Losar is the height of the villagers’ ritual calendar in Photoksar and celebrates the passing of the old and onset of the new year. Within the nine days (and more) of dances, rituals and sheer enjoyment there are exemplified, in subtle ways, the dynamic between the social organisation of the village and the inhabitants of the spirit world, an underlying tension between the yulpa and the resident monks, and a self-conscious suspicion of modernity and resistance to change.

It is generally agreed that the central themes of the Losar celebrations are the chasing away of the old year, with its bad or inauspicious elements, and the welcoming in of the new (Rigal 1985:95; Dollfus 1987: 64). Kaplanian (1981: 277), for example, says, ‘Le Nouvel An ladakhi est réellement une deuxième naissance où le groupe rejette l’ancien et accueille le nouveau’. Similar interpretations were offered by a number of my informants in Leh. The rituals chase out the bad elements of the past year and welcome the good of the new. Specifically they are intended to ensure that people do not become ill, that livestock does not die, that snow falls, babies are born and everyone flourishes.

Losar is undoubtedly a rite of passage, from the old year to the new, involving the deliberate exorcism of the evil spirits which threaten life. It also involves a symbolic denial of the processes of ageing and death, a feature of rite of passage rituals throughout the world. However, the symbolism of evil and age that pervades the festival, that which is to be chased away with the past year, is surrounded by music, dancing, eating and drinking, masquerade and pantomime. There is a constant juxtaposition of the forces of age and sickness with symbols of youth and fertility. In this, I would suggest, it is possible to detect a subtle challenge to the established social order. It occurs at several points during the festival, particularly in the more exuberant activities of the youth.

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1 The Ladakhi New Year is really a second birth when the group rejects the old and welcomes the new (my trans.)
The events of Losar

Losar, itself, runs a course of nine days in Photoksar, as it used to elsewhere, beginning on the first day of the eleventh month, but preceded by a number of preliminary events. There are significant differences in the form that the celebrations take here from those now found in other Ladakhi villages, but most of the important events and the significant aspects of the festival as I describe them, seem to have been present in the celebrations that occurred throughout the region.²

The Galden Ngamchod commemorates the day on which Tsongkapa, founder of the Gelukpa sect of Buddhism, achieved enlightenment. It is observed on the twenty-fifth day of every month and is not, therefore, directly linked to Losar, but its occurrence in the tenth month marks the start of the celebrations. In Photoksar this is the first day of the meto, the bonfire lit after dusk by the boys of the village. On this and subsequent nights, up to and including the twenty-ninth, a group of boys visits each village house, collecting flat bread, which they divide up between them while they warm themselves and sing songs around the fire. The most important song describes Bagatam, a mythical figure who journeys into Ladakh from the mouth of the Indus and who needs to be banished along with the evils of the old year. On the last two days, burning branches from the fire are flung down the hill to cries of ‘gya khor!’ the imprecation with which evil spirits are always banished, here directed at Bagatam. There is a considerable party atmosphere around the bonfire which develops into a general round of singing and dancing, along with the telling of licentious jokes, at which point any watching women become embarrassed and run away.

The annual changing of the juniper on the shrines of the phalha deities takes place on the twenty-ninth. Formerly, there was a blood sacrifice at these shrines, which were smeared with blood and decorated with skulls and horns. However, following the intervention of Togdan Rinpoche, this practice has been replaced by a simple purification ritual, normally carried out by the local komnyer. As part of this sangs, a dough ibex figure, flat bread, flour, chang and juniper are offered to the spirits, as they are repeatedly throughout Losar.

² The historical and mythological elements of Losar have been discussed by Rigal (1985), Kaplanian (1981) and Brauen (1980), along with the reasons it is celebrated in the eleventh, not the first month, of the year. Dollfus (1987) concentrates on the festival’s affirmation of internal unity and social relations. I participated in the Photoksar Losar twice, in 1999 and 2002.