This chapter looks more closely at the relations among the shamans, the village lamas and their conventional Buddhist-minded counterparts. While the *pawo*, the *bongthing* and the village lamas have established a form of understanding and ritual collaboration which over the years has resulted in the practice of what I have called ‘village religion’, outside conventional Buddhist influences seem to have come into conflict with this local understanding repeatedly. We follow Lopen Dugyal’s confrontation with the *bon* ritual specialists and the way the conflict between village religion and conventional Buddhism expressed itself dramatically in the course of the *pawo*’s annual retreat. But details of the retreat as well as the growing conflictual relation which developed between Lopen Dugyal and the village lamas reveal that an important aspect of the conflict may actually have been between conventional Buddhism and its village adaptation.

1. The case of Lopen Dugyal’s return to the village

The relation between lamas and shamans in the village seems to have developed and evolved to its present state gently, oscillating between a certain degree of rivalry on the one hand and assimilation and cooperation on the other. In the end, at least in theory, the superiority of any form of Buddhism remains unquestioned by all, mainly because of its supremacy in the domain of death and rebirth, the power of its Rinpoches, the superiority of its deities and the wisdom of its philosophy. Even if villagers do not understand the Buddhist scriptures, they realise that *bon* is only there to help the living, which cannot be compared with the depth of Buddhist wisdom. Eventually, everyone will need the help of the lamas when they finally die, but meanwhile, any form of ritual may be sought by anyone if it may be of help when dealing with the problems of life in this world. Thus, the rivalries are never between *bon* and village Buddhism *per se*, but between the successful application of different practices by the various ritual specialists in their
efforts to help the living. Lamas and shamans are thought generally to get on and work together for the welfare of the people. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this co-existence has found its best expression nowadays in the chirim annual ritual and, in the past, during certain rituals performed at the Palace chapel.

In contrast to this local understanding, tensions between village religion and outside forms of conventional Buddhism have always been present on a certain level. However, the efforts by the Lachen Gomchen, the Sakya Lama and the 16th Karmapa were all directed at specific aspects of bon and village religion and did not try to eliminate these practices as a whole. In Tingchim, a new form of confrontation with conventional Buddhism occurred when Lopen Dugyal returned to the village as a fresh post-graduate in Buddhist philosophy. His views on bon and village religion were naturally more dogmatic, and understandably he was not prepared to compromise and accommodate the shamanic views of his fellow village lamas.

Lopen Dugyal had previously been a village lama and had initially learned to read and perform rituals from Tingchim’s lama-teacher. He was the first lama to leave the village for a higher Buddhist education and was also the first to return to the village—at the age of forty-one, after nine years of study—with the Acharya or Masters Degree in Buddhist Philosophy, which he received from the Institute of Higher Nyingma Studies. Lopen Dugyal was my teacher, research assistant, translator and friend. We worked together on and off, in Gangtok and in Tingchim, over a period of two years, a period during which he went through a personal transformation which in a way was relevant to my research interests. As an Acharya graduate, his re-integration into his previous role as village lama was not without its difficulties. Like all advocates of conventional Buddhism, he initially disputed the practice of bon and the village lamas’ lenience towards and participation in unorthodox Buddhist practices. My interest in village religion and the assistance I needed from him in order to look into this subject did not make matters easier for him. He was openly challenged about his ritual powers by the shamans, while the village lamas remained silent, but became increasingly irritated by what they saw as his intellectual arrogance and the threat his knowledge represented to their status. This confrontation was complex and painful since, despite his high Buddhist education, Lopen Dugyal had himself been a village lama for years and could sympathise with relatives and neighbours and understand their need for village religion. The bon ritual specialists