

Physical, Cultural and Religious Space in *A myes Bar dbon*. Written and Oral Traditions of a *gnas ri* in Amdo¹

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Tibetan Representations of Landscape

Tibetan Bon and Buddhist religions have recorded their canons, rituals, hagiographies and histories in detail, establishing the written word as the dominant form of knowledge transmission through the centuries, and therefore assigning to it a privileged place in Tibetan society as a whole. Nevertheless, Tibetans have also been passing down a rich oral culture for generations, too often overshadowed by the large amount of textual sources available. Compared to the written texts, oral narratives present quite a different religious and cultural *scenario* to what local ordinary Tibetans identify themselves with, thus providing us with an understanding of the richness of those aspects of Tibetan culture not included into the established canons.

Before the spread of Buddhism in the eighth century, Tibetan religious life was dominated by Bon religion and the substratum of indigenous beliefs, those classified as “folk religion” by Tucci.² Defining the Bon religion of Tibet is not an easy task, as with the term Bon we touch upon several issues. In general, Bon is understood as referring to the pre-Buddhist beliefs and practices of the Tibetans, but one must be careful to distinguish this from the organized Bon religion, which, with its monastic institutions, canonical collections, and philosophical systems represents effectively one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism which began to take shape only after the tenth century A.D.

In those pre-Buddhist times, certain mountains acquired a special status and played a major role in the elaboration of myths, the formation of community identities and the conception of political power.³ The natural space was thus sacralized in order to pacify, propitiate and consolidate

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² See Tucci, 1970, pp. 205-214.

³ See Huber, 1999, pp. 26-27 and Karmay, 1996, “The Cult of Mountain Deities and its Political Significance” in *The Arrow and the Spindle*, pp. 432-450.

deities' power, and to ensure their protection both in individual and community life. Praying and offering to local deities (*yul lha*)⁴, often dwelling on high mountains (called mountain gods [*ri lha*]), could be exchanged with happiness, good health and prosperity only for the local people. The nature of this relationship was contractual and to a certain degree even equal because of the non-transcendental status of this class of deities.⁵

In order to avoid a frequent theoretical misunderstanding concerning the cult of Tibetan mountain deities as an animistic cult, one fundamental clarification ought to be made: the mountain is the abode of the deity and not the deity itself. Thus, Tibetan mountain deities cannot be considered as souls permeating the mountainous features of the landscape; they are rather separated entities dwelling in the mountains.

The later spread of Buddhism elevated the position of local deities, placing them in a higher though less familiar pantheon. An interesting case in point is the classification of the level of enlightenment achieved by the most revered mountain deities according to the ten stages of the bodhisattva, (*bhumī*).⁶ However, the conversion of local deities and mountains to Buddhism was more a matter of reinterpreting the pre-existent Bon institutionalized rituals than a substantial transformation; in fact, Buddhism made its way into Tibetan society by partially maintaining the indigenous religious practices in order to be gradually accepted in the local context.

The "buddhistization" of a *yul lha* and its dwelling mountain includes a defined sequence of ritual actions, as it is also usually recorded in pilgrims' guidebooks. First, a lama whose spiritual powers are accredited "opens the gate to the (sacred) place" (*gnas sgo phye*). Then, lamas and yogins perform Buddhist rituals in order to subdue and convert ('*dul ba*) the local deity, by asking him to promise that he will protect the Dharma and will not fight against it; while *gter ma* might also be hidden in the mountain. A date to commemorate the conversion of the *yul lha* (*gnas 'dus*) is set according to the Tibetan calendar. Moreover, a celebration is held once a year and a bigger celebration takes place once every twelve years, usually on the same

⁴ Tibetan landscape is populated by a myriad of local deities *yul lha*, who act both as protectors and wrathful gods, depending on the ability of the local community to please them. They are grouped as '*jig rten pa'i lha*, mundane deities, and classified into the following categories: *klu* (naga spirits dwelling in the water), *gnyan* (kind of spirit usually dwelling in trees and rocks), *btsan* (kind on spirit-demon), *sa bdag* and *gzhi bdag* (protective spirits of the ground), *gdon* (kind of demon), '*dre* (kind of demon), *sri* (kind of demon), *srung ma* (protectors) and *dgra lha* (war gods). See Khyung thar rgyal, 2000. See also De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1998, pp. 203-252.

⁵ See Karmay, "The Local Deities and the Juniper Tree: A Ritual for Purification (bsang)" in Karmay, 1998, pp. 380-412 and Karmay, "The Cult of Mountain Deities and its Political Significance" in Karmay, 1998, pp. 432-450.

⁶ For example, A myes rMa chen sPom ra, the most important mountain deity in Amdo abiding on A myes rMa chen mountain, is classified as *bcu pa chos kyi sprin*, the highest stage of attainment on the bodhisattva path. See Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las, 2002.

astrological year when the mountain's gate was open, according to the twelve-year cycle of Tibetan astronomy.

Landscape, in its sacralized representations, is a recurrent topic in religious literature. The organization of the natural space into mandalas, and the extensive production of catalogues and guidebooks for pilgrimages to sites disseminated on the whole Tibetan land have developed into cultural models for interpreting the landscape, echoed in oral traditions. Detailed descriptions on specific places were learned by heart and recounted by people, not only for religious purposes but also for aiding with orientation in the space.⁷

Folk stories and cultural references connect Tibetan people to the territory they inhabit and provide a mental map of the land where special and common spots are linked together by both residents and travelers. Spatial and temporal paths have relevant implications for building group memory and identity, as this process is based on the reiteration and reproduction of cultural models by means of remembering and transmission. Tibetans' relationships with the land are thus filtered through a comprehensive set of specific semantic references and cultural values, where landscape elements happen to be conceptualized through the inclusion of aesthetic, emotional and spiritual-religious qualities. In particular, people refer to physical components such as landforms, water features and vegetation through familiar images rooted in Tibetan culture.

In this sense, as the following oral account about the *Bar dbon* area in Amdo will show, in Tibetan communities the description of natural features reveal a certain degree of shared collective imagination. The representation of the landscape is based on a coherent cognitive model and reflects a holistic gnoseological approach where history, religion, myth and geography produce a *unicum*, whose understanding necessarily requires a multi-faced approach.

A myes Bar dbon: The Geographic Setting

A myes Bar dbon is a mountain standing 3816 m above sea level, located in the Amdo area of mTsho lho (Ch. *Hainan* Prefecture), south of Kokonor Lake. More precisely, Bar dbon is situated around 200 km south of Chabcha county (Ch. *Gonghe* county), north of Longyang Gorge (Ch.

⁷ The "unity of the Tibetan conception of space" is conceived in terms of an interdependent relationship among elements constituting the landscape: "a mountain is usually associated with a lake, and in that case, the first is regarded as the father, and the second as the mother." See Buffetrille, "Reflections on Pilgrimages to Sacred Mountains, Lakes and Caves" in McKay, 1998, pp. 18-34. In fact, the production of cognitive patterns, *ecotopes*, is based on a process of cultural understanding of the natural environment. So-called traditional societies in different cultural contexts rely on such patterns to make sense out of ethnoecological classifications. See Hunn and Meilleur, "Towards a Theory of Landscape Ethnoecological Classification" in Johnson and Hunn, 2010.

Longyang xia), and east of bLong po gSer chen mountain⁸. It is situated in the middle of the grasslands, where only a few houses used by nomads during wintertime can be seen.

***A myes Bar dbon or A myes War won:
Interpreting the Name and the Spelling Question***

In the textual sources, A myes Bar dbon is found with two different spellings: A myes Bar dbon and A myes War won, due to the fact that in Amdo dialect the pronunciation is the same.

A myes is the traditional kinship term for “grandfather” in spoken Amdo dialect. Most mountain deities in this area, including the best known A myes rMachen sPom ra in mGo log area, are actually revered by local people as “*a myes*”. The wide usage of this term as a toponym for those mountains that are abode to each tribe’s protective deity reflects an intertwined relationship between the mountain and the local community, and could eventually signify the establishment of a direct kinship between the local tribe and the deity abiding on the mountain, considered as their ancestor.

The meaning of “Bar dbon” is not so obvious. In fact, the explanation I introduce here is based on what was reported by the interviewees; further textual research might provide a clearer understanding. “Bar” literally means “the middle, middle part”, in this case, as it is referring to the mountain, it might mean “a mountain in the middle of a range or the middle mountain in a range”. However, in order to clarify and contextualize the meaning of “bar”, we must look at the following word “*dbon*”.

In fact, “*dbon*” means “grandchild”, so “*bar dbon*” could eventually be understood as the “grandchild born in the middle”, not the first nor the last of a vague number of grandchildren, likely related to rMa chen sPom ra. In the following paragraph I will attempt to draw out in detail the kinship between A myes Bar dbon and A myes rMa chen sPom ra, as it is commonly acknowledged and explained by local people.⁹ Another unlikely interpretation for “*dbon*” is its meaning as “*dbon gsas*”: practitioner of Bon rituals, a word still common in Amdo spoken Tibetan.¹⁰

⁸ See Tshe lo, 2010, pp. 59-60. See map (1).

⁹ It said that A myes rMa chen sPom ra has nine sons, nine daughters and numerous grandchildren. However, different traditions in different areas claim that their local mountain deity is part of the family tree of A myes rMa chen sPomra, so there is a plurality of contrasting versions on this matter.

¹⁰ *dBon gsas* or *dpon gsas* is the name of the fourth part of the *Bon sgo bzhi mdzod lnga*- Four ways and the Treasury, one of the two main systems of classification for the Bonpo teachings, believed to be directly taught by Shenrab Mibo. In the *dPon gsas* section, instructions for psycho-physical exercises are presented, including the system of *rDzogs*

War won is the other and less common name of the mountain¹¹, explained as a phonetic calques from the Mongolian language, whose introduction into Tibetan language can be connected to the long lasting presence of Mongolians in Amdo, particularly intense during the Yuan (1279-1368) and Qing dynasties (1644-1901). The appropriateness of this spelling could be justified by the great and widespread occurrence of Mongolian-based phonetic calques for many toponyms in the area of Kokonor, created after the occupation of the area by Mongolians during the second half of the Qing dynasty.

In the Mongolian dialect still spoken in some areas of Amdo, "*war won*" means "on the west side of...". This possible explanation implies that something located to the east of *War won* mountain is considered very relevant for the characterization of A myes Bar dbon itself, to the point that the mountain's name reflects this relational spatial arrangement. Interestingly, A myes rMa chen is geographically located on the south-east of A myes Bar dbon, arousing the question whether the name *War won* might be referring exactly to the location of A myes Bar dbon by reference to the most powerful mountain deity in Amdo.

However, the Mongolian-based calques in the Amdo region were mainly introduced ex novo, in order to designate new settlements of Mongolian armies and civilians or relevant strategic areas. An example is a toponym like Ulan, a place on the northern bank of Kokonor Lake. "*Ulan*", a Mongolian word, meaning "red", was later phonetically loaned in Tibetan as "*dBus lam*" and thus semantically reinterpreted with the meaning of "the road to Central Tibet".

It is difficult at this point of the research to establish the ancient etymology of this name, but from another point of view, this kind of unsolved linguistic question proves the high degree of interaction and the process of exchange and syncretism taking place over centuries in this multicultural border area of historical Tibet.

Different folk accounts about kinship ties between A myes Bar dbon and A myes rMa chen

It is said that Bar dbon faces the direction of A myes rMa chen. Even though they are separated by hundreds of kilometers, these two mountains are tied together by kinship relation, a linkage generically expressed as "*sbra che chung*", "big and small tent" with an immediate reference to the

chen meditation. See Karmay, "A General Introduction to the History and Doctrines of Bon" in *The Arrow and the Spindle*, pp. 111-112.

¹¹ Personal communication by Om chen from sNgags pa Research Center of Xining, (Xining 18 April 2011).

Tibetan nomads' custom of different generations' members of the same family living in adjacent tents.¹²

Bar dbon is in fact usually considered the third son, and in other accounts the second son, of A myes rMachen sPom ra. Interestingly, sometimes Bar dbon is also called rMachen sPom ra's grandchild.

In another version, it is told that Bar dbon is an old man without children, and for this the reason A myes rMa chen sPom ra would have given him one of his own sons, dGra 'dul. Bar dbon is thus considered not a son of rMa chen sPom ra, but rather his older blood-brother: in this event the linkage to the rMachen sPom ra family is stressed as well as in the precedent version, though this degree of kinship between blood-brothers makes their status more equal than father-son. According to this same version, Bar dbon's wife is a very young girl living on A myes dGo rtse, a mountain in the southern area of mTsho lho.

**A myes Bar dbon, bla ri of sGo me tribesmen:
who are the people of sGo me?**

Etymology, legends and distribution of sGo me tribe

The Tibetan saying "*sa 'go'i la btse gcig, sde 'go'i dpon po gcig*" or "every place has one *la btse*¹³, every group has one chief", emphasizes how traditionally the exercise of political power was interdependently linked to the worship of the local deity and how both the temporal and spiritual authorities played a major role in the process of formation and reinforcement of the local group's identity.

A myes Bar dbon is the *bla ri*¹⁴ of sGo me tribe. *Bla ri*, "mountain (where the) soul (abides)", is a pre-Buddhist concept of a spiritually powerful place where the entire local community can get spiritual energy for life. This implies that every member of the tribe should practice the prescribed rituals and make the required offerings to ensure the health of his own *bla*: by sharing the process of worship to the abiding deity, the connection among tribesmen is reinforced. Every year on the thirteenth day of the

¹² See Namkhai Norbu, 1990, pp. 48-56.

¹³ *La btse*, also spelled as: *la btsas*; *lab rtse*; *lab tse* is a structure of wooden poles, prayers flags and arrows which covers the place on the peak of a mountain where the deity abides. When a *la btse* is set, first a wide deep square hole in the ground should be dug, this is called "*lha mkhar*" or "*gsas mkhar*", the castle of the deity; people believe that this is the place where the deity actually lives. See photo (1) of the *la btse* set on Bar dbon peak. It has been suggested by Karmay (conference at Minzu University, Autumn 2010) that "it is probable that the term *la btsas* also refers to a landmark on a mountain top before it became a ritual term."

¹⁴ *bLa ri* and *lha ri* are almost homophonous, whose literal meaning is respectively soul mountain and deity mountain, are often interchangeably used. As already outlined in note 3, this definition does not imply an animistic approach, the mountain is in fact the abode of the soul or the abode of the deity.

sixth month of the Tibetan calendar, sGo me tribesmen gather on the peak where the first *la btse* was set to make offerings and perform rituals to the deity abiding there. A myes Bar dbon deity belongs to one of the five categories of protective deities (*'go ba'i lha lnga*)¹⁵, and it is usually identified as a *dgra lha*, alternatively spelled as *sgra bla*¹⁶, which is a kind of protective god in charge of the protection of individuals and the entire tribe from enemies.

The first mythical chief of sGo me tribe was sGo me dGe gnyen, a very tall and fat man with a terrifying appearance, riding both a horse and a mule at the same time because of his enormous body size. According to local memories, the story of sGo me tribe can be dated back six hundred years. It started as a tribal confederation made up of three subgroups: *sGo me smad mdo bar gsum*, upper, lower and medium sGo me. This division is referred to the territory occupied by the tribe, whose entire extension is from the southern bank of Kokonor Lake in the north until the margins of mGo log in the south, and from the boundary with mTsho Nub in the west until the town of Khrika in the east. Today the sGo me tribe includes a population of around one hundred thousand and more than eighty villages. Each of the three subgroups is further divided into three units, so sGo me tribe is also called "the nine tribes of sGo me".

The etymology of the name "sGo me" or "fire on the gate", is explained by people in different ways.¹⁷ Elders from today's sGo me village say that an ancient anonymous writer used this name for the first time and then its use was spread throughout the area. A second common recount narrates that a great lama came to sGo me from the south, bringing such prosperity and happiness to local people that, in order to reward him, they gave him a beautiful girl to marry. They had many children, and the third one chose to become a monk, he spent many years in retirement and meditation, his name was Grub chen sGo me. The name of sGo me was given to the tribe after him.

According to the most detailed accounts from the areas surrounding Ting gya and Sa phyug monasteries, and to a survey about toponyms carried out in the 1980s by the county government of Khrika, this name first appeared sometime around 900 A.D.

At that time, a big plague had spread from the northern part of the Yellow river to this area, causing the death of thousands. No medical treatment was available and the situation deteriorated until suddenly a

¹⁵ The five categories of protective deities are: *pha lha* the paternal god, *ma lha* the maternal god, *zhang lha* the maternal uncle god, *dgra lha* the god protecting from enemies or war god (see note 1), *srog lha* protecting one's life. See Nagano and Karmay, 2008, p. 45.

¹⁶ *sGra bla* is almost homophone with *dgra lha*, so the two words are often indistinctively used without regard to their literal meaning. *sGra bla* literally means "sound soul" and *dgra lha* literally means "enemy god", both refer to a kind of spiritual energy that affect individual and community life and are connected to the local sacred mountain.

¹⁷ See sGo me lo rgyus rtsom sgrig lhan tshogs in Qinghai Zangzu 2010.2, pp. 40-43.

lama and a yogin arrived from Kham. In order to rescue the population from the disease, they did circumambulations and prayed, and then they proclaimed: "In the lower part of this place there is a valley which is like the entrance gate (*sgo*) to this place, over there the wind blows without obstacles towards our direction. If you want to stop the plague, you have to set fire (*me*) to that gate, otherwise the disease will kill everyone."

Locals immediately arranged for a big fire and the flames burned high in the sky, after one day and one night the plague gradually disappeared. They were deeply grateful to the lama and the yogin, so the two masters agreed: "From now on, this place is called *sGo me* "fire on the gate". Every family should avoid impure behavior and build an altar at the place where the fire was set; every traveler and pilgrim should keep the custom to set a fire when passing through this place; build stupas, temples and monasteries."

A myes Bar dbon: symbolization and sacralization of the landscape in one oral account¹⁸

sGo me tribesmen say that A myes Bar dbon is the centre of Asia and the only mountain which can breathe (*dbugs len pa'i ri bo 'di ma gtogs med*). Locals from the pastures surrounding Bar dbon mountain say that after a weather station was built very close to the *la btse* on the peak of Bar dbon, the mountain stopped breathing and now it is becoming like other mountains.¹⁹

The full name of A myes Bar dbon is *Bar dbon dung ri dkar po*, "white conch-shell shaped mountain", because local people see its shape like an upside down white conch shell with the open part corresponding to the top of the mountain,²⁰ where the *la btse* was set on one of the nine peaks of Bar dbon for the first time by Sangs rgyas rDorje²¹, after an accurate geomantic analysis of the surrounding landscape.

Located in the middle of the grassland of Ra lung, Bar dbon resembles a black golden vajra on a piece of silk, delimited by four columns which also divide the sky and the earth (*gnam sa'i ka bzhi*)²². These four columns are themselves mountains, whose names are listed as follows:

¹⁸ See photos (2) and (3) of two speakers: Chos dbyings rgya mtsho from Sa phyug village and dBal mgon skyabs from *sGo me* village.

¹⁹ See photo (4), the weather station on the peak of Bar dbon.

²⁰ See photo (5) of the white conch-shells held by the 'cham dancer at Ting kya monastery.

²¹ Sangs rgyas rDorje could be the same lama cited in the history of Sa phyug monastery, see the following paragraph.

²² *gNam sa'i ka bzhi* are natural columns, mountains which support the sky and prevent it from falling down, and at the same time they represent a connection between the sky and the earth.

- A ma Zor dgu mountain (complete name: A ma Zor dgu gangs dkar phyogs las nram rgyal);
- mThon po rdza rgan, one of the peaks of bLon po ser chen range;
- sGo me lab tse, another peak of bLon po ser chen;
- (Missing).

Four special stones were chosen by Sangs rgyas rDo rje to be in charge of the protection of this sacred mountain (*ri'i srung ba bzhi*):

- A large square stone called *tshogs chung rdo rgan*;
- Two piled stones under the ground of Ting kya monastery;
- *rnga lan rdo rgan*;
- *stag g.yag gnyis* (tiger and yak) at the foot of the mountain.

The peak of Bar dbon is flat like two golden plates and it is a very good place to hide *gter ma*. Between the two plates there is a small silver hill and on its top there was a throne in the past. This is like the heart of the mountain, shaped like a *norbu*, and it is also the access point to Bar dbon (*gnas sgo*).

There are two golden belts, which are the two paths leading to the peak: *rdza lam gong* and *rdza lam zhol ma*. There is no road between bLong po gSer chen and A ma Zor dgu, apart from the one passing through the peak, walked only by the *gzhi bdag*²³. It travels as follows: from gLong po gSer chen it arrives in Dum pa'i kha lam, then it goes up to Bar dbon, arriving in Nag rgan sgang nag. Once it reaches the peak of Bar dbon, it goes down to gSer gzhon sgang, and finally it reaches the top of A ma sgo rdzong. On one peak of Bar dbon there is a throne sustained by eight lions: nine dragons drinking water sit on it, they look towards the feet of Bar dbon but if a lake were located there, they wouldn't be able to drink that water (because the dragons are on the top of the mountain, too far from the foot).

At the foot of the mountain there are some hills, which are the disciples of Bar dbon. Lay people can set foot on the first one. When the sky is clear, from the top of Bar dbon you can see all the hills. At the end of the road there is a grey mountain, it is said that it is an abode of Padmasambava. Some old lamas noted that this place is good for the practice of both the present and the future realization of one's prayers (*tshé 'di phyi gnyis ka*), so many people go there. It is said that in the past there was a meditation cave where Sangs rgyas rDo rje meditated.

Looking from the top of Bar dbon, in one's sight, there is A myes Pandit and there are three *la btse*. Looking at an even closer distance there is a hill

²³ See note 2.

called "prayer flags' hill", and on the top of that hill there is a *dar shing*²⁴ justly covered in prayer flags.

There is another special dwelling called "stair of tables", which is located under *rdo rgan*, one of the four protectors of the mountain (*sri'i srung ba bzhi*) mentioned above. Approaching one's sight there is Sha rgan mountain and an old tree; and in ancient times there was also a small meditation house. Coming closer again, there is Dar lung sna kha which in the past housed four wooden pillars in the ground, found on the top of rGya ri.

Radiating far in the distance, A myes sgo rdzong guards the entrance to Bar dbon, that is said to be the access point to a *gter kha*. For those who are lucky and hold special spiritual powers, it is possible to see the face of the guard and they can also see that the place looks like a golden deer, even though for others it looks like a lining tiger.

Regarding the monastery of Ting kya, it is usually said that the shape of the area where the Ting kya monastery was built resembles the nose of an elephant, like the long rope used by herdsman to fetch yaks. It is situated in the middle of two mountains which are like the horns of a dragon; on both sides of the dragon's mouth there is a small valley.

The Iconography of A myes Bar dbon deity: A small painting from Ting kya Monastery

I was able to find only one iconographic representation of the deity abiding on A myes Bar dbon mountain, a small painting owned by Ting gya Rimpoche refiguring an anthropomorphic figure riding a white horse.

In his left hand he holds a bowl containing four *nor bu 'od 'bar*. On the top of them there is a *dung dkar g.yas 'khyil* (turning right white conch-shell), symbolizing the shape of A myes Bar dbon mountain. In his right hand he holds an arrow (*mdung*), which might be a direct reference to the martial origin of this deity. *Yul lhas'* iconography in Amdo was in fact primarily inspired to the victorious generals of the past Tibetan empire or to the local tribal chiefs. Following the later conversion of Tibetans to Buddhism, local deities maintained their fierce warrior-like nature, but their role was reinterpreted as they were invested as protectors of the Dharma.

His hat might be a *rigs lnga*²⁵, however, it is quite interesting to notice that the hat worn by the monk-dancer, playing the role of the Bar dbon

²⁴ A *dar shing* is a tall wooden pole covered with prayer flags along its whole length and is a representation of the sun, the moon and a jar on the top. The sun and the moon are symbols for the sky where *lha* dwell, the jar signifies the water where *klu* dwell.

²⁵ (*rGyal ba*) *rigs lnga* literally means "five Buddha families", it refers to the families or aspects of Buddha: Vairocana, Akśobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi. *Rigs lnga* designates the ceremonial crown with five points. We cannot be sure if the hat in the picture is actually a *rigs lnga* because even if the shape looks similar, there

deity during the *cham* dancing performance in the courtyard of the monastery, is a completely different one. It is a felt hat, called *phying zha*, usually worn by Tibetan nomads for protection from the rain. This detail confirms the suggestion that local deities such as *yul lha*, *skyes lha* and *dgra lha* (*sgra bla*) are strictly linked to the local community and are mundane deities who don't hold a much higher position than human beings, and should be pleased to bring benefits to people, as much as in any other kind of human relationship.

The Local rNyingmapa Monasteries

Ting kya dgon pa

According to the story told by the Fifth Ting kya Rimpoche, the rNyingmapa monastery was initially a *ri khrod* where Padmasambava meditated after the foundation of Samye sometime in the eight century. The stone, where his footprint was impressed, is buried under his statue in the Main Prayer Hall '*du khang*' of today's Ting kya monastery.

Ting kya maintained its status as a place for meditative retirement until 1781, when it was transformed into a monastery by Ting kya snyan grags rgya mtsho. The religious tradition speaks about precise extraordinary signs manifested from the sky: at noon white clouds arouse from the earth and suddenly assembled, while a crush of thunder rumbled in the sky. Ting kya snyan grags rgya mtsho walked until the point where clouds arose and he found the stone with the footprint of Padmasambava. It was exactly in that place that the '*du khang*' was to be built.

In order to draw an accurate map for the construction of the monastery, Ting kya snyan grags rgya mtsho prayed and meditated for further signals from the sky; he recalled many times the eight names of Padmasambava²⁶ and finally the *zhi khrod dam pa rigs brgya*²⁷ appeared to him together with an octagon made of light. According to that shape, he forged the plan for the Main Prayer Hall and built it on the foot-printed stone. The top of the roof was shaped like a *rgyal ba rigs lnga* crown²⁸.

The monastery was enlarged in 1718, thanks to the effort of the first reincarnation lama, and for the following centuries it enjoyed great fame in mTsho lho, until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, when it suffered

are only three golden points. Compare photos (6) and (7) showing the painting and the costume representing Bar dbon deity.

²⁶ Padmasambhava is said to have taken eight forms or manifestations representing different aspects of his being - wrath, pacification, etc. (1) *Guru U rgyan rDo rje 'chang*, (2) *Guru Sakya seng ge*, (3) *Guru Pad ma rgyal po*, (4) *Guru Pad ma 'byung gnas*, (5) *Guru blo ldan mchog sred*, (6) *Guru Nyi ma 'od zer*, (7) *Gu ru rDo-rje gro lod*, (8) *Guru seng ge sgra sgrags*.

²⁷ *Zhi khrod dam pa rigs brgya* One hundred peaceful and wrathful deities.

²⁸ *rGyal ba rigs lnga* see *rigs lnga* note 16.

major damages. It was only in 1985 that the monastery was reopened to monks and gradually returned to normality. Since 2003, the present reincarnation lama of Ting kya has been supporting the restoration of the Main Prayer Hall and the building of a new, bigger hall.

Sa phyug dgon pa

Sa phyug is a rNying ma pa monastery located six km outside of Chabcha county, in the village of Sa phyug. The construction of this monastery was prophesied by Padmasambava and it was actually built with the patronage of the three subgroups of the sGo me tribe in 1695, when the Main Prayer Hall was erected and thirty monks moved in. In 1831, Khams Sangs rgyas rDo rje was made up of twelve prayer halls, three protector's temples and three teahouses. During the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) the monastery underwent serious damage, and it was rebuilt in the 1980s on a hill due to flooding in the valley. Presently, approximately fifty monks live in the monastery.²⁹

Written Sources

The gsol mchod of Bar dbon

The following text is recited by heart by the monks of the monastery of Ting gya. I later found a handwritten copy of the same text in a private house in the village of Sa phyug. When I asked other villagers about the *gsol mchod* of Bar dbon, they confirmed this very same version:

*Bar dbon gsol mchod/
kyee dge mtshan stong 'bar bar dbon dkar bo zhes/
sa 'dzin chen por gnas pa'i dge bsnyen che/
yum sras blon 'bangs lha klu sde brgyad bcas/
dkar phyogs skyong ba'i dgra lha chen po la/
gsol lo mchod do bcol ba'i 'phrin las mdzod/*

Translation:

Invocation to Bar dbon

Oh! The white Bar dbon blooming with thousands of auspicious omens!

He is a religious devotee³⁰ who abides on the big mountain!

The mother and son, the minister and the attendant,³¹

²⁹ See Qinghai sheng Hainan Zangzu Zizhizhou Fojiao Xiehui, 1999, pp. 402-404.

³⁰ *dGe bsnyen* means religious devotee and can be referred both to Bon devotee and Buddhist devotee.

The eight categories of gods and nagas³²
 To the great *sgra bla*³³ who protects the virtuous gods³⁴,
 Perform the magical actions you have promised!

**The description of A myes Bar dbon deity
 according to a longer contemporary *gsol mchod***

From: *dKar phyogs dgyes pa'i dgra bgegs zil gnon*, written by the Eleventh Reincarnation Lama of Ting kya, Kun bzang Padma Nam rgyal

[...] O A Hu bar dbon dung ri dkar po/ dung gi skyes ri mtho po/ rdza phyi rdza gsum dang nang rdza gsum// nang rdza gsum gyi dang po na bzhugs nas/ g.ya' ma sngon mo'i khri steng na bzhugs nas/ spang ri ser po'i gdan steng na bzhugs nas// a myes bar dbon dung ri dkar po/ dgra 'dul stobs ldan dbang phyug/ 'khor mi nag rta nag stong gi bskor nas// phar 'gro rnam la rgyab brten byed nol tshur 'ong rnam la bsu ba yid nol/ dgra bgegs chams la 'phab nas/ stong gsum kha lo bsgyur nas// srid gsum zil gyis gnon nas// nyi zla cha lang sdebs nas//

pha ring bu (sic!)³⁵ rgyud kyis skyes lha'i rgyal po a myes dgra 'dul// a dgra 'dul/ lan gsum bos/ ye rgyab ri klad 'da' smug ri// gter bdag dpal gyi ri bo//za lde mig gnyis kyi bdag poll/ sgom rdzong g.yang gi phyug mo//gzhi bdag rnam la dngos grub ster nol// lam 'gro rnam la gdong grogs byed nol// bka' srung dbang drag bstan skyong//

g.yas na a myes ba yan// rgyab na blon po gser chen// g.yon na zor dgu phyug mol// mdun na rma rig sum brgya drug bcu// dbo yi tshwa mtsho dkar mol// lha mo stong gi bla mtsho// mtsho sngon khri gshog rgyal mol// (rang rang gzhi bdag bar 'dir bris) rang rang bka' 'khor bran g.yog/ phar ri g.yas la gnas pa/ tshur ri g.yon la gnas pa/ 'bab pa chu la gnas pa// 'gro ba lam la gnas pa// mtho ba mkha' la gnas pa// 'tsher sa chu mig la gnas pa// sa 'di' sa bdag/ yul 'di' gzhi bdag/ mchod mchod bstod kyi srung ma// mchod rang 'khor gyi srung ma/ pha myes brgyud kyi srung ma/ khyed rnam gyi zhal du bdud rtsi bsang gi mchod pa// gser skyems phud kyi mchod pa dam pa 'di' bul lo// [...]

³¹ Mother and son recall the basic relation of kinship of A myes Bar dbon. The political and social structure is evocated by naming his minister and attendant as part of his entourage.

³² The eight categories of gods and nagas, *lha klu sde brgyad* or *lha srin sde brgyad*, refer to the eight types of mundane spirits who can cause either help or harm, but remain invisible to normal human beings. It is a different classification for the mundane deities 'jig rten pa'i lha, explained in note 2. See De Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1998, pp. 203-252.

³³ See note 9.

³⁴ *dKar phyogs* literally means the white part. It also has the meaning of waxing moon or the light half of a month. Its extensive religious meaning is the side of virtue, positive forces, virtuous gods. On the contrary, *nag phyogs* means the black part, and waning moon; in a religious sense it means the side of evil, negative forces and evil gods.

³⁵ Read *du*.

Translation:

Oh! A myes Bar dbon!

White conch-shell shaped mountain, high mountain born from a conch-shell!

There are three external slates and three inner slates, you dwell in the first of the three inner slates,

You dwell on the top of ten thousands blue slates,

You dwell on a cushion made of a yellow hill covered with meadows.

A myes Bar dbon, white conch-shell shaped mountain,

The powerful lord who conquers enemies,

Surrounded by an entourage of black (lay) people and black horses,

Support those who depart and welcome those who return.

Pacifying enemies and obstructers,

Dominating the three thousands fold universe,

With your brightness overcome the three realms of existence,

Conjoin sun and moon like a pair of cymbals.

A myes dGra 'dul (Subjugator of enemies),

King of the deity of birth from the patrilinear lineage,

A myes dGra 'dul:

"Purple mountain going above the mountain behind",

"Mountain of the glorious guard to the *gter kha*",

"Owner of the two keys",

Give spiritual powers to the powerful goddess Zor dgu of the auspicious meditation castle and to the *gzhi bdag*,

Be a friend to those who travel, protect the Dharma with subjugating and wrathful actions.

On the right there is A myes Ba yan,

On the back bLon po gSer chen,

On the left Zor dgu Phyug mo,

In front there are three hundred sixty members of rMa chen sPom ra family.

Salt white lake of dBo, spiritual lake of thousand Lhamo, Khri gshog rgyal mo of Kokonor,

(Each *gzhi bdag* at this point writes) we servants dwell on the right of the mountain over there,

On the left of the mountain over here,

In the rain, on the paths, in the high sky, in the springs of the abandoned pasture lands.

In the presence of all of you,

Protective spirits of this land, protective spirits of this place,

Guardians of offerings and praises,

Guardians of self ripening karmic fruition of the ritual offerings,

Guardians of the ancestors,

We present the best offering of *chang* libation, the best offerings of ambrosia and smoke.

Conclusions

The worship of local deities and, by extension, of their abiding sacred mountains—whose origins are not easy to trace—appeared for the first time as an important component of Bon religion before the eighth century, and have survived until present day. In fact, even though both the landscape and the ancient gods were tamed and converted by the advent of Buddhism, the essence of their function for the local community was preserved, and the linkages between the social groups and their territories were reinforced.

Since ancient times, Tibetans have been cohabitating in Amdo areas with other ethnic groups: Han, Hui Muslims, Mongolians and other smaller minorities. Relationships were often contrastive and violent, due to the sharp diversity between Buddhism and Islam and because of land disputes between autochthonous people and immigrants from inland China. When the government of the Dalai Lama was set in Central Tibet, Amdo Tibetans were never completely under the rule of Lhasa, the political organization of Amdo being based on a scattered system of local chiefs without a central power. The change of toponyms bears witness to the fact that the arrival of different groups coincided with the reversal of the previous political control and the establishment of a new ruling power, while Tibetans were mainly playing a subjective role.

I think it should be suggested that, despite multiple external influences and invasions, the connection between strong tribal socio-territorial identities and their local landscapes and gods was a key factor in the preservation of Tibetan autochthonous traditions.

The sporadic Mongolian occupation of Amdo, continuative during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) through the establishment of a military banner system and the later immigration to western Amdo, broke the previous territorial organization of Tibetan tribes, but the local group identity continued to remain strong.³⁶

Afterwards, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Amdo Tibetans experienced the brutal regime of the Hui Muslim warlord Ma Bufang (1903-1975) who made every effort to elevate the social and economic position of Muslims, persecuting Tibetans and other minorities in the area under his control. Many Tibetan monasteries were destroyed, and Labrang monastery was continuously occupied from 1917 until the 1940s. Sadly, during that time a genocidal war was conducted against the Tibetan

³⁶ See Sonam Dorje, 2009, pp. 29-37.

nomads of mGo log and in some places the entire population was massacred.³⁷

In the more recent past, the spread of the Chinese communist revolution and the subsequent foundation of the People Republic of China in 1949 had a destructive impact on Amdo: religious issues were outside the realm of communist concern and the limits imposed over religious freedom came to a climax during the Cultural Revolution, when monasteries were locked, monks persecuted and forced to marry, and pilgrimages forbidden for more than ten years.³⁸

Nevertheless, nowadays Tibetan pilgrims are resolutely back on the paths of their protective gods and their religious traditions once more, and though influenced by the changing of times, are still surviving.

Despite the fact that the traditional organization of the landscape based on tribal agreements has been substituted by a reorganization of the landscape within the Chinese administrative units' system, Tibetan communities still regularly experience rituals and pilgrimages. The unity of the landscape and its cultural narratives has been split into villages, counties and fenced pastures, but the sense of belonging to the traditional articulation of tribes continues to exist.

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³⁷ See Ceng Qian, 2008, pp. 60-63. See also Nietupski, 1999.

³⁸ See Huber, 2002, pp. 1-15 and Pirie, 2005.

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Map of the area.



Photo (1) The *la btse* on the peak of Bar dbon.



Photo (2) Chos dbyings rgya from Sa phyug village.



Photo (3) dBal mgon skyabs from sGo me village.



Photo (4) The weather station on the peak of Bar dbon.



Photo (5) The white conch-shells held by the 'cham dancer at Ting kya monastery.



Photo (6) A painting of Bar dbon.



Photo (7) The 'cham costume.