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de l'économie dans une région pastorale tibétaine du Golog, Qinghai, Chine*

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# Caterpillar fungus and the economy of sinning. On entangled relations between religious and economic in a Tibetan pastoral region of Golog, Qinghai, China

*Le cordyceps et l'économie de péchés. Sur les relations intriquées du religieux et de l'économique dans une région pastorale tibétaine du Golog, Qinghai, Chine*

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## A mysterious encounter

- <sup>1</sup> In the summer of 2007 I rode a motorcycle to Chamahe (Khra ma hi), a township in northern Golog (Mgo log)<sup>1</sup>. Affected by grassland desertification, Chamahe was abandoned by a large part of its inhabitants who were relocated to town. It was June and caterpillar fungus collecting season was coming to end. On the mountain slopes on both sides of the road, tiny silhouettes crawled through dry meadows searching for the last fungi. The road climbed higher. One mountain pass separated us from Chamahe – Dramani La (4782 m). A small *laptse* (*la btsas*) or cairn for ritual offerings stood there, surrounded with prayer flags and empty liquor bottles left after earlier libations. A cushion of snow covered the central part of the *laptse*. In the middle of the cairn was a lonely specimen of caterpillar fungus. Who put it there and for what reasons?

Photo 1. A *laptse* on the mountain pass to Chamahe



© Emilia Roza Sulek (Golog 2007)

- 2 This article seeks to understand the motives that brought someone to leave caterpillar fungus on a *laptse* between two townships of Golog. It argues that this act was not accidental and can be taken as proof of entangled relations between economic activities and the domain of action, value and thinking that is normally described as religious. *Laptse*, or a cairn used for ritual offerings, is an example of a communication channel between people and territorial deities which, as the pastoralists believe, inhabit the land. Caterpillar fungus, on the other hand, is a commodity that has brought the pastoralists prosperity and symbolises their successful participation in the market economy. So why was this profoundly economic fungus placed on a cairn for ritual offerings? The purpose of this article is to explain this action by relinking the religious and economic and in doing so, illustrate that these categories are not mutually exclusive.
- 3 By bringing together these two domains of action and thinking, this article continues on a path of analysing Tibetan religious life in what could be broadly called economic terms. The most prominent examples of this approach are studies by Clarke (1990), Lichter & Epstein (1983) and Da Col (2012), who demonstrate that elements of economic thinking are found in individual approaches to, and performance of, religious practices as well as in the functioning of religious institutions. Clarke ventured as far as to write about “religious capitalism” (1990, p. 183) and Da Col about “cosmoeconomics” (2012, p. 75). This article adds a new term to this economy-related vocabulary used in a seemingly non-economic context. It proposes an “economy of sinning” as a conceptual tool to analyse pastoralist decisions made in various (religious and economic) domains and shows how interdependent these domains are.

- 4 This task is accomplished by examining the example of an economy based on the gathering and selling of caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), a wild product of the Tibetan plateau popular as a medicinal resource and luxury gift item. The focus is a region of Golog (Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture), Qinghai Province. Owing to the caterpillar fungus economic boom observed during the last decade, Golog faced an economic awakening and the pastoralists earned income of a size unrecorded in their history. This has translated into a consumption and construction boom and changes in the pastoral production system (Sulek 2010, 2012, 2014a)<sup>2</sup>. This “caterpillar fungus boom” has been studied by many scholars (Winkler 2008, 2009; Gruschke 2011a, 2011b; Boesi & Cardi 2009; Yeh & Kunga Lama 2013). However, many of its consequences will become evident only with time<sup>3</sup>. This article asks how compatible the caterpillar fungus economy is with the religious domain of people’s lives who engage in it. It reveals where the conflict zones are, and shows them as opening the field of possibilities for human agency in minimising their effects.
- 5 Finally, this article calls for breaking from the portrayal of many societies, especially the so-called pre-modern or traditional ones, which commonly appear in ethnographic writing. It advances Clifford’s notion that ethnographies are “cultural fictions [...] based on systematic, and contestable, exclusions”, which silence incongruent voices and tell “partial truths” (1986, p. 6). Placing these voices back into the picture can bring ethnography closer to life, which is unavoidably built of inconsistencies. The topic of caterpillar fungus reveals these inconsistencies: it allows one to observe both a friction between the normative and the performative and a lack of unanimity in people’s approach to it. Golog resonates with a polyphony of voices, which is difficult to render within one article, but nevertheless finds some expression here.

## Risk lines

- 6 In spring each year, many people across the Tibetan plateau set off to the mountains to dig caterpillar fungus<sup>4</sup>. This work carries the promise of attractive gains, but also risks. These risks are associated with not following the unwritten rules stating under what circumstances digging the fungus can be safely performed. According to these rules, this activity can be dangerous when done in certain places, *i.e.* on sacred mountains and sites inhabited by non-human and non-animal beings, as well as during certain periods of time or on certain dates. In order to avoid crossing the line that divides safe fungus digging from that associated with risk, people limit their activities spatially or temporarily. As this article shows, some of these risk lines are not clear and it is helpful to envision a digger as moving through a dense fog intersected with invisible or partly visible lines. This fog sometimes thins, showing the digger a better view, and sometimes thickens, making the digger grope around for orientation. Moving through the fog, the diggers touch these lines and activate a mechanism of punishment that comes immediately or is delayed in time<sup>5</sup>. This punishment comes immediately when the fungus is dug in places where this activity should not be performed, and it is delayed when the fungus is dug during digging-free periods.
- 7 The speed with which a digger is punished relates to which of two causal systems his/her actions affect. One system is based on karmic categories of virtuous and non-virtuous action (*digpa*; *sdig pa*) and associated with Buddhism. The other is based on the concept of “pollution” or “defilement”, *drib* (*grib*), and is associated with what some scholars call

“lay people’s religion” (Lichter & Epstein 1983, p. 238). Regardless of whether and to what degree Buddhism and this “lay people’s religion”, called also folk or nameless religion (Tucci 1980; Stein 1972), are experienced as separate and qualitatively different, the causal systems associated with them condition the character and quality of human existence. They do it either in a short-term perspective of the person’s current life or in a long-term one, stretching into the lives-to-be.

## Angry mountain

- 8 Domkhog (Sdom khog) Township, where this material comes from, is home to a whole range of territorial deities inhabiting different forms of the landscape, most commonly mountains and water reservoirs. The most important of them is a *zhibdag* (*gzhi bdag*) named Amnye Wayin (A myes ba yin) associated with a mountain of the same name. He belongs to a group of deities related to Amnye Machen (A myes rma chen), a mountain which is the destination of pilgrimages from well beyond Golog<sup>6</sup>. Amnye Wayin’s status is lower and he does not attract pilgrims. Nevertheless, he is the main reference point for Domkhok pastoralists. He is a subject of community rituals performed at important points of their migration cycle. His support is sought for group and individual enterprises and is crucial for the *dewa* but also household and individual well-being<sup>7</sup>.

Photo 2. Amnye Wayin



© Emilia Roza Sulek (Golog 2009)

- 9 Amnye Wayin is powerful, but also rich, as his name, deriving from Mongolian “rich” (*bayan*) suggests<sup>8</sup>. The pastoralists call him a *terbdag* (*gter bdag*), a “treasure owner”, and say that he guards enormous riches hidden in the mountain<sup>9</sup>. They tell about rich vegetation covering the mountain and excellent quality of caterpillar fungus growing there. This makes Amnye Wayin mountain slopes a tempting goal for people seeking a shortcut to wealth. However, they are the *zhibdag*’s sacred precincts and should not be

trespassed or at least not without a good reason. Doing it is associated with risk, as the *zhibdag* has little tolerance for it and when provoked can demonstrate anger. Residents of Domkhog say that Amnye Wayin is a “social being” fond of interacting with people: he can help in finding lost livestock or scaring thieves away<sup>10</sup>. He likes playing tricks: he sometimes hides a yak from a herder or makes one get lost on the way home. But he is also short-tempered and easily takes offence. This side manifests itself when someone violates his precincts and breaks rules of a particular *savoir-vivre* which bind people as users of the land. Among the black listed activities are hunting, fishing, logging trees and destroying vegetation, disrupting the surface of the earth and polluting the land, air and waters, either with material garbage or even smells, for example of scorched meat. Digging caterpillar fungus brings together several points from this list. The diggers disrupt the surface of the earth, but staying in the mountains for a longer time, especially in tents, they are likely to commit other offences. They need fuel (*ergo* destroy vegetation) and food (*ergo* cook and fish), and produce garbage. “They are dirty and make the land dirty”, as my informants said with visible disgust. Dirty socks, shoes and shoe pads were listed as a trio of impure parts of clothing, which the diggers leave behind them and which epitomise their lack of respect for the *zhibdag* and the land.

- 10 Considering the many negative facets associated with digging caterpillar fungus, it should be no surprise that Amnye Wayin has little tolerance for it. A punishment which he sends against intruders takes usually a form of a lightning strike. Accounts of accidents when diggers were struck with lightning from a clear blue sky at exactly the spot where they worked show that the danger is real:

A woman from Rebkong was killed there recently<sup>11</sup>. She went to Amnye Wayin to dig *yartsa* and was killed by lightning<sup>12</sup>. People told her not to go, but she said that *yartsa* is so good there and she went. She was killed the same afternoon. There was another person with her, but that one turned back. And the woman didn't [turn back] and died.

- 11 Such narratives have a didactic value and are a warning against violating the *zhibdag*'s laws. They are constructed around an interaction between local pastoralists and visitors from other regions: the latter are the trespassers, while the former try to dissuade them from doing it. However, the diggers disrespect the danger and get punished, sometimes barely escaping with life. But is it only non-locals who violate the *zhibdag*'s laws? The answer is negative, even if material confirming it is scanty. Kunga Lama analysed a case of Lama Norlha, a *zhibdag* from Yushu (Yul shul) TAP, who attracted so many diggers that the pastoralists organised patrols to guard the mountain. However, some local pastoralists were caught among the trespassers, too (2007, p. 86). Although in Domkhok the fault is delegated to persons from outside the township, also some residents take the risk to dig on Amnye Wayin. During my research, several accidents took place in which people were killed by lightning high on a mountain range. This was interpreted as a punishment for crossing a line beyond which digging the fungus is forbidden. In one case a relative of a victim admitted that the woman left home to climb Amnye Wayin and dig caterpillar fungus there. This is also where her body was found.
- 12 Another problem associated with non-local diggers can be called a patriotic one. The role of territorial deities in building local identities (also political ones) was discussed by Samten Karmay (1998a, 1998b). Yet, this role appears to be not only symbolic: my informants said that in times of military conflict Amnye Wayin also takes direct action. This was reported at least twice during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Once, during a conflict with a

neighboring *tsowa*, he descended in a shape of a raging red bull upon the aggressors who fled in panic. He also demonstrated his fury in 1958 when the pastoralists clashed with the Communist troops. This shows that Amnye Wayin has personal, ethnic and even political sympathies mirroring those of the local inhabitants. He prefers pastoralists to farmers and Tibetans to other nationalities, especially Hui and Han. He more likely accepts people from those *tsowa* who the local people are on good terms with than those with whom they are conflicted. Thus, the problem consists not only in the fact that his land is trespassed, but *by whom*. The very presence of non-locals disturbs the *zhibdag* and it is easy for them to make one step too far. They have to be careful, as even actions positively valued when performed by the locals can have the opposite effect if performed by others. My informants recalled how a group of Tibetans from Rebkong performed *bsang* offering to Amnye Wayin, perhaps without bad intentions<sup>13</sup>. They were warned that only locals can perform it, but did not listen. Soon after a storm carried their tent away and they barely escaped with their lives.

- 13 Amnye Wayin's anger can turn not only against the trespassers, but also their relatives and the local community<sup>14</sup>. Some persons believed that local residents are in bigger danger, as non-locals and non-Tibetans are beyond the *zhibdag*'s power and can often go unpunished<sup>15</sup>. However, who exactly was to carry the punishment was unclear. Some pastoralists argued that it is only those persons who actively assist the trespassers, and others that the *zhibdag* applies a principle of collective responsibility: regardless of whether it is a direct involvement, passive consent or negligence, crime and punishment remain the same. If a lightning is a high precision weapon used against individual trespassers, there are other methods in the *zhibdag*'s arsenal which have a more spatially distributed impact. Many pastoralists interpret droughts, floods and animal plagues as such forms of punishment. One of the fields in which the *zhibdag*'s anger can seriously affect pastoralists' livelihoods relates to "essence of the land" (*sabchud, sa bcud*). This term denotes a nutritional and resilience potential of the land, that conditions its ability to nourish livestock, resist plagues of pests and processes such as desertification<sup>16</sup>. Its strength relates to the quality of natural resources of the land, including medicinal plants and caterpillar fungus. Depleting them is believed to weaken the *sabchud*:

Q: Does digging caterpillar fungus have any effect on environment?

R: It does. Grass grows fewer and thinner. The land is losing its *sabchud*. Also animals give less milk. The land must be losing its *sabchud* when people dig out millions of yuan from under the ground. Gold is dug by the government, and *yartsa* by Chinese, Tibetans and farmers. [...] It's good for them, but bad for the land. All people here are nomads and depend on livestock. When the land is losing its *sabchud*, livestock give less milk and get weaker. This bad weather [it was a rainy summer] is perhaps also connected to *yartsa*.

- 14 The relation between digging caterpillar fungus and weakening of *sabchud* is mediated through the *zhibdag* who is a guarantor and protector of the fertility of the land. A cornerstone of this relation is the concept of *drib* understood as "both physical and social pollution that is associated with various substances and proscribed social practices and relations" (Huber 1999, p. 16). This pollution is a type of offence that antagonises the *zhibdag*. Although my informants did not use the term *drib*, but spoke about "dirtiness" (*tsogpa, btsog pa*), this term meant for them a similar type of offence. In the following excerpt various elements discussed above are brought together in one broad stream of critique:

I don't agree for all these Chinese and farmers to come here to dig [yartsa]<sup>17</sup>. I only support the local folk. Otherwise it's a disrespect to our *sabdag* and *yulbdag*<sup>18</sup>. These people hunt game animals in the woods, kill birds and put traps to catch deer. Digging *yartsa* weakens *sabchud* and brings trouble upon people and livestock. People may fall ill and bad things may happen to livestock. I don't agree with that. But since everyone agrees, I can't stop it.

## Mystery of spring

- 15 The Tibetan name of caterpillar fungus, “summer grass winter worm” (*yartsa gunbu*), captures two points in this organism's lifecycle and an idea of a metamorphosis taking place between them<sup>19</sup>. But between winter and summer there is one more season: spring, when the caterpillar fungus digging takes place. Is this metamorphosis complete by then? Is the organism which people extract from the ground a “grass” or is there something of a “worm” remaining in it? These are central questions for any digger who wants to define his or her work in ethical terms<sup>20</sup>. If during spring this metamorphosis was complete, *yartsa gunbu* would be a plant and digging it would not pose ethical problems. However, if it retained some of its “worm life”, tearing it out of the ground would equal a violent act of killing it. In the context of Buddhism, this would be a *digpa* and lead to accumulating of negative *karma* and have an adverse impact on the person's future rebirths. A Tibetan approach to it makes killing large animals which furnish a large amount of meat more tolerable than smaller ones (Ekvall 1964, p. 75). Breeding animals only for meat is ethically problematic and killing for profit, especially small animals and to satisfy the whim of the palate, is particularly distasteful<sup>21</sup>. If *yartsa gunbu* was a worm, killing it would have the last two features: it is done for profit and certainly not to satisfy hunger.

**Photo 3. Digging caterpillar fungus on a mountain range**



© Emilia Roza Sulek (Golog 2007)

- 16 Stories told among pastoralists about caterpillar fungus specimens whose larval part was moving when extracted from the ground suggest that this metamorphosis is not always complete. Such instances were reported from northwest Yunnan by Stewart (2009, pp. 82-83). However, they must be extremely rare as none of my informants confirmed having ever seen such a specimen. It cannot be ruled out that these stories are example of a “grassland legend” (an equivalent to an “urban legend”), a lurid story or anecdote based on hearsay and widely circulated as true. They could be taken as an expression of uncertainty about the workings of caterpillar fungus’ biology and a sign that people concern themselves with it. But they could also be purposely spread because of their cautionary character, which many urban legends have: a warning that digging caterpillar fungus could be less innocent than it seems.
- 17 There is no consensus in Golog about how to classify caterpillar fungus during spring and no definite answer about the “ethical weight” of digging it. The opinions recorded varied between seeing it as an innocent activity not entailing any guilt and as a *digpa*. Between these two extremes stretched a field of uncertainty built of doubts, guesses and speculation:
- Of course it’s a *digpa*, because it’s somebody’s life! Maybe of a person who did something bad in his former life? (a *ngagpa* in his mid-forties)<sup>22</sup>
- There’s no *digpa* in digging *yartsa*, since it’s dead, and not alive. It’s more like digging *droma*.<sup>23</sup> Nobody says that digging *droma* is a *digpa*, right? (an ex-monk, 27 years old)
- My wife took me to Nagchu<sup>24</sup>. I couldn’t see any *yartsa*, but she showed me one. I covered it with a piece of dung so that it could live. If it’s a *digpa*, why should I commit it? (a caterpillar fungus trader, over 60 years old)
- Maybe it’s a *digpa* or maybe not. People say different things. But when I dig *yartsa*, I say *om mani padme hum* for each of them. (a pastoralist, 27 years old)
- 18 This selection shows a wide range of opinions. But although it is possible to pinpoint basic stances, it is more difficult to identify parties to which they can be assigned. It is the stances which are fixed points in the discourse, whilst people as their exponents enjoy a privilege of mobility migrating with their thoughts depending on time and context. Many scholars and local observers believe that age and occupation are the main factors influencing people’s approach to the topic<sup>25</sup>. A common assumption is that young and lay people are more materialistically oriented and hence more flexible, and elderly ones as well as Buddhist monks, nuns and other religious specialists more uncompromising in their approach to the topic of caterpillar fungus. However, closer examination shows that these are partial truths. Elderly pastoralists often criticised digging the fungus, but some dug it themselves and took pride in it. Some monks, nuns and religious specialists also worked as diggers or traders or benefited from this economy through donations from lay population<sup>26</sup>. The lack of a unified stance on the side of the Buddhist clergy was also mentioned by many pastoralists, who supported their view that digging the fungus is ethically neutral with the fact that it has not been condemned by their religious leaders. Several monks said that it is precisely because caterpillar fungus is such an intricate organism that the latter refrain from critique: “It’s hard to say anything definite about it without making a mistake”, as one of them said. Condemning something economically so vital is not easy, either, without risking being criticised oneself: “It’s better to leave some things unsaid”, as one ex-monk stated<sup>27</sup>. This leaves the space open for pastoralists’ own judgements and strategies on how to cope with the fungus’ unidentified status. The opinions quoted show a desire to define it and avoid or minimise a possible *digpa*. They

reveal that digging caterpillar fungus falls into a categorical grey zone and can be classified as *potentially* a sin. This denotes an action whose status is pending and conveys a feeling shared by many pastoralists that something definite will be announced about it at some point, perhaps its condemnation. If this happens, the question will be whether the rule *lex retro non agit* applies to moral laws, as well. If digging the fungus was downgraded to a *digpa*, this *digpa* in Golok would count in thousands of lives and measure in tons<sup>28</sup>.

- 19 This lack of clarity manifests itself in the dilemma around whether caterpillar fungus can be dug on *düchen* (*dus chen*) or days of religious observance, which fall on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> day of each Tibetan month. The most important are those during the 4<sup>th</sup> month, called *Sagadawa* (*Sa ga zla ba*), which marks the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death. Karmic effects of positive actions taken on these days are believed to multiply and people distribute alms, ransom animals destined for slaughter and do other good deeds. However, the arithmetic of good also has its arithmetic of evil counterpart and negative actions taken on such days are also said to multiply. This creates a problem for a whole army of diggers as *Sagadawa* overlaps with the caterpillar fungus digging season. Can this activity be performed on *düchen* days? My informants said: no, either because it is a *digpa* or because on such days one should strive for religious merit rather than material gain. They said they do not do it, but complained that their neighbours or relatives do. Regardless of who did what and why, it was clear that norms and social practice go different ways. Even if only *potentially* a sin, digging the fungus on *düchen* days was not something to take pride in: it should be avoided or at least kept secret. Kunga Lama's observations confirm this, too. He recalls a talk with a woman (on a *düchen* day), who declared that people do not dig the fungus on such dates. Her relatives, who arrived a moment later carrying freshly dug fungi, showed that actual behaviour does not follow the norm (Kunga Lama 2007, p. 79).

## Economy of sinning

- 20 With the advent of the caterpillar fungus economy, pastoralists in Golok have had a chance to earn cash income which outweighed anything they earned from pastoral production. It has become the foundation of the pastoralists' economic functioning, reaching even 90 per cent of entire household budgets (Sulek 2010; Gruschke 2012). They invested it in changing the material realities of their life and transforming their environments, building houses, buying cars and other consumption goods and even building roads (Sulek 2014a). But if this income comes from activities which have an unclear ethical status, does it mean that the income itself and prosperity it brought is also perceived as problematic?
- 21 According to some pastoralists, material wealth derived from the caterpillar fungus economy cannot bring anything good, neither for people nor for the region. Human diseases, livestock epidemics, weather disasters and other misfortunes are a sign that building one's fortune on it is dangerous. This money does not belong to the people, but was stolen from the land, as one man said, and it will have to be paid back. The question remains: in what form and when. A *khadroma* from Dawu was sure that this money brings trouble<sup>29</sup>:

If a family earns 50 000, 60 000 or 100 000 yuan from *yartsa*, it will definitely face problems. Someone in the family will pass away or the livestock will die. I don't

know why. Maybe among *yartsa* there is something what belongs to the *zhibdag* and people take it away?

- 22 Opinions that all caterpillar fungus belongs to the *zhibdag* were rare. If they described reality, the diggers would have a choice either to stop digging the fungus or to live in a constant fear of punishment. This fear should be the bigger the more unclear is the extent of the *zhibdag*'s property rights to the fungus and this, as the quote above suggests, is not entirely clear even to a person familiar with the world of territorial deities<sup>30</sup>. While it is clear that caterpillar fungus digging does not stop in spite of risks associated with it, it is worth asking what measures can be taken to mitigate its consequences and minimise the risks. To prevent misfortunes people seek divination about where and when they can safely go digging. They also buy *düpa* (*mdud pa*) and *shunkor* (*srung 'khor*) amulets which help averting the *zhibdag*'s anger. These are preventive measures which either offer guidance or protection during work. But are there any steps which can be taken *post factum* when the caterpillar fungus money is already in people's pockets?
- 23 The income from caterpillar fungus has made the pastoralists less dependent on pastoral production. They adjusted to the new situation by breeding fewer sheep and reducing the sale of dairy and other products. They also reduced the number of yaks sold for commercial slaughter<sup>31</sup>. During the period of my research, households selling ten or more yaks per year were a minority. Most sold several or none, arguing that they did not have fully grown animals or referring to Buddhist ideals of compassion and a concept of *digpa*:
- Compassion is a traditional feature of Tibetan culture, and we shouldn't kill animals. It's our lifestyle that makes us kill yaks. But at least we don't have to sell them [to be killed].
- We have money, so we don't have to sell yaks. We're trying to eat less meat and more vegetables and *tsampa*<sup>32</sup>. It's a *digpa*, after all.
- 24 This was the second occasion when *digpa* appeared in discussions with the pastoralists about their economic practices. In the quotation above, the speaker recognised a correlation between his financial status and a decision not to sell yaks or, in other words, refrain from committing a *digpa*. "We can afford keeping yaks", as other people said implying that it was economic necessity which forced them to sell yaks before. Now, having income from other sources, they can cut or "trim" these branches of pastoral production which are not essential for their economic survival or for other reasons not preferred. The same logic applies to slaughtering yaks for domestic consumption. With cash at hand and a car or motorcycle in front of the door, the pastoralists can go shopping in town: "We can buy everything now. We don't need to kill so many yaks anymore", as one man stated.
- 25 The pastoralists' decision to sell fewer yaks can be interpreted in different ways. Gaerrang, in his study of the anti-slaughter movement in Hongyuan, showed how pastoralists took oaths to reduce or stop the sale of livestock for three or more years<sup>33</sup>. He argued that by doing it, they challenged the state vision of development with its stress on commercial production. Instead, they fostered an alternative vision "based on their own understanding of the world and value system" and which "contests and compromises capitalist development" (Gaerrang 2011, pp. 32, 41). Such interpretation would be incorrect in Golog, whose inhabitants relaxed their ties with the market, but only of pastoral products. This was possible because they strengthened their ties with the market *via* caterpillar fungus. Their decision to refrain from selling yaks did not imply a renunciation of commercial activities. On the contrary, it was a commercial success which allowed it. They could manifest their religious sentiments by not selling yaks because

they were financially secure and giving up part of their income did not threaten their financial stability.

- 26 The material prosperity brought by the caterpillar fungus economy created conditions that have allowed pastoralists to decide not to sell yaks for commercial slaughter. However, this decision should not be seen as a mere consequence of affluence in a society where pastoralists *have* money. It connects to the question *what* kind of money it is. If it comes from caterpillar fungus, as is the case in Golog, this money is bound to create problems and it is the pastoralists' concern to decide how to avoid negative consequences. The decision not to sell yaks can be interpreted as a manifestation of an "economy of sinning". This denotes a mechanism of thinking which makes people measure their economic actions according to their positive or negative value or *digpa* they create, and balance its account. In this particular case, the pastoralists reduce the sale of yaks to abattoirs, a practice which is ethically negative, while engaging in another activity which is negative or at least potentially negative: digging caterpillar fungus. Thus, they minimise their *digpa* accrued from the field of pastoral production to compensate for its growing account in another field: of the caterpillar fungus economy. My informants often said they can *financially* afford keeping yaks instead of selling them. They could perhaps add that they *cannot* afford selling yaks when their engagement in the caterpillar fungus economy makes their position volatile and exposes them to sometimes difficult to predict negative effects. The concept of the economy of sinning reveals a link between the economic and the religious and shows that these domains are not necessarily mutually exclusive.
- 27 The decision not to sell yaks for slaughter has to be analysed in its economic setting and this setting, in regions such as Golog, is shaped by the caterpillar fungus economy. It relates to this economy in two ways. First of all, participation in this economy creates ethical problems and risks caused by offending territorial gods. It also calls for compensation which would reduce these effects. Secondly, it brings income which facilitates such a compensation. It thus both contributes to the pastoralists' problems and helps them find a solution.

## Risk fields

- 28 Crossing the lines dividing safe caterpillar fungus digging from that associated with danger, people enter "risk fields" in which their every move can have serious consequences. In my informants' perceptions, the above two fields differ in two practical aspects: the timing and spatial scope of consequences associated with the digging of caterpillar fungus. The first difference consists in whether these consequences are expected to manifest themselves in the near future, *i.e.* during the digger's lifetime, or in a more distant one, such as during his/her next lives. The second difference consists in whether they are likely to affect only the digger or other people, including his/her relatives and a bigger community. In the case of digging on *zhibdag* mountains, a person affects not only his/her situation but that of a larger group. Thus, a *private* person's actions can bring consequences experienced on a *public* level, by people who were not involved in these actions or had no knowledge of them. In the second case, that of digging the fungus on *düchen* days, the digger does not create much risk for the community and his/her actions remains more of a *private* matter.

29 These two types of risk fields differ in their perspective, which is either spatially broad and community inclusive or longitudinally open and future-oriented. They entail two different kinds of responsibility and generate different conflicts. In the first case, pursuing individual gain conflicts with the community interest and in the second with the interest of individuals-to-be. As can be expected, social control in the first case is stronger than in the second. This control can take shape in direct actions or be internalised and manifest itself either in stronger self-control or lack of outspokenness on the topic. Because it is community wellbeing which is at stake, it is the community who takes measures to hinder the access to *zhibdag* mountains and punish those who are caught there. Cases of such punishment are rarely spoken about, but they were documented by Namkhai Norbu who wrote that people caught violating the ban on digging caterpillar fungus were “savagely beaten” (1997, p. 68). It is clear that the diggers should fear not only punishment meted out by the *zhibdag*, but by people: the violence of the *zhibdag*’s reaction can be taken as a metaphor for the human one. But there is little willingness, both on the individual level and that of the community, to admit that cases of digging caterpillar fungus do take place on *zhibdag* mountains. While my informants agreed that there are people among them who go digging on *düchen* days, there was almost none who admitted that this happens on *zhibdag* mountains. It would be unrealistic to claim that it never happens, but the fault is delegated to the outside of the community so that the home community’s good image can be preserved.

## Conclusion

30 The caterpillar fungus economy offered the pastoralists in regions such as Golog a chance of improving their financial situation and it has brought economic empowerment that is likely to continue in the coming years. However, engaging in this economy, people create numerous risks, which can impact their life in the immediate term, and over a longer duration. Moreover, wealth accumulated from this economy is not considered value neutral. Engaging in this economy and building their material prosperity on it put the pastoralists in a sort of moral quandary from which they are trying to find an exit to define or re-define their activities and find compensation for them. This kind of conflict between norms and social practice is an integral part of the human condition and social life. What makes the caterpillar fungus economy special is the scale of conflict generated: digging caterpillar fungus is not a sideline economic activity bringing subsidiary income, but now a fundamental aspect of the pastoralists’ economic life.

31 So who placed caterpillar fungus on a *laptse* on the mountain pass on the road to Chamahe? Maybe it was one of those few pastoralists who still lived there, but came to Domkhog to dig the fungus and placed it on the pass when going back home? Was this act meant to serve as paying toll for a safe passage through the mountain pass or a sort of tax paid on the export of caterpillar fungus from the township? Was it a symbolic gesture of returning something what was unrightfully taken from the land or an attempt at warding off misfortune? There is no conclusive answer. But since people’s motives are often difficult to disentangle, maybe it was all that at the same time.

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## NOTES

1. Tibetan terms are given in their approximate pronunciation, followed by transliteration with the Turell Wylie's system.

2. Consumption and construction boom has been also observed in the context of matsutake economy (Hathaway 2014), which noted a similar boom development, brilliantly described by Alai (1997) and Tsing (2015).

3. My research in 2014 showed a decline on the caterpillar fungus market linked to the anti-corruption campaign launched in 2012. This decline and people's response to it will allow observing longer lasting effects of the boom.

4. Tibetan verb is *kuwa* (*rko ba*). I refer to digging instead of "collecting" or "gathering" the fungus in this article.

5. A motif of a fog repeats itself e.g. in conversations with a *khadroma* from Dawu who said she is often called by diggers lost in a fog and asking for help in finding directions. As Dan Smyer Yü observes from his research in Amnye Machen area, the fog is more than a meteorological event and can be seen as "willed and manipulated by both supernatural beings and humans" (2015, p. 34).

6. On Amnye Machen as a pilgrimage site, cf. Buffetrille 1997, 2003.

7. *Dewa* (*sde ba*) and *tsowa* (*tsho ba*) denote units of socio-political organisation in Tibetan pastoral societies, which have been commonly translated as "tribes". However, this translation is criticised (e.g. Sneath 2007) and has been avoided here.

8. On Mongolian place names in Golog, cf. Sulek 2014b.

9. The mine in Derni (Dhi gnas) valley in vicinity of the mountain exploits gold, cobalt, silver, copper and other non-ferrous metals. Many of my informants used it as a confirmation of the accuracy of their knowledge about localisation of mineral resources.

10. Amnye Wayin is a male *zhibdag* (*gzhi bdag*). *Zhibdags* can also be female, such as Lama Norlha (cf. below).

11. In both examples, the diggers come from Rebkong (*Reb kong*) County, Malho (*Rma lho*) TAP, Qinghai.

12. *Yartsa*, abbreviation of *yartsa gunbu* (*dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*), a Tibetan name of caterpillar fungus.

13. A fumigation offering made with juniper twigs by lay members of the community, in Golog only men, cf. Samten Karmay 1998a, 1998b.

14. A good example comes from Melvyn Goldstein and Cynthia Beall who describe a hunter whose wife suddenly died : her death was interpreted as a punishment for the man's hunting game animals for profit (1990, p. 127).
15. Huber also observed that hunters poached on mountains belonging to other communities because "any wrath of the gods was much more likely to fall on the local community than on them" (2004, p. 143).
16. On *bchud* cf. Gerke (2012) and Da Col (2012) who translates *sabchud* as "fertility".
17. "Chinese" translates *Rjami* (*rgya mi*), a term applied to Han, but also other non-Tibetans. This broader meaning should be kept in mind when analysing this statement.
18. *Yulbdag* (*yul bdag*) refers to *yulha*. *Sabdag* (*sa bdag*) are yet other beings associated with more localised natural features, such as rocks, stones and small areas of land. People are often unclear about their location what makes dealings with them more complicated.
19. Tibetans conceive caterpillar fungus as a plant, and particularly as a "grass". This category designates for them "all the various common wild plants with narrow green leaves that are of little dimension and flexible nature, that are fixed to the ground by means of underground structures, and that are eaten by yaks and sheep" (Boesi 2014, p. 13).
20. On this moral quandary cf. Yeh & Kunga Lama (2013) and the insightful article by Hyytiäinen (2011), whose informant, a tantrist (*sngags pa*), says that the very problem with the caterpillar fungus digging is that a digger never knows "whether the caterpillar is actually dead or not" (2011, p. 31).
21. A good example comes from Drango (*Brag 'go*) County, Kamdze (*Dkar mdzes*) TAP where breeding pigs has been condemned by local monasteries as done solely for meat. In result, pig production declined, depriving the residents of an important source of subsistence. Danba Darje, personal communication September 2014.
22. *Sngags pa*, a non-monastic tantric religious practitioner. In this case, a former pastoralist who stayed with his family but devoted himself to religious practice.
23. *Droma* (*gro ma*), *Argentina anserina*, eaten as a delicacy with rice, yoghurt and in other meals.
24. Nagchu (Nag chu), county in a prefecture of the same name in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).
25. Cf. Yeh & Kunga Lama 2013. Less attention has been given to other factors : education, marital status and access to other income. There is also no data about differences in approach to the topic by men and women.
26. On monks and nuns digging the fungus cf. Boesi & Cardi 2009 ; Yeh & Kunga Lama 2013 ; Schneider 2013, p. 134. My observation confirms monks' involvement in trade : their status helped them gain trust of customers. I have also observed people offering the fungus as payment for religious services.
27. This agrees with Hyytiäinen's observations from Repkong (2011, p. 31).
28. Golog is estimated to produce 8-9 tons of caterpillar fungus per year. Its total production capacity exceeds 23 tons (Li *et al.* 2010, p. 32).
29. *Khadroma* (*mkha' 'gro ma*), a female religious specialist independent of monastic institutions whose powers transcend usual experience and who offers divination in all sorts of life problems.
30. Woodhouse *et al.* (2015, p. 301) show how unsure about the boundaries of the *zhibdag's* territories people can be, cf. this article also for a discussion of a negotiation of moral dilemmas connected to digging the fungus.
31. The phenomenon of "disappearing sheep" is analysed in Sulek 2010.
32. *Tsampa* (*rtsam pa*), roasted barley four.
33. County in Ngawa (Rnga ba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article explores the entangled relations between the economic and religious in the lives of pastoralists in the region of Golog, north-eastern Tibet. It examines the example of an economy based on a medicinal resource called caterpillar fungus (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*). It asks how compatible this economy is with the religious domain of the lives of people who engage in it. It reveals where the conflict zones are and shows them as opening the field of possibilities for human agency in minimising their effects. It proposes an “economy of sinning” as a conceptual tool to analyse pastoralists’ decisions made in various (religious and economic) domains and shows how interdependent these domains are.

Cet article explore les relations intriquées entre le religieux et l'économique dans la vie des pasteurs nomades de la région de Golog, plateau tibétain du nord-est. Il examine l'exemple d'une économie basée sur une ressource médicinale appelée cordyceps (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*). Il pose la question de la compatibilité de cette économie avec la vie religieuse des gens qui s'y livrent. Il révèle où se situent les zones de conflit et montre comment celles-ci ouvrent un champ de possibilités pour l'action humaine en minimisant leurs effets. Il propose une « économie de péchés » comme un outil conceptuel pour analyser les décisions des pasteurs nomades dans divers domaines (religieux et économiques) et montre l'interdépendance de ces domaines.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Tibet, Chine, pasteurs nomades, cordyceps, bouddhisme, divinité, péché

**Keywords:** Tibet, China, pastoralist, caterpillar fungus, Buddhism, deity, sin

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