CHAPTER FIVE

THE REALM OF THE SPIRITS

Several writers have suggested that a sense of cosmological order underlies the social and political structures of Ladakhi communities. Dollfus, for example, maintains that, ‘the observance of hierarchy and order is necessary for the maintenance of order, the success of a marriage, the efficacy of a ritual’. (1989: 98) This is expressed in seating plans, in language (the use of honorifics) in food and serving dishes. It reflects, she says, the hierarchical spatial ordering of the world in which east is superior to west and above over lower, which is also reflected in the physical structures of individual houses and the arrangement of the village itself (1989:102). Hierarchy is also said to be present in the worlds inhabited by the spirits, the lha, which are divided between the stanglha (an upper realm), the barsam (the immediate world) and the yoklu (the underworld) (Phylactou 1989: 55; Day 1989: 162; Riaboff 1997: 339; Mills 2003: 151-61). These writers suggest that the household is a similarly ordered social space, in which religious activities are related to productive and reproductive processes in a hierarchical relationship: the chod khang for the Buddhist deities is on the upper storey of the house, along with the lha khang for the phalha; in the middle are the rooms devoted to the pragmatic business of daily life and it is here that the spirits of the locality receive offerings from each meal prepared on the stove; while on the lower levels are the animals’ quarters and the shrines to the lu, the spirits associated with fertility. Protector deities are, thus, placed above humans who, themselves, inhabit a realm superior to that of the important, but problematic, lu. As Mills points out (2003: Ch 6), deity is superior to fertility.

These writers, therefore, present a picture of a hierarchical cosmological realm, reflected in the structures of village organisation and in the relations between the human and supernatural inhabitants of the village, which symbolises village order and the sense of solidarity that unites its members. The existence of the community, Dollfus maintains (1989: 

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1 The translations from the French are my own.

2 Aggarwal (2004: 153) likewise suggests that ‘to sit in a place (in the dral) is to embody and inhabit a material territory, a cosmological sphere, a social identity, a niche in the universe’.
125), is ‘often defined by reference to either the village divinity or the
gonpa,’ and she links this to the ‘strong sense of solidarity’ within the
village. Srinivas (1998: 90) also suggests that, ‘the symbolic unity of the
village ... the internal field of power and well-being, is affirmed in the
presence of the god of the village settlement’. Conflict, it would seem,
must pose a threat to this overarching cosmological order, dislocating
the hierarchies which constitute it and which allow humans and spirits
to live in harmony. Indeed, there is evidence that elsewhere in the
Tibetan region disputes are, indeed, considered to give rise to drib,
spiritual pollution (Schickelgrüber 1989).

Other writers on the Tibetan region have linked religion and social
practices in different ways. In his study of the Sherpas of Nepal, Fürer-
Haimendorf (1967: 181) describes their local moral concepts as having
been ‘shaped by’ the philosophy of Buddhism. Ortner (1978, 1989)
describes Buddhist divinities and rituals as providing models for the
social problems of Sherpa society. The symbolic meanings of these rites,
she says, provide models for the problems of ageing, wealth, status,
fighting and the contradiction between hierarchy and equality. Inspired
by Geertz’s (1973c) description of religion as a cultural system, she
argues that through its rituals, ‘the Buddhist mode of seeing, feeling,
interpreting, categorising and so forth, are constantly and systematically
fed into lay experience.’ (1978: 162) \(^3\) A related view is taken by Samuel
(1993: 362) who suggests that other aspects of religious life in Tibet, not
just the strictly Buddhist, provide the ‘cultural patterns’ that are funda-
mental to social forms. As he puts it (1993: 4):

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For Tibetans, the vocabulary and modes of thinking deriving from Indian
Buddhism came to pervade many areas of experience that we do not neces-
sarily think of as ‘religious’, while the concerns of Tibetan folk religion, such
as the maintenance of good luck and good fortune, continue to underlie
virtually all facets of life.

Religion, that is, is multi-faceted and fundamental to social life.

These writers, thus, suggest three distinct ways in which the religious
or supernatural may be concerned with wider social and moral processes
in Tibetan societies. Fürer-Haimendorf and Ortner concentrate on the
moral content of Buddhism and the symbolism of its rites and deities. Indeed, Ortner has been criticised for over-interpreting her material in
line with Buddhist doctrine (Ramble 1980). Samuel’s analysis of the

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\(^3\) This view is substantially repeated in her later work (1999: 102-05).