ESTATE AND DEITIES: A RITUAL FROM CENTRAL BHUTAN.
THE BSKANG GSO OF O RGYAN CHOS GLING

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INTRODUCTION

The O rgyan chos gling estate in the Stang valley of Bum thang (central Bhutan) is associated with great Tibetan masters. Klong chen rab ’byams (1308–1363) meditated here and it was one of the residences of Rdo rje gling pa (1346–1405). The family that owns the estate, and has done for generations, considers itself as one of his blood descendants.

In the 19th century, the estate and the family became powerful and prosperous. The head of the lineage Mtsho skyes rdo rje, alias Dbang chen, became the governor (dpön slob) of Tongsa dzong (Krong gsar Chos ’khor rab brtan rtse rdzong) and the de facto leader of Bhutan. Moreover, the marital alliances between the Rdo rje gling pa lineage and the descendants of Padma gling pa (1450–1521), the other great lay-practitioner and treasure discoverer of Bumthang, increased the religious prestige of the O rgyan chos gling family. Thus, Ye shes, the daughter of Mtsho skyes rdo rje, married ’Phrin las, the son of Gtam zhing chos rje. Their son O rgyan rdo rje became the Bya dkar rdzong dpön, that is to say the head of the Bumthang district, and between 1900 and 1902 he rebuilt the family residence, which had been damaged by

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1 This article is part of a series that will be published in the years to come on the estate of O rgyan chos gling. A book destined to a wider audience will also be published at a later stage with Kunzang Choden.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Kunzang Choden and her family, who enthusiastically helped me with the research on their estate, as well as all the villagers of O rgyan chos gling. Please see also Kunzang Choden’s article in this volume.

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2 For Rdo rje gling pa’s activities in Bhutan, see Karmay 2000.

3 I will not elaborate here on the history of Bhutan in the 19th century. See Aris 1994.

4 Descendant of Padma gling pa (1450–1521).
the 1897 earthquake. His paternal uncle was the 8th Pad gling *Gsung sprul* Kun bzung bstan pa’i nyi ma (1843–1891) and his son was Thub rtan dpal ’bar, the 9th Pad gling *Thug sras* (1906–1939).

Today the estate is still in the hands of the same family, which belongs to the *chos rgyud gdung rgyud* class. In Bhutan, traditionally, families do not have names, but the collective term of *chos rgyud gdung rgyud* is applied to the social strata to which families who have both a religious and noble lineage belong. This position in a traditional feudal society implied a certain number of rights and duties that still survive today in spite of major social and economic changes in the country. Since the 1960s, without any formal or spoken agreement, the villagers and the *chos rje* family,6 conscious of their respective leverage powers, have manoeuvred within their socio-religious and economic spaces. They constantly negotiate compromises between the traditional and the modern socio-political structures, progressing by consensus rather than confrontation.

Testimonies of the feudal and religious set-up typical of central Bhutan come to light during the annual festival of the *bskang gso*, which takes place in the autumn in O rgyan chos gling, from the 8th to the 10th day of the 9th month. In this paper a presentation of the ritual will serve as a background to explore, in the context of central Bhutan, elements of the social and religious organisation at the estate when the performance of the *bskang gso* ritual takes place.

O RGYAN CHOS GLING: A SHORT PRESENTATION

At the top of a hillock with a commanding view of the Stang valley, O rgyan chos gling is composed of a large manor and twenty houses, which form the village (Plate. 1). Before the abolition of serfdom in 1953 and the 3rd King’s (1928–1972) land reorganisation in the mid-1950s, the village was inhabited by serfs who worked for the very large

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5 On the relations between the Bumthang noble families and the reincarnated lamas of the Pad gling lineages, see Pommaret, forthcoming.

6 In Bhutan the title *chos rje* is given to descendants of a prestigious lay-practitioner and it also implies generally the possession of a temple and of an estate (*gzhis ka*). It therefore may also carry an economic connotation, depending on the size of the estate, and before the advent of the monarchy, a local political power. In today’s Bhutan, the title *chos rje* is still prestigious and is the term by which the O rgyan chos gling family is referred.