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The Seven Rongtsan Brothers in Ladakh

Myth, territory and possession

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Pascale Dollfus

The Seven Rongtsan Brothers in Ladakh

Myth, territory and possession

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- 1 The present paper will deal with the legends, rituals and ceremonies relating to seven local protectors called the Seven Rongtsan Brothers (Rong btsan spun bdun), said to be natives of Tibet, who settled in different places all over Ladakh, but always linked in some way to royal estates. Every year, they manifest themselves through a medium—a layman or a monk—in an outdoor seance. They give blessings and advice, and forecasts about the future of the country, but unlike ordinary Ladakhi oracles, they never suck out poison or cure disease.
- 2 I shall start by examining various accounts relating to the introduction of the Seven Brothers to Ladakh. Following a description of each of the gods in turn, I shall broadly outline the common features of the mediums who act as their mouthpieces, and present the characteristics of their trances. Finally I shall attempt to synthesise the diverse data.

How the “Empty Country” became “the Place of Many People”

- 3 According to local tradition, Ladakh was formerly an uninhabited land, an “empty country”, where there were no villages or settlements. The first inhabitants were three brothers from Gilgit. As Vohra explains:
- [They] came hunting and were successful in their hunt in the mDa pasture area (*mDa 'brog*). That evening when they settled down to sleep, several grains of barley fell out of the straw stuffing in their shoes. Back in Gilgit, once their meat supplies had been exhausted, they remembered once more the *mDa 'brog* with its bounty of wild life. Upon their return there the following year, they found that the grains of barley they had dropped had flourished and bore ripe ears of grain, which proved the fertility of the soil.
(Vohra 2000, p. 149)
- 4 This testimony to the fertility of the land persuaded them to leave Gilgit and to settle there. They started to cultivate the land and built houses. As the years went by, groups of people from all the neighbouring countries followed: from Kashmir in the West, the cis-Himalayan valleys in the South, the oases of Central Asia in the North and Tibet in the East. They settled on the banks of the river Indus and founded many villages. The country was called *Mang yul*, a contracted form for *mi mang po yul*, “The Place of Many People”.
- 5 These migrants brought their own techniques and savoir-faire. The three brothers of Gilgit are said to have introduced the practice of agriculture, including the use of irrigation systems; the Tibetan nomads to have brought in tents of yak hair as well as large-scale pastoralism involving yak, goats and sheep; the Newars from Nepal to have set up metalwork. The present inhabitants of the village of Chilling, which is populated by gold-, silver- and coppersmiths are said to be their descendants. The same is true of the village gods, *yulha* (*yul lha*). In fact, in Ladakh the *yulha* are largely conceived as newcomers from afar, installed in the village by the enactment of appropriate rituals, rather than local *numina* who have been subdued and tamed by holy men whose magic powers bound the local deities and demons by oath.¹ Some gods came along with migrants, as in the case of Mahādeva (Śiva) and Gauri Ma (Pārvatī), the protective deities of Chilling (Rigal 1985). Others came on their own, as in the case of Nesar Gyalpo (Ne ser rgyal po), the god of the town of Leh (Gle), who is said to have fled from Tibet.

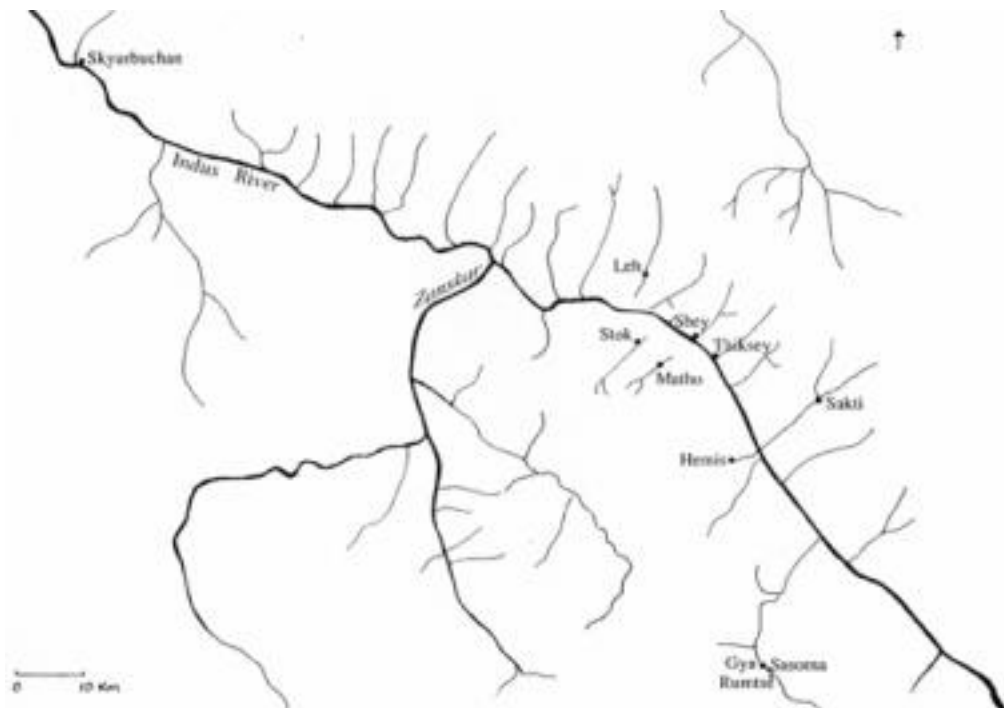
In compliance with the insistent request of an old woman, he stopped and settled down in the capital. But most of the gods came with tantric masters and wandering yogis. Dorje Chenmo (rDo rje chen mo) for example, the current *yulha* of Shey (Shel), is said to have accompanied the Great translator Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 958-1055), who built a temple in her honour at Nyarma (Nyar/Myar ma), in order to assist him in his missionary task and to perpetuate his work after his departure. The goddess and her retinue were then brought to Shey by the Tibetan lama Kathog Rigzin Tsewang Norbu² who installed her as a protective deity in 1753 at the time of King Tsewang Namgyal's enthronement (Shakspo 1988, pp. 21-22).³ In the same way, the Seven Rongtsan Brothers are considered to have accompanied Dorje Palzang (rDo rje dpal bzang), a Sakya (Sa skya) lama and native of eastern Tibet.

6 The Tibetan origin of the gods is presented as a guarantee of great efficacy.⁴ Indeed, in the stories told from one village to another there are always mediums or great masters, originally from Tibet, who manage to re-establish order and prosperity in the land where attempts by local specialists have failed.

How the Seven Rongtsan Brothers came to Ladakh and settled down according to local accounts

A long time ago in Bodhgaya, there were seven gods. They were all brothers and all very fierce; they were so fierce that they were kept in an iron cage. One day—how they did it—I don't know, they managed to run away. They flew to Tibet where they stayed a few years in Kham (Khams). But feeling homesick, they decided to come back home. On the way back, they crossed Ladakh. On arriving at Gya (rGya), two of them said: "Oh what a lovely place! We are fed up with travelling, travelling, travelling. We don't want to go any further." So they stayed. The five remaining brothers took to the road again. A few days later, they reached Matho (Ma spro). There, two more gods decided to settle down. Some kilometres further, in Stok (Tog), two gods stopped again. The last one—I don't know who he was, probably the youngest one—walked three or four more days alone, and reached Skyurbuchan (sKyur bu chan)⁵. When he arrived there, he was so impressed by the place and particularly by the beautiful juniper trees growing there, that he abandoned the idea of returning to Bodhgaya and decided to settle down too. Because they liked our country so much, they established themselves here. Later on, gods and villagers showed a mutual appreciation to each other. This is why the Seven Rongtsan Brothers are still here to this day: the so-called Lchags rang (lCags rang) are associated with Gya, the so-called Nag rang (Nag rang) with Matho, the so-called Ser rang (gSer rang) with Stok. As for the one who set up in Skyurbuchan, I don't remember his name.

7 This account was told to me by an old man from Sasoma, a hamlet located near Gya. The stories narrated by Ladakhi scholars such as Jamyang Gyaltzen (1985*a* and *b*)⁶ and Jigmet Dorje (1989), respectively natives of Matho and Stok, are somewhat different. According to their accounts, the Seven Rongtsan Brothers came from eastern Tibet to Ladakh along with Lama Dorje Palzang in the early 15th century. Their peregrination can be summarised as follows.



- 8 Formerly, the Seven Brothers were wild *tsan* (*btsan*) demons living in the lower region of Kham in eastern Tibet, in a fertile valley surrounded by high glaciers known as Rongchen Khawa Karpo⁷, where all kinds of excellent plants and trees grow. When Padmasambhava came to Tibet and subdued the mischievous *dre* (*'dre*) and *shrin* (*srin*) demons, the Seven Flaming Wild *tsan*⁸ as they were called at that time, tried to obstruct his journey. But, thanks to his supernatural power, the saint defeated them. The tamed demons became oath-bound protectors of the new religion and were appointed as the “owners of the land” *zhidag* (*gzhi bdag*) of this very sacred place, which has remained a famous pilgrimage site to this day. Subsequently they were called the Rongtsan Khawa Karpo (Rong btsan Kha ba dkar po). They were said to be so fierce that nobody in Tibet would venture on horseback near their shrine.
- 9 How did they arrive in Ladakh? The Sakya monastery of Matho was founded by Dorje Palzang, also known as Drungpa Dorje (*drung pa rDo rje*)⁹ (fig. 1). He was a very great yogin and a skilled tamer of *tsan* and *dregpa* (*'dregs pa*, “proud ones”) demons. He was able to summon the Seven Brothers and bend them to his will, making them his servants. When he came to Ladakh, they came along with him. On the way, two gods stopped at Gya and became known as the Lchags rang. Two stayed in Stok and were named the Skya rang (sKya rang), or Skya rang and Ser rang, according to Jigmet Dorje’s version¹⁰. Two settled in Matho and were called the Nag rang. Lastly, the remaining one, Zang nam (Zangs rnam), took residence in Skyurbuchan. According to another source, when he decided to settle in this place, another god, Shar chok (Shar phyogs), was already there. They decided not to fight against each other, but to live peacefully side by side.¹¹

Fig. 1 — The Sakya monastery of Matho

P. Dollfus, 1999

- 10 In the preceding stories, mythic elements are clearly combined with historical facts. However, this does not pose a problem for the Ladakhis themselves. They believe that these tales recount events that actually occurred in the distant past and that they require no verification. Both are called *logyus* (*lo rgyus*), a term which may be literally translated as the “chronicles of the years”, and do not fall into the category of *rungs* (*sgrungs*) or “legend/epic”. In the absence of any verification source, it is hazardous to draw conclusions about the reliability of these accounts depicting the settling of the Seven Brothers. From what we know, three remarks can be made. First, a place called Khawa Karpo (“White Snow”) really does exist in southeastern Tibet. Located between the Mekong and the Salween rivers, it is a well-known pilgrimage place, which includes an eponymous mountain depicted in a Tibetan manuscript¹² as a sacred abode of the *tsan*. Secondly, as Dargyay (1985, pp. 60-61) underlines in her pioneering work on the White and Red Rongtsan of Matho, Lama Dorje Palzang is mentioned in Mipham’s *Collected Works*, “as Smad Dbang phug, a name which explicitly shows that he was a native of the ‘lowland’, i.e. Eastern Tibet, where the Kha-ba dkar-po mountain and the country of Rong are”; and he indeed had some contact with people from Western Tibet. Lastly, the foundation of Matho monastery (Mang spro sha gling chos ’khor) in the beginning of the 15th century during the reign of king Drag Bumde (Graggs ’bum lde) is recorded in an incomplete document kept in the monastery.

The Seven Brothers: Temper, appearance and attributes

- 11 In spite of their biography, the fact that their name includes the word *tsan*, and the martial features characteristic of *tsan* demons in the Tibetan literature,¹³ locally the Seven Brothers are never perceived as such by the people. In fact, according to Ladakhi belief, *tsan* are wandering demons associated with redness. When seen from the front, they look like human beings, and can be very attractive indeed. But when seen from behind, *tsan* have no back, revealing to everybody their bloody internal organs: a horrific sight that may provoke illness or even death. Furthermore, *tsan* are driven only by bad feelings and cannot in any case be tamed and pinned down in a particular place.¹⁴ Now, as Day (1989, p. 373) clearly points out, “Discriminations are made through their relations with people. Thus, gods are spirits who have been given homes

such as shrines (*lhatho*) and the bodies of trained oracles.”¹⁵This is exactly what happens to the Seven Rongtsan Brothers who are considered as fierce and powerful high-ranking oath-bound gods and categorised as *lha*.

- 12 Concerning the gods’ names, people usually translate them in the following way: Nag rang: “Black colour”; Ser rang: “Golden colour”; Skya rang: “Grey colour” and Lchags rang: “Iron colour”. But, as a Ladakhi scholar has pointed out to me, this translation is based on a mistaken interpretation. Instead of *rang*, a term derived from the Hindi word *raṅg* meaning colour and widely used nowadays in Ladakh, we should understand *hrang*, a similarly-pronounced Tibetan term, which means “strong, hardy”. The seventh god, Zang nam, may be written in two different ways: Zangs rnam, “Coppers”, or bZang rnam, “Good entirely”. The first spelling is in favour with common people, the latter with local scholars and monks.
- 13 In addition, it is worth noting that the Nag rang, the Lchags rang and the Skya rang always appear in pairs and simultaneously. Indeed, some people say that they are two manifestations of a single god, while others claim that they are distinctive deities. Whatever they say, people agree on the fact that one is linked to the king and therefore called “god of the king”, while the other is bound to the clergy and named “god of the lama”.¹⁶ Interestingly, some villagers also told me that the Skya/Ser rang of Stok form a couple called respectively “god of the king” and “god of the goddess (or queen)”, or “big god” and “small god”.
- 14 Of the Seven Brothers, the only detailed written descriptions available are those for the Nag rang, also known as the White and Red Rongtsan (Rong btsan dkar dmar), or as the White Lhatsan (lHa btsan dkar po) and the Red Dagtsan (Brag btsan dmar po). According to Jamyang Gyaltsen:

The White Lhatsan bears a white colour. He has one face and two hands. He possesses the eye of wisdom. He wears a white garment, armour made of rhino skin and Mongolian boots. His head is covered with a rhino skin helmet and a flag of white silk is attached to it. In his right hand he brandishes a white spear pointing to the sky and adorned with streamers of silk. In his left hand he grasps an arrow adorned with ribbons of silk of five different colours. He rides a divine white horse, very well decorated. The Red Dagtsan bears a red colour. He has one face, two hands and possesses the eye of wisdom. His mouth is wide open and he bares his teeth. His body is covered with a red garment and with an armour of rhino skin. His feet are protected with Mongolian boots and pieces of white cloak. His head is covered with a rhino skin helmet, adorned with a turban of red silk. His right hand seizes a red spear adorned with silk and resting on a human skull. His left hand holds a snare tied around someone’s neck. He runs like the speed of the wind, surrounded by 3000 attendants, among an army of numberless *lha btsan*. (Jamyang Gyaltsen 1995b, p. 488)

- 15 The visualisation text, which the monks must recite repeatedly every day during the initiatory retreat prior to becoming entranced, depicts the Red Dagtsan in a very similar way. The following is an extract from *asāḍhanā* collected by Crook at Matho:

In front of me in the primeval sky, void emptiness, A black wind rises and swirls, a fire blazes, The syllable HUM sounds, And the fierce red spirit of the gorge [*rong*] appears before me. In the centre of his forehead the eye of primordial awareness, Wearing armour of rhinoceros hide, a coat of mail and a scarlet cloak He stands atop a red and godly horse. From his helmet of rhino skin there flies a red silk flag. He stabs the hearts of the enemies of Dharma, Their blood spurts forth like the currents of an ocean. (Crook 1998, p. 30)

- 16 Two statues of the White and Red Rongtsan are kept in the chapel of the protective gods on the top floor of Matho monastery. They stand in the darkness of this little room draped with white offering scarves, surrounded by hundreds of ancient weapons (mainly bows, arrows and spears) hanging from pegs that are said to belong to them. In the same way, two paintings portraying the two gods of Stok are kept in a little temple situated out of the monastery complex, further up the valley. Like the White and Red Rongtsan statues they are unveiled only twice a year, and women—unfortunately including the present writer—are not allowed to see them.

- 17 According to local tradition, the Ser rang are believed to be the eldest.¹⁷ They are terrifying. Their heads are covered with the headgear of the *tsan*, a hat of red brocade in the shape of a prism, decorated in front with the depiction of three human eyes gouged out of their sockets and encircled with a diadem bearing five human skulls. They are said to be very fond of barley beer. This is why people say that when the gods make their appearance among masked dancers on the occasion of Stok festival, they are welcomed with many offering vessels of beer.
- 18 No image exists of the two Lchags rang. (Nevertheless masks made of clay lie in the shrine devoted to them.) They are said to be of a red colour, with one face and two hands. Their legs are tied together with heavy iron chains, from which their name is derived. This is why one says these gods do not walk, but jump. Questioned on their attire, villagers and monks describe the set of ceremonial garments and weapons displayed by the mediums whom these gods possess. Indeed, it is a cause of confusion that the term *lha*, i.e. god (and, in this particular case, Rongtsan) is applied not only to a divinity but also to the man who acts as his mouthpiece. The confusion may be illustrated by the following anecdote. While conducting the enquiry concerning the Lchags rang I asked about the gods' appearance and paraphernalia, and the villagers unanimously told me: "Now there is only one god, the other died." When I argued that it was the medium who had died, and pressed my question about the god himself, I received the same answer. It was only after quite a long discussion that they admitted that it was the monk who used to lend his body to the god, who had in fact died two years earlier and had not been replaced.
- 19 In the same way, there is no iconography or written description of Zang nam. People describe him as a very fierce god, fond of blood. Some say that in former times, Zang nam used to demand blood offerings three times a year: on the occasion of the ritual offering of unripe grain to local guardian deities that celebrates the opening of the harvest season; on the 9th day of the ninth Tibetan month during the village festival held in honour of the god; and at New Year. Others say that annually, on the 27th of the second month, the god wanted the warm blood and heart of an eight-year-old child, a sacrifice replaced later on by that of a white kid goat. A piece of meat is now used as a substitute.
- 20 The wrathful temper of the Seven Brothers, emphasised by every informant, is perceived as indissociable from their protective function. In fact, it is considered as a testimony to their great power and efficiency. Because of this genuine violence "comparable to that of a rapid river", they were held in an iron cage, or kept in an isolated ravine, far from human settlements in the remote past. Today, although they have been tamed and somehow kept under control, their shrines are always built at a distance, some kilometres away from the villages to which they extend their protection. Closer proximity to them would be dangerous.

The shrines or "supports of the gods"

- 21 The shrines built by the villagers for their god and referred to as its "palace", *phobrang* (*pho brang*) are usually called *lhatho* (*lha tho*, from *lha* "god" and *tho yor* "cairn, heap of stones"). But in the case of the Seven Brothers, they are named *lharten* (*lha rten*: "support", *rtten*, of the "god", *lha*), a term which is said to be an honorific equivalent.
- 22 Historically the rites performed in honour of the Nag rang of Matho were at first held only inside the monastery but, "on perceiving their power, the neighbouring village (formerly on the estate of a relative of the royal family of Ladakh) also adopted them providing them with special shrines (*lha.to*) as a home situated at exactly the point at the head of the valley where a mountain stream bursts out from a narrow gorge onto the alluvial fan" (Crook 1998, p. 29). On both sides of the running stream, standing at the top of adjoining steep and dry gorges, two juniper trees create a gate to the gods' sanctuary. Located below a rough footpath the shrines are enclosed in a crude stone hermitage built under steep rocks and hidden from view behind shrubs, bushy tamarisks and wild willows. Indeed, it is also said that while in residence at

the monastery the gods missed the wilderness of their original habitat in southeastern Tibet (Brauen 1980, p. 136). In addition, the spot chosen for their dwelling was famous for wild hoofed animals (such as mountain goats and sheep) described as the gods' livestock. Nearby one can see many petroglyphs carved on big stones and depicting ibex. On the other hand, the shrines of the Ser rang are tucked away high above the village on the way to the mountain pastures. The same holds true for that of Zang nam, which stands near a juniper grove in the upper part of the valley. Lastly, the shrine dedicated to the Lchags rang is situated across the river, facing villages and fields located on the opposite bank.

23 The homes built for the Seven Brothers are very imposing structures, always daubed with red ochre, the colour of the *tsan* deities. For instance, the Nag rang shrines present a massive base made of stones stuck together with mud mortar, and reaching a height of 2 to 2.5 metres. This base is crowned by a huge bundle of juniper branches pierced with arrows, spears and swords, and maintained in place by an amazing pile of several dozen horns of wild sheep and ibex. The magnificent juniper foliage is said to be a gift offered by Zang nam to his brothers. It is fetched by four laymen, appointed from among the crowd by the gods themselves during their first public appearance on the 10th of the first month. Every year, seven donkey-loads are thus sent from Skyurbuchan to Matho for the renewal of the shrines. In order to keep this juniper free from any pollution, and especially from ritual pollution due to childbirth or death, new regulations were fixed when Zang nam settled in Skyurbuchan. Since that time, when a woman gives birth to a child, she and her spouse are not allowed to remain in the vicinity of the juniper grove. In the same way, when a person dies, the villagers immediately move the corpse downwards near the river.¹⁸ The Lchags rang shrine, a single construction for both the White and Red Lchags rang, is also quite impressive (fig. 2). It is surrounded by low stone-walls painted with grey, white and red stripes curiously reminiscent of the way Sakya buildings are painted in Tibet, a motif that is quite unusual in Ladakh. Within the enclosure a whitewashed *stūpa*, a long prayer wall and the shrine itself stand side by side. The structure is crowned by a bunch of *Ephedra Gerardiana* planted with a dozen spears. The latter, given to the gods by the king (or his representative) and faithful inhabitants, are tipped with triangular iron-shaped heads. Moreover, the shrine presents another noteworthy particularity. Each face of the cubic base comprises a niche in which an anthropomorphic mask, 15-20 centimetres high, made of clay has been set (fig. 3). The inhabitants call these masks *zhalbag* (*zhal 'bag*), the honorific term usually given to any kind of mask whatever the manufacturing process or the ritual context may be, and present them as the faces of the gods. This kind of mask, kept inside votive cairns where local deities are worshipped or summoned, does not seem to be very widespread in the Tibetan area,¹⁹ and I do not know any other examples of this practice in Ladakh.

Fig. 2 – The Lchags rang shrine in Rumtse



P. Dollfus, 1999

Fig. 3 — The mask made of clay kept in the Lchags rang shrine



P. Dollfus, 1999

The vessels of the gods

24 Ladakhis call mediums *lha* (gods) or *lha ba/lha mo* (god-men and women). They sometimes make a linguistic distinction between a possessed state and a “normal” state. Thus, they use the term *luya* (*lus g-yar*)—one who lends his/her body—for the empty vessel, that is, the human being out of possession and, in certain cases, *yishespa* (*ye shes pa*), “those with divine wisdom”

for the embodying god.²⁰ In our specific case the human vessels that the gods enter into can be monks or lay people, but they are always males. According to Ladakhi informants, this is not because the Seven Brothers themselves are male gods—there are, in fact, many cases in Ladakh where male gods possess female mediums and *mutatis mutandis*—but because they are high-ranking oath-bound gods.²¹ Indeed all women are believed to have “low spiritual power” *parka mammo(spar kha dma’ mo)* compared with men and have a lower ranking in religious matters.

- 25 In the case of the Rongtsan Brothers, the mediums do not necessarily have to be elected through an initiatory madness, as is always the case with “village oracles”.²² In fact, some mediums inherit their gods from a parent and belong to lineages, which sometimes include a remote ancestor,²³ as in the case of the laymen who nowadays act as vessels for the Ser rang. On the other hand, some of them are appointed. Thus, the monks who act as vessels for the White and Red Rongtsan of Matho are chosen by drawing lots on the 15th day of the tenth month according to the Tibetan calendar. On this very day, a ritual is performed in honour of Gurgon (Gur mgon, Mahākāla), a favourite protector of the Sakya tradition. The names of senior monks advanced in yogic abilities are written on pieces of paper and placed in parched barley flour balls, which are then shaken in a pot in front of the gods’ statues in the chapel until two names come out three times.²⁴ Once selected, these monks are expected to undergo a long period of spiritual training to become suitable mediums. After that, they perform this function for only a limited period, usually five years, although some individuals appear to serve longer (Brauen 1980, p. 136). However, earlier accounts suggest some differences from the present day. Thus the Hebers, a Moravian couple, who stayed in Ladakh from 1913 to 1925, report that in

Marshro, a village situated a day’s march from Leh, *two brothers* would become possessed by two very fierce demons [...]. It is said that these special demons always take possession once a year of two men belonging to *two definite* Marshro families. Sometimes they are the same two men for a number of successive years, at others they vary [*my emphasis*]. (Heber and Heber 1978, p. 206)

- 26 Prior to becoming entranced, the men who will act as the temporary embodiment of the god have to go into a strict solitary confinement for at least one month and prepare themselves with purification and prayers. During their retreat, they must repeatedly offer sacrificial cakes to the various Protectors of the Doctrine and recite visualisation texts. They also receive baths and ablutions with scented water, which are performed by the tantric master of the nearby monastery, to purify their bodies.
- 27 The two monks chosen to act the Nag rang festival have to undergo a one-year retreat²⁵, during which they propitiate Hevajra, one of the main tantric deities of the Sakya school. During the last two months, they remain in strict isolation and meditate continuously attended by one boy attendant.

They sit in a box, which is so made that they can neither lie down, nor assume any attitude other than of sitting absolutely upright, and they are only allowed out for a very short space of time in the morning, afternoon and evening. They do not divest themselves of their clothes the whole time, and so cramped do they become that a rope is fixed above their heads by which to pull themselves up. (Heber and Heber 1978, p. 206)

- 28 On the other hand, the two laymen of Stok, i.e. the “borrowed bodies” of the Ser rang, stay at home. Yet, it is also said that in previous times they used to meditate from the 10th day of the twelfth month in a small cave situated far up the valley near a sacred spring, next to *astūpa* said to have been founded by the famous translator Rinchen Zangpo.
- 29 The mediums who become possessed by the Seven Rongtsan do not wear the same dress and headgear. Moreover, even when they are incarnating the same god, they can be clothed in different costumes. Thus, during the festival of Guru Chishu (Gu ru tshes bcu) performed

annually in Stok on the 9th and 10th days of the first Tibetan month, against the background of a ritual dance performed by monks in the monastery courtyard, on the first day they appear wearing the red headgear of the *tsan* deities, a long-sleeved garment, a short cape and a brocade apron. The following day, they wear short white trousers and small sleeveless cloaks of brocade, and their heads are covered with wigs made of numerous woollen locks: a black one for the “god of the king”, a red one for the “god of the lama” (fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – The “god of the lama”



P. Dollfus, Stok monastery, 1992

30 The vessel of the Lcags rang of Gya are one layman of the village and one monk belonging to the nearby monastery, which is a branch of the Hemis (He mi) monastery. They are possessed on the 14th of the first Tibetan month in the village, then on the 15th next to the gods' shrine located at some distance across the stream. According to informants²⁶ they are dressed in tiger skins loosely wrapped round their waists and some kind of short cloaks made of red or yellow brocade. Sometimes they wear a red wig, sometimes a *ringa* (*rigs lnga*), the five-pointed crown upon which the five Buddha families of the five directions are depicted. Each holds a ritual dagger and a spear to which is fastened a triangular flag.

31 The Nag rang festival is held on the same days, but within the monastery of Matho²⁷. On the 14th in the afternoon, some hours after the dances have started, embodied in the monks, the gods rush into the monastery courtyard and perform a religious dance with the other monks who are dressed as Mahākāla and surrounding deities. They wear only a monastic skirt tied around their waists and a circular metal breastplate called "mirror", fastened with the help of crossed scarves. On their backs hangs a kind of huge safety pin made of iron that alleviates the painful penetration of the gods into the mediums' bodies (Brauen 1990, p. 138). In their right hand they brandish a sword, the handle of which is adorned with numerous white scarves, and in their left hand they hold a leather whip and a triangular flag. Around their left wrist, they also wear a thick bracelet made of cloth and decorated with pictures of gouged-out human eyes. Having danced a few minutes, they move to the flagpole erected in the centre of the courtyard. There, two attendants help them to put on a kind of short cloak made of coloured brocade, as well as a white turban.²⁸ Thus dressed, they run up to the chapel of the protectors and to everybody's surprise appear on the roof in spectacular running performances, bare to the midriff again. On the following day, the 15th of the first month, they are dressed in a completely different way (fig. 5). Their bodies are entirely covered with a black mixture of soot and oil, and a fierce face with three eyes is painted on their chests and backs. Their feet are covered with black felt ankle-boots, and their heads with black wigs and complete blindfolds made of nine layers of black cloth. They are adorned with ornaments of bones and bracelet-like small relic boxes which some say have been offered to them in the past by a pious woman or, according to other people, by a repentant Ladakhi queen²⁹. Both hold a wooden rod *gandī* struck to call the monks together in the left hand and a small *damaru* drum that they play in the right one, using them to bless people by touching them. As before, an iron cross is attached to their backs. Now, they run and jump back and forth, only guided—people say—by the open eyes painted on their bodies. But this time it is said that the gods enter into the monks in the form of Gurgon.³⁰ After an ablution, they receive the robe of Dorje Palzang, the founder of the monastery. Holding the garment over their heads, they enter the main temple. Finally, on the 8th day of the second month, when the gods make their final appearance of the year at the renewal of the shrines where they reside, their "borrowed bodies" wear heavy dresses and special fur-lined hats.

Fig. 5 – Nag rang Festival

P. Dollfus, Matho monastery, 1997

- 32 To sum up, the ceremonial garments donned by the men who act as the mouthpieces of the Seven Rongtsan Brothers offer a wide range of dress and headgear (form, colour, style, etc.). However, they do not fit the traditional pictures of those gods drawn from both the liturgies and the works of art. Moreover, in spite of the great diversity in their equipment, no medium wears a heavy helmet resembling that worn by the great oracle of Nechung or other prominent oracles in Central Tibet. Nor does either of them carry the rolled-up snare said to be one of the characteristic weapons of the *tsan* deities. Lastly, it is worth noting that the brilliant red, said to be the characteristic colour of the *tsan* and therefore—according to Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, p. 413)—the predominant colour of the various pieces of dress worn by the mediums who are being visited by *tsan* deities, is conspicuously under-represented.
- 33 The medium's facial expression, his gestures and his dress not only refer to the god he embodies, but also figure signs and prophecies. As Dargyay (1985, p. 59) notes, "every moment of the Rong Tsan is loaded with ominous significance pointing at future events related to crops, livestock, and the general prosperity of the Ladakhi people." For instance, when the deities appear with red ribbons attached to their headgear during the Matho festival, this warns the public of impending national disasters (Jamyang Gyaltzen 1995a, p.58). In the same way, when they choose to wear wigs on the first day of the Stok festival, it heralds an unpromising period of famines, epidemics or wars.³¹ Furthermore, when they draw their swords across their tongues and over their arms, no blood should flow and no trace of a wound should remain. In fact, bleeding is perceived as a sign of the god's anger and interpreted as a very bad omen. The crowd, the lay musicians who play the "dance of the gods" which accompanies the possession³² and the monks themselves dare not do anything in their performance that might provoke anger and therefore bleeding.

Possession and prophecies

- 34 When possession takes hold, the mediums are very turbulent and perform extraordinary feats. Some jump or dance wildly around the shrines, threatening to strike the unbelievers with their weapons. Others run along the edge of the wall surrounding the very high parapets and the roofs of the monastery, and cut themselves by passing their sharpened swords across their tongues and their naked arms several times. However, no trace of scars or wounds can be found

on their bodies. Some twist iron swords into knots to prove the authenticity of possession. (Such swords can be seen in Stok palace.) Others swallow boiling tea straight from kettle or take burning embers in their mouths. In ancient times it was also said that the monks possessed by the White and Red Rongtsan would fly from their cells into the temple and the courtyard by holding the upper robe of Dorje Palzang above their heads. Such unbelievable actions make the people marvel at the oracular gods.

35 The mediums possessed by the fierce brothers are judged not only on these performances but also on the accuracy of their divination and predictions. These are delivered in an almost unintelligible language spoken in a high-pitched voice and are interpreted by the oracles' attendants. In fact, the gods are believed to speak in Kham dialect, because people say that the Seven Brothers are natives of this area, or at least stayed there quite a long time. The gods receive prominent persons—high lamas and officials—and common villagers, individually. They answer private questions and give advice. But they also identify individuals who have stolen, lied, or consumed excessive alcohol, and they may hit them with their weapons. Lastly they make prophecies about calamities, weather and the coming year's harvest. The last day of the festival, when the ceremonies come to end, the mediumstake some barley flour and throw it in all four directions. The amount falling in a particular direction indicates which part of the country will have a good or bad harvest. They also make predictions about the success or failure of the next crop by examining the grain stored in the “vases of the god” (*lha'i bum pa*), or “treasure vases” (*gter bum*), concealed inside the shrines. This takes place during the renewal of the shrines, which occurs on the 8th day of the second month at Matho.³³ Early in the morning the monastery of Hemis and the palace of Stok, where the Ladakhi king now resides, send horses and servants to Matho. After their arrival, the oracle monkstake a ritual bath and offer morning prayers. Then, they leave the monastery on horseback for the shrines. They are accompanied by their attendants, a representative of the king of Matho, low-caste musicians and a few others. At a certain place on the way to the upper part of the valley, they are re-entered by the gods. Then they race into the mountains. On reaching the shrines they bring out the “vase of the god”, an earthen pot placed amidst the juniper boughs topping the structure. Then they deliver prophecies about the forthcoming harvest by carefully examining the grain extracted from the pot. The first prophecies are based on its appearance and concern the quality of the future crops. Hair amidst grain is the sign that weeds will grow abundantly in the fields. Grains of black colour mean a bad harvest and the further rotting of the crop in the granary. On the other hand, sprouted grains are considered a good omen. The crop will arrive early and will be of good quality. The second divination forecasts the yield of the crop and requires some experiments. The vase is first emptied of its contents on a ceremonial scarf, and then filled again with the same grain. If there appears to be less grain than before, it bodes no good. On the other hand, if the grain overflows from the vase, it heralds a plentiful harvest. The complete procedure is done three times for barley, wheat and peas. Once the predictions are delivered, the god-mendirect lay attendants to renew the shrines by placing fresh bunches of juniper inside them and adding the arrow for the new year and the sword given a month before by the king. The musicians play the “drumming of the gods” accompanying the “dance of the gods” around the shrines for the final time. Finally with loud cries, the oracles thrust their heads into the shrines and collapse as the deities leave them and are absorbed into the vases.³⁴

36 Usually, the mediums' statements are not proved wrong because any prediction is declared to be subject to the continuation of correct religious observance among the believers, upon whom the blame for any unfulfilled prophecy would therefore fall. To give an example, in 1999, one of the mediums of Gya predicted that all would be well in the coming year, provided that villagers performed the “Purification of Mountains and Cultivated Lands”.³⁵ Time passed, and the villagers forgot the prophecy and did nothing. But when the time of sowing arrived, the soil was still frozen

and snow covered the summits of the mountains because of persistent cold. The inhabitants then remembered the prophecy and performed this cleansing rite to ensure that pollution was washed away from both the “wild” and “civilised” spaces, represented by the mountains and the cultivated valley respectively. A few days later, the sun came out, the snow and ice melted and it was possible to sow the barley.

37 The Seven divine oracles predict harvests and forecast weather, but also advise the king. Traditionally they were consulted on matters affecting the country much like the well-known Nechung oracle, who since the office was formally institutionalised by the Fifth Dalai Lama has been consulted by the Dalai Lama’s government down to the present time.³⁶ Some of the more significant utterances concerned the welfare of the country and, as Crook notes, this tradition persists:

On the occasion of our visit [in the winter of 1990] a senior Indian army officer, said to be the GOC himself, came to the monastery and interviewed the monks [...]. The officer together with his wife and two adjutants stood as the *lha-pas* rushed in, both shrieking in their bird-like voices. They had already chosen from a set of wigs to wear those with long red hair indicating danger to the dharma and the state in Ladakh. We were told this was unusual, reflecting the current political turmoil in Kashmir. They showed no respect to these authorities whatsoever but, in a particularly florid manner, waving their swords, announced that the times were threatening, attention to the dharma was vital and only so long as the army was with the people would all go well in Ladakh. This message was later broadcast on Leh radio. They then rushed forth again to continue their escapades on the roof. The atmosphere in the room had been electric, an attendant monk had his facial muscles quite distorted with anxiety or fear, the army officers standing at attention were struck silent for some minutes. The Staglung Rinpoche seated in a corner turned to look out the window with a deeply reflective expression on his face. (Crook 1998, p. 34)

38 In 1983, they were asked by lay people about the future of the political situation in Assam and the Punjab (Phylactou 1989, p. 224). Today the Matho mediums are consulted at the Nag rang festival by representatives of Leh station of the *All India Radio* network, which broadcasts an annual message.

39 The mediums incarnated by the Seven Rongtsan Brothers never suck poison out, nor extract pollution or needles from men or animals, contrary to “village oracles” of either sex who mainly work with unwanted substances.³⁷ Moreover, the gods enter their vessels at fixed date festivals (according to the Tibetan calendar) and not throughout the year for diagnostic and curative purposes in case of individual troubles. However, in former times, there was a notable exception in the person of the king. The royal family was not restricted to the temporal order but had the exclusive right to private consultations with mediums possessed by Rongtsan at any time of year. This privilege derived not only from the king’s economic status but also from his divine authority.

The Seven Brothers and the figure of the king

40 At the beginning of the 15th century, the Seven Brothers came from Kham in eastern Tibet and settled in different places located all over Ladakh: from Gya in the eastern region to Skyurbuchan in the far west near the current Indo-Pakistan cease-fire line. Since then, they have acted as local protective deities. Remarkably, all the villages placed under the jurisdiction of the Rongtsan deities feature a fortress in ruins or a palace in fairly good condition; both kinds of building are referred to as *khar* (*mkhar*). In fact, in colloquial Ladakhi, this term encompasses various meanings. It designates not only secular and military fortresses, but also palaces built for residence and royal display as well as royal government buildings for the king and visiting high officials, or even stores for taxes. One may object that such buildings stand over almost every village. Indeed, as Howard (1989) perceptively remarks, defensive

settlements and watchtowers have been built all over Ladakh for local defence throughout history. However, chronicles, inscriptions and collected evidence suggest that these very places were the seat of a king or a petty lord at a given period at least.³⁸

41 In these places dotted with palaces or royal estates, the ruling family was personally involved as patrons and as consulters of the gods. Every year the king or one of his representatives offered new weapons to the Rongtsan gods. The villagers' turn came only afterwards. These weapons—swords and spears—were kept in the temple of the protective deities or stuck among the boughs crowning their shrines. Everywhere people maintain that in former times there were many more ceremonies that strengthened the bond between the Seven Brothers and the ruler(s) who ensured fertility and prosperity. Today they are on the decline, but certain elements have survived. Now as before, the barley kept in the Rongtsan chapel of Matho monastery is still used to sow the king's fields and to fill the vases enclosed in the royal shrines.

42 Kings' time is over, but memories remain vivid. At Gya, the elders remember with emotion the "dances of Gya" which they say was one of the greatest festivals of Ladakh. Huge earthenware pots "as tall as a door" and therefore called "door-pots" were filled with barley beer. Men and women were dressed in their best. And in the late afternoon, a race was held to please the village deities and dozens of riders—including the king—mounted on caparisoned horses participated in the event. At Stok, the festival was formerly held in the courtyard of the palace. It has now shifted to the courtyard of the monastery located nearby. But it is still attended by the main branch of the royal family. The musicians playing the drums for the (auspicious) descent of the king take "the royal procession into the monastery courtyard and towards the stairway which leads to the balcony where the royal audience takes up its privileged position overlooking the courtyard" (Trewin 1995, p. 288). The same holds true at Matho.

43 In fact, as Vitali (1996) clearly points out, a complex political situation existed in Ladakh with a few local petty lords controlling different areas, all of them theoretically entitled to be called *gyalpo* (*rgyal po*) or king. This contrasts with the picture presented in the Chronicles of Ladakh, which suggests a single realm extending over its territory. Besides, only three Buddhist schools played a large role in Ladakhi history: they were the Drigungpa ('Bri gung pa) at the beginning of the 13th century, the Gelugpa (dGe lugs pa) in the 15th century, and the Dukpa ('Brug pa) in mid-17th century. Neither the Nyingmapa nor the Sakyapa, present here, ever exerted political influence. It seems to me rather hazardous to assume that Lama Dorje Palzang became the court priest of various rulers and thereby installed the Seven Brothers as crown deities simultaneously in Skyurbuchan, Stok, Matho and Gya. On the other hand, I find slightly difficult to follow the interpretation given by Dargyay (1985, p. 64) that "as long as the Rong-btsan stayed in southeastern Tibet, they were linked with Gesar. [...] Later, when the gods had been moved to Ladakh it well suited them to find in the Ladakh king a descendant of Gesar."

44 At the time of the visit of Dorje Palzang, the country was fragmented into different principalities struggling for supremacy.³⁹ Indeed, the "New Red Annals" (*Deb ther dmar po gsar ma*, 1538) says that no less than five kings of Mar yul supported the Gelugpa, the new sect founded by Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa, 1357-1419) (Vitali 1996, p. 498). One was Drag Bumde belonging to the Leh lineage, who ruled from Leh over Central Ladakh.⁴⁰ He received the first envoys from the reformer, but he also gave a grant of land to Dorje Palzang in order to establish the Matho monastery, the first monastery belonging to the Sakya school in Ladakh. Furthermore, he sponsored the founder of Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po), a place that he visited in the autumn of the iron female snake year (1461) (*ibid.*, p. 517). On the other hand, a ruler known as *mnga' bdag* bTsan dar and belonging to the Shey lineage obtained gifts from as far as Sakya in Tibet, which requested his protection. According to Vitali (*ibid.*, p. 494 note 831), Sakya did so "to strengthen links with a king of sTod [Upper Ladakh] whose line was historically close to the Sa.skya.pa-s at a time when most kings of sTod were starting to side with the emissaries of Tsong.kha.pa."

- 45 In addition, Drag Bumde's brother, Dragpa Bum, was the ruler of Lower Ladakh and built a new capital at Temisgam (gTing mo sgang), some twenty kilometres east of Skyurbuchan. He was succeeded by Bhagan who, according to the Chronicles, combined with the people of Shey to depose the sons of the king of Leh. By the second half of the 15th century, he extended his control from Temisgam to Leh. In the late 16th century, King Jamyang Namgyal ('Jam dbyangs nam rgyal) had as his religious teacher the Sakyapa head of the Matho monastery. In 1613-1614, the Ladakhi king summoned to Ladakh Taksang Repa (Stag tshang ras pa, 1574-1651), who was a scion of the Sakya prince-abbots and an outstanding member of the Dukpa school (Petech 1977, p. 35). The great lama refused the invitation as he has not yet accomplished his journey to Swat, but he came a few decades later. First he resided at Gya, as the guest of the local ruler. Then he went on to Shey and later on to Basgo (Ba sgo) in Lower Ladakh, where he was received by Sengge Namgyal (Seng ge nam rgyal), the son and successor of Jamyang Namgyal, for whom he became the preceptor. The king brought the royal house to the Dukpa school and patronised the foundation of Hemis monastery (1630-1638), which became the royal monastery of Ladakh. Since that time, the close connection between the Dukpa monastery of Hemis and the royal family of Ladakh proper has never been severed. The Matho royal estate was also given over to this school, but the monastery has retained its Sakya identity (*ibid.*, pp. 52-58). Today, all the households in the village still belong to the Sakya order, except one: the house of the king, which is affiliated with the Dukpa order and houses its own private temple and caretaker belonging to Hemis monastery.
- 46 In conclusion, through the centuries, the Rongtsan deities maintained close relations with rulers referred to as kings, but not as it has often been assumed in earlier literature, with *the* king of Ladakh. However, many questions remain concerning, among other things, the special bond between the Seven Brothers who exchange gifts (spears, juniper); the links among the various rulers of Ladakh at the time of the great yogin's visit; the relationship between State and Church who both established their authority; and even the dates and chronology. To answer these questions further research is needed, particularly on the history of the four villages placed under the jurisdiction of the Seven Rongtsan Brothers, as well as the history of the main festivals performed in these former seats of power.⁴¹ In addition, such local research will provide, I hope, new sources to clear up the fog covering this obscure period, which seems to have been of the greatest importance in the history of Ladakh.

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Notes

- 1 See Dollfus (1996).
- 2 Ka' thog rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698-1755) was a Nyingmapa (rNying ma pa) incarnate from Ka' thog monastery in East Tibet. He was sent to Ladakh in 1752 by the Seventh Dalai Lama to solve the conflict between the Kingdom of Purig and the Kingdom of Ladakh. Concerning his diplomatic mission to Ladakh, see Schwieger (1997).
- 3 Tshe dbang nam rgyal (r. 1753-1782). The story told locally differs from this literary tradition. It says that the king tried to take by force Dorje Chenmo, pulling her with a rope made of iris leaves. But the deity managed to burst her bonds and ran away. What the king did not obtain by force five tricky villagers got it by cunning. They disguised themselves and enticed the goddess with dances, songs and funny plays.
- 4 This is also true of gods coming from India, the native country of Buddhism.
- 5 Skyurbuchan is located on the banks of the Indus, in the lower region of Ladakh, not very far from the Indo-Pakistan cease-fire line. According to Aggarwal, *skyur bu can* is believed to mean "the Sour place" after the solitary *skyur ru shing* tree that is said to grow in its midst, bearing sour olives. Other people insist that this toponym is a corruption of *skyid bu can* or "the Place of bountiful children", or of *skyin brus can*, "the Place dug out by ibex", referring to the reservoir-like cavity that still exists in the centre of the village, where water collects on its own (Aggarwal 1994, pp. 117-118).
- 6 'Jam dbyang rgyal mtshan (1995b, pp. 487-492). His paper concerning Matho monastery, included in his *dGon rabs kun gsal nyi snang [History of Ladakh Monasteries]*, is derived from a longer history by Klu sdings mkhan rin po che.
- 7 Rong chen Kha ba dkar po, literally "Big Valley, White Snow".
- 8 The Flaming Wild *tsan* or *btsan rgod 'bar ba*: Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, pp. 170-171) mentions "an ancient group of Tibetan deities, known as the 'Bar *baspun bdun*. Its members are believed to be the commanders of the wild *btsan* demons (*btsan rgod dmag dpon*)". The proper names of these gods differ, however, from those given in Ladakh.
- 9 *Drung pa* is an ecclesiastical title.
- 10 According to another source, the Seven Rongtsan comprised the two Nag rang of Matho, the two Lchags rang of Gya, the two Ser rang of Stok, and one god called Skya rang and established at Mulbeck.

- 11 Personal communication from Sonam Phuntsog, Achinathang.
- 12 Called *Kha ba dkar po'i bskor ra gyi pha yon*, "The Merit of Circumambulating Kha ba dkar po"; see Large-Blondeau (1960, pp. 231-237), Buffetrille (2000, pp. 188-199) and Dargyay (1985, pp. 60-61). For a vivid narrative of the journey around this sacred mountain, see Bacot (1909).
- 13 In Tibetan literature, *tsan* are usually described as forceful mounted warriors, wearing armour and helmet, or clad in a robe and heavy boots. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, pp. 166-176).
- 14 For folk beliefs concerning the *tsan* in Ladakh, see Dollfus (2003).
- 15 Gods in this quotation are worldly gods. Enlightened gods have no need of homes.
- 16 According to Crook (1998, p. 30) "the red *bTsan* of Matho is sponsored by Hemis monastery and the white one by the royal family at sTok. The names of the *Rong.bTsan* are also said to indicate metals which relates them to royal prerogatives of metal mining and the manufacture of armaments."
- 17 At Matho, the monks told me that this statement was inaccurate. According to them, the Nag rang of Matho are the oldest, then come the Ser rang of Stok, the Lchags rang of Matho and, lastly, Zang nam of Skyurbuchan.
- 18 Personal communication from Sonam Phuntsog, Achinathang.
- 19 Although the context is quite different, the only masks with which they may be compared are those, also made of clay, which are put above the doors to expel the spirits of the dead in the Nyinba communities of Humla (northwestern Nepal). Cf. Bancaud and Macdonald (1982, Wg.87).
- 20 See Day (1989).
- 21 Nevertheless a woman served as a State oracle in Lhasa until 1959. She belonged to a female medium lineage and was possessed by the Tanma (bsTan ma), guardian goddesses of the Buddhist doctrine. (Havnevik 2002, pp. 262 sq.). This situation persists in exile at Dharamsala (personal communication from Monnier).
- 22 Village oracles are elected through an initial affliction when they lose control and go mad. For the sake of simplicity, I have retained the distinction made by Day (1989) between "village oracles" and "monastery oracles". Strictly speaking the denomination "monastery oracle" should be used only for the oracles who are monks and/or act within a monastery.
- 23 See also Day (1989, p. 270): "Some village oracles also belong to a lineage because they share the same place (*yul*), not because they share the same genealogical descent line."
- 24 According to Jamyang Gyaltzen (1995a, p. 80), "If after three attempts in this manner the name of the monk does not fall, he will never be chosen as oracle." For other examples of lottery using "name ball" procedure to recruit officials, see for example Cech (1987, p. 112) and Sherpa Tulku (1977, pp. 68-69).
- 25 In the early 20th century, the Hebers note: "Should the chosen candidate be a new one, he has to prepare himself from three to four months before, but otherwise one is sufficient. When the time has arrived, these two men, generally, if not always, lamas, repair to a mountain retreat." (Heber and Heber 1978, p. 206).
- 26 Unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity to see the Lchags rang festival at Gya.
- 27 In fact, the ceremony begins before. According to Jamyang Gyaltzen (1995a, pp. 80-81) and Dargyay (1985, p. 57), the two monks conclude their retreat on the 10th day of the first month. When they enter their own rooms, the White and Red Rongtsan enter their bodies. Then they go to Mahākāla shrine rooms where people are allowed to meet them and predict about the events, which will occur in Ladakh during the following year. The next day (i.e. on the 11th day of the month), embodied in the two oracles monks, the Rongtsan give audiences to high lamas and officials. They give their old clothes and other articles to the officials who, in turn, offer them new clothing and other religious objects. On the 12th and 13th days, the gods again enter the monks' bodies, perform simple religious activities and answer the individual questions from the public. About the events of the Nag rang festival, see Brauen (1983) and Crook (1998).
- 28 Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, p. 413) mentions aturban of red silk for mediums possessed by *tsan* deities in Tibet.
- 29 According to Jamyang Gyaltzen (1985b, p. 493), a long time ago, a powerful Ladakhi queen was doubtful about the authenticity of possession. So she asked the mediums to cover their eyes with complete blindfolds and then to run on a beam. They ran without fear like the speed of the wind. The queen apologized, prostrated in front of them, and offered them a lot of precious gifts: amongst them these charm boxes. Since that time, the blindfolding is kept by a member of the royal family and inspected before use every year.

30 See Jamyang Gyaltzen (1995a, p. 57). According to iconography, this particular form of Mahākāla carries across the crooks of his elbows a wooden gaṇḍī, symbolising his vow to protect Nalanda monastic university and by extension all Buddhist monasteries.

31 See also Crook (1998, p. 34).

32 For a study of the performance of *lha mnga* (“drum of the gods”) in Ladakh as “a type of symbolic action, linked to the social constructs of power and authority”, and especially the *lha mnga* played during the Matho and Stok festivals, see Trewin (1995, chapter 6).

33 At Gya it occurs on the same day (8.II). But at Stok and Skyurbuchan, it is carried out on the 10th of the seventh month, which coincides with the annual monastic festival of *shrub lha*(*shrub lha*), “the dedication of the first ears (*shrub*) to the gods”, at Shey.

34 Jamyang Gyaltzen (1995a, p. 59) notes “into the recently changed junipers”.

35 *Ri khrus klungs khrus*.

36 See Gibson (1991, p. 60 *sq.*) The state oracle of Nechung was consulted for conferring legitimacy upon government policy, notably by forecasting the reincarnation of subsequent Dalai Lamas, but also for deciding foreign policy. After an inaccurate prediction of military victory over the British in 1904, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama forbade the possession of the Nechung medium for twenty years, during which time the old medium died and a new one was found. The medium at Samye (bSam yas) who acts as Tsi'u Marpo (Tsi'u dmar po) vessel was also consulted in the attempts to discover and identify rebirths of the Dalai Lama, *cf.* Maraini (1952, p. 148).

37 See Day (1989, p. 436).

38 About the “capital” (*rgyal sa*) of Skyurbuchan, “a place possessed of the ten virtues, where nectar of the fruits gather”, see Tobdan and Dorje (1996); about Matho and Stok monasteries and palaces, see Petech (1977); about Gya and his petty king, see Petech (1977, pp. 93-94) and Vitali (1996).

39 For other sources, see Vitali (1996).

40 He appears to have relocated the capital of the kingdom to Leh. *Cf.* Howard (1997, p. 122).

41 As Trewin (1995, p. 246) points out: “Significantly, the principal festivals in crown villages did not come into being in their modern royally-sponsored form until the eighteenth century, and it appears that this more conspicuous patronage of Buddhism was motivated by the need to subdue instability.”

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À propos de l'auteur

Pascale Dollfus

Pascale Dollfus, chargée de recherche au C.N.R.S., est ethnologue. Ses travaux portent sur l'organisation sociale, les croyances, les représentations et les rites, ainsi que sur la civilisation matérielle des communautés de langue tibétaine de l'Himalaya occidental indien. Elle a travaillé au Ladakh chez les agriculteurs sédentaires et les éleveurs nomades, notamment sur la notion de territoire. Aujourd'hui, elle poursuit au Spiti et dans le Haut-Kinnaur ses recherches sur les dieux locaux et leur relation au pouvoir politique, s'intéressant tout particulièrement à la religion oraculaire.

Droits d'auteur

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Abstract / Résumé

Called “local gods” (*yul lha*), the Seven Rongtsan brothers are found in different places all over Ladakh, but always linked in some way to royal estates. Every year, on fixed festival days, they manifest themselves through a medium—a layman or a monk—in an outdoor séance. They offer advice and deliver prophecies about calamities, weather and the forthcoming harvest. This paper examines the various accounts related to their introduction to Ladakh, and gives a description of each of the Seven Brothers, detailing their temper and attributes. Lastly, it explores the close relations they maintained with rulers, referred to as kings, through the centuries.

Keywords : oracle, kingship, possession

Les Sept Frères Rongtsan au Ladakh. Mythe, territoire et possession

Décrits comme des « dieux de village » (*yul lha*), les sept frères Rongtsan étendent leur tutelle sur plusieurs localités du Ladakh, géographiquement éloignées, mais toutes liées à des degrés divers à un roi ou un roitelet. Chaque année, à l’occasion de danses masquées au sein de monastères ou de fêtes liées au cycle agricole, ils « descendent » dans des hommes — laïcs ou moines —, par la bouche et le corps desquels ils s’adressent aux villageois, prédisent l’avenir du pays et, notamment, les récoltes à venir. Cet article relate l’histoire de leur venue et de leur installation dans la vallée de l’Indus, puis offre une description détaillée de chacun des Sept Frères, soulignant la relation particulière qui les lie au pouvoir royal.

Mots clés : royauté, médium, possession

Thématique : rituel, bouddhisme

Géographique : Ladakh

ndla : This paper is based on research carried out during several visits to Ladakh in the years 1997, 1999 and 2000, albeit some of the facts it deals with had been collected during previous stays. I would like to thank Gabriela Reifenberg for having corrected my English. An earlier version of this article was presented during a workshop held in Vienna in 1999 and then revised by Charles Ramble for the proceedings which were never published. Phonetic spelling is used for all vernacular terms. The first occurrence is followed by the Tibetan transliteration.