted on a yak, such as 'Od 'dod pa of upper Paro or g.Yag bdud nag po of U ra in Bum thang. Also the sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma*) dedicated to them often represent a yak, as is the case for 'Od 'dod pa, Tshe ring ma, Khyung 'dud or dGon/mGon mo of mGar sa.

Of course the *yul lha* is concerned with the crops that he or she protects or can destroy by hail or drought. Depending on the region, a short ritual is performed for the *yul lha* at each important step of the agricultural calendar: ploughing, sowing, transplanting (in case of rice), and harvesting.

The deity's intercessor (*rnal 'hyor ma*, *dpa' bo*, or *dpa' mo*, *gter bdag*, *lha 'bab*) plays an important role in the daily life of the

community as he or she is called whenever an unwelcome event disturbs the life of a house or the community. Through possession of the medium, the deity reveals the causes of social or physical disturbances and therefore acts to re-establish harmony. This is a well-known process which does not need to be commented upon here. The intercessor also performs divination either for individuals or for the community and performs certain rituals of exorcism for certain categories of spirits.³⁷ An intercessor seldom leaves the deity's territory unless he or she is called by somebody from the territory but living outside of it, and for the annual general ritual of the intercessors, about which not much is known to date.

Unless he or she is engaged in squabbles with another deity, a *yul lha* will only rarely extend his or her almost infinite power over the daily life of the people by bringing misfortune to people outside of his or her territory. They belong to another deity and territory, and it is just as if they did not exist. On the other hand, if strangers come to the deity's territory, they have to obey certain rules so as not to incur his or her wrath. The case of a soldier in upper Paro who did not believe in 'Od dod pa, uttered derogatory remarks on the deity and died the next day after meeting a black dog, is documented by Schicklgruber (1997: 169). Pollution (*sgrib*) rules are also to be respected by strangers.

In Sag gteng, Sos, La g.yag and Gling bzhi, high-altitude regions devoted mainly to yak herding, the deities are so sensitive that they cannot tolerate being polluted by any kind of "dirty smoke", and that is why dead bodies are never cremated but exposed to the vultures. Therefore, as soon as strangers enter these deities' territories, they are advised not to burn garbage or to smoke, lest they meet the wrath of the *yul lha* (Pommaret 1996: 52). More generally, if a woman alien to the territory is menstruating, she should also obey the rule and not go near the sacred domain of the *yul lha*.

These attitudes attributed to the *yul lha* towards the outside world, ignoring it in one sense but obliging it to respect his or her rules in the other, show once more that the deity exercises his or her power over a specific and well-defined territory.

³⁷ The specific attributions of the intercessor and the local priest will be examined elsewhere.

Rituals

In exchange for the protection and well-being of the territory, the community performs rituals for the *yul lha*, a process that is well documented throughout the Tibetan world. However, throughout Bhutan the style of worship has no set pattern and each territory has its own customs and rituals, although basic characteristics such as fumigation (*bsang*) and libations (*gser skyems*) seem to exist everywhere.

Two specific cases of worship have to be briefly commented upon: the deity of the territory as "birth deity" and as "warrior deity".

Individually, a person - man or woman - would appear to go for annual private worship (*bsang* and *gser skyems*) either to the Buddhist temple where the *yul lha* is housed, or preferably to the palace of the *yul lha*. In fact, this individual worship is not for the *yul lha* as such, but for the "birth deity", the *skyes lha* who, as we have seen earlier, is usually the same deity. Therefore, it seems to me that there is no individual worship of the *yul lha* but only of the *skyes lha*.

If the deity of the territory is also the warrior deity (*dgra lha*), as is often the case, he might, for this specific role, be dedicated a special annual ceremony, like the propitiation ritual for the warrior deity (*dgra lha gsol kha*) of the fortress of Paro.

This is a short ceremony performed, as one would expect, only by men dressed as a general and his soldiers. Led by the intercessor (*dpa' bo*), they make offerings and libations to the warrior deity and perform a dance, swinging their swords and shouting at the top of their voices.

Besides these specific cases, as a *yul lha*, the deity is worshipped annually by the whole community, and its members living far from the territory try to come back for this occasion. In Bhutan this ceremony has almost as many different names and dates as there are territories, and this makes it really difficult at times to discern whether or not this particular ceremony is for the *yul lha*, unless one attends it. However, the two most common terms used for this propitiation ceremony are *gsol kha* and *mchod pa*. This annual ceremony may also have different phases and women are included in some of these.

To take a few examples of this diversity: in Paro Dos phu shar ri (Dz. Dop sha ri), in sKyabs khra/cha, or in Bum thang, only men go to the palace of the deity, and each house has to send there at least one man or a representative. They offer fumigation and libation (*bsang* and

gser skyems) to the deity. The prayer to the *yul lha* names the deity of the territory but also all the neighbouring deities who, as we have seen earlier, are often related to him. The prayers are usually led by the local priest called by different names according to the region: *rtsis pa* (Dz. *rtsip*), *pha jo*, *bon po* or *phramin*,³⁸ but monks from the state clergy are never involved and do not participate. Women join the men only later and then archery matches, drinking and dancing start.

The deity's intercessor (*rnal 'byor ma*, *dpa' bo*, or *dpa' mo*, *gter bdag*) may become possessed by the deity on that day and utter prophecies regarding the territory and its people, but possession does not always occur.

Women are included in the main ceremony for the worship of Khyung bdud in Haa, which consists of a procession and the killing of a yak (Pommaret 1996: 47). In Kheng 'Bu li, where the *yul lha* is a female water-deity (*mtsho sman*), women and men worship together.

In most Tibetan areas, the worship of the deity of the territory includes archery contests and horse racing, sometimes both combined with acrobatic performances (Schicklgruber 1998: 99-108). Because of the rugged nature and steep slopes of the terrain, horse races do not take place in Bhutan where the people are not great riders. However as mentioned earlier, archery plays a part in most celebrations for the deity of the territory and a competition may take place after the ceremonial offerings as a concluding event, but it can also be the essential part of the ritual to the *yul lha*. Archery is also associated with fertility, and it is believed that an archery match on a day of celebration to the *yul lha* increases the fertility of the place. At g.Yag sa, a small settlement in northern Paro where yak herding provides the livelihood, an archery match which takes place in the second month, starts with a *mar chang* offering³⁹ to Jo bo brag skyes and his brother Khyung bdud. If this ceremony does not take place, Jo bo brag skyes is displeased and calamities befall the settlement and the cattle. In the

³⁸ *Phramin* is a word used in Tshangla (Tshangs la - Shar phyogs pa'i kha), and therefore has no written form. However one may ask whether it does not refer to the Tibetan word *phra men*. This word is found, for example, in Mi la ras pa's *Hundred Thousand Songs* by gTsang smyon, when Mi la ras pa questions beautiful young women on who they are in reality: "Are you magic *dākinī*?" (*phra men*). Cf. Chang 1977: vol. 1: 314; and is used by the 5th Dalai Lama in his '*chams yig* and translated by Nebesky-Wojkowitz as "witch" 1976: 91, 169-173. Also Das 1977 gives the meaning of "magical forecasts". However, one notes that in classical Tibetan, *phra men* seems to be applied only to women, and not to men.

³⁹ For an explanation of *mar chang*, see below.

same way, archery is considered to be the most important part of the annual ritual to Me me Drang ling, the deity of Kha gling in Eastern Bhutan, who is male and lives in a lake.

Offerings to the *yul lha* can also differ according to his or her nature. They can simply be dried cakes made of flour (rice, wheat, barley), alcohol, and sometimes even milk. In many cases, it also includes chunks of meat, and even the sacrifice of a whole animal such as a yak or a sheep. There is a general consensus in Bhutan that animal sacrifices were common in the past, except maybe in Bum thang, and that it is only quite recently (the last 30-50 years) that the practice has been slowly disappearing. The sacrifice was performed by the local priest, who then offered the best pieces of meat to the deity, and the people shared the rest according to a pattern which has already been analysed in a historical and anthropological perspective.⁴⁰

The worship of the deity of the territory may also include a *mar chang* ceremony. It is a ceremonial offering of alcohol, butter and an arrow to protective as well as local deities. A large copper or bronze vat containing alcohol is placed on a stand in front of the person representing the lord or high authority of the territory. The vat is ornamented with horns made of butter. The master of the ceremony who stands in front of the vat facing the lord, offers a ladle of alcohol while saying a short prayer. Then he brings the lord a long arrow (*mda' dar*) wrapped in pieces of cloth of five different colours. The lord quickly touches it, ending the short ceremony, which is clearly at the same time a ritual of propitiation and allegiance to the deities.

Besides this particular occasion, the *mar chang* is also performed in many other circumstances and there is no official function in Bhutan which does not include a *mar chang*. To my knowledge, this ceremony has not been mentioned in any ethnographic or historical writings about Tibet, although the symbolism and role of the arrow is well documented.

In the course of the year, a fumigation ceremony (*lha bsang*) for the deity can be performed by individual houses if they fear they have angered the deity or polluted him, or simply if they have a request to make regarding the well-being of the household. This ritual always includes the notion of *g.yang 'gug*, "the calling of the fortune", and a *g.yang gtor* is added to the sacrificial cakes representing the deities. If

⁴⁰ On ritual dismemberment in Tibet and the Himalayas, cf. Stein 1959: 464; Macdonald 1980: 199-208; Diemberger and Hazod 1997: 261-279. However one may argue that we have here a case of sharing of meat as a social act, and not a dismemberment which creates a society.

the *yul lha* is also the deity of the cattle and wealth (*nor lha*), the *gyang gtor* will be ornamented with yak horns or a yak head made of dough, as in the case of Tshe ring ma, who looks after the border region in the upper Paro valley,⁴¹ or Indrabhuti who rules over O rgyan chos gling in Bum thang.

In areas where cattle migration is part of the way of life, as in northern Paro, Bum thang and Sag gteng, people will not go up to the high summer pastures without making offerings to the deity once they reach them. By this gesture, they ask the deity permission to graze the cattle on his or her property.

In this context of rituals to local deities, one must mention the numerous festivals of Eastern Bhutan, especially, those that have a strong sexual component and where men and women alike participate. In the present state of research, it is difficult to say whether these festivals are linked to the worship of the deity of the territory or if they are simply fertility festivals. The Bhutanese classify them as *Bon chos* and the local priests (*pha jo*, *bon po*, *phramin*, etc.) preside over them.

Buddhist ceremonies also often includes a part which is dedicated to the deity of the territory. Examples of this include the *bskang gso* of O rgyan chos gling in sTang (Bum thang),⁴² the *mchod pa* in Kheng 'Bu li (Pommaret 2004), the festival of Chu stod Nam kha'i lha khang in sTang (Bum thang), and the lHa rdzong (Dz. Hong tsho) festival in the Thimphu region. In O rgyan chos gling, Indrabhuti the host (*gnas po*) of the place, as well as other local deities which came from Tibet with Klong chen and rDo rje gling pa; and sKu bla mkha' ri, dGong dkar klu bdud gi grags pa rgyal mtshan and Jo bo lha dar, are invoked in the *bskang gso* ritual dedicated to the protector (*chos srung*) mGon po Ma ning. At Chu stod nam kha'i lha khang, in the 10th month, dPal ldan lha mo and mGon po, as well as the local deity, here called a *gter bdag*, are worshipped. At this place, the local deity has a yak head and his name, Rwa skyes, reminds us, of course, of Zo ra rwa skyes, a complex deity present in this valley and also found in other parts of the Himalayas.⁴³

Another instance is the Hong tsho mchod pa. On the second and last day, once the religious dances are over, the deity of the territory, here also called "host" (Dz. *gnasp/* Tib. *gnas po*) Yazap/Yasab (Yab

⁴¹ Ceremony of *lha bsang* observed in Chu yi, Paro, 9th November 1996. For more details, cf. Schicklgruber 1997: 170-173.

⁴² This ceremony will be studied in a forthcoming article.

⁴³ On Zo ra rwa skyes in Bhutan, cf. Pommaret 1998.

zap?'), is taken out of the temple where he resides the rest of the year. Addressed by the villagers as Ap Yazap, he is also the *yul lha* of sTod sbe sa (Chhoki 1994: 111), which is located on the other side of the rDo skyongs la pass, closer to Punakha than to Thimphu. The fact that he is also the deity of Hong tsho village, most probably reflects the ancient seasonal migration pattern between the Thimphu and Punakha valleys. Ap Yazap is represented by a huge effigy dressed as a warrior. He is accompanied by two other effigies, also housed in the temple and called mGon yab yum which are said to represent a male and female form of Mahakala. Preceded by the main festival officiant dressed as a Tantrist priest with a black hat, and lay attendants carrying sacrificial cakes made of dough, the three deities are taken in procession to a field at the limit of the village where the offerings are thrown and burned in an exorcism ritual (*gtor rgyab*). Although the ceremony of this village is not entirely dedicated to the deity of the territory, his being carried in a formal procession from the temple to the limit of the village bears witness to the importance that the villagers accord him for the protection of their properties.

These are only a few examples that illustrate that the deity of the territory is also worshipped in different ways, during Buddhist rituals.

CONCLUSION

The information provided here, although still sketchy, raises some questions and allows some remarks.

It is quite impossible to give a definite pattern for the worship of the deity of the territory (*yul lha*) in Bhutan, but we can remark that, albeit protean, it is alive and requires the participation of the whole community. The size of the territory controlled by one deity makes no difference to the importance he or she has for the community, and the worship is carried out with the same diligence. However, there is clearly a hierarchy among the deities of the territories, and it seems that it is linked to the extent of power attributed to the deities.

In this context it appears that certain deities who are also present in Tibet, such as Khyung bdud, dGe bsnyen Jag pa me len, and Tshe ring ma, are considered the most powerful, owing to an origin which gives them prestige over the more indigenous deities, even if this is not articulated in such explicit terms by the people.

The *yul lha*, and its association with a territory, imparts a strong sense of identity to the people who live in osmosis with their

respective deities to the point of acquiring certain of their characteristics (toughness, wittiness, beauty, etc.). This has certainly played a role, along with other geographical and historical considerations, in the difficult emergence of the concept of Bhutanese nationhood.

Although the Bhutanese state (*gzhung*) has existed since the 17th century, it was seen as a political entity superimposed by a centralised power, and people identified themselves first with their territories of origin. The idea of a Bhutanese nation is relatively new and is linked to the monarchy - in Dzongkha, "nation" is translated by the term *rgyal khab*, "kingdom"⁴⁴ and to the feeling of having to fight for survival in a particular geo-political and demographic context.

The first allegiance of the people was to the deity of the territory and his or her human representative, who could answer their immediate needs. It is interesting to note in this context that the government policy of the past thirty years has been to strive to get closer to the people through a process of decentralisation which would "serve" them better. The great prayer-flag (*dar lcog*) which is erected near the fortress housing the provincial government and is dedicated to the protective deities (*chos srung*) of the nation, is a telling symbol. Each household of a district must send a member on the day when the prayer-flag is to be renewed, otherwise a fine is imposed.

From the four perspectives examined above, the deity of the territory emerges like an anthropomorphic lord ruling an estate with a large range of rights over individuals but also duties regarding their protection and well-being. If the deity also takes the function, as is often the case, of birth-deity, cattle-deity and warrior-deity, his or her powers over daily life are almost unlimited. In exchange, the people offer him or her rituals which are testimonies of allegiance, gifts, supplications and sublimated taxes, and they try not to break the social and physical order so that the lord is not offended. This alliance - one might also call it a contract - has a strong feudal component and creates a powerful bond which is reflected in the relationship between the territory and its human ruler.

Indeed, the relationship between the deity of the territory and the political power is one of the key issues for any comprehensive study of

⁴⁴ In Tibetan too though, but in Bhutan the word started to be used with the connotation of "nation" in the specific context of the monarchy.

this deity, as well as for an understanding of the traditional political set-up in Bhutan.

In this context, two issues must be taken into account: first, the disparity of politico-historical contexts which differ greatly from one region to another; second, the apparent lack of related myths and historical texts that might allow an in-depth study such as those carried out by Diemberger, Hazod and Karmay. Even the ritual texts of fumigation and libation rituals have been disappointing thus far as they often contain no more than just a list of names, far from the poetic and descriptive style found elsewhere.

We all remember the pioneering assessment of Stein, who forty years before this field of study became *en vogue*, wrote:

Il nous semble digne de remarquer que, par la nature même des documents, nous avons constamment été obligés de passer des faits religieux et légendaires à des faits réels. C'est que dans la religion indigène des Tibétains, chaque groupe humain homogène a conscience de se relier, dans l'espace, au site qu'il habite et, dans le temps, aux ancêtres dont il descend, et de communier avec eux. Car l'ancêtre est inséparable de la montagne sacrée qui domine, comme lieu-saint, le pays habité et communique avec le ciel. Les relations des clans et de leurs chefs avec les divinités qui peuplent les accidents du terrain, sont conçues comme des liens de famille. (Stein 1959 b: 85).

This assessment obliges us to ask whether, in some regions, the *yul lha* is considered the ancestor of the community and whether he is the deity of the rulers who took over the territory. Part of the answer may lie with an investigation of the "personal male deity" (*pho lha*), which can also function as the deity of the territory (*yul lha*).

However, according to the short mythic accounts related at the beginning of this article, the deity of the rulers did not become automatically the deity of the territory. It is also known that Shel ging dkar po, the *pho lha* of the King of ICags mkhar, who is believed to have ruled Bum thang in the 8th century, did not become the *yul lha* of the valley where ICags mkhar was located. In Eastern Bhutan where Prince gTsang ma is said to be the royal ancestor of all the ancient clans, his deity's name is not even recorded. Some deities are believed to have arrived with great lamas after people had already settled within a territory, such as Ra brag in dBang 'dus pho brag, or the *yul lha* of

U ra in Bum thang. On the other hand, certain deities came with the people as did A ma Jo mo in Sag gteng.

The question of ancestorship is therefore too complex and too linked to each local history to be answered easily. The socio-historical framework of the regions of Bhutan, which differ greatly from one another, must also be taken into account. While the western part of the country became the stronghold of religious schools as early as the 12th century, the eastern part remained divided into fiefdoms ruled by petty kings (*rgyal po*) until the 17th century; and the central region was ruled, also until the 17th century, by a nobility of chiefs who combined, by way of marital alliances, prestigious religious descent and royal origin from Tibet.

And yet the *yul lha* is addressed in kinship terms and he or she is identified with a specific territory. Is the historical perspective at odds with the ethnographic findings? The deity of the territory is a trickster and may well deceive strangers stepping into his or her territory.

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