DANCING IN THE FACE OF DEATH:
LOSAR CELEBRATIONS IN PHOTOKSAR

Fernanda Pirie

It is generally agreed that the central themes of the Ladakhi New Year, Losar (loqsar)\(^1\) celebrations are the chasing away of the old year, with its bad or inauspicious elements, and the welcoming in of the new (Dollfus 1987: 64). Jean-Pierre Rigal (1985: 95), for example, talks of "the major themes of the expulsion of the old and the welcome of the new" and Patrick Kaplanian (1981: 277) says, "Le Nouvel An ladakhi est réellement une deuxième naissance où le groupe rejette l’ancien et accueille le nouveau" [The Ladakhi New Year is really a second birth when the group rejects the old and welcomes the new]. Similar interpretations were offered by a number of my informants in Leh: the rituals chase out the bad 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.

In the academic literature little attention has, however, been paid to the celebratory aspects of the event.\(^2\) Losar does, after all, constitute the biggest festival, with the longest series of parties, of the Ladakhi year. It is undoubtedly a rite of passage, from the old to the new year, involving the deliberate exorcism of the evil spirits which threaten life. It also includes 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 is surrounded by music, dancing, pantomime and the symbols of youth and fertility. My suggestion is that as well as affirming the cyclical continuity of

\(^1\) I transcribe Ladakhi words, many of which have no official orthography, according to their pronunciation in Photoksar, but include the Wylie transcription, where relevant and different, in brackets.

\(^2\) 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 Tibetan year, while Dollfus (1987) concentrates on the festival’s affirmation of internal unity and social relations.
the physical community this also involves a subtle challenge to the established social order.

While Dollfus (1987) sees the festival as primarily affirmative of the social order, I consider that it also highlights normally hidden tensions between the realm of the lha (the spirits), who are responsible for sickness and health, and that of human social organisation. Intertwined with the rites of renewal is an opposition between the supernatural world and the social order of the village, between the vitality of youth and the status of age represented in the social hierarchy. The festival brings to the fore an important, but normally hidden, tension within the village order.

**The Events of Losar**

Photoksar, a village of 200 people in the Lingshed area, is a long day’s walk from the nearest road and separated by high passes from the neighbouring villages in either direction. Its people are still largely dependent on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism and still maintain a measure of autonomy from the urban centre and the dominance of the monasteries (Pirie 2006a).

_Losar_ runs the full course of nine days, here, at the beginning of the eleventh month. There are significant differences in the form that the celebrations take in various Ladakhi villages. However, most of the important events and the significant aspects of the festival, as I describe them, are also found, or used to be present, in the celebrations that occur throughout the region.

_The Twenty-Fifth to Twenty-Ninth Days of the Tenth Month_

The Galden Ngamchod commemorates the death of Tsongkapa, the founder of the Gelukpa sect of Buddhism. It is observed on the twenty-fifth day of every month and is not, therefore, directly linked to _Losar_, but it marks the start of the celebrations. The dawn of this and each subsequent day until the ninth of the eleventh month is greeted by the village drummer, who beats his drum 360 times, one for each of the days of the new year. This is music “for the spirits, the lha and the lu (klu).”

In most parts of Ladakh, including Leh, butter lamps are placed on the outside of the houses on the twenty-fifth and burning torches (now kerosene) light up the hillsides. In Photoksar this is the first day of the metho, the bonfire lit after dusk by the boys of the village who visit each