CHAPTER THREE

RITUALS IN THE IMPERIUM AND LATER: CONTINUITY IN THE RITUALS OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

This chapter analyzes some rites that are either overtly political or have political implications. Although it would be preferable not to simply list them and provide minimal descriptions, we lack the data to see most of them clearly in their court environment. Further, many political rituals are by nature performed \textit{ad hoc}. We can find no over-arching ideology in the Imperium beyond the superiority of the btsan-pos that legitimized their leadership, so we should not expect to find a grand design into which these rites were fit beyond their immediate usefulness to the government. If the additive principle concerning religious practitioners at courts enunciated in the first chapter is valid, rites would have been added as they were considered to be beneficial. Thus, no matter what rituals we look at, it is difficult to find in them an over-all picture of court religious life.

The value of studying these rites is not only that they are interesting \textit{per se}, but also because most continued to be significant, with little change, at later courts, including the Dga’-ldan Pho-brang. The fall of the Imperium did not relieve Tibetan rulers of the need for ritual methods to stabilize or expand political power. If anything, it increased that need. Buddhist traditions adapted these rites to meet changing needs. These include the most fundamental customs, such as oathing and ceremonies to benefit the religious and political elite.

Before beginning our brief enumeration of only a few broad categories, a general note on ritual and Tibetan Buddhism is in order. There is a vast, largely unstudied literature, particularly in the works of the Rnying-ma tradition, in which many rites are described. Some of these are designed to benefit either “Tibet” (Bod) in general—whatever that actually means in a particular context, which is a subject worthy of a separate study—or a part of it. Many of these rituals are aimed at pacifying local spiritual beings, and achieving this entails bringing stability and prosperity to that area. Most are aimed primarily at the health and well-being of Tibetans, their livestock, etc., which are long-standing responsibilities of local lamas. They sometimes contain
references to the Imperium or btsan-pos, or use terms from that time. While these are nearly always anachronistic, they are valuable resources because they give us a view of the btsan-pos complementary to their fixed interpretation in the mythology of the later Buddhist traditions. Moreover, some texts may, in fact, contain data about practices at the courts of the btsan-pos which were embedded within Tantric Buddhist ritual, either late in the Imperium or shortly after. Before we can claim to understand the relationship between Buddhism and local culture in Tibet, with its political and social implications, we need to examine these materials. Rituals to benefit Tibet likewise give us a concept of ‘Bod’ which complements its presentation in historical sources. These materials are also worthwhile to study because, objectively considered, such rituals are the most valuable services many monks and lamas ever performed for those under their care.

rim gro, sku rim

Let us begin with the oldest and most well-attested court rites, rim gro and sku rim. What is the fundamental meaning and relationship of these terms?

To address the first part of this question, we have recourse to the Mahāvyutpatti and Madhyavyutpatti. The former term occurs at MV.1578 (rim gro bya ba bla na med pa = paricaryānuttaryam), 1762 (rim gro or rim gror bya ba = upasthānam), and 5565 (rim gro'i gnas = upasthānaśālā). Its earliest citation in a Tibetan dictionary is in the Li shi gur khang from the fifteenth century—the oldest Tibetan dictionary—where it is equated with satkāra. In order, these four definitions amount to: the ultimate form of service/worship to be made; attending/worshipping; the hall where this is done; and, veneration/worshipful praise/religious observance (satkāra is also equated in MV.1760 with bkur bstir byed pa, to pay honor or reverence). The pattern of usage here agrees in general with its use in Old Tibetan sources. However, all these definitions are vague (i.e., they display a wide semantic range), and we need to understand more precisely—if we can—what these terms meant. As with Sku Bla, the terms almost certainly had earlier, more precise applications that we no longer clearly understand, and some reinterpretation necessarily accompanied their equivalence with Indic terms. Unlike Sku Bla, though, these terms passed into the Phyi Dar in a variety of contexts, both Bon and Chos.