

## THE PLAY OF THE SHEEP

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The play of the sheep is about a quarrel. It is performed by two discursive positions --a corrupt mayor and his recalcitrant village community. The quarrel costs the lives of some of the villagers. I shall describe the main characters, tell of the cause of their conflict and relate the way they carried out their quarrel. Two non-human actors play a main role in these events: a sheep and a *yul lha*.

### The Stage

The village of Phijor<sup>1</sup> lies in a steep ravine in the Dolpo (*dol po*) province in north-western Nepal. The thirty or so houses which make up the village are inhabited by Tibetans belonging either to *rnying ma pa* or to *bon*. The pronounced local *yul lha* cult is typical for Tibetan regions situated on the outskirts of governmental authority. The most important *yul lha*, called *smug po ron* is worshipped by Buddhists and Bön disciples together.

Until the eighteenth century, Dolpo had to pay taxes. The internal political organisation was left to the inhabitants of Dolpo. When *smon thang* was conquered by the Gorkhas, Dolpa was

<sup>1</sup> Snellgrove transcribes "Phijor" "*bi cher*" (1992, 2), or "*phyi mtsher*" (1981,282). A locally written text (cf. this paper) spells the village "*byi geer*". This spelling corresponds to the founding myth of the place, according to which a lama shot an arrow from a mountain pass and founded the village on the very spot where his arrow had speared a mouse.

incorporated into the state of Nepal. On the village-level the original political structure remained unchanged throughout all periods of integration into superior political circumstances. At the head of each village stands a "mayor" (*gras po*), in whose hands the administration and the jurisdiction of the village rest. This position is heritable.

I shall narrate the play mainly in thematic categories. In order to facilitate the understanding of the narrative, I shall explain some of the background, such as which religious concepts justify the mayor's authority, what the sheep stands for and who the *yul lha* actually is.

"When the people are not happy, the God is not happy" (*mi ma dga' na lha ma dga'*) --"When the people quarrel with each other, the God is angry with them" (*mi 'khrugs na lha 'khrugs*). So say the people of the village of Phijor.

### The Actors

#### The God

The God Mukparong (*smug po rong*) referred to in the above-mentioned proverbs, is embodied in a steep mountain at the valley head. Oral tradition tells, the God came here with the immigration of the first family from Tibet as the protector (*pho lha*) of their lineage (*brgyud*). After his arrival he chose a mountain as the manifestation of his being. Since then it has been the spiritual centre of the settlement area. With the arrival of other patrilinear clans (*rus*), the connotation of the mountain changed from 'lineage God' (*pho lha*) to "God of the territory" (*yul lha*). At the adoration ceremonies (*yul lha gsol, lha bsangs*) for the mountain deity, the Lama recites a locally

drawn up text with the title *lha btsan smug po rong gi bsang(s) mchod bzhugs so*.

To present the god I shall mention synoptically a few passages from this text. Here Mukparong appears as a white being, his head adorned with multicoloured silk, the colour of his body is white and clear, he shimmers like light on a glass. His body radiates the colours of the rainbow, the sun and the moon circle above his head. All the glory and prosperity of the universe are united in him. The importance of worldly things pales beside him.

The god described in this fashion is endowed with almost human character traits in the interpretation of the villagers. One informant described him as "... resembling a child, capricious and greedy. When he receives something, he is full of joy. But he can get angry just as easily." The text then tells the god of the sacrifices presented to him by his worshippers such as bee honey made of turquoise, medical sacrifices, precious barley and milk, yaks, sheep and goats, their blood and meat all the good-looking sacrificial substances and the sheep of god (*lha lug*). When the god is thus supplied with sacrifices, he can be asked for a favour in return. Referring to this subject the text goes back to the mythological story of the Lama, who entered into a relationship with the mountain god by magic. The god is told never to stray from the activities appointed to him. Since *bla ma yang ston rgyal mchan rin chen*<sup>2</sup>

and all the other late high Lamas instructed him, with whatever orders and statements they gave, Mukporong will never forget it and do what he was told to do.

What is expected from the mountain god? In the text the list of sacrifices is immediately followed by requests: may it rain in time and may the harvest be rich and the animals multiply, may the age of sickness and drought be banished. May he prolong the lives of the aged and strengthen the activities of the young. The enemies, who are filled with envy and the demonic powers (*gnod pa'i bgegs*), whoever wants to do harm, may he bring them under his control (*dpang*) and crush them to dust in doing so.

The mountain and the protection it grants are the preconditions for settlement in a certain area. It grants fertility and protection from demons, whose only intention is to harm the humans.

#### *The First Lama*

The Lama, whose encounter with the god is mentioned in the text, also plays an important part in the founding history of the village. Lama *yang ston rgyal chen rin chen* founded a dependency of his home monastery. In oral tradition the foundation of this monastery is accompanied by miraculous deeds. Relying on his magic powers the Lama could dare to engage the capricious mountain deity Mukparong in a duel. As was to be expected the Lama kept the upper hand. Up to this point the protection of the god had only applied to the line which had brought him here. Now the Lama succeeded in expanding the deity's patronage to everyone

<sup>2</sup> This Lama came from the *ya ngal* family, who were residents of *klu brag*, a village of southern *glo*, in the Kaligandaki village. In the 12th century, he was brought here to Dolpo from *stag rtse*, by his uncle, the celibate Bon lama *bla ma sngags pa*, to found a lama lineage in *byi gcer*. He is regarded as the founder of the *bsam gling* monastery (Snellgrove, 1967, 4-5).

settling in this area. In return the *yul lha* was offered regular worshipping and a large number of sacrifices.

In connection with the mountain cult, the Lama also laid down the village's structure of power once and for all. In addition to the ownership of the Samling monastery which he had founded, he also assigned the position of village Lama to his direct successors. The regular worship of the *yul lha* is his responsibility.

### *The Mayor*

But the approach to the "supreme protector" was not exclusively reserved to the village Lama. The first-born son of each generation, from the line which had brought the mountain as its lineage protector (*pho lha*), was appointed as the "treasurer (*phyag mdzod*) of the mountain. While *phyag mdzod* designates the head of the economic department of a monastery, on the village-political level the role of "treasurer" for the god is expressed by the position of "mayor" (*gras po*). He has the power to administer justice in cases of litigation among the villagers and impose (financial) sanctions. He is the preserver of all documents concerning the village. Thus, he keeps all the records on real estate and tax assessment. Beyond the authority directly assigned to him through his position, it also endows him with a great amount of prestige. Thus the mayor's voice carries great weight and cannot be ignored in the decision-making process at assemblies.

The villagers attach certain moral expectations to the mayor's power. He is supposed to keep social harmony in the village. "When the people are happy, the god is happy", as the say goes.

"Happiness" is used as a synonym for the term "harmony" (*mthun pa*) which is equally applied. The concept of "harmony" is best explained by its antonym "defilement by conflict" (*'khon grib*). "Defilement by conflict" designates a state of broken social order or refers to a smouldering quarrel between individuals. When a society lives in such a state the god turns his back on them. With this the way is open for the constantly pressing powers of evil, not only to harm the individual but the whole society. Thus the preservation of "harmony" is the key to safeguarding the social life. And the mayor plays the most decisive role in this safeguarding.

Apart from the political functions the first Lama also charged the "treasurer" with ritual performances. He too must keep the mountain deity in a good mood by performing a quarterly adoration ritual (*yul lha gsol*).

### *The Sheep*

The mayor is the one and only person who can sacrifice the "sheep of God" (*lha lug*) to the *yul lha* as it is told in the text. The live animal is handed over to the god and is well-tended to his glory. The sheep must be jointly paid for by the entire village community and handed over to the "mayor", who will then "set it free" in the course of an adoration ceremony for the mountain god. Should a "sheep of god" perish, it must be replaced as soon as possible.

At the end of the description of the spiritual stage and the actors of the "story of the sheep", I would like to draw a brief summary of the most important points. The mountain god and his

demands draw a picture for the information of the people of Phijor and for the creation of their social conditions. These will be based on the moral demand for the avoidance of "defilement by conflict". In the regularly recurring ritual of "setting free the sheep", the villagers present themselves to the mountain god as a society in harmony.

### *The Story*

With the description of the spiritual construct of society, I have evoked an image of Phijor as a harmonious world, protected by a benevolent mountain god. And yet it was just the one, who plays a particular role in the creation of an harmonious society who destroys this image.

It is said of the last mayor that his judicial decisions were always passed for the benefit of his friends and relatives. Also, he very often imposed extremely excessive fines. For example, at one time villagers kept animals of relatives from other villages on pastures, which were actually reserved only for animals belonging to residents of Phijor. As one villager put it, "the problem was that the grass in our pastures was so high. But still the sanctions he imposed were much higher than the actual value of the grass. Everybody grumbled, but they all paid up." The mayor often embezzled the fines he collected instead of using them for community projects such as the construction of roads, the maintenance of the irrigation system or the enlargement of the monastery library. Time and again the mayor's biased judgements were the cause of new quarrels and discord in the village. And the old conflicts remained unsettled. In

all of these cases the mayor was never alone on the winning side. The profits resulting from the abuse of power were always shared by its buyer and seller.

For a long time the mayor's shady dealings were covered by the cloak of a purported harmony. This lasted until it became known that funds remitted to Phijor by the Nepalese government for "the development of very underdeveloped areas" were vanishing into the mayor's pockets. Now the village community unanimously began to revolt against the mayor. And they were intent on action. But how to do so? The use of force promised no solution, as the reaction of the *yul lha* would have been terrible. But it was only a few weeks later than an opportunity should arise. The "mayor" is responsible for the well-being and protection of the "sheep of god" (*lha lug*). The last two sheep had not survived their first year as the property of the god. A new sheep had to be chosen for the god. The mayor said that he owned a sheep himself which would be well-suited for the mountain deity. Some of the villagers also claimed to own sheep of a pure white with a reddish head, which would fulfil the requirements. The mayor chose one from his own flock. The villagers paid the price and the mayor set the sheep free. Shortly thereafter he complained to the villagers that the price he had been paid had actually been too low and demanded more money.

Now for the first time, the villagers refused to comply with the mayor's orders. They did not pay him anything else. A short time later this sheep perished, too. It was to be the last one. In an assembly some villagers of high standing decided that, for the time being, no one should talk to the mayor about another sheep. The

village community decided to depict the disharmony in their society. They did not want to continue acting as if everything were in perfect order. By withholding the sheep from the god, who was in fact entitled to it, the villagers conveyed the impression of appealing directly to the god as a superior authority, as if they were saying: "Look down upon us, but bear in mind who caused the conflict!"

With their actions the villagers did not question the order which had been broken or revolt against it. They did not act against the institution of the mayor as such, but again the actions of an individual, who had exploited his position for his own personal interests. In doing so, they used a form of expression of this order to return it to its original balance. The system itself defined the form of its own deviance.

The altercations between the mayor and the villagers almost always took place on an informal basis, with a few exceptions where a direct verbal confrontation occurred. Before the escalation of the conflict a direct discourse was usually avoided. In the last phase it was completely denied. Information was transmitted on the level of gossip (*rgyab bshad*). Literally the expression which is rendered here as "gossip" means "speech from behind". Such speech alone could already be regarded as the cause for illness. The mayor was informed about the process of public volition. He was aware that the villagers knew about the government funds he had embezzled and that they would not give him another sheep, as long as he did not hand over the money for the benefit of the village. Thus the villagers were offering him a last opportunity to settle the conflict. But he did not use it, quite to the contrary. He even went one step

further in the altercation. In doing so, he chose the same level the village had entered upon. On the roof of his house he performed one of the quarterly adoration ceremonies (*yul lha gsol*) for the mountain god. Apart from myself, an ethnologist, who at that time did not know anything about the conflict, there were also some itinerant craftsmen present, who were manufacturing boots for him. In the interview about the ritual the mayor emphasised its importance for the prosperity of his own line. He referred to the god, to whom the ritual was directed, as the protector (*pho lha*) of his own line. The presence of the itinerant craftsmen provided a guarantee for the propagation of the proceedings.

When I returned to Phijor a year later I believed at first that an epidemic of tuberculosis or a similar disease had struck the village. But soon the atmosphere in the village made me realise that things were different --the conflicts had started to enter into the bodies of the people. The *yul lha* had become the judge in this conflict. In this he followed the existing codes, the village was stricken by disease and death. The inhabitants of Phijor ascribed the many cases of illness to the mountain god. It was only in their village that so many people had fallen ill, not so in the neighbouring villages. Thus it had to be the wrath of the mountain. The mayor's family was the worst affected. He himself was seriously ill for a long time. He hoped to be healed in a hospital in Kathmandu. But getting there meant a six-day journey on foot. Weakened by his illness he had to give up and return on the second day. A few days later he died. Soon after his elder son also died, the younger one fell seriously ill. A daughter of the village Lama

died too. He is the mayor's mother's brother and in the "speeches from behind" he was often mentioned as being an accomplice to his nephew's misdemeanours. Thus it is not surprising that he stands alone in blaming the village as the only guilty party in the present state of affairs. Everyone else in the village says the diseases are caused by the mountain god due to the mayor's deeds and the quarrels in the village.

How did the story continue?

The consensus of the village was that the *yul lha* had to be placated. And he had to receive his sheep. One of the village spokesmen asked the Lama of the village monastery to perform a great ceremony for the mountain god. At least one family member from each house in the village attended this adoration ritual. Everyone contributed to the proceedings with their obligatory donations. In the monastery kitchen a meal was prepared from the contributions of flour and butter for all the participants. The question of the sheep proved to be somewhat more difficult. The village had provided an animal and wanted it to be set free as soon as possible. But there simply was not anyone left alive, who could have performed the ritual according to the ideal order. The only surviving son of the mayor was too young to carry out the ceremony. The problem was solved by the brother of the deceased, who performed the ritual proceedings. Their effectiveness and their acceptance by the *yul lha* was guaranteed through the presence of the mayor's young son. As soon as he is old enough, he will take up the duties which his father had so irresponsibly neglected. The villagers say that there

is no need to lose another word about the story of the sheep --the mayor is dead and the mountain has its sheep.

There are two aspects of the play which I wish to emphasize: When I saw all the sick people in Phijor I had met a year before in good health, I asked myself, who is responsible for this --the mayor, community, or both? Who caused the problems? Is the common notion of, what we may call "morality" threatened, so that the survival of society is in danger? The villagers have chosen an overt form of moral deviance to answer the mayor's covert form of amoral activities. They all had known what might be the outcome of the story. In the state of general disruption this is what eventually really happened. The events confirmed the "conception of life" or *Weltbild*. I shall not attempt to answer the question of whether morals really need deviances and infringements for their existence. Certainly in Phijor the play of the sheep had provided a new vital impulse for the morals. Even if it is too late for so many.

The second reason to think about the whole issue lies more in the scholarly domain. Here, too, I do not want to give any solutions but open a question for discussion. Can such models derived out of local expertise at the peripheries of a central state provide insights about the centre's inner genesis? The sources tell us very little about the social system of ancient Tibet before the first kingdom. The blurred picture which we have of this time shows small, independent clan principalities, settling in clearly defined areas. The ideal centre of their world was a mountain as the abode of the ancestor and the "soul-mountain" (*bla ri*) of the lineage and the clan. The special access to the veneration of the mountain legitimised a position of

power in the society (Tucci, 1949; Stein, 1981). In the last scene of the play we have seen the *yul lha* venerated in the Buddhist monastery of the village and not in the private chapel of the mayor. Will the son of the deceased still be in power then? Or will the monastery finally take over this religious service and claim the social positions intrinsically linked to it? Or will the democratically elected representative of the Nepalese state take over the political influence in the village? At the close of the *yul lha* ceremony in the monastery the elected representative of the Democratic Party interrupted the ritual performance to announce to the assembled village community that from now on all the monetary aid from the government would be used for the intended purposes and not disappear in the pockets of notorious persons.

For the answers to all these questions we have to wait for a few more years. The structures of today's political system and ideological concepts would allow the run of Phijor's history in different directions.

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