DEATH CUSTOMS IN LADAKH*

Martin Brauen
Zürich

As the Ladakhi death ceremonies are largely identical to those of Tibet, about which much has already been written, this article will confine itself to dealing with questions peculiar to the ceremonies of Ladakh.

There is one striking difference between the death ceremonies of Ladakh and those of Tibet: with few exceptions in Ladakh all corpses are burned. The exceptions are people who died in epidemics and children who were not yet eight years old (other informants say twelve) at the time of death.

If a very young child dies "before it has cut its first teeth"[1] and if an astrologer *dbon-po* deems it necessary, the child's corpse is placed in a small box and walled up in the parents' house. This takes place whenever the astrologer determines that the family's good fortune *g-yang* (or *g-yang*) is strongly connected with that of the dead child. If the child's corpse is interred in the wall, the family in question retains its good fortune.[2] Usually, however, the corpse of a child who is younger than eight or twelve is deposited on a hill in a box which has been strewn with salt or it is buried under a stone; sometimes it is even thrown in a river. A *bla ma* makes a sacrifice for this purpose, says a prayer and gives the children who are present rolls (*phu li*), roasted barley, etc. which are called the children's meal.[3]

When someone dies, the *pha spun*[4] of the deceased are informed first. They in

---

*This article appeared (in German) in the book *Feste in Ladakh*, Akademicsche Druck-und Verlagsanstalt, Graz 1980.

1 Asboe 1932:66

2 According to Asboe this custom is done in the hope that the soul of the deceased child will re-enter its mother's womb and that its ghost will protect the inmates of the house from further molestation by evil spirits. Asboe 1932:66

3 According to Ribbach 1940:211

4 According to the research I conducted in Ladakh, *pha spun* are members of several households which are more or less close to one another and which form a group based on certain reciprocal rights and obligations, the worship of a common guardian deity *(pha lha)* and the possession of a common cremating oven *(spur khang)*. Such *pha spun* groups are comprised of from two to ten households; usually, however, there are between four to six. With few exceptions, every household belongs to a *pha-spun* group.

turn advise an astrologer and a monk and arrange for them to come to the house of the dead person. First the astrologer is commissioned to work out a death horoscope; the monk's task is to return to the body the 'soul' or the consciousness (*rnam shes*) which escaped at the time of death. If he is successful the corpse becomes warm again and blood flows from the nose.[5] The same monk then tears a handful of hair from the corpse's scalp, thus allowing the 'soul' to leave the body for the second time—this time, however, under the monk's control; a small opening in the scalp has been created by ripping out the hair and it is through this opening that it leaves the body. If the soul does leave the body through this opening, it can penetrate to the Buddha Amitâbha, conceived to be on the head of the deceased, through the spinal nerve and can go directly to Amitâbha's paradise. Were this ceremony, called *'pho ba gdab ces* or *'pho ba 'debs pa*, not to be performed, the 'soul' would depart through other openings in the body, which could have a deleterious effect on its future. The monk in charge of conducting this important rite is given alms, called *'pho yon*, for his religious services.

Until the ceremony has been completed the deceased's spouse is not allowed to leave the house and, except for the monk conducting the ceremony, no one should touch the corpse either. For a whole month the spouse of the deceased is not allowed to leave the house and must eat and drink from his or her own dishes; neither is the partner allowed to touch other eating and cooking utensils nor come in contact with the hearth.[6] If he or she does go out, the spouse is not to cross a stream or go into the fields, if it is summer.[7] Nowadays, these rules are not everywhere observed as stictly.

When the *'pho ba gdab ces* ceremony has been completed, the deceased, who has been placed in a foetal position, is wrapped in a shroud (*ro ras*), apparently to make it easier to cremate the corpse later. This job is carried out by *pha spun* as only they are allowed to touch the body at this point. Then the head is drawn towards the knees with a rope and the hands are laid in front of the face in such a manner that the tips of the little fingers are resting in the nostrils while the other fingers cover the eyes.[8] If the body is already stiff before it is tied together, the bones must be broken.

For a more detailed description of the *pha spun* see Brauen 1980. (1) : 23-29, Brauen 1980 (2), Dargyay 1980 : 113 and Prince Peter-1956.

[5] According to Ramsey (1980 : 26) "it is considered a very happy sign, if by the time the reading is finished, any blood has come from the nose of the corpse, as proving that the spirit ... of the deceased has entered paradise .."

[6] See also Asboe (1932:67) who reports the same for Manchat.

[7] See also Ribbach 1940:214

[8] Nowadays the corpse is usually arranged in this position the night before.

Ceremonies for the Welfare of the Deceased

The Ladakhi death ceremonies are conducted by both monks and an astrologer who carries out his own rites in a separate room. These rites can last between 4 and 10 days, sometimes even more depending on the wealth of the deceased—rich families can finance more elaborate ceremonies—, the calculations of the astrologer and the time of the year since in winter a corpse can be kept at home longer than in summer. The monks' rites are conducted in the cult room of the house where the body is also sometimes kept. Usually, however, the corpse is locked in an adjoining room. A burning butter lamp together with food and drink are set in front of the body to please the deceased and they remain there until the corpse is removed from the house.

The rites are performed in accordance with the preferred manner of the school to which the monks belong. All the death ceremonies performed by the clergy are concerned with making the deceased aware that he or she has left the body and must now be prepared to behave fearlessly when faced with the various gods who will appear in visions. This is not the place to discuss these interesting texts and rites in detail: they are very comprehensive and this subject has already been extensively treated in the literature available, nor do they actually belong to the folk-religious rites discussed here.[9]

The ceremonies to be conducted by the *dbon po* depend on the calculations he has made.

The data used as a basis for the calculations of these death horoscopes in a case I observed were, according to the attending astrologer, as follows: the exact time of death (time of day, day of the week, date, "moon-houses",[10] month, year), the year of birth of the deceased and his or her *spar kha* could be defined according to Das as "Mystical marks on tortoise-shell from which the Chinese are said to have derived their knowledge of divination" (A Tib-Eng Dic. p. 798). On the basis of this data and his astrological books, the *dbon po* was able to clarify the following questions:

Did the deceased die prematurely, that is, before his time and if so, what can be done about it?

When will he or she be reborn and what must be done to insure that this kind of rebirth actually comes about?

---

9 See the books of Evans-Wentz; Ch. Trungpa and F. Fremantle, E. & L. Dargyay, etc.

10 In order to determine the positions of the planets within the framework of the calculating astronomy, the moon's orbit is divided into 28 houses *(rgyu skar)*. See D. Schuh: Zur Geschichte der tibetischen Kalenderrechnung, Wiesbaden 1973.

What was the deceased thinking about at the moment of death and which rites are necessary to "neutralize" any negative thoughts?

In the aforementioned case the astrologer decided that for the welfare of the deceased and his family the following rites were to be conducted by the *dbon po* personally during the time in which the corpse was in the house of the deceased: the *brgya bzhi*, the *bstan 'dos*, the *dgra bzlog*, the *mgo gsum* and the *dur kha cho ga* ceremonies.

Another important duty of the astrologer is that of determining the day on which the body should be removed from the house and burned. Of the 28 "moon-houses", the following are considered inauspicious: the 4th, 5th and 16th houses; the days Wednesday, Saturday and Tuesday and the dates 9th, 19th and 29th as well as the 8th, 18th and 28th day.[11] The astrologer is paid about six rupees a day for his services and is allowed to keep the barley used to conduct the various rites. Furthermore, the astrologer as well as the native doctors are supported during the planting and harvesting of the crops by the respective households for services rendered on behalf of the village inhabitants.

Visits

As soon as the relatives, friends and neighbours hear of the death of one of their number, they look up the family, take them tea or beer and console the immediate kin. The *pha spun* of the deceased—at least one member per *pha spun*-family—go to the house of the deceased where they help by arranging for the ceremonies as well as by cooking and serving. The day on which the corpse is to be removed from the house and burned, two *pha spun* from each family belonging to the same *pha spun*-group, usually a man and a woman, are required as there is much to be done on this day because of the large number of visitors. The relatives are served inside, the male relatives in a room next to the cult room; the female relatives are in the kitchen where sobbing, they, noisily recite mantras and sing a kind of dirge praising the positive traits of the deceased and lamenting his or her death. Relatives who have come from far away are seated in a special room and are served better food than the other guests.

The deceased's immediate relatives and their families are responsible for providing room and board for all the monks, visitors and helpers and sometimes even for paying the monks a small fee. Beginning with the day of death and continuing until the cremation, this duty is carried out by a different family in the following order:

Relatives living in the household of the deceased;

Children of the deceased living outside the house: each

---

11 According to Ribbach (1940:224) the lst and 30th day are inauspicious whereas 5th, 7th, 15th, 17th, 25th, and 27th are favourable.

of the children and his or her family is responsible for one day;
Brothers and sisters of the deceased living outside the house,
each sibling and his family is responsible for one day;
Siblings of the spouse of the deceased if they do not live
in the same house (optional).

Those responsible for a day bring all the food, any and everything from salt, rice and tea to the seasonings, offerings which will be noted in the "connection"—list (*'brel tho*).[12]

Each of the many guests who come to the house of the deceased on the day of the cremation, including Christians and Muslims who know the family well, give the family in mourning or some of the helpers sitting in front of the house gifts: an uneven number of flat breads, beer and/or money (usually between one or five rupees), offerings which will also be entered in the "connection"-list, or flour or biscuits which will not. In return the guests are plied with tea and beer. Only the *pha spun* are not required to make a gift. Their duty consists in performing services for which the family rewards them by providing them with room and board, sometimes food, usually in the form of different kinds of breads.

Procession, Cremation and Bone Ceremony

When the prescribed ceremonies have been completed by the monks and the astrologer, all those present in the house of the deceased rub their bodies with little pieces of dough forming so-called *chang bu* (also called *fan ril*). These clumps of dough which have been infected with the evil of the people are then taken outside and, at some distance from the house, thrown away. Now the corpse can be carried outside the door. It is not clear as to who should carry it. Some informants thought the spouse of the deceased had to do it or, if no longer living, the son the father, the daughter the mother. Others thought that the corpse was first carried by a *pha spun* and only then by a relative; still others maintained that the man had to carry his deceased wife and that otherwise there were no exact rules.

---

12 Each household keeps an exact record of the goods (primarily food-stuffs) it has received, entering them in the "connecton-list" (*'brel tho*). If at a later time the same celebration takes place in the donor-family, the *'brel tho* is consulted and with careful attention paid to what was received at that time, at least as much, and if possible, a bit more is given in return.

The name of the list (*'brel tho*) plainly states what is behind the custom of mutual gift-giving: *'brel* means "to adhere, to be connected, connection, union." Thus, *'brel tho* is a list (*tho*) of gifts which demonstrates the close cohesion of the individual households in a Ladakhi village. Giving and receiving serve to bind the respective households together, creating between them a feeling of togetherness and solidarity.

The corpse is placed in a sedan-chair (*spur sgan*), in front of the house which has been covered on four sides with cloth. A banner of honour (*rgyal mtshan*) has been affixed to the middle of the roof and to each of the four corners. This chair is carried by the *pha spun* or by relatives. Sometimes, if the deceased is poor, one of the *pha spun* carries the corpse to the cremation site outside the village on his back.

The lavish procession, in Tibet reserved only for high-ranking monks, is led by several men laden with firewood. In some areas of Ladakh, for example in Zangskar, they are preceded by two men walking single file and carrying a white cloth about three metres long. This is to show the deceased the white path to the paradise of Amitâbha. The monks follow the vanguard who on this last day are attired in the "sacred clothing" (*dbang rdzas*) which consists of a brocade smock (*smad gyogs*), a large brocade collar (*stod le*), a black headband with long braids which cover the eyes (*mig dar*), a *rigs lnga* crown and a black, turban-like head-covering. Several monks play oboes (*rgya gling*) while others beat large drums or cymbals and the rest of the monks carry a small 'hour-glass drum' in the right hand and a bell in the left. Bringing up the rear are the men bearing the sedan-chair and all the male mourners carrying burning pieces of incense. The women remain in the village.[13]

Once the cremation site has been reached, the sedan-chair is placed on the little funeral hut (*spur khang* or *ro khang*) belonging to the *pha spun* group of the deceased. The *pha spun* and the relatives first circle the *spur khang* three times, after which they throw themselves to the ground three times. The mourners do not remain long at the cremation site, soon returning to the house of the deceased. Only the *pha spun* linger at the (site) in order to conduct a fire ceremony called *sbyin sreg* for the welfare of the deceased.[14] For this purpose a white cloth with a special mandala is used, the oven diagram (*thab thig*), and it is laid in the fire hole where wood has been piled. Then the monks prepare the offerings which are subsequently emptied into the upper opening of the *spur khang* during the ceremony, the same opening into which the corpse has already been sunk.[15]

---

13 According to Ribbach (1940 : 229) the women also go to the crematorium, something I, however, did not observe.

14 In Tibet such a ceremony is reserved only for the death of a high-ranking monk.

15 The offerings are as follows: many regular wood sticks of the same length which create a radiant, vigorous appearance; liquid butter (wealth), sesame seeds (destruction of sins), roots of a certain herb (long life), rice (development of virtue), *rtsam pa* mixed with yoghurt and milk (good fortune and contentment), kusha grass (destruction of dirt), mustard seeds (removal of obstruction), rye (development of grain-wealth), barley (destruction of illness), peas (development of physical and spiritual strength), wheat and *gtor ma*, which are sometimes given to beggars instead of being thrown into the furnace.

In addition to these offerings to the fire god (*me lha*) and his companions, this fire ceremony is concerned with the purification of the deceased. The fire is to burn up all the sins , suffering and obstacles which stand in the way of liberation from this life cycle. All together there are four different types of *sbyin sreg* ceremonies which correspond to the "four (Buddha) acts" (*'phrin las bzhi* : appeasement, multiplication, control and destruction): *zhi ba'i sbyin sreg, rgyas pa' i sbyin sreg, dbang gi sbyin sreg* and *drag po'i sbyin sreg*. The first of these is most often used at cremations.[16]

In addition to the *sbyin sreg* ceremony conducted by the monks, the astrologer, who is somewhat removed from the others, recites a last prayer. This is done after two figures of dough, which were brought from the house of the deceased, have been thrown far away. These two figures assume whatever form the astrological calculations require and are to accompany the soul of the deceased.

The guests who have returned to the house of the deceased are served outdoors or receive some money from the family in mourning and their relatives, so they can buy beer themselves.[17] This is generally the case because people who are not related to the deceased should not accept food or drink from the house of the deceased for up to one month following the removal of the corpse. The relatives and *pha spun* are able to enter the house of the deceased without danger to themselves and are served inside.

The monks who return from the cremation site are given food and drink as well as—according to Ribbach[18]– a big dumpling (*tshogs 'khor*) and a roasted sheep-head, something I did not observe, however. And finally the monks auction off the personal effects of the deceased as well as things donated by the relatives such as clothing, spoons, pans, jewelry and so on. A part of the proceeds from the auction is turned over to the monks who conducted the ceremonies and the other part goes to their monastery.

Several of the *pha spun* and a few monks remain at the oven and "wait for the first bones to fall down". From what I could see, this appeared to be a part of the deceased's skull, called the "flower" (*me tog*) which is brought back to the house of the deceased by the monks to the accompaniment of oboes where it is kept in the cult room for four days.

---

[16] For the *sbyin sreg* ceremony see Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 : 353, 528–32, Lessing 1942 : 150–161, Schlagintweit, E. *Buddhism in Tibet*, London 1868 : 249–253.

[17] According to Ribbach (1940–230) called "meeting-beer" (*'phrad lugs kyi chang*) or street-drinking beer.

[18] Ribbach 1940 : 230

Early in the morning of the fourth day (*bzhi tshigs*[19]) after the cremation of the corpse (the day of cremation is the first day) "when the lines of the hand become recognizable", several of the deceased's *pha spun* go to the *spur khang* and remove the ashes. One of the *pha spun* throws them into a river, which is an offering to the *klu*; or they are laid on a mountain, an offering to *lha*. Some informants say that the bones and ashes of greatly loved people should be taken to India if possible where they are thrown in the Ganges.

This is also the day on which the *pha spun* clean the oven and repair it by replacing stones which have fallen out, replastering the walls and whitewashing them. They cover the top opening with twigs and stones and between the twigs they place a staff with a white prayer-flag.

On the morning of this day the monks gather in the house of the deceased to produce little clay figures (*tsha tsha*)[20] for his welfare and to consecrate (*rab gnas*) the *thang ka* or bronze figure which was made at the bidding of the astrologer. The preparation of the *tsha tsha* precedes the so-called bone ceremony (*rus chog*): the monk conducting the ceremony must at the beginning conceive of himself as a god. In this state he must overcome any of the *bgegs*-spirits which may have remained on the piece of bone removed from the cremating furnace. Then the monk has to meditate on the "emptiness" of the respective bone, summoning up the consciousness (*rnam shes*) of the deceased and cleansing it of any impurities before sending it to a pure and holy land (*dag zhing*).

The *tsha tsha* are produced by a monk from the pulverized bone fragment which is mixed with the dust of five metals and with clay. With the help of a model, the monk prepares at least one little figure (*tsha tsha*) from this mass which is then put in a pure place such as a cult room, on a hill, in the niche of a *mchod rten* or of a *ma ni* wall. On the same day, the relatives and close friends once again visit the house of the deceased bringing gifts – bread and beer – while the *pha spun* of the family in mourning must help with the cooking and with serving the guests.

Commemoration of Ancestors in Ladakh (Ancestor Worship)

There is some indication that at certain times the Ladakhi commemorate their dead and even honour them. Such ancestor worship is most apparent on *shi mi*. In the early morning of the 30th of the tenth month, on the last day of the year, at least one member of the family goes to the *spur khang* of his *pha spun* group where he

---

19 The correct transposition is not clear.

20 According to Ribbach (1940 : 232) the *tsha tsha* is constructed on the day of cremation; my own observations as well as the information of my informants, however, suggest that it is done on *bzhi tshigs*.

invokes the spirits of the ancestors he can remember, offering them food and drink.[21]

Moreover, according to Asboe, when the first ear of corn is celebrated (*shrub lha*), the first kernels are mixed with dough and formed into little balls. Every family brings these balls as an offering to the family of the deceased. They are taken to the funeral hut (*spur khang*) where they are laid out as food for the ancestors.[22] These two examples clearly illustrate that the *spur khang* is not only the place where the corpse is cremated but where, on occasion, a form of communion takes place between the living and their ancestors.

And there is yet another indication in the chapter on agrarian celebrations that the ancestors are commemorated: during the ploughing of the fields, *pa ba* mixed with liquid (melted) butter[23] is laid on some of the stones which mark the so-called mother field (*ma zhing*). This comprises an offering to the ancestors who first staked out and planted the field.

Not only in Ladakh but in Tibet as well it is believed that the souls of some of the dead could not find peace and are therefore still roaming around having found no satisfying existence. The reasons for this may be that they lived a wicked life or were thinking bad thoughts at the moment of death and, as a consequence, they reappear as evil spirits (*gshin 'dre*).[24] They cause the living difficulty, and above all the relatives suffer at their hands. Certain rites are meant to counteract the effects by pacifying the *gshin 'dre* thus enabling these stray souls to be reborn; or they are transformed into local deities well-disposed to people.[25] The fact that the dead sometimes become beings who interfere in the affairs of the living and themselves try to influence the spirits is an indication of the not inconsiderable role of ancestor whorship in Ladakh. This contention is further supported by the fact that a year after the death of some person a ceremony is held in his or her honour.[26] It is not surprising that 30 and 49 days after death such rites are conducted given

---

21 Early in the morning of the 30th day *gnam gang* of the tenth month, an offering is made called the "year's allocation to the deceased" or, more commonly, *shi mi*.
For this feeding of the ancestors at least one family member from each family goes to the cremating oven of his *pha spun* group. For a more detailed description see Brauen 1980 (1) 98–99—

22 Asboe 1938 : 386. This may concern a custom no longer observed as no mention of it was made to me.

23 *Pa ba* is barley and pea flour boiled in water.

24 Another name for such spirits is *'olangs*. There are also ancestor-spirits called *mtshun* (*tshun*, *btsun*) or *mes btsun*. See Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 : 311.

25 See Ribbach too, 1940 : 235

26 See Asboe too, 1932 : 67

the fact that according to Tibetan—Buddhistic belief the consciousness of the deceased roams around for a total of 49 days before embarking on a new existence. If, however, a commemorative ceremony is held after a year, this indicates that the consciousness of the deceased represents a power which is not only taken seriously by the surviving relatives but can also be influenced. This is still another indication that in Ladakh the commemoration of ancestors or even ancestor worship is not altogether unknown.

Rules of Conduct upon Death

It is interesting to note that in traditional families the rules of conduct applied in the event of a death are the same as those at the time of a birth. In the case of death, it is the spouse of the deceased who cannot leave the house, touch the hearth and who must use special eating utensils; in the event of a birth it is the parents who are subject to such rules. Guests in a house where there has been a birth, who are not related to the family and who do not belong to the same *pha spun*—group must observe the same rules as those of guests in a house where there has been a death. For example, the guests are not allowed to eat food prepared on the hearth of the houses where there has been either a birth or death or to use eating utensils from these houses.

The same or similar rules of conduct also pertain between the "commoners" (*dmangs rigs*) and the "lowly" (*rigs ngan*).[27] Thus, the *dmangs rigs* never use eating utensils belonging to someone of a lower rank nor do they eat food prepared on the hearth of such a person. Lowly people are also not permitted to approach or to touch the hearth of a *dmangs rigs*.

---

27 The Ladahki-Buddhistic lay population belongs to one of the four following strats (or classes): the class of the royal families (*rgyal rigs*), of the nobles (*sku drag or rigs ldan*), of the "commoners" (*mi dmangs, dmangs rigs* or *dmangs phal*) or to the "lowly" (*rigs ngan*). The class of the lowly divides once again into that of the *mgar ba, mon* and *be da,* all of which—as far as the other classes are concerned—are impure. This is illustrated by the fact that, for example, a *dmangs phal* does not drink or eat from a vessel previously used by a member of the *rigs ngan* class; furthermore, a commoner does not eat any food prepared by one of the lowly. Whenever the lowly are together with people from other classes, they must be seated on low cushions or on the floor, separate from the others. No table is placed in front of them—at most, a few planks are laid out. The *rigs ngan* are also barred from entering a monastery.

The members of the lowest classes used to have their own specific trades. The *mon* were cabinet makers and/or musicians, the *mgar ba* blacksmiths the *be da* were itinerant, partially mendicant, musicians. Today this assignment of specific trades to the lower class is no longer so strictly observed. (See also Brauen 1980 (1) 15–21 — ; Erdman 1981)

It would appear that parents and widowed spouses temporarily assume a status similar to that of someone of a lower rank. In the case of a birth or death, the relatives and the *pha spun* are assigned to a transitional category in which they become immune to any taboos.

The whole process of birth and especially natal blood are said to be impure and there are people who are said to be especially exposed to this contamination. Because the gods, especially the goddess of the hearth, hate dirty people, these people are in a special position which makes it necessary for them to observe the aforementioned rules of conduct. But why, we ask ourselves, do the same rules of conduct apply for the father of the newborn as for the mother, although he was neither present at the birth nor did he have any contact with the natal blood? And why are those individuals who helped at the birth free of any taboos? Finally, why it is customary in some places that the birth-taboos do not go into effect immediately following the birth itself but only at the moment the umbilical cord is cut?

Even more difficult to explain is why in the case of death the surviving spouse should be contaminated (by blood). What other explanation can there be for this temporarily "low position" of the new parents and the surviving spouse?

We must take a closer look at the fact that apparently it is not the moment of birth or death itself that is decisive for these rules of conduct: the rules do not go into effect until the baby is separated from the mother[28] or the partner from the spouse (removal of the body). What appears to be important here is the separation which, like any transition, causes uneasiness, difficulty and danger, states which are by no means abstract for the Ladakhi but personified in the form of real beings. It seems obvious that these dangerous beings would pose a threat to those who are weakened by this transition.

Those most directly affected are the parents at the time of a birth and the surviving spouse in the case of death so far as these people are in the house at all.

The reason the people most directly exposed to these malevolent spirits assume a status very close to that of the *rigs ngan* can be explained in one of two ways:

Those people most directly affected by the malevolent spirits pose a threat to the whole family. For this reason they become pariahs and are avoided; by giving them the status similar to that of a *rigs ngan* they are isolated and symbolically banned from the family.

An even more obvious interpretation, it seems to me, is the following: we have seen that the newborn do not receive a proper name immediately. Instead, they

---

[28] I am basing this on the assumption that not only in some villages but all over Ladakh the various birth taboos used not to go into effect until the moment the umbilical cord was cut.

are given the name of a member of the *rigs ngan* class so that the malevolent spirits wishing to harm the child will desist. No matter how wicked the being, who would do violence to one of the lowly? It would seem reasonable to interpret the low status of the new parents and that of the surviving spouse in much the same way: those most directly affected by the dangerous spirits temporarily assume a low status not because the evil beings have already dealt cruelly with them, but because they must be prevented from focusing on those endangered persons. These people temporarily "play" or mime the lowly (*rigs ngan*) in order to get through the difficult transition unscathed. "Play" is not really the correct expression because this whole matter is certainly taken very seriously and is meant to be reality. This becomes apparent in the behaviour of those who conduct themselves towards the parents or the surviving spouse in the same manner that is normally reserved for the commoners (*dmangs rigs*) in their dealings with the lowly.

I am fully aware that these attempts at interpretation cannot be regarded as definitive and must be supported by additional data and investigation. Most important in this regard should be the question of how the Ladakhi themselves view the special status of the parents (after a birth) and the surviving spouse (after a death).

Celebration and Community

What is striking about the celebrations and rites in Ladakh is the fact that the entire community participates. During the celebrations, each social stratum (class) has its unique task to carry out, no-one is excluded from participating, not even the lowly. On the contrary: the *rigs ngan* have very important jobs to perform. This "communitas-aspect" of the celebrations deserves closer consideration and will be the subject of the following.

Closer study of the Ladakhi celebrations reveals the extent to which the respective households of a region are bound to each other by mutually binding gift-giving (money and/or goods) or by work-obligations. The description of the funeral rites made apparent that not only the members of the household in which the death ceremony takes place are responsible for conducting the celebrations. The following either share the responsibility or often they assume the major part of it:

— the close relatives and those farther removed who are not living in the same household (mainly contribute goods);
— neighbours, friends and village inhabitants (money and goods);
— the *pha . pun* (mainly contribute work).

An exact record of the goods contributed (mainly foodstuffs) by those outside the family which receive the goods is kept by this household which enters it in the "connection-list" (*'brel tho*). Characteristic of this occasion is the fact that the gifts

are not made according to the taste of the gift-givers, but are exactly prescribed, both as to the kind as well as to the amount, including the work. Normally they are equivalent to the gifts they once received on the same occasion. Only the money and certain goods are recorded in the *'brel tho;* never, however, the work done as this is carried out by the *pha spun* and is prescribed for every celebration anyway.

There are several advantages to this system of mutual gift-giving at celebrations:

— In the case of single households in which, for example, two or three funeral rites have been celebrated in rapid succession, heavy burdens can be avoided. By dividing up the considerable expenditures and the work load among many people, they can be borne by even large households.

— Without a doubt the Ladakhi system of gift-giving on the occasion of a celebration is a good way of creating stable relationships between the otherwise loosely related households of a village or region; this is also implied by the name of the *'brel tho* "connection list". This system engenders a feeling of community, a feeling, moreover, not only confined to the Buddhistic population. At these celebrations Muslims and Christians can also participate in the exchange described above.

— There are also obvious advantages to the work done, in the main, by the *pha spun:* tasks forbidden for religious reasons to the members of a household-such as seeing to the cremation of a member of the household—are performed by others less immediately involved. Moreover, in the case of a death, the occasion on which most of the work is done by others not directly involved, the grieving relatives who are under severe emotional pressure are relieved of the necessity of doing the work at hand (cooking and serving). As a Ladakhi put it, "one feels better when other people help at this difficult time."

In summary it can be said that through the exchange of money, goods and work during celebrations the financial and emotional burdens are distributed among many people: such burdens are assumed cooperatively so that it can be said to be a form of "collective responsibility" for conducting these celebrations.

Bibliography

Asboe, Walter, 1932, Disposal of the Dead in Tibet, *Man* 1932, vol. 32: 66–67.

Brauen, Martin, 1980 (1), *Eeste in Ladakh,* Graz 1980.

Brauen, Martin, 1980 (2), The pha-spun of Ladakh, in: *Tibetan Studies in honour of Hugh Richardson,* Warminster 1980 (ed. by Aris Michael and Aung San Suu Kyi)

Dargyay, E. K. and L. 1980, Vorläufiger Bericht über zwei Forschungsreisen nach Zanskar (West-Tibet), in: *Zentralasiatische Studien* 14/2, Wiesbaden 1980.

Erdmann, F., 1982, Social stratification in Ladakh, "Doctoraal" paper Cultural Anthropology, University Amsterdam 1982.

Heber, A. Reeve and Kathleen M., 1976 (1903), *Himalayan Tibet and Ladakh,* A description of its cheery folk, their ways and religion, of the rigours of the climate and beauties of the country, its fauna and flora, (first edition 1903), Delhi 1976.

Lessing, F. D., 1942, Yung Ho Kung, An Iconography of the Lamaist cathedral in Peking, with notes on Lamaist mythology and cult, The Sino-Swedish Expedition, publ. 18, VIII: 1, Stockholm 1942.

Nath, Amar Pandit, 1931, *An echo of the unknown, or guide to Ladakh,* Mangalore 1931.

Nebesky-Wojkowitz, René de, 1975 (1956), *Oracles and demons of Tibet* The cult and iconography of the Tibetan protective deities, Graz 1975 (with an introduction by Prof. Per Kvaerne) reprint.

Peter, H. R. H., Prince of Greece and Denmark, 1956, The pha-spun of Leh Tehsil in Ladakh, Eastern Kashmir, India, *East and West,* Rom 1956, vol. 7: 138–146.

Ramsay, H., 1890, *Western Tibet,* a Practical Dictionary of the Language and Customs of the Districts included in the Ladak Wazarat, Lahore 1890.

Ribbach, S. H., 1940, *Drogpa Namgyal,* ein Tibeterleben, München 1940.