‘LOCAL COMMUNITY RITUALS’ IN BHUTAN:
DOCUMENTATION AND TENTATIVE READING

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Two religious schools of Tantric Buddhism have shaped the history and the religious traditions of Bhutan: The ’Brug pa Bka’ bgyud pa and the Rnying ma pa. The landscape is dotted with Buddhist architectural structures from monasteries to humble mchod rten and prayer-flags. Buddhist concepts shape the thoughts and life of the people; religious ceremonies are performed on official occasions, and grand religious festivals and rituals are sponsored by the state.

However, besides these very Buddhist marks of religious devotion, there is a wide range of rituals performed in the villages that have non-Buddhist and Buddhist features. They are apotropaic or dedicated to deities who are believed to have a direct impact on the daily life and the prosperity of a family or a community.

It is well-known that Buddhism in the Himalayas has incorporated local deities, or numina, who reside in rivers, rocks, forests, and mountains and makes them part of an extensive pantheon. Called by the generic term of 'jig rten pa'i srung ma or spyi'i [ba’i] chos skyong, they are the lowest in the hierarchy of the pantheon but not the least important. The worship of these local deities through appropriate rituals constitutes an essential part of the religious life of the Bhutanese. These deities have a volatile temperament: if pleased, they can grant prosperity, health, good harvest and abundant cattle; if angered, they will retaliate against the people by sending calamities. These aspects have been studied elsewhere and are well documented.

Bhutan has an amazing variety of rituals destined to ward off evil spirits and to please local deities. While many of them bear

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Words have been rendered in Wylie transliteration when possible. However, the Bhutanese convention for transliterating Dzongkha has also been used. Additionally, because Bhutan has several non-written languages, some names have been kept in the Roman transcription used in Bhutan.

similarities with those found in the rest of the Buddhist Himalayas, some of them—probably because of particular historical circumstances and geographical specificities—are identified by the Bhutanese as Bon chos\(^3\) and more particularly Bon dkar, a term which, in Bhutan, encompasses any belief or ritual which does not fall under what is considered to be Buddhist.\(^4\) One may argue about the thin line between Buddhist and non-Buddhist practices in the ritual context of Tantric Buddhism in the Himalayas,\(^5\) but it is important to take into account the Bhutanese viewpoint concerning rituals when studying them. For the Bhutanese, rituals that ward off evil spirits or propitiate local deities that are performed by practitioners who are neither Buddhist monks (dge slong) nor lay practitioners (sgom chen) are considered Bon chos. However in Bhutan, it is not a case of either/or. These practitioners, men or women, are usually devout Buddhists. However, when performing rituals dedicated to local deities, they become non-Buddhist practitioners. I will come back to that point later.

Whatever the religious denomination of these rituals, they are practices which are very much alive and are considered to be indispensable for the welfare of a community. Until the mid-1990s, they were not much talked about by the urbanised elite and sometimes frowned upon by the official Buddhist clergy, although everybody knew how much importance the villagers gave them.

This attitude experienced a shift when preserving the environment became an active government policy. In this perspective, the worship of local deities, which encourages respecting and not polluting their abodes (such as rivers, rocks, mountains, and forests), was seen as an

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\(^3\) In this article, I will use terms with their meaning in the Bhutanese context. One will observe a significant semantic change compared to similar classical Tibetan terms. For example, *sgom chen* is equivalent to chos pa.

\(^4\) The terms *Bon dkar* and *Bon chos* are never used in the Bon po literature. The term *Bon dkar* is found with a derogatory connotation in the Buddhist literature and especially among the Bka’ brgyud pa school. The term *Bon chos* seems to be particular to Bhutan.

Karmay (1998: 290) explained the term Bon in the following manner: “It is to this system of beliefs that a certain number of Dunhuang documents including PT 972 and 1038 refer as Bon and its practitioners as bon or bon po. This Bon must of course be distinguished from what one calls the Svastika Bon of the later period which is a reorganisation of this Bon along Buddhist philosophical and institutional lines with gShen rab Mi bo as the central figure from the eleventh century onwards”. It is well-known that in the *Nine ways of Bon*, the first two deal with divination and rituals to local gods (Snellgrove 1987: 407). However I will not risk here any suggestion, and mention this simply for reference.

\(^5\) This has been debated particularly by Samuel 1993 and 2005.