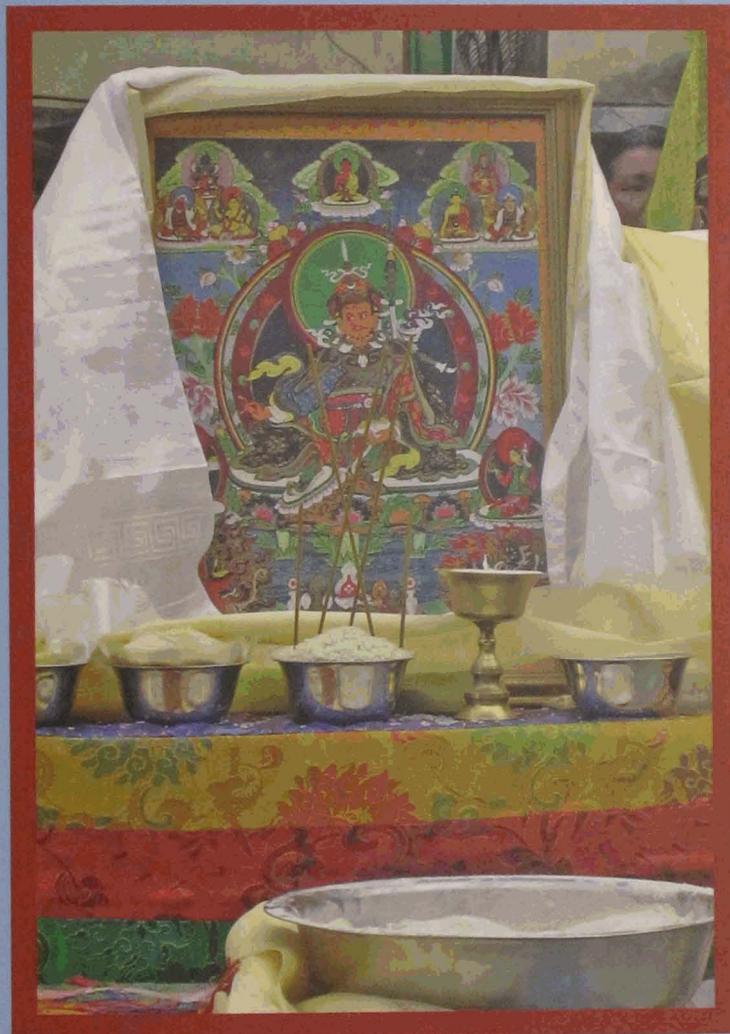


Eberhard Berg

Building the Sherpas' New Present in the Age of Globalization

The construction of a novel tradition as well as a collective Sherpa identity in a new place through the performance of Tibetan Buddhist ritual celebrations:
a close look at the present revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism,
culture, and society



Lumbini
2011

Building the Sherpas' New Present in the Age of Globalization

“Religion [i.e. the Dharma – E.B.] is the most powerful agency of social service and all the activities of the people are guided by the idea of the religion.”

Ang Dorje Lama (1940–1992)

A leading Sherpa ‘big man’, Ang Dorje Lama was the spokesman of the group of three influential Sherpas who were deeply committed to the urgent task of the revival of the Sherpas’ religious and cultural traditions. These three personages represent the major driving force that was to set into motion the remarkable process of revitalisation under the guidance of the clerics, which can be witnessed today. Their main effort was to lead the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, the Sherpa Community Center in Bodhnāth, KTM. This community institution is the arena in which the novel tradition is being created, strengthened and reaffirmed.

Ang Dorje Lama, along with his wife and several relatives, lost his life in the tragic Thai Air crash at Gosainkund in the year 1992.

“We are a people in the midst of change, and what will happen in the future is hard to say. But so far, though we have left our homeland, we have stayed pretty much together, and there has not been much intermarriage with outsiders.”

Tenzing Norgay (1914 or 1915–1986)

Tenzing Norgay, along with the late Edmund Hillary, reached the summit of Mt. Everest on 29 May 1953. His far-sighted observation was mentioned in his first autobiography (1955, p. 108).

“It is important to remember, however, that Tibetan Buddhism, especially the form followed by the Rnying ma pa, is intended first and foremost to be pragmatic (...). The explanation for the multiplicity of metaphors and tutelary deities lies in the fact that there must be a practice suited to every sentient creature somewhere. Forms or metaphors that were relevant yesterday may lose their efficacy in the changed situation of today.”

Ellis Gene Smith (2001, p. 240)

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Lumbini International Research Institute
Lumbini 2011

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Cover illustration: Painted scroll of Guru Padmasambhava

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ISBN 978-9937-553-01-8

First published 2011

Printed in Nepal by Dongol Printers, Kathmandu

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Acknowledgements

Throughout my research I have been fortunate to receive invaluable advice, support, and guidance from a number of Sherpa lamas, eminent scholars, colleagues and friends.

First and foremost I am indebted, in various ways, to Ven. Tulku Padma Tharchhin Lama, the abbot of Serlo Monastery in the Solu region. It was this eminent Sherpa lama, accomplished practitioner and highly learned scholar who, truly embodying spiritual knowledge and wisdom, kindly offered me valuable guidance, support, and explanations for all matters related to Sherpa Buddhism. These matters include its history, the complex symbolism of the ritual ceremonies, priestly lineages, to name but a few major subjects. Having been my main mentor throughout the years of my long-term research among the Solu Sherpas he has always been a great source of invaluable help and kind encouragement. Without his continuous inspiration, tireless collaboration, and profound sense of good humour this book could not have been written. Much gratitude is also felt to him, his relatives, and the entire 'Serlo family', i.e. the extended monastic community of Serlo, especially to Mrs. Zangmu Sherpa, the widow of the late Khenpo Sangye Tenzin (1990–1924), the founder of Serlo Monastery, for all the warm hospitality shown to me throughout almost two decades that I was fortunate to live in Shedrup Zungdel Ling Monastery in each season.

In Nepal, as well as in Germany, I benefited greatly from the expert assistance of Professor Dr. Franz-Karl Ehrhard (Munich), a veritable treasure-mine of knowledge and expertise in the field of Tibetan Studies. From him I have been fortunate to receive numerous valuable explanations, a lot of advice, many important references, and much inspiration. I am deeply indebted to him for having shared his impressive knowledge with me in long nightly conversations in his former home in Bodnath and also through correspondence. His pioneering essays on the history and spread of Tibetan Buddhism in the Nepal-Tibet borderlands, in general, and on Buddhism among the Sherpas, in particular, opened my eyes in many ways and helped greatly to pave the way that was to lead to the present investigation until its completion.

A great debt of gratitude is due to the late Dr. Richard J. Kohn (1948–2000). Rick introduced me to a major kind of Tibetan Buddhist festival as enacted in two different types of sacred masked dance dramas depending on the specific setting that are being performed among the Sherpas (the monastic *Mani Rimdu* and the *Dumji* as held in numerous village temples), and the tradition of Mindröling, where both kinds of sacred dances have originated.

Without the knowledge of this outstanding scholar I could have hardly begun to fathom the complexity of the respective sādhana, the meditation and ritual text concerned with the spiritual practice of the central deity that serves as liturgy, as well as the overall structure of this kind of Tibetan Buddhist tantric ritual.

Special thanks go to H.H. Trulzhig Rinpoche Ngawang Chökyi Lodro (Thubten Choling/Sitapaila), Zang Zang Tulku (Buddhanilkanta), Ven. Dzatul Rinpoche Ngawang Tenzin Jigdral Wangchuk Chökyi Gyaltzen (Pharping/Taiwan), the Tengboche Rinpoche, Ngawang Tenzin Zangpo (Tengboche/Bodnath), the late Thame Rinpoche, Ngawang Tsedrup Tenpe Gyaltzen and Ang Kinji, his wife for their kind hospitality extended to my wife and me during our stays at Thame Monastery on occasion of the outstanding performance of the *Mani Rimdu* (Thame/Bodnath), the Toloka Tulku, Ngawang Losang Yeshe Gyatso (Bodnath), and to Ang Babu Lama, the abbot of Jalsa Monastery in Solu (Jalsa/Taiwan/Bodnath).

Moreover, I have to thank two clerics of Trulzhig Rinpoche's Thubten Choling Monastery in Solu: Ngawang Shenphen (orig. Gole/Solu), personal assistant of H.H. Trulzhig Rinpoche, on the latter's order presently the head lama of Chiwong Monastery/Solu) and the nun Ngawang 'Kyarog' Palmo, eldest daughter of the former Kyarog lama/Khumbu.

Among my Nepali colleagues I should especially mention the late Dr. Harka Gurung and Dr. Ramesh Raj Kunwar (formerly Kathmandu University).

My deep gratitude goes to the entire Sherpa community. I owe an ongoing debt of gratitude to all my Sherpa friends who have been extraordinarily generous, benevolent, and helpful throughout all the years of my long-term research. I extend my heartfelt thanks and appreciation for their great support and encouragement to Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa from Bagam/Solu, until last year chairman of the *Sherpa Seva Kendra* committee, my invaluable main informant who was always helpful and patient despite the almost never ending stream of my questions; Dr. Yula Sherpa, President of Monastery Management and Development Committee, Ministry of Local Development, Government of Nepal, Shree Mahal, Pulchowk, Lalitpur; khenpo Ngawang Thubten Sherab Gyurme (Phungmoche Monastery); khenpo Namkha (Serlo Monastery/Solu; Ang Kaji Sherpa 'Kisan' from Phaplu/Solu (Treasurer of the SSK, Member of Nepal Mountaineering Association; active member of NEFIN);

Walung Dorjee from Walungchung, Director of Airway, Travels & Tours (Pvt) Ltd., Phulbari, Baudha; Ang Temba Sherpa from Chaplung (Pharak), several posts; Sarki Nurbu Lama, Director of Mount Fuji Treks & Expedition (P.) Ltd.; Jangbu Sherpa from Chaurikarkha/Pharak, Managing Director of Himalayan High Country Treks & Expedition (P) Ltd.; Ang Nyima Sherpa from Gumdol/Solu); Capt. (ret.) Ang Dendi Sherpa from Kyerung/Solu, Board of Directors of Upakar Saving & Credit Co-operative Ltd., chairman of British Gurkha Sherpa Association; Ang Dendi Sherpa from Kyerung/Solu, President of Federation of Nepal

Cottage and Small Industries; Chewang N. Lama Ph.D. (A.N.U., Canberra) from Junbesi/Solu, Govt. of Nepal, Ministry of Environment Science & Technology; Capt. M.T. Lama from Phaplu, Pilot of Air Nepal;

Pemba Lama Sherpa from Junbesi/Solu, guide at Himalayan Shangri-La Treks & Expedition P. Ltd.; Sarkey Sherpa, Managing Director of Face to Face, Treks & Expedition (P) Ltd., Kopan, KTM; Dendi Sherpa from Phera/Solu, Trekking guide at Trek Into Another World, KTM; Lhakpa Gyaltzen Sherpa, Managing Director of Sherpa & Swiss Adventures (P) Ltd., Mandikhatar, KTM; Ang Furi Sherpa, Proprietor of Pumori Trexpedition Shop, Jyata, KTM.

A very special thank goes to Ms. Yangjang Sherpa (Serlo/Solu), at present pursuing her studies in New York, who provided valuable data concerning the living conditions and the communal religious festivals that are being celebrated by the Sherpa diasporic community in the USA, particularly as to those of the diasporic community in both the city and the state of New York.

In Bodnath several friends deserve special mention. First of all, I would like to express my thanks to Thubten Lama, the renowned Sherpa historian and thangka painter, member of *Nepal Buddhist Nyingma Association*, Founder Vice-president of *Nepal Sherpa Association*, (orig. from Phungmoche/Solu, today Pipal Bot, Bodnath) for having generously given permission to reproduce from his book (1999) a fine painted scroll depicting the religious landscape of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. My thanks go also to:

Sonam Sherpa, Mahankal/ Bodnath, trekking guide and Nepal representative of *medihimal e.V.*, *Organisation für medizinische Entwicklungshilfe in Regionen tibetischer Kultur*, Munich, Germany (orig. from Dorphu, Solu); late Karma and Ang Kinji Sherpa (orig. Thragboduk/Solu, today Bodnath); Prakash Dhakwa of 'Dharana Cyberspace' who has shared his great expertise in photography, printing, and map design, for all his invaluable computer support throughout the last five years, and for his and his wife's kind hospitality; Dr. Christine Daniels (D. Phil., Oxford), Bodnath (d.2009), and Ani Jamyang Wangmo (Thame Monastery), associated with Kopan Monastery, Bodnath, and Lawudo Monastery, Khumbu.

My appreciation also goes to Bidur Dangol, Vajra Bookshop and Vajra Publications, Jyatha, Thamel, Kathmandu for having generously given permission to reproduce a section of one of his maps, and for his friendship throughout the last fifteen years.

I was able to undertake the present investigation through the kindness of the Lumbini International Research Institute. Without the LIRI research grant the project could neither have been undertaken nor brought to completion. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Dr. Christoph Cüppers, the director of the Lumbini International Research Institute, for

his continuous kind encouragement, advice, support and patience throughout the years it took to complete this project.

My initial research among the Sherpas upon which all my subsequent projects have built was made possible through the generous support I received from the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research to whom I express my appreciation. My initial research as a LIRI research scholar was made possible through the help of Professors Leonard W.J. v.d.Kuip (Harvard), Sherry B. Ortner (UCLA), and Michael Oppitz (Emeritus, Zürich University)

My deepest gratitude goes to Verena-Maria Felder, to whom this book is dedicated. She has accompanied me on numerous field trips, read and criticized most of my writings, and tolerated both the numerous long periods of my absence and the countless situations when an often distracted and sometimes discouraged husband lived less with her at home and more often in far-away Sherpa culture and society he was trying to put on paper. Without her continuous encouragement, trust and sustenance during all the years of this project this book would never have seen the light of day.

In fond memory of my dear friends lama Tenzing, Junbesi's former tantric village lama and Karma Tshultrim (Junbesi), the renowned thangka painter, Thapkye Lama (Thombuk), 'mad monk' Tenzing alias 'Dutch Bob' (Thubten Choling), James Marshal H. and Grace S.

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Map showing the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth and the inner part of its surrounding sacred space in which currently six Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and three temples including the Sherpa Gonpa in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* exist

Sketch of the Sherpa Gonpa located on the first floor of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building in Bodhnāth

Painted scroll from the hand of Thubten Lama, the renowned Sherpa historian and thangka painter (orig. Phungmoche/Solu, today living in Bodhnāth) showing the Sherpas' traditional sacred landscape of Solu-Khumbu

Photos

The colossal statue of Padmasambhava in the fierce form of Guru Nang srid Zil gnon placed in the centre of the altar being the main statue of the Shar pa dGon pa in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth

The statue of Padmasambhava is graced by big-sized photos of leading dignitaries of the rNying ma pa School; this photo shows H.h. 'Khrul zhig Rin po che (b. 1924) who is highly venerated among the Sherpas; he is abbot of a big monastery in the Solu region which is the home of the exiled community of rDza rong phu Monastery just north of Mt. Everest in the Ding ri region

Metal plate adorned with a *vajra*, symbol of Vajrayāna, below the bust of Ang Dorje Lama, the major among the three Sherpa 'big men' who had been responsible for the planning, design, and construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex in Bodhnāth

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa in the courtyard in front of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex; the Sherpa temple is located on its first floor; until 2006 chairman of the *Sherpa Seva Kendra* management committee, he has been one of the major driving forces that

were to lead to the construction of the communal institution; moreover, he has been the invaluable source of oral history concerning the formation of the Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley who was the main informant of this investigation

The present XIIth rDza sprul, Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan (b. 1959) who usually presides over the performance of *lo gsar*, the major annual festival, as celebrated in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*

Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin bzang po (b. 1935), the present abbot of sTeng po che Monastery in the Khumbu region, being the second-most important bla ma in the novel framework of the Sherpa community temple in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*

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Courtyard as seen from above which is densely packed with spectators during the brief sacred masked dance ('*chams*) performance on occasion of *lo gsar*

Young Sherpas on the roof of the communal kitchen building watching the sacred masked dance performance

The sacred masked dance performance as seen from the roof of the communal kitchen building

Full view of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* from the roof of the communal kitchen building adorned with numerous strings of prayer flags on occasion of *lo gsar*; the temple is situated on the first floor while the large hall on the groundfloor is used for mundane purposes

The Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth adorned with numerous strings of prayer flags on occasion of *lo gsar* as seen from the roof of the communal kitchen building

Sherpa ladies old and young dressed in their finest festive clothes performing the *zhabs bro*, the Sherpa round dance, in the courtyard of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* after the religious celebration of the Tibetan New Year has come to its end

Sherpa lady dressed in her finest festive clothes wearing different kinds of traditional jewellery

Renowned old Sherpa chanteuse singing traditional songs on occasion of the performance of the *zhabs bro*, the Sherpa round dance, in the courtyard building

A Brief Chronology of Sherpa History

With a special focus on the current revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism and culture as embedded in the context of the revival of the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism in exile in Nepal

- 1480 – 1500 The ancestors of the Sherpas leave Kham and settle in south-central Tibet
- 1533 The ancestors of the Sherpas cross the Nangpa La and enter Khumbu
- 16th cent. The Sherpas' settlement of the northern Khumbu region
- 17th cent. The Sherpas' settlement of the southern Solu region
- 1610 Founding of Dorje Trak in Central Tibet, the main monastery of the tradition of the 'Northern Treasures' of revealed literature of Rigzin Godem, by Dorje Trak Rigzin III, Ngagi Wangpo (1580–1639)
- 1676 Founding of Mindröling in Central Tibet, the main monastery of the 'Southern Treasures' of revealed literature of Ratna Lingpa, by Rigzin Terdag Lingpa (1647–1714). In close cooperation with his brother Lochen Dharmaśri (1656–1717) Terdag Lingpa created the Mindröling teaching tradition; he created, among, a.o., the grand public festivals known as *sgrub chen* or 'great liturgical performance' to which both the *Dumij* village temple festival and the *Mani Rimdu* monastic masked dance drama as held among the Sherpas conform
- 1667 Founding of the first Sherpa village temple in Pangboche in Khumbu by mythical ancestor hero Sangwa Dorje; around the same time his two brothers, Ralpa Dorje and Khyenpa Dorje, found the temples in Thame and Rimijung
- 1720 Founding of the oldest village temple of Solu in Gonpa Zhung by mythical ancestor hero Dorje Zangbu
- 1772 Peaceful acquisition of Solu-Khumbu by the unified state of Nepal under the House of Gorkha established in the year 1769
- Before 1850 a group of Sherpa village priests traveled to the Mangyul region in southwest Tibet to study with the great Thrakar Taso Tulku Mipham Chökyi Wangchuk (1775–1837), a famous teacher in the Tibet-Nepal borderlands. The Thrakar Taso Tulku transmitted both the ritual cycles of the 'Northern Treasures' and the teaching tradition of Mindröling including its tradition of grand public festivals as represented by the 'great liturgical

- performance' called *Dumji* to the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. Greatly strengthened Sherpa Buddhism thus adopted its modern form
- Mid-19th Century Out-migration to Darjeeling; emergence of the community of Darjeeling Sherpas, being the Sherpas' first diasporic community
- 1850 Birth of Lama Gulu/Ngawang Norbu Zangpo, major Sherpa disciple of Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu; main founder of Tengboche/Khumbu, the first celibate monastery among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu
- 1867 Birth of Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu, the 'Buddha of Dza Rongphu'
- 1902 Founding of Dza Rongphu Monastery in the Dingri area by Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu. He transmitted the Mindröling teaching tradition to the Sherpas and inspired the construction of celibate monasteries and the introduction of the *Mani Rimdu* monastic masked dance drama among them. Thus, Sherpa Buddhism was again greatly invigorated
- 1914 or 1915 Birth of Tenzing Norgay in Thame/Khumbu (d. 1986 Darjeeling)
- 1916 Founding of Tengboche Gonpa in Khumbu, the Sherpas' first celibate monastery; the main sponsor was Lama Gulu
- 1919 Consecration of Tengboche Gonpa by Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu
- 1923 Founding of Chiwong Gonpa, the largest celibate monastery in Solu established by Sangye Lama (1857–1940) under the guidance of the Kusho Tulku (? – 1932) and his brother Kusho Mangde (1905–92) from Thame Monastery
- 1924 Birth of Trulzhig Rinpoche, Ngawang Chökyi Lodro; today a leading dignitary of the 'Old Translation School' he is the undisputed authority as to the entire Mindröling teaching tradition; Trulzhig Rinpoche, the major representative of the Dza Rongphu tradition, is highly venerated among the Sherpas
- 1924 Birth of highly learned Khenpo Sangye Tenzin (d. 1990), founder and abbot of Serlo Shedrup Zungdel Ling Monastery (1959) close to Gonpa Zhung in Solu; due to his collaboration with A. W. Macdonald internationally famed historian of Sherpa Buddhism and Sherpa customs
- 1925 Founding of Deboche monastery, the first Sherpa nunnery, located near Tengboche monastery
- 1928 Consecration of Deboche monastery
- 1929 Consecration of Chiwong Gonpa
- 1932 Birth of Drubwang Penor Rinpoche, Eleventh Holder of the Palyul lineage, abbot of Namdroling, the seat of the Palyul lineage in exile in Bylakuppe,

- Mysore, Karnataka, India. Penor Rinpoche was third supreme head of the Nyingma pa School (from 1993 until 2001)
- 1934 Great earthquake throughout Nepal; destruction of Tengboche Gonpa and of numerous religious monuments throughout the Solu-Khumbu region; caused the death of Lama Gulu
- 1935 Birth of H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and birth of the Tengboche Tulku, Ngawang Tenzin Zangpo, Lama Gulo's reincarnation
- 1937 Birth of the Toloka Tulku, Ngawang Losang Yeshe Gyatso
- 1940 Demise of Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu; enthronement ceremony of the Tengboche Tulku
- Mid-20th Beginning of the Sherpas' out-migration to the Kathmandu Valley; emergence
Cent. of the Sherpa Valley community
- 1953 First ascent of Chomolungma or Mt. Everest by Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary (1919–2007)
- 1953 – 1955 Following the first ascent of Mt. Everest and the coronation of King Mahendra in 1955 Nepal slowly opened up its borders to foreign visitors; this made the emergence of the trekking and mountaineering business in Nepal possible
- 1957 Birth of Thame Rinpoche, Ngawang Tsedrup Tenpe Gyaltzen
- 1959 Birth of Dzatul Ngawang Tenzin Jigdral Wangchuk Chökyi Gyaltzen, 12th reincarnate of the Dzatul incarnation lineage
- 1963 Foundation of Thegchog Namdrol Shedrup Dargey Ling Monastery, the seat of the Palyul lineage in exile, in Bylakuppe, Mysore, Karnataka, India by Drubwang Penor Rinpoche; the majority of Sherpas pursuing higher religious studies today attend the Namdroling monastic college
- Mid-1960s Beginning and continuous booming of adventure trekking, climbing and mountaineering business in Nepal until its almost-breakdown around the year 2000; its second-most important destination is the Solu-Khumbu region with the Everest Base camp trekking trail
- 1961 Sir Edmund Hillary builds the Khumjung School
- 1964 The Namche, Chaurikarkha and Junbesi schools and the short airstrip at Lukla, the main entry point of tourists to the Khumbu region, are built by Sir Edmund Hillary
- 1966 The Khunde Hospital is built by Sir Edmund Hillary

- 1968 Consecration of Thubten Chöling, Trulzhig Rinpoche's monastery in exile situated an hour's walk to the north of Gonpa Zhung (Nep. Junbesi) in northwestern Solu
- Mid-1970s Emergence of the Sherpa Valley community in the environs of Kathmandu preferably in the larger area around the Great Stupa of Bodnath
- 1976 Foundation of *Sagarmatha National Park*
- 1978 Foundation of the *Sherpa Seva Kendra* or *Sherpa Service Centre* in Bodnath, the communal building complex including the *Sherpa Temple* of the entire Sherpa community which is the center of the current revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism and culture
- 1978 Demise of Au Leshe, Sherpa monk, hermit and Solu's most famous Thangka painter (b. 1900)
- 1980 Foundation of Shechen Tennyi Dargey Ling Monastery in Bodnath, seat of the Shechen lineage in exile, by H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche; today, numerous Sherpas pursuing higher religious studies attend Shechen's monastic college; since its foundation Shechen is also the monastery where Sherpa lamas and advanced monks undergo a thorough training in the realm of sacred dances of the Nyingma tradition
- 1980 Foundation of the Chime Tagten Chöling Monastery at Maratika in Halase, Kotang district, eastern Nepal by the Sherpa Ngawang Chöpel Gyatso, the Maratika Lama (1922–1997), under the guidance of and with great support from H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche and Trulzhig Rinpoche; these three leading dignitaries of the 'Old Translation School', deeply committed to the revival of their order in exile, were also the three key figures who greatly inspired and under whose spiritual guidance the current revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism was initiated and set in motion. Until today, H.H. Trulzhig Rinpoche, the only survivor of this group of three, continues tirelessly to act as its major mentor
- 1983 Fatal bus accident that caused the death of twenty-eight Sherpas on their return from a pilgrimage to the four major Buddhist places of pilgrimage
- 1983 Construction of a small hydroelectric system in Namche Bazaar
- 1984 Demise of Kapa Kalden, Khumbu's most famous Thangka painter of his era
- 1985 Sudden outburst of Dig Tsho, the moraine-dammed glacial lake above Thame, due to an ice avalanche; this catastrophe destroyed a newly built

- hydroelectric power plant, 14 bridges, about thirty houses; much of the scarce valuable arable land in the Bhote Kosi valley was washed away thus also causing a profound landscape change in Khumbu and Pharag
- 1987 Demise of H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdral Yeshe Dorje (b. 1904), first supreme head of the Nyingma pa School until his death, eminent master and learned scholar, respected poet and great teacher
- 1989 Tengboche Monastery burns down to the ground due to the innocent use of an electric heater
- 1989 Institution of the annual *Nyingma Monlam Chenmo* in Bodhgaya by Thartang Tulku, Berkeley, Calif., one of the initiators and major sponsors of the ongoing revival of the Nyingmapa School of Tibetan Buddhism in exile
- 1990s Emergence of diasporic communities in Japan and the West, the main ones being in the US, predominantly in New York, California, and Oregon
- 1991 Demise of H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (b.1910), one of Tibetan Buddhism's most outstanding masters of the 20th century, knowledge holder of numerous teaching lineages, a.o. teacher of the XIV Dalai Lama, acted as second supreme head of the Nyingma pa School from 1987 until his death in 1991
- 1992 Inauguration of the Swiss-aided hydropower project installed below Salleri, capital of the Solu-Khumbu district
- 1993 Consecration of the rebuilt Tengboche Monastery by H.H. Trulzhig Rinpoche
- 1993 Birth of Urgyen Tendzin Jigme Lhundrup, H.H. Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche's incarnation
- 1995 Inauguration of the Austrian-aided hydropower project installed near Thamo/ Khumbu
- 2003 Foundation of the *Nepal Buddhist Nyingma Association* under the supervision of Dr. Yula Sherpa, president of the Monastery Management and Development Committee, Ministry of Local Development, Govt. of Nepal, the major Nepal-wide religio-political association of the 'Old School' committed to its revitalization
- 2007 Demise of Minling Thrichen Rinpoche, Gyurme Kunzang Wangyal (b. 1931), eleventh Throne-holder of Mindröling, fourth supreme head of the Nyingmapa School from 2001 until 2007, who was abbot of the Mindröling Monastery re-established in Dehradun, U.P. India. The monastic college of Mindröling in exile is the third monastic site where today's young Sherpa monks use to pursue their higher religious studies today

2009

Demise of H.H. Paltrul Drubwang Padma Norbu Rinpoche, 11th Throneholder of the Palyul lineage, acted as third supreme head of the Nyingmapa School from 1993 until 2000. Due to his initiative Palyul monastery was rebuilt in Mysore, Karnataka, South India, named Namdroling. Since its construction in 1978 Namdroling's monastic college has always been the major college for young Sherpa monks to pursue advanced studies

Introduction

1. A vignette

It was an early afternoon on Wednesday, February 8th, 2006, the third and final day of the spiritually significant first phase of the Sherpas' seven week long mortuary rites. In the course of each of these three days the *'pho ba* practice, i.e. the ritual transference of the consciousness of the deceased to a pure realm of rebirth, is performed by one bla ma. As a rule, neither family members or his assistants take part in this most intimate religious ceremony. The locus of its performance was the separate room especially built for this purpose in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodnāth, which is the communal building (*mi 'dzom sa*) of the entire Sherpa community. Its distinctive feature is a finely built and lavishly ornamented spacious temple called 'Shar pa dGon pa' (i.e. 'Sherpa Temple').

The deceased person was a nineteen year old Sherpa man from Bodnāth who belonged to the Sherpa clan (*ru*) called Khampache (Khams pa che).¹ His family, hailing from Mali village in the Dolakha area in the midhills of eastern Nepal, located just an hour's walk from Jiri on the Everest base camp trail, moved to Bodnāth about twelve years ago with their three children and the husband's aged parents. The family established itself in a house of their own, in the wider area of the highly sacred space around the famed Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. The Great Stūpa has long occupied a very special place in the larger narrative of Buddhism's introduction from Tibet.

As is usual in the death-case of a young Sherpa of a relatively well-to-do family, the social gathering held on the second day, which is closely associated with this particular phase in the course of the Sherpas' extended mortuary rites, was attended by a large crowd of people. The assembled guests came from villages and hamlets from all over the Solu-Khumbu region, the Sherpas' Himalayan homeland in northeastern Nepal, and also from the Kathmandu Valley, where numerous Sherpa families have firmly established themselves. Consequently, they have formed the Sherpa Valley community. It is common for the Sherpas to invite, if possible, 'their own' bla ma and monks from their home locality to perform the

¹ Actually, Khampache is one of the four sub-clans of the Thimmipa (Thim mi pa), also known as Paldorje (dPal rdo rje), which is one of the four original Sherpa clans. For the genealogy of the main Sherpa clans refer to Oppitz, M. 1968, appendix; the author has given a detailed account of the history of both their immigration and their clans (op. cit. , pp. 73–104). As to the four original Sherpa clans see also the brief overview found in J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 319–321.

mortuary rites and all other religious services. This custom is being continued among the Sherpas of the Valley community, which clearly indicates that, although they have shifted to a culturally alien Hindu environment, the Sherpas continue to keep the strong bonds that prevail between them, their home locality, and the priesthood of their locality. Nowadays, it is most common among the Sherpas to invite the celibate bla ma and a group of monks of 'their' monastery, which is located in the home area. In this case, the *'pho ba* rite was held by the abbot of Thodung, the monastery located in the wider area around the Mali Pass, where the bereaved family's original home is situated.² The Thodung bla ma came to Bodnāth only for this purpose, which involves a short walk to Jiri, the road head, and a tiring ten to twelve hours' bus drive. There were six monks in his entourage to assist him in this important ritual performance.

While occupied with the measuring of the diverse structures of the *Sherpa Sewā Kendra*, which was necessary for recreating the architectural design of the entire communal building complex, I felt that I was being observed by a young Sherpa. In order to avoid unnecessary attention I was eager to do this job as stealthily as possible. The young Sherpa was the only one present who seemed to follow my activities with great interest. Over the entire three days we had given each other various glimpses from a distance, yet never had occurred a chance for an exchange of words. He had seen me most often engaged in long conversations with the spiritual practitioners when they were 'off-duty', usually while having lunch with them, as well as with numerous leading 'big men' of the Sherpa community who kept showing up individually in the course of the day of the 'public gathering'. I had also seen him during these three days and had noticed that he had always been occupied with helping his parents take care of the performing bla ma and his monks as well as hosting the huge social gathering on the second day.

After the period of the first three days of the Sherpas' mortuary rites had almost come to its end and with it the hosts' work, a relaxed atmosphere had taken over in the almost empty courtyard. Ultimately, the young man came closer and kindly introduced himself, in fluent and advanced English, as the twenty years old senior brother of the deceased. He gave me a brief, but lively account of the origin of his family and the – usual – reasons for its shift to Bodhnāth: to be close to the center of the booming trekking industry in which his father was successfully involved. I also learned of his education career. Presently, he was a student of 'business management' at a known big college located close to the airport. In short, the young educated Sherpa was a representative of the steadily increasing modern English and

² A photo of the renovated Thodung Monastery (built in 1947) may be found in Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, p. 22.

Nepali-speaking Sherpa elite that has become a distinctive mark of the relatively affluent Sherpa Valley community. And he told me of his dream, as is usual among his generation, of going to the West, preferably to New York, as soon as possible after graduation in order to pursue advanced studies at university.

Thereupon the young Sherpa turned to me asking straightforward whether I was a researcher, if so, of which kind of scientific discipline, and as to the specific purpose and goal of my current research project. Upon his unusually detailed questioning I told him that being a cultural anthropologist with a particular focus on Himalayan Buddhist communities I have, since more than two decades, specialized in Sherpa religion and culture, history and society. It has been since then that I have been interested in and involved with Sherpa Buddhism, their monasteries, village temples and certain figures of both tantric householder and celibate bla ma-s. My current investigation is concerned with the urgent contemporary problem of how to preserve the Sherpas' rich cultural heritage at the time of their encounter with modernity and the forces of globalisation and their global dispersal. My central concern is the question of cohesion of Sherpa society in this novel framework: what holds the Sherpa society and its numerous diasporic communities together under circumstances that, as in the case of other ethnic communities, may easily lead to its fragmentation or even to its disappearance? My key question refers to the function of Buddhism in the present context. Seeing the foundation of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* as emblematic of the current revitalisation of Sherpa religion, culture and society following a long period of profound loss of culture and alienation from its guiding Buddhist norms and values, while at the same time representing its central arena as well as its major driving force, I have chosen to undertake an investigation into this hitherto more or less fully ignored but currently, in fact, increasingly important field of scientific interest.

After having listened carefully to what I had to say the young Sherpa first expressed his deep appreciation of both my general endeavour and the specific subject of my current research project, thereupon, he emphasized that he had understood perfectly well its very significance. Ultimately, his speech culminated in an unusual kind of profound cultural self-criticism. His argument that I recorded on tape with his consent was advanced as follows:

“So you are doing what actually constitutes an important part of our own task and obligation vis a vis our Sherpa religion, culture, and society and its preservation. But unfortunately, we have not done it, and we still don't even consider or move to undertake this long overdue task. This sad state is due to the fact that we are still not thinking of our rich Sherpa culture and the proper practice of the Dharma as our great ancestors have done although both have been suffering

gravely from decay in the recent past until this very day. (...). Instead, despite our severe neglect that was the cause of the decay of our cultural heritage everyone of us continues to care solely about making money for himself. (...).

Hence, in fact, it is you, the foreign outsider, who is doing our job that is to record as much of our religion, culture, society, and history as possible and to put the collected findings on paper thus creating written documents for the benefit of the coming generations of Sherpas.³ However, we do not have any written documents that may help us to imagine and remember our religion, culture and society of which we are so proud and upon the knowledge of which also our present and future will have to be based.⁴ (...). But, for the sake of the argument, let's assume, in case you were not engaged in this field: If we Sherpas will not undertake to tackle this urgent task of eminent importance ourselves in the near future, we easily may have soon forgotten about our the rich cultural tradition we have always been so proud of, as well as the Dharma's particularly great value to the people of my generation since it has given our ancestors and continues to give profound meaning to our contemporary lives.(...).

Even more important, however, is the fact that the Dharma serves to hold us Sherpas together in our degenerate era despite the considerable geographical distance that nowadays separates our diverse communities scattered widely across the globe. Some of my relatives have been living in New York since quite a few years such as so many of us these days, especially of my age-group. There they celebrate our traditional religious festivals that have always served to bring us Sherpas together, they perform the same sacred masked dance dramas, and they sponsor the ritual ceremonies, etc., just as we do here.(...). We keep contact via email and inform us by means of specific websites. In case people of a specific

³ This has been the explicit motive that had led to the compilation of the cultural history of the Himalayan High valley community of Manang (sMa nang or Nyi shang) in northern Central Nepal by L. Messerschmidt et al. 2004 in the form of stories told from the natives' own point of view.

⁴ This is not quite true but his remark is illustrative of the profound loss of their tradition that Sherpa culture and society have suffered in at least the last four decades since the inception of the trekking and mountaineering business. A notable exception are the treatises of the internationally renowned highly learned Sherpa bla ma, and scholar Sangs rgyas bstan'dzin (1924–1990), the abbot of Ser log Monastery in the Solu region (see the major one 1971). Another significant exception is the exceptional work of Au legs bshad (1900-ca. 1978), eminent Sherpa monk, hermit and thang ka painter from dGon pa gZhung in Solu who is famous in the West among historians of Tibetan Buddhist sacred art. Today, work and author have been forgotten among the Sherpas of Solu, even among those of his home locality (for his life-story see E. Berg 2002). Other examples are the compilations published by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu, Abbot of Tengboche Monastery (2000), and Pasang Sherpa 2007.

community abroad needs spiritual advice or help they turn to our Sherpa Community Center, and the management committee provides a bla ma who will contact them and help to solve their problem.”

In his recent major work the great French philosopher P. Ricoeur examines the mutual relationship between remembering and forgetting taking a phenomenological approach. Here, Ricoeur posits, among others, that “...the duty of memory consists essentially in a duty not to forget.”⁵ It is this dictum that serves as the leit-motif of this investigation.

The young Sherpa clearly did feel ‘a duty not to forget’ since this act is, in fact, a necessary precondition for any project of thorough revitalisation of religion, culture, and society. Moreover, statements such as his cited above are indicative of the long overdue emergence of an awareness among the Sherpas of his generation regarding the urgency of countering the contemporary Sherpas’ grave loss of culture and their profound alienation from it. This alienation is due to their uncritical adoption of modern Western material values, an attitude that dominated and thus profoundly changed the world view of many Sherpas for almost two generations. Today, however, a clearly increasing number of Sherpas are convinced that their religion, culture and society’s predicament can, indeed, be countered and overcome through a thorough revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism and culture. It is hoped, after all, that the ‘duty not to forget’ that seems to be coming to the mind of present day’s young Sherpas not only implies a due appreciation of their religion and culture but will also lead to appropriate forms of action among them in view of the urgently needed deliberate preservation and strengthening of their cultural heritage. In the days to come one among its manifold possible expressions may also be to assume the role of an ethnographer and chronicler of their own culture and society.

2. The setting of the investigation

Subsequent to their settlement of what today is known as Nepal’s northeastern Solu-Khumbu district throughout the 17th century the Sherpas, adherents of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism, have experienced three different waves of out-migration. All three were undertaken in search of new avenues of income. The first wave began to rise in the middle of the 19th century and lasted until the middle of the 20th century. It led to Darjeeling where the Sherpas became involved, from its early beginning, in British mountain climbing in the Himalayas. It was here that the Sherpas established their favourable reputation within the increasing international climbing scene as *the* Himalayan ethnic community that thanks to

⁵ Ricoeur, P. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Pr., p. 30.

their special nature as strong high-altitude-dwellers and their peaceful and cooperative character suited best to the growing needs of their British sahibs. The second wave of out-migration from Solu-Khumbu, starting after the slow opening of Nepal to foreigners at the beginning of the 1950s, led to Kathmandu since the mountaineering business was shifting at that time from Darjeeling to Nepal's capital. It was here that the Sherpas first began their career as mountaineering guides and climbing instructors for which they are known today. From the beginning of the 1970s onward they began their successful involvement in the mountaineering and trekking industry as businessmen who opened up companies of their own. Others started shops specialized in the sale of mountaineering equipment or opened up restaurants or hotels. In consequence, many of these new-born Sherpa entrepreneurs were to make a considerable fortune in the course of a formidable economic boom that was generally to last until the inception of the ten years' civil war in 1996 from which it has been recovering only very slowly. The third and most recent wave of out-migration has to remain, for obvious reasons, beyond the scope of the present inquiry. This migration movement began only at the end of the 1980s. It was to lead to the emergence of diasporic communities overseas which lend today's Sherpa society its distinctive character. In this framework it will only be briefly be discussed in the conclusion of the investigation.

The case of the Sherpas represents a significant exception that sets it apart from the rootlessness and out-of-place feeling due to forced migration of political refugees into exile, a process that is increasingly becoming the fate of countless populations, ethnic communities, and individuals around the world. In contrast to the Tibetan people, to give but one example, the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu have never been made victim of a forced dispersion and of a deliberate ethnocide. Instead, many Sherpas have even managed to engage their Western clients/friends to assume the traditional role of the sponsor (*sbyin bdag*) in religious and communal affairs⁶ for the realization of their own mundane needs such as the providing of working permits, flight tickets, visa, work, and a place to stay abroad.⁷

In sum, it was in the course of almost four decades that the Sherpas have experienced a tremendous success that is due to their advantageous integration into a globalized economy. Due to their deliberate engagement in the flourishing trekking and mountaineering industry in Nepal the small ethnic group of the Buddhist Sherpas has been, at least economically, one of the most powerful among the diverse ethnic and caste groups in that country.⁸

⁶ For the sponsor's role in a traditional local setting among the Sherpas refer to E. Berg 2003 and 2008.

⁷ This subject has been examined and discussed at length by V. Adams 1992, 1996, 1997 and by Sh. B. Ortner 1999.

⁸ In 1990 the Sherpas were in control of almost one third of the most important sector of the country's economy, compare J. F. Fisher 1990, p. 115; unfortunately more recent data are still unavailable. According to my current

Ultimately, however, the significant individual financial gains were coupled with a general rupture and grave loss of their cultural heritage throughout the Solu-Khumbu region, as exemplified through the decay of numerous of their religious monuments, the neglect of their religious and cultural traditions and, in consequence, deep cultural alienation.⁹ Without any doubt, a major reason for these severe negative effects of their prospering business was their all-too-ready adoption of Western norms and values. However, an awareness as to these adverse socio-cultural effects began to emerge only in the course of the 1980s. In other words, their growing predicament became obvious to the Sherpas themselves only after many years of profound damage that Sherpa Buddhism and culture had already been suffering.

In recent years the negative side of their 'progress to modernity' was to make its influence felt especially among the young generation of Sherpas who, particularly exposed to Westernisation and Hinduisation, most often simply lack their ancestors' usual store of cultural knowledge. Many of them do not even speak Sherpa anymore, especially those who grew up in the Kathmandu valley or abroad. What makes things even worse: many of the latter have never even visited their ancestors' homeland. It is the interplay of these different factors that ultimately was responsible for the Sherpas' current deliberate effort at revitalising and strengthening their cultural heritage.

For centuries Svayambhūnāth and Bodhnāth, the major Buddhist Stūpas in the Kathmandu Valley, have been important destinations of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims.¹⁰ Illustrative of the close Tibetan association with these monuments is the series of renovations that had been undertaken by Tibetan lamas and yogins in the course of time.¹¹ Significantly, for several centuries the maintenance of these great shrines had been in the hands of Tibetan priests.¹²

After the exodus of a considerable part of the Tibetan people from their homeland following the uprising in Lhasa in the year 1959 many Tibetans chose to settle close to one of these major sacred places. It is here just like in Bhutan or in regions such as H.P., U.P., Ladakh, Sikkim, Orissa, and Karnataka in India where Tibetans found refuge and are able to revive their religious and cultural traditions thus maintaining and reaffirming their religious

information collected from leading figures in this sector their present share has remained more or less the same (2008) despite all profound changes that it has undergone in the course of the last five years of the decade long civil war (1996–2006) when this business came almost to a break-down.

⁹ Cf. Ch. von Furer-Haimendorf 1984; J.F. Fisher 1990, pp. 162–177; see also 1991; Sherpa Thubten Lama Sherpa 1999, pp. 68–72.

¹⁰ Refer to D. Snellgrove 1957, pp. 95–100; K. Dowman 1981; M. Slusser 1982 Vol. I, p. 71, 290; F.-K. Ehrhard et al. 1991.

¹¹ Compare F.-K. Ehrhard 1989, 1990; Chr. Cüppers 1993; M. Ricard 1994, p. 362.

¹² See B.H. Hodgson 1971, p. 21 fn.; F.-K. Ehrhard 2005, p. 1235.

and cultural unity and identity that an extraordinary renaissance of Tibetan Buddhism may be witnessed.¹³ The great majority of Tibetans who moved to the Kathmandu Valley established themselves in the area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. Since long the Great Stūpa has occupied a very special place in the larger narrative of Buddhism's introduction in Tibet.¹⁴ Due to the fact that the complex mythology surrounding the impressive religious monument locates it at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism a wide range of highly differentiated blessings may be obtained from visiting and from certain offerings made here.¹⁵ Consequently, it has become a major Buddhist holy site attracting devout pilgrims from all over the Tibetan cultural realm.¹⁶ Commonly, it is regarded as highly auspicious if one is fortunate to make this exceptionally sacred site one's place of living as is the case of the Tibetan community in exile.

In the course of the last two to three decades a still increasing number of people from most of the Tibetan enclaves in Highland Nepal such as the Sherpas joined the newly established diasporic community of Tibetan refugees in Bodhnāth in search of novel sources of income that were not available in their remote regions. There they formed their own ethnic Valley community. The enormous influx of Tibetans and ethnically Tibetans from Highland Nepal has transformed the sacred place and the wider sacred space around the Great Stūpa from rice fields owned by Tamangs into a vast booming urbanization area with

¹³ Refer to Ch. von Furer-Haimendorf 1990, pp. 103–110; M. Helffer 1993 a, 1993b. In May 2008 the number of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries of all four schools in the wider area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth amounted to thirty-two.

¹⁴ The Tibetan name of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth is *Bya rung kha shor* ('Permission to Do What is Appropriate'). This is an allusion to its historical origin according to the Tibetan tradition. The inventory (*dkar chag*) of the Great Stūpa had been discovered by a certain sNags 'chang Śā kya bzang po (15th/16th century) in the year 1512 in the course of a renovation of bSam yas Monastery. It tells the legend of a woman who made her living as keeper of geese. She obtained the permission from the king of Nepal to build a Stūpa which she succeeded to do with the help of her three sons. On occasion of the consecration of the big religious monument each of the three brothers swore an oath to join again in their next life in Tibet in order to introduce the Buddhist doctrine in the Land of Snows. One brother was reborn as Śāntarakṣita, the abbot, the second as Khri srong lde'u btsan, the king, and the third as Padmasambhava, the tantric master and sage. In the final chapter of the inventory is prophesied that sNags 'chang Śā kya bzang po will be the reincarnation of a Buddhist minister named Padma Gung btsan, himself the reincarnation of a fourth person who was involved in the building of the Great Stūpa. It is also prophesied that it will be the task of sNags 'chang Śā kya bzang po to rebuild it which, in fact, he did, see F.-K. Ehrhard 1990. For a detailed discussion of the incarnation lineage of the Yol mo ba sprul sku-s that begins with sNags 'chang Śā kya bzang po refer to F.-K. Ehrhard 2007; as to a detailed examination of the myth surrounding the Great Stūpa and its different traditions see A.-M. Blondeau 1994.

¹⁵ For a translation of the *Legend of the Great Stūpa* see K. Dowman 1973, Part One. For the different benefits to be obtained through prostrations and circumambulations, e.g., refer to Ch. 3, pp. 40–48.

¹⁶ The only detailed ethnographic account of the diverse Tibetan pilgrims' practices at the massive shrine has been provided by Chr. Daniels 1994.

a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist population.¹⁷ Hence, Bodhnāth mirrors ‘old Tibet in miniature’ as D. Snellgrove has noted in his auto-biography.¹⁸ In recent years, however, Bodhnāth’s colourful Tibetan character is being diluted through the influx of masses of cheap and cheapest quality Chinese goods from the mushrooming shops that are being opened up by Tibetans. These Chinese goods have fully taken over the local market that had formerly been controlled by Indian salesmen. Significantly, these goods are being consumed by the entire population including Tibetan bla ma-s, monks and nuns; some of them such as fruits, sweets and cookies have even become an integral part as offerings in practically all religious ceremonies.

Numerous of the Himalayan groups established their own community center and/or temple.¹⁹ Subsequently, greatly encouraged by the successful efforts of the Tibetan exile community and particularly inspired and supported by certain of their leading bla ma-s the Himalayan Buddhist communities present also began to undertake great efforts at revitalizing their own religious and cultural traditions.

The members of each of these communities live in a mixed neighbourhood consisting of predominantly Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist groups and of a number of Newars. It is significant that they share the sacred place and space on various religious occasions with those of all other Tibetan Buddhist communities that have established themselves in the wider area around the Great Stūpa. These range from everyday ritual practices such as circumambulating the stūpa, visiting certain shrines, worshiping particular deities and taking their blessing, lighting of butter lamps, turning of prayer wheels, to the celebration of the grand Buddhist festivals such as the Tibetan New Year, the Buddha’s and the Dalai Lama’s birthday to name the most important ones. Hence, it is in this framework that each community experiences itself as both an integral and a distinct part of the whole Tibetan Buddhist community.

Consequently, it is in this particularly sacred environment that each Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist community is able to maintain its religious and cultural identity through the performance of a range of individual and collective ritual practices. It is here in a place far away from their homeland that they celebrate both the religious and secular festivals of their own. Depending on their adherence to one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism they also take part in the religious ceremonies that are being performed in the respective monasteries. As a

¹⁷ In his contribution to the commemoration volume in honour of famed Austrian mountaineer and mapmaker E. Schneider (1906–87) on settlement development around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth C. Jest observes “...an anarchist urbanization that progresses without any respect as to building norms.” (2004, p, 126)

¹⁸ D. Snellgrove 2000, p. 104.

¹⁹ An account of the construction of a temple at Svayambhūnāth undertaken by the community from Nepal’s Mustang district has been provided by S. Craig 2004.

rule, they keep firm ties in various ways with ‘their’ lamas and monks of these monasteries. It comes as no surprise that both the religious and social setting characteristic of Bodhnāth, which constitutes a major locus of the ongoing revival of Tibetan Buddhism, greatly contributes to the current revitalisation and strengthening of the traditions of each of the established Himalayan Buddhist communities. Moreover, it is the new existential situation in a novel alien socio-cultural and geographical environment where the very basis of the traditional form of unity and identity of each distinct group is necessarily being reshaped.

3. The book’s subject, its specific focus, and the related goals of the investigation

The current condition of those Sherpas who participate in ‘a wider and more cosmopolitan world’, to use a phrase of Sh. B. Ortner²⁰, is characterized by the following main aspects: by the general rupture and grave loss of their tradition, deep alienation from their cultural values and norms, the detachment and dispersal of about fifty percent of the population from their remote ‘homeland’ in Solu-Khumbu where they have their ‘roots’, by their permanent establishment in far-away places, the major one being the wider area around Bodhnāth, and in diasporic communities abroad, the major one being in the US. Hence, the Sherpas find themselves at a unique historic juncture in which the contradictory drives of individual economic well-being and the collective care the Sherpas have been undertaking for the well-being of their rich religious and cultural tradition, the source of their cultural unity and identity, ultimately had to be re-accommodated.

Consequently, the Sherpas came to realize that, provided they truly sought to preserve their unique Buddhist cultural heritage and their way of life in our present time, the only successful way to overcome their predicament was through building a strong community. This book seeks to shed light upon and analyse the means that are being employed to achieve this goal. It seeks to answer the question of how the cohesion of a local Tibetan Buddhist culture that has gone global, undergone profound processes of secularization as expressed through grave culture loss and severe alienation from its values and norms, is being maintained. What holds the Sherpas together at the time of their encounter with modernity, their integration into a global economy, and their global dispersal? This investigation aims to highlight and explore the deliberate effort at revitalising and strengthening their cultural heritage that the Sherpas have been undertaking in recent years. Its central concern is directed on a close and detailed examination of the ways through which the Sherpas seek to undertake the building of their novel present in the age of globalization.

²⁰ 1999, p. 204.

As will be demonstrated the Sherpas seem to manage to cope with their predicament through both the forging of a novel tradition and, in close association, the formation of a new form of Sherpa community embracing all Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu. In consequence of this ongoing 'invention of tradition' (E. Hobsbawm 1983) a corresponding unity and identity is being created that transcends the narrow limits of the local community in their homeland, which has been and still continues to be strongly linked with the cult of local deities, gods of place, of mountain gods. It is through the performance of their major annual village temple festivals in worship of their local protective deities that the local community's unity, solidarity, and its relationship between place, space, and identity was and still is continuously being strengthened, reaffirmed, and renewed.

The characteristic feature of a Tibetan local community is, as has been aptly described by R.A. Stein, that "...each community living at a given site recognizes itself in its ancestor and in its sacred place [transl. – E.B.)."²¹ This implies, as A.W. Macdonald has suggested, that

“...the past is present for the Sherpa common man in ritual, in the memories of the lamas and their learning, in certain features of the landscape, in a few important man-made buildings (the monasteries and a few great houses); but above all it is present in what is said, what is recounted, from generation to generation, about these activities, places, people and their doings.”²²

In particular, the inquiry addresses and analyses the significant shift from the traditional, i.e. local, to a wholly new concept of community that is being created in this context. In close association emerges an extended notion of identity that is inclusive of all Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu. As has been observed by Ch. Ramble it is in the course of these processes of fundamental change that people's primary allegiance is being shifted away from an identity shaped by locality through the performance of cults of place gods to one based on 'more abstract religious ideals' that conforms to the 'overarching concerns of high religion'. The main means through which the forging of this 'invention of tradition' is being achieved are the solemn performances of certain major Tibetan Buddhist ritual ceremonies that belong to the rNying ma pa tradition. It is significant that these ceremonies are not tied, and thus restricted, to a particular locality and its distinct tradition but belong to the range of orthodox Tibetan Buddhism's annual festivals.²³ Nevertheless, ritual, as will be demonstrated in detail,

²¹ Cf. 1987, p. 143.

²² Compare 1987a, p. 61.

²³ Cf. 1997a, p. 398; p. 404. His remark is based upon a note by J. F. Fisher in which he observed among the Sherpas of the late 1980s a "...general twentieth-century movement toward a more orthodox, monastic,

constitutes the ‘adhesive’ that holds a Tibetan Buddhist community together as R.M. Davidson has noted in the context of his discussion of the activities of Sa chen Kun dga’ snying po (b. 1092), the first of the five Sa skya masters.²⁴ The different framework notwithstanding Davidson’s observation as to the crucial function that these major ceremonies serve in view of the strengthening a community holds true in the context of the Sherpas’ current revitalisation of their cultural heritage.

The underlying argument of this investigation is that the tradition of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism, as exemplified through both the ritual specialists under whose spiritual guidance the current revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism is undertaken and the five grand religious festivals established through their advice, serves to play the main role in the Sherpas’ ongoing construction of a novel all-embracing tradition. The rNying ma pa School’s distinctive character which is of utmost importance in this context has been noted by E.Gene Smith in the following:

“It is important to remember, however, that Tibetan Buddhism, especially the form followed by the Rnying ma pa, is intended first and foremost to be pragmatic (...). The explanation for the multiplicity of metaphors and tutelary deities lies in the fact that there must be a practice suited to every sentient creature somewhere. Forms or metaphors that were relevant yesterday may lose their efficacy in the changed situation of today.”²⁵

Some of the Sherpas’ religious and cultural practices and the corresponding forms of behaviour such as their mortuary practices that ultimately led to the construction of the community building complex, including a temple, are deeply rooted in both the ancient Tibetan cultural tradition as well as in Tibetan Buddhism. Others, however, have their roots in Tibetan Buddhism such as the ‘ethics of giving’ to the Dharma and her representatives. It was the latter that ultimately made the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodnāth and its subsequent projects possible; it is also the driving force of their specific festival economy, which is based upon the patronage of a fixed number of household heads of the entire community that rotates annually. It will be shown in detail that it is particularly these two different ancient ‘cultural patterns’, which serve as the central principles around which

transcendental form of Buddhism.” (1990, p. 159)

²⁴ R. M. Davidson observed: “Ritual not only welds the community of religious into a unified whole but also establishes the basic relationship between the institution and the surrounding valley, over which Sakya and similar monasteries exercised authority and decisions.” (2005, p. 296).

²⁵ Cf. 2001, p. 240.

the Sherpa community in their novel community center in the Kathmandu Valley, i.e. in a culturally alien environment, is organised. In other words, these two patterns are the central pillars of that very stage upon which the forging of a novel tradition as well as an all-embracing unity and identity of all Sherpas is currently being undertaken. These two aspects will be closely examined. The central focus of this book is directed upon their new place and the religious performances that are being enacted on this novel stage.

Subsequent to their settlement in the larger area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth on a permanent basis, that started only in the 1970s, Sherpas undertook the foundation of a community center cum temple in the year 1978. Since then this center has gradually evolved into both the arena for private life-cycle events, social gatherings and worldly festivals and the temple stage where their religious ceremonies are being performed. Popularly understood as 'the place where we practise religion and celebrate Sherpa culture and being from Solu-Khumbu', its common name *Shar pa dgon pa* clearly emphasises the importance of the sacred place where, apart from the range of secular events as held in the surrounding secular community center, their religious festivals are being celebrated. However, the Sherpa community's full ritual autonomy was achieved only after the year 1983 with the building of a separate facility to store on ice the mortal remains of a deceased person for the duration of three days before cremation. This period is necessitated to ensure the proper performance of the transference of the consciousness of the expired to another realm. It was in February 1983 when the Sherpa community, in a single blow, lost twenty-eight of its people and found themselves incapable of providing the deceased with this essential part of their mortuary rites.

Seeing it as emblematic of the ongoing revival of Sherpa Buddhism and culture, as well as its major driving force the inquiry focuses on the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodnāth, the communal building (*mi 'dzom sa*) of the entire Sherpa community including the *Shar pa dGon pa* ('Sherpa Temple'), its history, the goals associated with its establishment, its administration and maintenance, and on some future projects of its management committee. Moreover, a detailed account will be given of the performance, the history and of the symbolic meaning of each of the five major annual religious festivals that are performed in this novel setting. At the same time attention will be directed to the ritual specialists, under whose spiritual guidance the five religious festivals were established and who through their ritual performances are responsible for the creation of the new 'tradition in the making'. In addition some light will be shed on their life-histories, incarnation lineages, the teaching tradition each one represents, and the diverse sacred sites where each one has been active as a *bla ma*. A major goal of this investigation is to bring together the significant topoi that make up the processes to be highlighted and examined and arrange them into a coherent meaningful whole. The unfolding picture reveals both the history of Sherpa Buddhism as represented by

the Sherpas' religious landscape of their homeland Solu-Khumbu consisting primarily of sacred man-made monuments such as village temples and monasteries, and its modern form which some charismatic bla ma-s helped to give shape. Thus, this book seeks to contribute to an understanding of the present chapter of Sherpa Buddhism as it is currently being developed.

In sum, the investigation seeks to highlight and explore a range of interconnected contemporary issues characteristic of the Sherpas' contemporary situation. At present, Sherpa Buddhist culture and society are at a historical juncture while the Nepalese nation-state continues to be weak. It aims to reach an adequate understanding of the various ways and tools used as well as of the actors' creativity to carve out a suitable niche in the globalized world of the 21st century. It is this niche which enables the Sherpas to do both lead a successful individual and an active community life while at the same time preserve their rich Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage and maintain their cultural and social identity. It is significant that whereas their traditional order has been studied from a variety of perspectives by a range of researchers over more than four decades the Sherpas' current living conditions in a highly globalized context have not attracted any scholarly interest until today.

I hope that the findings presented in this book may be a source of inspiration for readers interested not only in Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society of the past but also in the contemporary question as to how Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society may remain alive, well, and flourishing in the future. It is hoped that this book will present new materials that may also shed light on other modern-day local Himalayan Buddhist societies and thus contribute to our understanding of their contemporary condition, and hence be relevant to broader discussions on contemporary problems within the fields of Tibetan and Himalayan studies. Moreover, it is hoped that the research findings will invite other scholars both to investigate the current circumstances and the activities of the groups of other Tibetan enclaves and to undertake future comparative studies in this wide field of scientific interest, which only lately has opened up.

Field research was carried out in two periods that extended from February until June in 2006 and again in 2007. A follow-up study was undertaken from February until end of May 2008. Detailed explanations from my bla ma informants served to clarify crucial aspects and thus were of great help in my gaining a deeper understanding of the complex symbolism, history, and goal of certain rituals and of the incarnation lineages involved. In the discussion of each of the different building blocks constitutive of the investigation I sought to give cross-references to the respective findings from both Tibetan Studies and Himalayan anthropology.

As usual this inquiry builds upon ‘the length and the depth of the relationships established’ to use a phrase of Sh. B. Ortner.²⁶ In the case of this investigation, a complex network of social relationships with both Sherpas of the Valley community, clerics and laypeople alike, who come from all over the Solu-Khumbu region, and also with few Sherpas of the global diaspora, mainly in the US, has been available as source of valuable information. The network’s origin dates back to 1992.

²⁶ Cf. Sh. B. Ortner 1999, p. 204.

Chapter One

Two consecutive waves of out-migration from their high-altitude homeland in search for work and the emergence of respective diasporic communities

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards Sherpas looking for work emigrated from the Solu-Khumbu region to the Darjeeling district of West Bengal in British India. This movement, which lasted for about an entire century, is the subject of this first section. The second wave of out-migration from the mid-twentieth century onwards, the subject of the following section, lead to the Kathmandu Valley where many of them began to settle down on a permanent basis, preferring the wider area of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. At Bodhnāth, they were joined by a minor movement of ‘Darjeeling Sherpas’ who followed because the Himalayan climbing and mountaineering business had shifted to Kathmandu. The third section deals with the current state of Sherpa religion, culture and society. It discusses the profound changes brought about by the Sherpas’ successful involvement in the trekking and mountaineering industry. The progressive erosion of Sherpa cultural traditions and the resulting effort at a comprehensive revitalisation exemplify these changes.

1. Out-migration to Darjeeling: the emergence of an established community of ‘Darjeeling Sherpas,’ and the beginning of the involvement of Sherpas in the early period of Himalayan climbing and mountaineering

Darjeeling is an Indian trading town located within the Himalayan range just south of Mount Kangchenjunga (8.598 m), which is only a few days trek away. For slightly less than a century, Darjeeling was the main economic centre of the eastern Himalayas.¹ It was in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century that the village of rDo rje gling, which the British called Darjeeling, became the site of extraordinary economic growth. The success was due to many factors, and this tremendous boom lasted until the occupation of Lhasa by the Chinese in 1951, which ultimately led to the closing of Tibet’s border and to the collapse

¹ Refer to Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, p. 30; Hoffman, Th. 2001, p. 120f.

of the old trans-Himalayan trade. In what follows, a brief overview of Darjeeling's prosperous century shall be given, and thereupon the role of the Sherpas will be explained within this framework.

In November 1814 the East India Company launched an aggressive war against Nepal under Prime Minister Bhim Sen Thapa (1772/77 – 1832) in order to halt the powerful hill state's continuous expansion.² Under the terms of the Treaty of Segauli, which the Nepalese were eventually forced to sign in March 1816, the British were given control over Kumaon, Garhwal, large parts of the Tarai lowlands and the Darjeeling district in the east.³ Historian R. Shaha has commented on the devastating effects of the Treaty of Segauli, recognizing that Nepal lost one third of its territory, mainly in the west and to the south.⁴ This territory had earlier been acquired by the Gorkhali troops after their conquest of those areas that are constitutive of Nepal, which had come to an end with the successful occupation of the Kathmandu Valley in 1769.⁵ After this the Gorkhalis continued their expansion and conquered Sikkim in 1788.⁶

Following the Treaty of Segauli, Darjeeling, which had previously been part of Sikkim, was given back to the *rāja* in 1816.⁷ However, in 1835, the *Rāja* of Sikkim was coerced into handing Darjeeling over to the British as a 'gift'.⁸

Thereafter, the British, based in Calcutta, decided to establish a hill station in Darjeeling on account of its cool climate, situated well beyond and above the hot and humid Gangetic plains. This site was meant as a health resort for both its administrative staff and military personnel and their families during the period of monsoon season. Moreover, Darjeeling was chosen as the summer residence of the governor of Bengal. It was mainly these two factors that were to fuel Darjeeling's rapid economic growth, allowing it to become the economic centre of the eastern Himalayan region.

Another decisive factor, which somewhat later greatly contributed to Darjeeling's booming economy, was the construction of a railway. For several centuries, the Kathmandu Valley had been an important centre of entrepot trade in the highly developed trans-Himalayan

² For a valuable account of the circumstances that led to this war see Shaha, R. 1996, Vol. I, pp. 107–156.

³ For some important details of this British contribution to the history of Darjeeling see Sever, A. 1993, p. 32, 165. – For the British presence in Darjeeling see Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, pp. 101–105.

⁴ Cf. Shaha, R. 1996, Vol. I, p. 146.

⁵ For these important events which led to the formation of the Nepal nation-state refer to Pradhan, K. 1991, pp. 89–105.

⁶ Cf. Pradhan, K. 1991, p. 132.

⁷ Cf. Pradhan, K. 1991, p. 190.

⁸ For this episode refer to Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, p. 103; see also Sever, A. 1993, p.165.

trade system that connected northern India with central Tibet.⁹ In the 1880s, Kathmandu's monopoly of this highly lucrative trans-Himalayan trade had been mainly in the hands of Newari merchants. Yet, this trade was broken when a railway was constructed from Calcutta, the capital of British India, to the Himalayan foothills and up to Darjeeling. Thus, a new trade route was opened up, along which goods could be transported directly from the Port of Calcutta to Lhasa in only twenty days, less than half the time that had been required by the former journey via Kathmandu.¹⁰

In its capacity as a flourishing trading centre located between the Tibetan high-plateau and the Gangetic plains, Darjeeling became the major destination of a large migration movement from the entire region of Eastern Nepal. This movement, in search for labour, began by the middle of the nineteenth century. The migration, made up primarily Rai and Limbu peoples, led to the establishment of a migrant community in Darjeeling.¹¹ The British official W. W. Hunter, commenting on the Darjeeling district census of 1875, remarked: "The Nepaulis who immigrate to Darjeeling from their native country mostly settle down permanently in the District."¹² In addition to the diverse Nepalis, Darjeeling had been attracting people of various communities from Tibet, Sikkim, and Bhutan for similar reasons.¹³

Sherpas, in search for work, were part of the movement to Darjeeling. This is where the first community of Sherpas outside of their original high-altitude settlement area in north-eastern Nepal emerged.¹⁴ Hailing from Solu-Khumbu and surrounding areas, the journey to Darjeeling involved a trek of seven to ten days, depending on their particular location of their home. Some came to Darjeeling only as seasonal labourers, thus retaining their roots in their 'homeland,' whereas others eventually began to settle down in Darjeeling.¹⁵

⁹ See Sever, A. 1993, 164.

¹⁰ Sever, A. 1993, see pp. 165–166.

¹¹ For important details of this massive emigration movement from Eastern Nepal to Darjeeling and Sikkim, its circumstances, and its ethnic composition refer to Pradhan, K. 1991, pp. 190ff.

¹² Quotation from Pradhan, K. 1991, p. 193.

¹³ Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, p. 30.

¹⁴ A valuable overview of the Sherpas' movement to Darjeeling and the ways how they became involved in the early phase of Himalayan mountaineering first as porters and how they later became 'the uncontested mainstay of Himalayan expeditions' has been provided by R. Miller 1997 (1965), see pp. 18–21. A brief account of their migration to Darjeeling, their activities there, and the establishment of a Sherpa community in this growing trading town is given by Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, p. 30.

¹⁵ Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, p. 30; Sherpa population figures, *ibid.* – For the early presence of the Sherpas in Darjeeling refer also to Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, p. 24. – The following account of Darjeeling, the early years of Himalayan climbing, and the Sherpa community there draws largely on R. Miller's overview (1997) and on Sh. B. Ortner's recent work (1999). In her valuable book she presents a detailed and comprehensive overview of the history of Himalayan mountaineering including the account of the evolving, often conflict-ridden,

In Darjeeling, the Sherpas engaged in various sorts of petty enterprise, just like many of those belonging to the other afore-mentioned ethnic groups.¹⁶ Equally similar to the other arriving ethnic groups, the majority of the Sherpas took work as ‘coolies’, i.e. manual labourers, in the then emerging construction business, and, as porters for exploration and naturalist expeditions, survey work, and early mountaineering expeditions.¹⁷

From the early middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the British developed a strong interest in the survey and exploration of the central Himalayan range, which had previously existed as a vast white spot on the map of their expanding colonial interests. Darjeeling was strategically perfectly situated for such survey and exploration. Apart from this geopolitical strategy, the British had begun organized mountain climbing in the central Himalayas, based out of Darjeeling, due to the fact that Nepal’s borders continued to be hermetically sealed to foreigners until the middle of the twentieth century.

According to Sh. B. Ortner’s recent work on the emergence of Himalayan mountaineering and the Sherpas’ involvement in this business, two little-known Norwegian climbers were the first to realize, in the year 1907, the outstanding nature of the Sherpas as high-altitude porters for mountaineering as compared to that of other ethnic groups. One of them, C.W. Rubenson, wrote:

“Our experience is that the coolies, especially the Nepaulese Sherpa, are excellent men when treated properly, and our success is only due to the willingness and brave qualities of these people.”¹⁸

It seems to have been since then that Westerners have not only deliberately employed Sherpas for their ventures, but have also praised the Sherpas for their strength, bravery,

relationship between the Western mountaineers and the Sherpas. Among others, Ortner mentions the differences and conflicts between Darjeeling and Khumbu Sherpas (p. 157). Later, this conflict shifted with the Darjeeling Sherpas to Kathmandu where it was fuelled through the growing competition between Darjeeling Sherpas and those Sherpas who lived in Nepal (p. 156). – Some valuable data on the Sherpa community in Darjeeling and their activities are provided in bLa ma mZod pa Rin po che’s sacred auto-biography that had been collected and published by Jamyang Wangmo, one of his oldest Western disciples (2005, pp. 186–190).

¹⁶ One of the few Sherpas who were to make a tremendous fortune in Darjeeling was Sangye Tenpa (Sangs rgyas bstan pa) Lama (b. 1856), the founder of sPyi dbang Monastery, and his wife. The couple made substantial money in Darjeeling as labour contractors for two road construction projects between 1888 and 1891/92; for their success story see Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, ch.7.

¹⁷ According to R. Miller in the year 1901 there were 3, 450 Sherpas in the Darjeeling District; in 1931 their number had increased to 5,295, and in 1951 to 8, 998 (1997, p. 18).

¹⁸ Quotation from Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, p. 30.

willingness, good nature and, most important of all, the fact that they are better adapted to the conditions of high-altitude and the cold than those of any other ethnic community.¹⁹

From their first expedition in 1921 onwards, the British employed Sherpas from Darjeeling's Sherpa community in order to reach the foot of Everest, as well as to climb the top of the world.²⁰ Since then, Sherpas have been taking part in almost every expedition to Everest and to all other major mountains in the Himalayan range and in Tibet. In many cases, a Sherpa started his career in trekking and mountaineering at a young age as a porter or kitchen boy, later being promoted consecutively to higher-ranking jobs. Following work as a porter or kitchen boy, a Sherpa could then move up to work as a cook, depending on his cooking skills and his command of English, and then to that of a sardar. The latter post as manager and coordinator of the expedition staff, consisting of the usual ethnic mix of porters, was the highest that was open to Sherpas in this framework.²¹

A contemporary Sherpa who had migrated to Darjeeling, had made this place his center of living, and who later became a world-famous mountaineer was Tenzing Norgay Sherpa (bsTan 'dzin nor gyas, 1914/15–1986). After a short stay at the newly founded sTeng po che Monastery the young man from Thang smad village in the western part of the Khumbu region ran away and made his way to Darjeeling in search of employment around the early 1930s.²² It was here that he had started his future climbing and mountaineering career in 1935 as a porter with the fifth British expedition, led by E. Shipton. After he had successfully climbed Mount Everest with Edmund Hillary on 29 May 1953 Tenzing Norgay returned to Darjeeling. There he assumed the post of Field Director of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, which had been founded under the auspices of the Indian government with a new branch in Manali, H.P., India. It was at this renowned institution where he was to work for the next twenty-two years.²³

¹⁹ Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, pp. 30f.; see the respective section titled 'The "discovery" of the Sherpas' (pp. 30–32).

²⁰ See Höivik, S. 2003, p. 18.

²¹ As to the different categories of jobs that were then available to Sherpas in the climbing and mountaineering business see Fisher, J.F. 1990, p. 111.

²² Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, pp. 72f.; Höivik, S. 2003, p. 18. – A full account of his upbringing, childhood, youth, and his later career is provided in his autobiography 1977.

²³ This is mentioned by bLa ma mZod pa Rin po che in his sacred auto-biography recorded by Ani J. Wangmo. 2005, p. 187. – For this important chapter of Tenzing Norgay's life refer also to Höivik, S. 2003, p. 18.

2. Out-migration from the mid-twentieth century onwards to the Kathmandu Valley, preferably to the wider area of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth where they are joined by a group of ‘Darjeeling Sherpas’: emergence of the Sherpa Valley community, construction of the Sherpa *Sevā* Kendra

The closing of the Tibetan border in 1951, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, led to the decline of Darjeeling as a major trans-Himalayan trade center. Following the opening of Nepal to foreigners in 1951 and, in particular, after the first ascent of Mount Everest the staging base for Himalayan mountaineering expeditions began to shift from Darjeeling to Kathmandu, thus marking the beginning of Nepal’s trekking and mountaineering industry.²⁴ In consequence, particularly from the beginning of the 1970’s onwards, a section of the Darjeeling Sherpas began to move to Kathmandu. They established themselves in the business that was to emerge in the following decades as the major branch of the national economy. It was during the second half of the 1970’s that the Sherpa migration from the Solu-Khumbu region shifted accordingly to Kathmandu.²⁵ Most of them settled down on a more permanent basis in the wider area of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth where they began to engage in trade, restaurant, hotel, and carpet business, or, due to the growing number of young Sherpas, in education.²⁶ Since the early 1970s the Sherpas have been successfully starting trekking and mountaineering companies of their own or in joint ventures with foreign partners.

Bodhnāth is located in a central part of the Kathmandu Valley, only a few kilometres away from Nepal’s capital, on the northeastern side of the modern road that connects Kathmandu with Chabahil (Cā-bahīl) village, and ultimately with the Newari town of Sankhu. The distinctive feature of the Bodhnāth area is the impressive ancient stūpa. Situated on one of the major old trade routes connecting Tibet with the ‘Nepal Valley’, the considerably sized stūpa used to be visible from afar. The Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth, which Tibetans call *Bya rung kha shor* (‘Permission to Do What is Proper’), as to its importance similar to the

²⁴ For the circumstances that had led to this consequential shift from Darjeeling to Kathmandu refer to Hoffmann, Th. 2001, p. 121f.; Ortner, Sh. B. 1999, pp. 154ff.

²⁵ Refer to Th. Hoffmann 2001, p. 124. In this paper the author highlights the out-migration patterns of Solu-Khumbu District from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Fig. 2 (p. 119) shows the changing directions of migrants from 1945 until the year 1993. – At the same time another migration process began to lead northwards into Khumbu due to the growing need for workers to construct trekking lodges, restaurants, and shops in this region (op.cit., p. 123) that was to become, after the Annapurna sanctuary, Nepal’s second major trekking area.

²⁶ Compare M. Mühlich 1993, p. 209. The carpet business saw a boom that was to last until the mid-1990s when the absolute majority of the involved companies, for environmental and other reasons, were shifted to the Tarai.

‘naturally arisen’ Svayambhūnāth Stūpa on its western extension, has been a major destination for Tibetan men of religion, pilgrims and traders for centuries.²⁷ Illustrative of the close Tibetan association with the two ancient Buddhist monuments is a series of recent renovations that have been undertaken by Tibetan bla ma-s and yogins.²⁸ Also significantly, for several centuries the maintenance of these great shrines had been in the hands of Tibetan Buddhist priests.²⁹

After the exodus of a considerable number of the Tibetan people from their homeland following the uprising in Lhasa in the year 1959, many Tibetans chose to settle close to these two outstanding ‘spiritual power places,’ Bodhnāth and Svayambhūnāth, in the realm of Nepal. The great majority of these Tibetans established themselves in the larger area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. In subsequent years, and up until the present day, it was not only the Tibetans in exile who came in search of a new home at this sacred site. A still increasing number of people from all Tibetan enclaves in Highland Nepal, such as the Sherpas, joined the newly established Tibetan refugees in and around Bodhnāth where each of them formed their own communities. Thus, each of these established communities benefited from the highly charged major Tibetan Buddhist sacred place and its wider space. They share the sacred space on various religious occasions with those of all other Tibetan Buddhist communities present. These occasions range from individual everyday ritual practices such as circumambulating the stūpa, visiting certain shrines, worshiping particular deities and taking their blessing, the lighting of butter lamps, the turning of prayer wheels, to name but the most common ones, to the communal celebration of certain grand Tibetan festivals such as the Buddha’s and the Dalai Lama’s birthday. Moreover, it is in this public arena where the adherents of all different orders, clerics and laypeople alike gather spontaneously for exceptional occasions such as in the case of the passing away of a leading Tibetan Buddhist hierarch or his rebirth (*yang srid*), communal prayers for world peace, political upheaval in Tibet and its ensuing brutal suppression by the Chinese, etc. Hence, it is in this framework, as represented by this particularly sacred place and space, that each kind of Tibetan Buddhist community experiences itself as both an integral and, at the same time, a distinct part of the entire Tibetan community that has taken its roots here.

In consequence, it is in this sacred environment that each Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist community is able to preserve its distinct cultural heritage and maintain its religious and cultural identity through the performance of a range of communal ritual practices. Several of

²⁷ Refer to D.L. Snellgrove 1957, pp. 95–100; 2000, p.103; K. Dowman 1981; 1995, pp. 30–35; M. Slusser 1982, Vol. I, p. 71, 290; F.-K. Ehrhard et al. 1991; F.-K. Ehrhard 2005, p. 1235.

²⁸ Refer to F.-K. Ehrhard 1989, 1990; Chr. Cüppers 1993; M. Ricard 1994.

²⁹ Compare F.-K. Ehrhard 2005, p. 1235.

these communities have constructed a temple and/or community center at one of the two major shrines.³⁰ Depending on their adherence to one of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism, they may also take part in the religious ceremonies that are being performed in the respective monasteries. With 'their' bla ma-s and monks associated with these monasteries they keep firm ties in various ways.

The enormous influx of Tibetans and ethnic Tibetans from Highland Nepal in search of a new permanent home that Bodhnāth has witnessed particularly in the last two decades that have profoundly transformed the place, as well as the wider space around the Great Stūpa. Once rice fields owned by Tamang farmers, the entire wider area has been transformed into a vast and booming urbanized realm with a predominantly Tibetan Buddhist population.

Hence, as D. Snellgrove has observed in his autobiography, Bodhnāth mirrors 'old Tibet in miniature'.³¹ Particularly in the three cold winter months, a great number of pilgrims from all over the Tibetan cultural realm flock together at the famed great shrine and complete this colourful Tibetan Buddhist setting.³²

In their new urban environment, the Sherpas live in a mixed neighbourhood that consists predominantly of the local Tamangs, Newars, Tibetans, people of other Himalayan communities, as well as the traditional Bahun and Chetri inhabitants. Initially many Sherpas lived in rooms or apartments often rented from relatively well-to-do Hindu landlords. Eventually, those who could afford to began to acquire a house or a plot of land for the building of a house of their own.³³ A common household in this novel urbanized environment consists of the usual nuclear family. In many cases, this core is extended by either the aged parents of the husband or his wife. Sometimes, the married couple, representing a household,

³⁰ In the last years the Dol po pa have built a community center in Bodhnāth. Equally there the Yol mo ba have established a Yol mo Foundation for the preservation of their culture and language (R. Desjarlais 2003, p. 14). In Jorpati close to Bodhnāth the Tamangs have built a temple of their own. As to the temple of the Manangi (*Nyi shang ba*) community located just below Svayambhūnāth refer to Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf 1989, (pp. 109–110); compare also S. Craig on the intricacies of the building of a temple at Svayambhūnāth Stūpa by the community of Mustang (2004).

³¹ Cf. 2000, p. 104.

³² For a detailed account of the ritual practices of Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims at the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth refer to the investigation provided by Chr. Daniels (1994).

³³ As will be discussed in the following section a major reason for the significant step to acquire a house of their own was the fact that, contrary to Hindu mortuary practices, the Buddhist Sherpas observe a period of three days after death has occurred until the corpse of the deceased is to be cremated. It is in this period that the important *'pho ba* practice, i.e. the 'transference of the consciousness' of the deceased, is to be performed. It is during this period that a. the corpse has to be stored in the shrine room of the household for the performance of the mortuary rites and b. a large communal social gathering is to be held. In the initial narrow framework of the life circumstances characteristic of the new urbanised environment there was simply too little space to cope with these important requirements.

take on the care of the young children of close relatives in case the latter have to move abroad for labour or business reasons for a period of time. Most often, the household also includes one, or several, young relatives from Solu-Khumbu who belong to one of the two sides of the large web of the bilateral kinship system.³⁴ Here, the latter either attends high school or college, undergo a vocational training or work in the trekking industry or a hotel, restaurant or shop owned by a relative.

In permanence, the Sherpas of the Kathmandu Valley community have to cope with the alienating influence that is being exerted by the surrounding dominant Hindu culture. Making their living in the realm of Nepal's capital, the Sherpas are permanently confronted with this problem in their dealings with the Hindu-dominated state administration and its representatives as well as with their Hindu business partners. This holds especially true for the young Sherpas attending high school or college, since it is the system of higher education where this culturally alienating effect makes its strong influence felt.

Today, many Sherpas, especially those of the young generation, both female and male, live up to new, i.e. modern, values and ideals owing to contact with Western people, to the availability of modern education, of modern medicine, etc. Consequently, the modern values and ideals have tended to replace the characteristics of traditional Sherpa religion, culture and society. Instead of strengthening the traditional social networks, the modern values and ideals mainly serve to fortify individualistic motivations and tendencies, thus causing the progressive erosion of their traditional heritage.

Among others, the considerable success of the growing tourist industry gave rise to an increasing affluent middle class that represents a novel social stratum in Sherpa society. It is particularly its wealthy members who have chosen to become owners of a house, a plot of land, a station car, etc., and who seek to provide their children with a sound education which in Nepal is usually very costly and, in many cases can lead to a further educational career through college or even university abroad, preferably in the US. A core result of this new social stratum is a Nepali and English speaking elite. Significantly, the members of the new affluent middle class represent the major driving force behind the ongoing, and all-embracing, process of revitalization of the Sherpas' cultural heritage. Its most telling and significant expression is the construction and maintenance of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, a multi-purpose community building including the Sherpa temple where the Sherpas' major religious festivals are celebrated, which represents the focus of the present investigation.

³⁴ A brief mention of the structure of the usual house community in the urbanised environment around greater Bodhnāth of recent date may be found in Mühlich. M. 2001. p. 212.

According to findings of the national census of 2001, the number of Sherpas amounted to a total of 154,622. This figure represents 0.68 % of Nepal's total population. Over 20,000 Sherpas live in Solu-Khumbu and in the Kathmandu Valley.³⁵ According to my informants, the total number of Sherpas living in the US is about 2,000.³⁶ Between eight hundred to thousand Sherpas presently live in New York City and State. This group represents the greatest community in the worldwide Sherpa diaspora.

In the year 2007, the entire Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley encompassed a total of 936 households, as was recorded routinely by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. According to the estimates of my informants, a usual household in the novel urban environment comprises, on average, between six and eight persons who most often represent all three generations. However, these figures are continuously objects of a considerable fluctuation. After completion of college, many young Sherpas, both male and female, seek to go abroad for further studies, preferably to some institution in the US. Moreover, it is common that the leading figures in the trekking and mountaineering industry move for business reasons either for a restricted period or with open end to one of the industrialized countries. In a growing number of cases these Sherpas are also accompanied by either their wives or by the whole nuclear family. Numerous trekking and mountaineering guides, as well as staff in hotel and restaurant business, go to the US, France, or Switzerland. Whereas the former receive special climbing training and instructions, the latter usually attend hotel or restaurant management courses.

Due to their engagement in this new field of considerable economic activity, Nepal's trekking and mountaineering industry have experienced continuously increasing success. This formidable boom was to last until the early years of the civil war (1996–2006) when the political turmoil led to an almost total breakdown. Since peace had finally been restored, Nepal's trekking and mountaineering business have been recovering very slowly from the disastrous war, which had hit not only the majority of the established tourist areas in the

³⁵ Compare the data provided by sociologist Pasang Sherpa 2007, p. 1. He mentions, that, in contrast with the numbers of the national census given above the *Nepal Sherpa Association*, the major association of the Sherpas in Nepal, claims that the total of the Sherpa population numbers above 300,000 people. – Based upon his own research in the years from 1982 until 1997 Sherpa Thubten Lama gives the total number of Sherpas in both Nepal and abroad of two hundred and fifty thousand (1999, p. 8).

³⁶ The most comprehensive sketch of the Sherpa community in New York and the life-conditions in their novel setting including its main statistical data I owe to Dr. Yula Sherpa, at present President of the Monastery Management and Development Committee, Ministry of Local Development, Govt. of Nepal. He stayed in New York for a period of four months in the year 2006 just after he took his Ph.D. in 2005 at the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies in Sarnāth and at Banaras Sanskrit University. Presently, Dr. Yula Sherpa occupies one of the Sherpas' highest ranks in Nepal's public life just behind long-time Member of Parliament, Mrs. Yankila Sherpa.

country – with the remarkable miraculous exception of the Khumbu region – but ultimately severely affected the previously remote high-altitude areas that had been located off the major trekking trails.³⁷ By 1988, the Sherpas were already in control of almost half of Nepal's trekking and travel agencies as the American anthropologist J.F. Fisher has observed.³⁸ Although no more recent data exists, numerous Sherpa 'big men,' who are being successfully engaged and thus of great influence in this major branch of Nepal's national economy, have confirmed that the Sherpas' current share has remained more or less the same.³⁹ The civil war, however, has been the main reason for the profound changes that took place in this field, causing a great number of the medium sized and, even more so, the small companies and related businesses such as hotels, restaurants and shops specialized in trekking equipment and 'tourist art' to either close their doors or realign themselves with other partners.

3. On the profound changes brought about by the Sherpas' successful involvement in the trekking and mountaineering industry: severe cultural alienation and the importance of modern education

Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf (1909–1995), the pioneer of anthropological research among the Sherpas, and one of the eminent anthropologists of the inter-war generation, visited the Khumbu area for the first time in 1953. On this occasion, he carried out a preliminary study of a few high-altitude villages. In his subsequent meticulous and detailed account of the Khumbu Sherpas' way of life (1964), he created a picture that was full of deep admiration for the richness of traditional Sherpa religion, culture, and society. Notably, Furer-Haimendorf witnessed the Sherpas' traditional socio-cultural order. At that time the traditional society had still been unaffected by outside influences that, only shortly later, were to make their undermining influence increasingly felt. The major outside influence came from the political developments in neighboring Tibet. All these consequential changes were effected through the closing of the Nepal-Tibet border in the year 1959, which were to cause significant re-orientation towards the south of both the Sherpa economy as well as their places of Tibetan Buddhist learning which were to be re-established in exile from the 1970's onwards.

In his first monograph, Furer-Haimendorf created the image of a remote, small-scale society based upon a delicately balanced high alpine subsistence economy. The central feature of the Himalayan Sherpa society is their relatively egalitarian and conflict-free

³⁷ A case in point are the previously fully neglected region of Dol po and the area extending between Mount Everest, Mount Makalu and Mount Kangchenjunga.

³⁸ Fisher, J.F. 1990, p. 115; Fisher, J.F. 1991, p. 44.

³⁹ Unofficially, however, leading Sherpas in this sector note that in recent years Hindus have been gaining a considerable share in this market. This trend could not be verified since no reliable recent data exist.

political order. Moreover, the Sherpas are peace loving, good-humoured, and always helpful in character. It is obvious that this wholly positive kind of image is clearly rooted in the tradition of the European enlightenment. The ethnographic picture FÜRER-Haimendorf made compares the Sherpas characteristic features to the image of the 'homme naturel' who is basically of good nature ('la bonté naturelle'), which is unspoilt through '[European – E.B.] culture and civilization'. This influential image was created by J.J. Rousseau (1712–78) and A. von Haller (1708–77). It is of significance that both philosophers projected this image upon the contemporary, presumably 'unspoilt' Swiss alpine population.⁴⁰

However, when looking back at that early experience as expressed in the introduction to his subsequent re-study (1984) of a people he had learnt 'to love and admire', his initial full admiration has completely faded away owing to the profound changes that by now had been introduced through 'outside forces'. The consequential transformation of Sherpa culture, society, and economy that has been set into motion due to their successful involvement in Nepal's growing trekking and mountaineering business, had been so far reaching that the author felt compelled to put strong emphasis on the fact that the original version of *The Sherpas of Nepal* must be considered 'largely outdated and only of historical interest'.⁴¹ Hence, his wholly positive initial attitude had been more or less shattered and had gravely shifted accordingly.

In consequence, FÜRER-Haimendorf now depicts 'a world on the wane', that is the scenario of a socio-cultural order whose inevitable historical fate is to irrevocably disappear forever due to the fact that it had been discovered and appropriated accordingly by a certain group of representatives of the expanding capitalist order. In the case of the Sherpas, this was the ever-increasing tribe of the Western climbers, mountaineers, and adventure trekkers. The picture that he now paints in his re-study of the Sherpas is clearly rooted in another, much more recent tradition of the Western imagination of alien pre-industrial cultures. This tradition emerged only in the first half of the Twentieth century when Western ethnographers were no longer able to simply ignore the fact that the encounter with the various forces of the expanding capitalist 'market economy' in many cases inevitably led to the disappearance of the diverse forms that had been representing the subjects of their scientific endeavour. It was this period when critical ethnographers saw themselves as mutated into simple accountants of this seemingly inevitable process that is, in fact, simply the other side of the coin of what is called 'modernisation' and 'progress'. The novel tradition's central feature is the deep

⁴⁰ Interestingly, this wholly positive image was to be adopted and even strongly re-enforced throughout the personal memories of almost all eminent Western mountaineers. A telling example provide the recollections written by the late Sir Edmund Hillary (d. 2007).

⁴¹ FÜRER-Haimendorf, Chr. von, 1984, p. X.

melancholy that pervades the entire ethnographic account. It was C. Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908) who gave this kind of emerging literary genre its most nuanced expression in his famed *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).⁴²

Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf describes the massive changes that had mainly been brought by the then strongly growing trekking and mountaineering industry as follows:

“During my early fieldwork among Sherpas I succumbed to their charm and had to come to regard their society as one of the most harmonious I had ever known. I admired their gaiety and friendliness, their tolerance and kindness towards each other, and the piety which urged them to divert large parts of their scarce resources to the establishment and maintenance of religious institutions, and the creation of architectural monuments which not only served their spiritual needs but also added to the attraction of a scenery of unparalleled magnificence.

In writing about the present situation in Khumbu I cannot veil the feeling of disappointment and sadness to see this seemingly ideal society and life-style transformed by the impact of outside forces which disrupted the delicately balanced social fabric and undermined the traditional ideology that had dominated Sherpa thinking and conduct for countless generations. Happiness is a phenomenon difficult to measure, but my subjective impression is that the Sherpas I knew in the 1950s were happier than they and their descendants are in the 1980s.”⁴³

According to Furer-Haimendorf, the Sherpas’ truly successful adjustment to the conditions of the modern monetary economy was inevitably coupled with more or less extended periods of the absence of the majority of young and middle-aged men on tourist treks and mountaineering expeditions.⁴⁴ It must be added that it was, and still is, their very absence that was to effect grave repercussions concerning the formerly fairly balanced sexual division of labour as it prevailed among the Sherpas. All of a sudden, the women who remained in the village had to assume the full care of the household, the fields and the cattle, and also of the increasing number of trekkers’ lodges, restaurants, and shops. Hence, it is in this novel framework the Sherpa women alone have to shoulder the traditional household economy as

⁴² *Tristes Tropiques*, Engl. *A World on the Wane* (1961) is based on the author’s encounters with various small tribal groups in the Amazon area and the Mato Grosso in the years between 1935 until 1939 during his academic stay in Brazil.

⁴³ Compare 1984, p. XI.

⁴⁴ Compare 1984, p. 112.

well as a major part of all the tasks that have been opening up within the new trekking industry's infrastructure in the Khumbu region.

As to the circumstances characteristic of this novel context Fürer-Haimendorf notes that:

“... the Khumbu Sherpas are no longer a homogenous society of agriculturalists, cattle breeders and traders dwelling throughout the year in high Himalayan valleys, and leaving their home villages for brief trading journeys to Tibet or the middle ranges of Nepal. Today, tourism draws most able bodied men away from Khumbu, and many visit their homes and families for no more than two or three months a year. During the rest of the year they are engaged in either trekking or mountaineering, or stay in Kathmandu to remain in touch with touring agencies and be available for hire as guides and camp servants.”⁴⁵

But, most important, the adoption of Western values, norms, and ideals, invariably favouring and strongly accentuating materialistic attitudes and consumerism, was to lead to individualization and thus to the erosion of the Sherpas' traditionally closely-knit social bonds and the common associated moral obligations concerning both their local community as well as Tibetan Buddhism and its representatives:

“The moral values, which characterized the traditional Sherpa society undoubtedly developed in small communities whose well-being depended on the peaceful and willing cooperation of all the families inhabiting a village. There was little competition for sparse resources, (...), and it seems that land-disputes were also extremely rare. Success in trade resulted from individual skill and energy, and the magnitude of the volume of trade with Tibet of one merchant did not affect the chances of other traders. Hence there was little scope for rivalry in the sphere of economic enterprises. The system of village government by rotation served also the smooth conduct of public affairs, and apart from the occasional drunken brawl when *chang* had flowed too amply, there were few occasions for acrimonious disputes disrupting the peace of village life.

This situation changed with the growth of tourism. Today, the Sherpas are no longer alone in Khumbu and the old values of a society virtually free of competition and rivalry no longer fit an economic system that encourages individuals to consider acquisition of money their first priority.

⁴⁵ Cf. 1984, p. Xf.

Previously, a congenial domestic atmosphere was regarded as an essential element of good life, and wealth was not desired for its own sake, but as a means of running a household in which all members were provided with adequate food and clothing, and there was sufficient surplus to entertain guests as often and lavishly as possible. Wealth was valued also because it enabled a man or woman to dispense charity and give donations to religious institutions, and thereby acquire merit.⁴⁶

In consequence, in this new field of economic activity, stiff competition between Sherpas in the same business for lucrative jobs is the order of the day. In close relation with this new phenomenon, professional duties are given priority over the traditional values associated with family life and the that of the wider local community.⁴⁷

Only a few years later J.F. Fisher analyzed the question of how education and tourism have affected life in the Khumbu region, which represents another important issue in this context. Fisher had come to Khumbu for his first time in the year 1964 as a member of an expedition led by the late Sir Edmund Hillary (d. 2007). This expedition was devoted to building schools in certain Sherpa villages throughout the Solu-Khumbu region. Sir Edmund's intention was to provide the Sherpas with a modern secular education beyond that traditionally given by the Buddhist monasteries and that offered by the poor government schools and their Hinduizing curriculum.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cf. 1984, p. 112.

⁴⁷ See 1984, p. 113. – Fürer-Haimendorf's view of a peaceful, harmonious, and relatively egalitarian Sherpa society is by no means shared by all Western anthropologists. The most outspoken in this respect is American anthropologist Sh. B. Ortner (1978) whose image of Sherpa society is diametrically opposed. Ortner emphasizes 'anti-social tendencies in Sherpa society' (p. XI), that 'community' in Sherpa villages "...must be achieved through *overcoming* the basic atomism and insularity of the component family units'(p. 41); that "... a materialist drive to have more things, to keep them for oneself and at the same time to get them from others, is a pervasive concern in Sherpa social thought" (p. 67). "...envy over wealth differences is rife in the community, and status competition and rivalry chronic."(p. 77). In sum, Ortner names 'social atomism and social hierarchy' (p.128) as the two key features of the Sherpa community (for this view see also p. 60, 90, and 129). – Unfortunately, here is not the place for a discussion of the reasons responsible for the creation of the two contradicting pictures of traditional Sherpa society.

⁴⁸ J.F. Fisher has provided a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the almost legendary Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition of 1964 and the importance of a modern secular school system among the Sherpas, refer to 1990, chapters 1 and 3. – Sir E. Hillary has written a comprehensive account of this important and consequential chapter of recent Sherpa history that had been ushered in by the involvement of his expedition (1964). In the year 1963 he founded the Himalayan Trust and later established national branches in New Zealand, the US and Canada. Being the earliest NGO in Nepal it was meant to provide high schools, hospitals, health posts, infrastructure (mainly some bridges) as well as financial and material support for the overdue renovation of certain monasteries and temples in the Sherpa area. For good reasons, the Sherpas call him 'Shar pa rāja', i. e. the king who, unlike Nepal's kings, cares for his Sherpa subjects in both religious and secular matters.

J.F. Fisher reports that more than two decades later, the effects of the schools seemed swamped by a torrent of tourists, as some members of Sir Edmund's expedition had also built a short dirt airstrip at the small village of Lukla (Lug la), situated a short day's trek south of Namche Bazaar (Nags po ched), the business center of Khumbu.⁴⁹ In consequence, the economic shift to tourism brought a heavy, almost one-sided dependence upon the trekking and mountaineering industry. It has to be added that this consequential shift ultimately gave rise to one kind of modern industry that was, and continues to be, detrimental to the three branches that their traditional Himalayan high-altitude economy is based on. It is particularly detrimental to the industry of breeding and herding yaks and crossbreeds.

According to Fisher, to a certain degree mass tourism has been destroying the integrity and richness of Sherpa culture, not to mention the considerable side-effects such as the severe degradation of the environment through deforestation, the pollution caused by all the garbage left behind, and gambling, alcoholism, as well as ulcers that usually go with the former two activities. However, despite these negative effects, which are due to the growth of mass tourism and the Sherpas' successful involvement in this novel economic field, the author ultimately paints a positive picture of Sherpa culture and society today. Fisher's favourable outlook is based mainly on the Sherpas' success in maintaining their own cultural identity in their novel framework, on the fact that religion continues to occupy its central role, hence, that their religious beliefs remain intact, and, what actually is most important, that 'Sherpas are proud of being Sherpas'.⁵⁰

Fisher notes that the effects of the secular 'Hillary schools' on Sherpa life were minimal compared with the massive restructuring of the economy that was set in motion by tourism. In view of the Sherpas' future, these schools serve to successfully adjust to the modern globalised order.⁵¹ According to my own information, nowadays, i.e. two decades later, his position seems to be shared by a steadily growing number of Sherpas. Already at his time Fisher had observed among quite a few of his informants the emergence of awareness as the value of sound education and the good command of English is concerned.⁵²

The privileged field in which the alienating effects of the Sherpas' involvement in Nepal's growing trekking and mountaineering business are mirrored most clearly is in the realm of their religious monuments, such as stūpas, monasteries, temples, shrines, and maṇi walls. Most important, however, was the fact that many parents began to discourage their sons to

⁴⁹ Compare Fisher, J.F. 1990, chapter 4, and 1991, p. 41.

⁵⁰ These aspects are mentioned in chronological order in Fisher, J.F.1990, p. 136, 149, 159 and 1991, p. 43.

⁵¹ Fisher, J.F. 1991, p. 44.

⁵² Compare Fisher, J.F. 1990, p. 157.

become monks, as used to be common practice. Hence, the numbers of Sherpas entering the monastery has been suffering from a strong decline. Instead, many parents sought to encourage their sons to join the trekking and mountaineering businesses as soon as possible, as it was in this new sector that cash was to be made. According to my clerical informants nothing indicated the general rupture of tradition more convincingly than this consequential shift on the side of the parents towards Western norms and values.⁵³ Thus, not only traditional, but also the modern education provided by the Hillary schools were discredited, an attitude that has affected a long period of recent history. The continued alarming number of school-dropouts among the Sherpas, until the present day, is but one severe result of this short-sighted attitude that many Sherpas had adopted at the time of the veritable boom of the tourist business in Nepal.

It was at the end of the 1970's that the French anthropologist C. Jest carried out several field missions to various areas in Highland Nepal along the Upper Himalayan Range including the Solu-Khumbu region. Jest's goal was to record the state of the cultural heritage as is embodied by religious buildings, such as monasteries, temples and shrines. In his well-known survey he provides an alarming account of the miserable state of the temples and monasteries in the Sherpa area. This account is clearly indicative of the profound transformation of Sherpa culture and society due to their successful involvement in the growing trekking and mountaineering business and the associated adoption of Western norms and values:

“The traditional life-style and culture of the inhabitants of the Solu Khumbu region are slowly being undermined by the pressure of tourism and ‘Western influence’. The Sherpas’ natural tendency to follow a lucrative trade and the adventure-seeking tourists who have come to find beautiful scenery and an unusual way of life set a problem that has to be resolved, particularly with regard to the religious buildings and their communities. If these people suffer rapid and uncontrolled Westernization, their culture will quickly disappear.

The Solu Khumbu District is a ‘test zone’ where responsible authorities should closely follow developments, as we have suggested, so as to avoid both a cultural and a material decline.”⁵⁴

⁵³ To this is also attributed the fact that the entire Solu region has been suffering from an acute lack of religious services until the present day which is due to the almost-disappearance of their local tantric hereditary priests.

⁵⁴ Jest, C. 1981, p. 100. Unfortunately, C. Jest seems to have paid a visit to only a very few monasteries in the Solu-Khumbu region. A detailed description of a monastery and its then current state is only provided of sPyi dbang, the oldest and main monastery of the Solu region: “Today, [the number of monks – E.B.] has dwindled to ten, and one has the impression that there is neither guidance nor interest, so the monastery is in a very bad state. The school of theology no longer functions. About half of the monks’ dwellings are in a state of collapse.”

As is characteristic of societies undergoing the transformative process of 'modernization', i.e. from a subsistence to a cash economy, the benefits of new avenues of financial income among the Sherpas were coupled with the emergence of more or less profound regional and social disparities or the accentuation of existing ones, grave changes in population structure, severe environmental degradation, etc.⁵⁵ The serious degradation and depletion of natural resources in their fragile Himalayan high-altitude environment is but one major negative result of the adventure trekking and mountaineering business. This comes as no surprise. One telling example may suffice. As many of his tribe, mountaineer H.W. Tilman praises a common everyday practice among them that was usually performed by certain Sherpas:

“He had a passion for building immense camp fires, nothing less than a holocaust satisfied him. Long before daybreak one would imagine that the sun had risen untimely, but it was only Danu rekindling the overnight bonfire, so that we could breakfast round it in comfort at first light.”⁵⁶

Here, H.W. Tilman expresses a noteworthy, but very common misunderstanding among climbers and mountaineers who have been active in the Himalayas. It has to be drawn attention to the fact that people in pre-industrial societies, unlike our modern industrial societies, most often take great care of their environment and their natural resources, and it can safely be assumed that, in principle, this Danu is no exception. The truth, however, is simply that, as has been examined and convincingly discussed at length by V. Adams, the Sherpa is only intent to live up to the desires and needs of their Western employers to ensure his present and, if possible, his employment in future climbing ventures.⁵⁷

In consequence, contemporary Sherpas have to face a dramatically altered way of life. The following letter to a former young American student who had been teaching English for three months at Ser log monastery in the Solu region which I had to translate and write for a ten years old monk student mirrors the contemporary state of Sherpa society as scattered over a vast territory its new center being situated in the United States, especially in New

(op. cit. p. 100) The same must be said of the state of practically all monasteries and temples in the Sherpa area at that time.

⁵⁵ Compare the sobering early reports by I.-M. Bjoennes 1983 or Pawson, I. et al. 1984. – Recently, the deterioration of life conditions in certain local communities throughout Solu-Khumbu has been mentioned briefly by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, pp. 70–72. – For a comprehensive account of all these changes refer to E. Berg (in press, ch. 7).

⁵⁶ Cf. Tilman, H. W. 1952, p. 226.

⁵⁷ Adams, V. 1996.

York City.⁵⁸ In his letter young Nuru Sherpa briefly describes, among others, the current situation of his family, which is actually the present lot of a great part of the Sherpa community:

“My family is small. I have only father, mother, and a small sister. My grandpa and my grandma live in Loding, Solu [i.e. the village of the home of his family – E.B.]. My father, my mother, and my sister live in New York. I am the only son, I am a monk.”

In most cases, a thorough renovation of their religious monuments was undertaken only in the middle to late 1990s. This significant move is indicative of the growing interest among the Sherpas at that time in a thorough revitalisation and strengthening of their cultural heritage. It was the emergence of this growing interest in the revival and fortification of their religious and cultural traditions that, among others, was to lead to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* community building complex in Bodnāth from the year 1978 onwards.

Despite the fact that a great deal of what led to the fascination of traditional Sherpa society has eroded, Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf arrives at a fairly positive conclusion of his afore-mentioned re-study:

“The picture emerging is that of a people in part still rooted in an environment which had moulded their economic system. Many members of the younger generation have outgrown the framework of this system, but with the older people and the majority of women adhering to traditional values, even the Sherpas who derive the bulk of their livelihood from tourism and mountaineering are not completely detached from inherited codes of behaviour. Though their aspirations are different from those of their elders, some aspects of Sherpa culture and particularly ritual practices have changed relatively little.”⁵⁹

It is the idea expressed in this quotation that will serve as the line along which the present investigation is organised. After three to four decades that saw considerable gains in certain individual hands and, at the same time, grave decay or even loss of their rich cultural heritage,

⁵⁸ According to the information I received over the years from the Sherpas living in New York City their local diasporic community numbers about a thousand people; for the performance of communal festivals they have a center of their own which they sometimes even call ‘Sherpa gonpa’.

⁵⁹ Cf. 1984, p. XII.

the historic pendulum has now begun to swing to the opposite side thus setting the stage for the current comprehensive revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhist culture and society. Its most telling expression is the founding of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* including the Sherpa temple in Bodhnāth, which, in turn, serves as the most important arena for the Sherpas' current endeavour at revitalising and strengthening their cultural heritage at the time of their global dispersal. To contribute to an adequate understanding of this significant communal effort is the main concern of this book.

Chapter Two

The activities and goals associated with the establishment of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* or Sherpa Service Centre at the time of Sherpa Buddhism's revitalisation.

1. A new all-embracing Sherpa community with a corresponding novel sense of unity and identity is being forged

On occasion of the 5th convention of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* (2007), its management committee published a small booklet containing a range of statements from some of its members as well as from diverse members of the greater Sherpa community in the Valley. It is from the notes of certain members of the management committee that, once the scattered facts are put together, a representative overview of the activities of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* can be provided. At the same time, the main goals the Sherpa community seeks to achieve through this novel kind of institution are clearly formulated. Significantly, the traditional interconnectedness of clergy and laity continues to be flourishing in this new framework. This constitutes a decisive factor in their endeavour to forge a new sense of unity and identity.

The beginning and the end of the booklet is made up of a range of coloured advertisements of Sherpa companies all wishing peace and prosperity for all members of the Sherpa community. The diverse advertisements illustrate the wide range of economic activities Sherpa entrepreneurs are involved in within the present-day national economy: there can be found those of trekking and mountaineering companies, construction companies, hotels and restaurants, helicopter services, airlines, and even an incense factory.

In 2007, the annual edition the picture of the Nepalese royal couple was not reproduced for the first time, as was common in the preceding era. It is an indication that the popularity of the royal dynasty has, at least since the dubious murder of King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya and several other members of the royal family in the year 2001, dramatically lost ground among the Sherpas (and, it has to be added, among all other ethnic groups, as well). It is since then that the issue of ethnicity and the struggle for ethnic rights has gained immense ground in the country where the 'Nepalese Hindu kingdom' has finally been abolished.

Another clear indication of this current trend is the proud use of full festive dress also by male Sherpas, and by those, in particular, who have to perform the customary formal duty of either the sponsor (*sbyin bdag*) or the organizer (Sh. *lawā*) on the occasion of grand religious festivals.¹

In speaking of present-day Sherpas, the majority do not perceive themselves as supporters of the Nepalese government any more as their ancestors used to be. The young and educated Sherpas, particularly, are raised to expect a secular state, equal rights and job opportunities, an effective education system, etc.² A steadily increasing number of Sherpas are against the continued domination of Hindu philosophy and the associated system of values and norms as expressed by the still dominating caste system, and are instead explicit supporters of the preservation of their Tibetan Buddhist cultural heritage.³ Lecturer Pasang Dolma Sherpa argues against the understandably increasing trend, especially among the young generation, to simply adopt Western values and migrate to Western countries. Instead, she encourages other Sherpas, “...to value our own identity and culture,” and demands an effective and adequate state education system that opens up new options for the new generation “...to make their career better to live with dignity in Nepal.”⁴

Contained in the booklet are several brief texts, one each of the president, the general secretary, and the treasurer, those of a few leading politicians and academics, and of several well-wishers from all walks of life. There are published photos of the nineteen members of the Sherpa Sewa Kendra committee, a list of the annual income and expenditure, a list of specified expenditure and of fixed assets. Among the fixed assets are land property and a centre for people of old age that is being supported through the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Free

¹ This trend is but one remarkable aspect that is associated with the ongoing revitalisation among the Sherpas. Similarly, the Nepalese *topi* that had formerly been adopted by numerous well-to-do Sherpas, especially in the Solu region by the members of the Lamaserwa clan as a token of loyalty towards the Hindu nation-state and its representatives of the two ruling castes, is no longer in use. – However, unlike many Sherpa men, Sherpa women have never adopted any kind of Hindu gear and, most important, never stopped wearing their traditional festive dress on respective occasions.

² Just as the majority of the population of the diverse other Tibetan Buddhist enclaves along the Tibet-Nepal border the Sherpas and their associations have been strong supporters of the government. As indicated above, this attitude has changed profoundly in the recent years. Hence, Ch. Ramble’s dictum depicting the Sherpa associations simply as ‘supporters of the government’ (1997, p. 398) is outdated and has to be corrected.

³ Markedly critical, e.g., is the short article in English written by college lecturer Pasang Dolma Sherpa on the “Educational Status in the Sherpa Community.” In *Report 2007 of the Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Pp. 37–41. – Interestingly, she also blames the lack of educational awareness among Sherpa parents (39), the Sherpas’ own negligence of pursuing higher educational goals, their low literacy rate of 54% in comparison with that of other caste and ethnic groups in Nepal according to the national census 2001 (p. 38) and the deplorably low educational status of the Sherpa community in general (p. 39).

⁴ Op. cit., p. 37 and p. 41.

eye care services have also been provided by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* for poor patients of any ethnic and caste group on every Saturday since June 2002 by Patan Eye Center, Lalitpur, in association with the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. A Sherpa medical doctor trained in Japan conducts this service.⁵

Apart from these services, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* pays the salaries of the permanently employed staff. The majority of its financial income is obtained from the rent of the large hall on the ground floor, reserved for any kind of mundane event, donations from Sherpas, and membership fees. At the end of the booklet, a list of loans and advancements given by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, in its role as a mutual-aid association (*skyid sdug*), serving members of the Sherpa community is provided. The latter list includes the names of all those who took a loan in the course of the preceding year. It is owing to the fact that even these kinds of ‘profane’ services are, indeed, provided by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* which have led some foreign observers to entirely wrong conclusions as to the distinct character of this novel Sherpa institution which has been built in a culturally alien urban area.

In the summary of his ‘reflections on change among the Sherpas of Khumbu, anthropologist J.F. Fisher shortly makes mention of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. However, Fisher wrongly described this novel kind of institution as, “...a self-help group that assists Sherpas at critical periods – providing, for example, a proper funeral when a death occurs also helps to preserve the Sherpa community while it adapts to urban life.”⁶ Here, Fisher makes mention solely of the valuable, yet mundane types of services. However, the latter are, in fact, of secondary importance, as the Sherpas’ own understanding of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is concerned, when compared to the role it occupies within the life of the Sherpa community. Thus, Fisher reduces the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* to the usual kind of mutual-aid association (*skyid sdug*) that

⁵ It has to be drawn attention to the profound change that has occurred in recent years and is in full contrast to the dominant trend in the last half century in the course of which the Sherpas became favourably integrated into the globalised economy through their involvement in the flourishing trekking and mountaineering industry. As highly favourable as this was moneywise, their successful involvement in the growing tourism sector was to the full detriment as to the potential emergence of an own intellectual elite. Many members of modern present-day Sherpa society refer with obvious pride to this significant and wholly positive change. Nowadays the ‘modern’ sector of Sherpa society does not consist solely of people involved in the tourism business and related fields any more; instead, today a growing number of university-trained researchers, teachers, medical doctors and health-workers add a new stratum to Sherpa society which lends it its distinctive modern character. When asked no one forgets to mention with obvious pride that nowadays Sherpa intellectuals are beginning to take care of the Sherpas’ own urgent affairs such as the implementation of community and health programs, of sound education schedules in a Hindu nation-state, projects of environmental protection and sustainable development, of conducting long overdue inquiries into the history and sociology of their own Tibetan Buddhist culture, etc., in short, all those subjects that had been severely neglected even by their own people until the present day.

⁶ Fisher, J.F. 1990, p. 175.

can be found all over the Tibetan cultural realm.⁷ Erroneously, Ch. Ramble has reiterated this stance in a substantial paper on the reasons why Nepal's indigenous Tibetan-speaking peoples do not see themselves as belonging to a single ethnic group. There, he has depicted the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* simply as a mutual-aid association (*skyid sdug*) intended to serve the Sherpa community's members who are resident in Kathmandu, but which actually includes all Sherpas regardless where they come from.⁸

Quite contrary to these rather misleading statements, as will be described in the following, the distinct character of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* exists in both its religious and mundane aspect, which is a historically new phenomenon in the Sherpas' cultural framework. It has to be emphasized that the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is understood as the – first – institution of the entire Sherpa community. As has been clearly underlined by many of its leading representatives in numerous conversations, primary among its activities are those aimed at preserving and maintaining Sherpa Buddhist culture, identity, harmony and community solidarity in a new setting. In fact, its major activities consist of taking care of the organization of the Sherpas' great annual festivals in a deliberate effort to preserve and strengthen their cultural heritage within the wider society of Nepal's nation-state which is characterised, if not to say dominated, by the markedly different Hindu culture. As will be demonstrated below, it is not the traditional Sherpa culture and identity, which is primarily local in character, that is being reaffirmed in this novel context. Indeed, the act of preserving and maintaining their culture in this new setting, where all Sherpas unite, implies a significant transformation of their culture in which identity and unity had been based largely on local cults of place gods, in association with a limited territory.⁹ To summarize, the establishment of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is reflective of the Sherpas' effort at revitalizing their cultural heritage through the forging of a new, all-embracing Sherpa community with a novel sense of unity and identity in a new setting.

Its primarily religious character is clearly reflected in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*'s common name, which is simply *Shar pa dgon pa* or 'Sherpa temple'. Consequently, it is understood

⁷ For a brief mention of the Tibetan '*skyid sdug tshogs pa*', a term she renders as 'groups [to share] joy and sorrow' which emerged out of a kind of religious brotherhood, called the 'Maṇi brotherhood', refer to Dargyay, E.K. 1982, p. 49. She adds that today such groups may be observed among Tibetans in exile (ibid.). – For an analysis of credit and ritual exchange in the Sherpa *skyid sdug* system from a comparative perspective on different systems of credit relations in Nepal refer to Mühlich, M. 2001, pp. 240–248; for a brief sketch of ritual and credit in the Sherpa *skyid sdug* system see also Mühlich, M. 1999, pp. 87–91. – It is of significance that all diasporic communities of the Sherpas have established, a.o., a *skyid sdug* system.

⁸ Ramble, Ch.1997, pp. 397–99.

⁹ According to Ch. Ramble this is a basic marker of distinctiveness of all of Nepal's 'Tibetanid' groups, see 1997, p. 404.

as a strictly non-political, primarily religious body. As with all diasporic Tibetan and Sherpa communities who begin to organise themselves in an alien framework, the Sherpas in the Kathmandu Valley originally, i.e. at the end of the 1960's when the first Sherpas took firm roots here, first set up a *skyid sdug* or mutual-aid network. It was only in 1978 that the complex institution of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* was established.

Of particular interest is the long list at the end of the booklet containing all one hundred and sixty-four patron members of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Each patron-member is given a profile that provides a name, photo, clan name, place of origin, wife's full name, present address and phone number. Hence, this data is of great sociological importance; among other information, it reveals the significant fact that, at present, a total of thirty-four, or a fifth of all patron-members, are currently living in the USA, the majority of whom have taken firm roots in New York City.

Placed before the different texts contained in the brochure are three brief prefatory notes. The first two pieces of writing are from the hand of *bla ma*-s, the faithful adherents of the 'School of the Ancient Translations,' who are highly venerated by the Sherpas. The opening informal letter, written in Tibetan, is from the hand of H. H. rDza rong 'Khrul zhig Sha sprul Rin po che Ngag dbang Chos kyi blo gros (b. 1924), abbot of Thub bstan chos gling Monastery in Solu. 'Khrul zhig Rin po che, an accomplished Tibetan master and teacher, who is highly respected by the Dalai Bla ma and the leading dignitaries of all four Tibetan Buddhist Schools, is one of the leading hierarchs of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism. The other brief note written in Nepali is from Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin bzang po (b. 1935), incarnate bla ma of the internationally known Theg mchog gling Monastery in sTeng po che, Khumbu region. Both extend their greetings and express their best wishes to the Sherpas in support of their deliberate efforts at creating both a religious and social place and space for the performance of their religious festivals, thus serving for the preservation and continuity of Sherpa religion, culture, and society. In addition to these kind wishes, the sTeng po che bla ma emphasizes that the SSK gives support to the whole Sherpa community, the diverse constituents of which hail from all parts of Nepal and whom are staying in the Kathmandu Valley, either on a permanent basis or for a limited time-span. Moreover, this man of religion, who is a Sherpa himself, expresses his conviction that the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* will help with other activities to aid in the Sherpas' efforts to preserve their cultural heritage, as well as provide further services for the Sherpa community in the future.

Kripasur Sherpa, the president of the Sherpas' major political organization, the 'Sherpa Association of Nepal', describes the distinct character of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and the main goals associated with it in his brief prefatory note in the following words:

“The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is the communal organization of the whole community of the Sherpas who coming from various parts of Nepal are living in the Kathmandu Valley. Here, they are working as businessmen or in other kinds of professions, or they are religious people, all of whom constitute our Sherpa community. One of the major goals of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* as representative not only of the Sherpa Valley community, but of the Sherpa ethnic group as a whole, was the construction of a separate building where we could store the mortal remains of expired Sherpas.”

It has to be added, that, according to tradition, the mortal remains of deceased Sherpas are to be stored for the duration of three days for the proper performance of the main part of the Sherpas’ funerary ceremony before the cremation of the mortal remains can be undertaken. Kripasur Sherpa continues:

“The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* represents the example of a small [ethnic –E.B.] community that has created a strong communal organization and which has been developing into a site of the Dharma. Moreover, it has become a meeting place where the widely scattered Sherpas can communicate their problems and share their ideas, thus making friendship with each other and creating an all-embracing unity. The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* has been successful in creating social and religious unity among the Sherpas...”¹⁰

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa, who had been active as the chairman of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* from 1979 until 2006, adds another crucial reason for the establishment of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*: “To create unity among all Sherpas, to share their joys and sorrows, and to preserve Sherpa language, culture and religion.”¹¹ Apart from making the performance of the Tibetan Buddhist grand festivals at the ‘site of the Dharma’ possible, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee also organizes religious teachings by different Tibetan and Sherpa bla ma-s for the Sherpa community meant to preserve and revitalize the Sherpas’ cultural heritage, in particular, and that of Tibetan Buddhism, in general.

Built in 1978, this novel institution, combining religious and secular needs, is meant to serve the whole Sherpa ethnic group as a place where they can meet and celebrate both

¹⁰ In the third note titled ‘Heartfelt Greetings’ that precede the contents of *Smareka or Report 2007 of the Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Bodnath [n.b.: these notes are without pagination – E.B].

¹¹ Interview in *Smareka or Report 2007 of the Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Bodnath, pp. 1–3, see p. 1.

religious festivals and secular events. In fact, the Sherpa ethnic group consists of a number of different segments. First, there are the Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu, the heartland of the Sherpas. Then, there are those small communities widely scattered over some high-altitude areas of Northern Nepal along the Tibetan border from the regions of Humla and Jumla in the far west, gLo bo ma thang in the mid-west, gLang phrang and Yol mo in the center, to the Mt. Makalu and Mt. Gang chen mzod lnga areas in the northeastern corner of Nepal bordering Sikkim. Moreover, there are some small groups in Darjeeling and Assam who had migrated from Solu-Khumbu from the beginning to the middle of the last century. Finally, there are those Sherpas coming from all afore-mentioned areas, who stay in the Kathmandu Valley for only a limited time span for business, trekking, or mountaineering, as well as the Sherpas of old age who desire to spend the harsh winter period in the mild climate of the Kathmandu Valley and in close vicinity to the famous Tibetan Buddhist holy sanctuaries of the Svayambhūnāth Stūpa and the Great Stūpa Bodhnāth. In addition to these different segments, there are diasporic communities in Hong Kong, Japan, the UK, and the US that have sprung up in the course of the last two decades and continue to keep contact with Nepal's Sherpas through email and information posted on the websites of other Sherpa communities.

It is of particular significance that traditional Sherpa society consists of small local communities that are centered around the local temple. All religious festivals are focused, among other things, on the worship of the local protector deities are celebrated in the local temple, and it is in this context that Sherpa identity and unity is created, strengthened and reaffirmed.¹² In this framework, all mundane events are being celebrated in private houses; another kind of social meeting place, however, does simply not exist. In view of Tibetan village communities E.K. Dargyay writes: "The Tibetan village never offered such facilities an inn, a town-hall, a dancing-hall or any other lasting social centre. All this had to take place within the private atmosphere of one's own house."¹³ This holds true of the Sherpa village as well.

Through the creation of a religious and social place and space in another alien region that is meant to be shared by all Sherpas, a site in which belonging is no longer defined exclusively at the local or clan level, but instead at the general level of simply being a Sherpa is created.

¹² For these significant aspects as are created and reaffirmed in the course of the celebration of the annual grand religious ceremony see the detailed description of the performance of the *Dumji* (a Sherpa term that has contracted the two different kinds of ceremonies called *sGrub chen* and *sGrub mchod* which are combined in the Sherpa *Dumji* festival) as it is held in the village temple of Gshongs lung in Solu, which is the major annual festival as celebrated among the Sherpas in the local community. see Berg, E. (2008)

¹³ Dargyay, E.K. 1982, p. 15.

Traditional realities are profoundly realigned in such a way that it is now in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* that Sherpas can experience an all-embracing Sherpa-ness for the first time ever. It is through the different kinds of religious performance that all Sherpas, their different local origins notwithstanding, are bound into a new common frame of action. Thus it is possible to build a new and broader form of Sherpa community that unites and integrates all Sherpas beyond the local or clan level. In this wider context the Sherpas can experience, celebrate and reaffirm a new kind of all-inclusive religious, cultural and social unity. At the same time, a new all-embracing Sherpa identity is created. This novel kind of identity is of particular value in Sherpas' dealings in new settings such as within the nation-state of Nepal as well as in the diasporic communities existing in foreign countries.

It is of importance that the community site represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* has been built primarily by the relatively wealthy Sherpa community through both the membership fees and individual donations. The Sherpa community has been emerging since the end of the 1960's in the Kathmandu Valley and has taken roots predominantly in the sacred space of Bodnath, the site of one of the most famous Buddhist stūpas, located about six km northeast of the capital. Moreover, there are many Sherpa organizations of political and social character that helped the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in some or other way to realize the Sherpa community's goals, such as the *Nepal Sherpa Organization*, *Sherpa Students Organization*, *Himalayan Sherpa Cultural Organization*, *Nepal Sherpa Women's Organization*, and the *Ex-Gurkha Sherpa British Organization*. It is always with great pride that those responsible for the construction of the SSK emphasize that in constructing the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex, the Sherpas have never asked for, nor have they ever received, any support from the Hindu nation-state or donations from abroad.¹⁴ Instead, the Sherpas have always been able to realize their diverse projects solely on their own initiative and financial resources.

Hence, this novel institution is commonly understood as the epitome of the all-embracing Sherpa community that hitherto has been consisting of a vast number of small local communities, widely scattered across the high-altitude areas in the Tibet-Nepal-borderlands. In conclusion, the considerable effort of funding, planning and construction of the Sherpa community's spacious sacred, as well as mundane, center are reflective of both a profound

¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the complexity of those efforts undertaken by a host of different players that led to the restoration of Thubchen Lhakhang, a 15th century temple in Lo Monthang, Mustang District, Nepal, that due to neglect had fallen into disrepair, see the detailed account by S. Craig 2004, pp. 11–36. For the rather strange and contradictory role of cultural 'outsiders' (*phyi pa*), foreigners, in particular, such as western restoration experts, architects, planners, and donors, have been playing in the process of planning, designing, and executing the restoration project which is explicitly meant as a contribution to the endeavour to preserve what has been defined not by people from Mustang themselves but by these culturally outsiders as 'traditional' culture of Mustang, see S. Craig, op.cit., pp. 14 ff., 16–21, 24f, 26, 27 fn. 23, 31–33.

cultural commitment and a strong sense of responsibility vis a vis their community for the deliberate preservation of the Sherpas' religion, culture, society and language.

2. The particular circumstances that had led to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* or *Sherpa Service Centre*

Three Sherpas constituted the driving force that eventually, in the year 1978, was to lead to the construction of a community site in the Kathmandu Valley. Since this new kind of institution is located close to the capital, it did not receive a Tibetan name. Instead, for clearly 'strategic reasons', it was called *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*¹⁵. The Nepali term *Sevā Kendra* means simply 'service centre' thus bearing no specific connotation whatsoever. However, it is popularly called *Shar pa dgon pa*, i.e. 'Sherpa temple'. In fact, this name not only reveals its major function, but also clearly mirrors the goals of those who had been responsible for the planning of the institution, as well as the initiative to realise its construction. The novel institution, representing both historical and newly arisen needs, as well as forming a new kind of edifice, without any precedence among the Sherpas, was meant to have an overall religious character that also offered urgently needed secular services. Hence, it was conceived of as a communal sacred place and space in the Kathmandu Valley where all Sherpas could gather, meet and celebrate their religious festivals as well as any kind of private/mundane event.

The three Sherpas were Ang Dorje (Ang rDo rje) Lama, Sonam Gyaltzen (bSod nams rgyal mtshan) Sherpa and Sonam Tshiring (bSod nams Tshe ring) Sherpa. According to Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa, who had been active as the president of the SSK from 1979 until 2006, it was these three men who, "...were the first to develop the vision of establishing the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, and the Sherpa Valley community helped us to build it." He does not forget to emphasize: "Without their help we would not have succeeded with our project."¹⁶

Sonam Tshiring Sherpa, who had formerly served in the then Nepali government as a RPP minister for some years, is an influential Sherpa 'big man'. He hails from Lodingma (Lo sdig ma), which is a village located some two hours' walk to the west of Salleri in Solu, the capital of the northeastern Solu-Khumbu district. He was the active secretary of the SSK

¹⁵ In the following the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* will usually be referred to in the abbreviated form of 'SSK'.

¹⁶ Interview in *Smareka* or *Report 2007 of the Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Bodnath, pp. 1–3, see p. 1. – On the particular circumstances Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa has elaborated at length in the course of both three formal interviews and a number of conversations that were all held in the SSK in March and April 2007. Many important details of the following overview have been obtained through this influential Sherpa who is a veritable gold mine of information as to the history of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. In fact, in the Sherpa community this kind personage is regarded as its living history book to whom the curious field researcher has always been referred.

for twenty-two years. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa (b. 1942), from Bagam (Ba gam), a small village an hour's walk to the east of Salleri, had been a climber and climbing instructor first in Darjeeling, and then in Manali (HP, India) before he became co-owner of a trekking and mountaineering company in Kathmandu.¹⁷ The enterprise had been set up in association with his wife's close relative Tenzing Norgay (bsTan 'dzin nor gyas) Sherpa.¹⁸ He was the successor of the first president of the SSK who was active only for the first year of the SSK's existence. During that initial period Sonam Gyaltzen acted as the vice-president of the SSK working committee.

Ang Dorje Lama (1940–1992) from Jiri was the wealthy owner of a construction company. In the year 1983, he was among the few Sherpas who survived the tragic bus accident that had occurred in the vicinity of Narayangadh in the Terai. The bus carried a large group of Sherpa pilgrims who, after having visited the four major holy places in Lumbinī, Nepal, in Bihar, and in Uttar Pradesh associated with the Buddha Śākyamuni, were on their way back to Bodhnāth from where they had started their sacred journey. Twenty-eight Sherpa pilgrims were killed on the spot, and the surviving Sherpas were severely injured. For the whole Sherpa community this was a grim, and historically new, experience. In a single blow, the Sherpa community lost a score of its people, and it comes as no surprise that this first major tragic bus accident occupies a special place in the Sherpas' cultural memory of the recent past.

It took a whole day and night to have the mortal remains of the deceased Sherpas transported back to the Valley, where there were the only three Hindu cremation halls in the Kathmandu area at that time. One facility was in Teku and in the other two were located at Svayambhūnāth. The dead bodies were cremated almost immediately, without the time necessary, according to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, for the proper execution of the funeral rites. According to tradition, this lack may cause grave retribution for the bereaved families from the deceased's soul, who may not be liberated from this world but remain in it and come back to them as an evil spirit.¹⁹

In the case of a deceased person at that time, Tibetan Buddhists in the Valley were wholly dependent on the existing three Hindu cremation facilities in the Kathmandu area. These unfavourable circumstances implied that Tibetan Buddhists were obliged to conform to the Hindu rules and to burn the mortal remains of deceased persons as soon as possible. In consequence, this condition did not leave time to observe their customary mortuary rites

¹⁷ For a brief biographical sketch of this personage see the respective section below.

¹⁸ Tenzing Norgay (bsTan 'dzin nor rgyas) became famous with Sir Edmund Hillary after they had climbed Mount Everest for the first time. For this achievement E. Hillary became a 'Sir'; not so Tenzing Norgay...

¹⁹ For an adequate understanding of this predicament refer to the following chapter three which provides a detailed analysis of the Sherpa mortuary rites.

properly. Yet, owing to the sudden mass of dead people, the Sherpas of the Valley community were confronted with a serious and urgent spiritual problem hitherto unknown to them. It was until then that they had to deal solely with the mortal remains of individual death cases and the performance of the respective mortuary rites. The Sherpas were somehow able to manage these tasks on an improvised basis, as my older informants vividly recall. In addition to the lack of cremation areas, they had no place of their own for communal gatherings; social meetings used to be held at spacious private places.

It was due to the fatal bus accident that the Sherpa community gained awareness of their social and, more important, of their spiritual predicament. The Sherpas' needed a facility of their own for the chilled storage of the mortal remains of deceased Sherpas for the duration of three days. Through this tragedy the lack of such a center or facility, and, the urgency of the need for such a facility was felt. According to tradition, a period of three days is needed for two reasons: first, to make sure that the person has actually passed away and second, for the adequate performance of the first, and major, part of the mortuary rites that has to take place before cremation. Moreover, they were strongly suffering from the lack of both a temple of their own to perform their communal religious festivals and for a place to hold their social gatherings.

In 1992, Ang Dorje Lama, his wife and many relatives lost their lives together with a lot of other Nepali citizens in the tragic Thai Air crash at Gosainkund which is also still vividly remembered among both the Sherpa community and the population of the Kathmandu Valley.

Chapter Three

Sherpa mortuary rites in the context of the Tibetan cultural world

In the novel geographical framework situated in the northwestern part of the Hindu-dominated and comparatively warm Kathmandu Valley, the emerging Sherpa community met severe restrictions over the proper performance of their funerary rites and the related events of social importance. According to Hindu practice, a deceased person has to be cremated as soon as possible. In contradistinction, Tibetan Buddhists believe that a person does not know whether she or he is going to die until three days after their death. A distinct ritual must be performed on each of these three days, each of which bears the utmost importance in the larger context of Sherpa mortuary rites. Consequently, the mortal remains of an expired person must be stored for the duration of three days so that this ritual may be executed before the remains are to be cremated according to Hindu tradition.

This particular three-day period occupies a place of overwhelming importance in the context of Tibetan Buddhist mortuary rites. On each of these three days the practice of *'pho ba* is to be performed. *'Pho ba* is the tantric practice of ejection of the deceased's consciousness through the crown of the head at the time of death to effectuate the rebirth in Sukhāvātī (*bde ba can*), the 'buddhafield' (*zhings khams*, Skt. *buddha kṣetra*) or 'pure land' of Buddha Amitābha (Tib. *'od dpag med* or *snang ba mtha' yas*), the Buddha of Boundless Light who represents the Buddha of the Lotus Family. The conservation of remains necessary to observe this custom constituted a problem neither in Tibet nor in Himalayan high altitude areas such as Solu-Khumbu. In the markedly warmer Kathmandu Valley, however, the Sherpas initially made use of the existing Hindu cremation sites at Teku and Svayambhūnāth, and were thereby forced to follow the Hindu conventions of cremation. This clearly violated Tibetan Buddhist norms and values, since in many cases the *'pho ba* practice was not at all or insufficiently performed. Such violations risked retribution from the deceased, who might come back in the guise of evil spirits to bring bad luck to their family members and old household.

In a traditional village setting, a Sherpa household has always been able to host a number of bla ma-s and monks during religious occasions and, at the same time, a social gathering of several dozen guests on the occasion of a death. However, the majority of Sherpas in the

Kathmandu Valley initially had to rent a room or a small apartment in a Hindu-owned house and predominantly Hindu neighbourhood. Consequently, they lacked the domestic space to host a *bla ma* or the group of monks needed to perform the usual reading of the *Bar do thos grol* for the common duration of seven weeks. They also could not host a larger gathering of relatives, friends, and members of the local community.¹ For these reasons, the Sherpa Valley community decided to build a facility of their own where they would be able to perform religious ceremonies, as well as come together during other social events. This facility—a temple in close association with a community center (*mi 'dzom sa*)—was to become known as *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, or *Sherpa Service Centre*.

In this chapter, some light shall be shed on the elaborate Tibetan Buddhist mortuary rites, which extend over the considerable period of seven weeks such as they are practised among the Sherpas. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate for our understanding the full significance of the complex mortuary rites in Tibetan Buddhism, and particularly the strong ritual emphasis on the passage of the dead.² First, a brief summary of the Tibetan Buddhist mortuary rites shall be provided, along with the practices of early Tibetan kings. The funerary rites of the Sherpas exist in the larger Tibetan culture, and the elaborations below are meant to connect this aspect of Sherpa Buddhism to its historical roots. Second, the common ritual period of the Buddhist funeral service of seven weeks, which became established practice in later Tibetan Buddhism, will be discussed. Third, this chapter will examine the complexity of Tibetan death rituals and the *Bar do thos grol* that serves as the textual means to safely guide the consciousness of the departed person for the sake of its liberation on the dangerous path through the intermediate state to a pure realm. Special focus will be drawn on the three-day period during which the deceased does not know whether she or he is actually going to die. Finally, the sequence of mortuary rites as performed among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, as well as in the Sherpa Valley community, is highlighted and described in detail, including the fundamental changes in the case when death occurs in the urbanized setting of contemporary Bodnāth and environs.

In M.T. Kapstein's most recent publication, titled 'The Tibetans', he briefly discusses the importance of the Tibetan mortuary rites as is expressed through the elaborate and long-lasting funerary practices.³ He strongly emphasizes that death, within the Tibetan life-cycle, was always of preeminent concern of Buddhism, and how funerary rites were in almost all

¹ Many of my informants placed strong emphasis on the fact that, prior to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, these constricting circumstances of their new living conditions eventually became the driving impetus to acquire a house of one's own or to buy a plot of land: to be able to host a great many people on their festive occasions.

² M. T. Kapstein has specially noted this 'remarkable ritual emphasis' (2006, p. 215).

³ Kapstein, M.T. 2006, pp. 213–215

cases performed in accord with Buddhist ritual injunctions. Some of their major features, of special significance in the context of the present investigation, are summarized as follows:

“...the art of dying correctly was a matter of particular urgency for religious Tibetans. Typically this meant either learning to perform for oneself, or having a lama perform on one’s behalf, the last rite of *powa*, the projection of the dying consciousness into a pure realm of rebirth.⁴ In this context particular devotion was accorded to the buddha Amitabha, whose heaven, the Land of Bliss (*bde ba can*, Skt. Sukhavati), was the object of special prayer services:

From here in the western direction,
Is Amitabha’s field.
May all those who adhere to his name
Be born in the supreme field!

Like the lotus unsoiled by the mire,
Unsoiled by the three worlds’ taint,
Sprung from the lotus of being,
May we be reborn in the Blissful Land.”⁵

Additionally, H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Bla ma has noted in his autobiography the very reason for Tibetan Buddhism to attribute such a prominent place to death, and its surrounding ritual practices:

⁴ Inserted explanation from E.B.: Since death may occur any time, and a bla ma may not always be at hand to confer the transference of consciousness (*'pho ba*), there are always experienced laypeople such as the father, a paternal uncle or a brother of the deceased who may perform this crucial task in the bla ma’s stead. Hence, even when a young Yak herder among the Sherpas dies on a summer-pasture in a remote high-altitude area it is always ensured that the departed is properly conferred the important transference of consciousness. This is notwithstanding the fact that the *'pho ba* practice to cause one’s consciousness to leave the body at the moment of death and to seek rebirth in a pure realm belongs to the advanced techniques of yoga (see M.T. Kapstein 2006, p. 227f.). Significantly, for its performance empowerment (*dbang bskur*) is not a sine qua non precondition; it is sufficient to have once received the necessary *'khri* (explanations) and *lung* (instructions). Thus, practically, every Tibetan Buddhist has to learn the basics of the mortuary rites so that he is capable of performing them properly when death occurs in his family. This conforms to an introductory passage to the original tenth chapter entitled ‘Consciousness Transference’ of the ‘Tibetan Book of the Dead’ as translated by G. Dorje (2006). There the latter practice is described as a “...powerful method, a means for attaining buddhahood which does not [necessarily] require meditation.” Hence, it is valuable “...for ordinary persons, officials, householders and distracted individuals who have had no time for meditation, despite having received those [instructions].” (p. 200)

⁵ Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 213f.

“According to Buddhist thought, there are many levels of consciousness. The grosser pertain to ordinary perception – touch, sight, smell and so forth – whilst the subtlest are those which are apprehended at the point of death. One of the aims of Tantra is to enable the practitioner to ‘experience’ death, for it is then that the most powerful spiritual realisation can come about.”⁶

Recitation of the so-called *Tibetan Book of the Dead* occupies a special place among the rites executed on behalf of the deceased. In times of mourning the merits of charity and religious offering are strongly encouraged to ensure the propitious rebirth of the departed. An equally important function of the complex mortuary rituals is to benefit his or her survivors by preventing the spirit of the deceased from disturbing the living, haunting his former dwellings and causing mischief. When this occurs, special rites aimed at exorcizing the ghost and sending it to a suitable dwelling are necessary. Similar rites are performed upon the premature death of children. The bla ma names an astrologically determined date for the disposal of the mortal remains through consultation of the *rtsis* book. In Central Tibet (*dBus gTsang*) the mortal remains were brought to the cemetery (*dur khrod*) to be dissected and then to be fed to the vultures, a practice called ‘sky burial’. According to M.T. Kapstein, cremation is also prominent in some places, particularly in the wooded Himalayan regions. High-ranking clerics and reputed saints are often cremated; in other cases they were mummified and entombed in shrines, as was the Great Fifth Dalai Bla ma (1617–82).⁷ Liturgical rites were performed for a period of seven weeks following death, corresponding to the forty-nine days of the *bar do*, i.e. the intermediate state between death and rebirth.

The practice of mummification and entombment of eminent clerics and great saints recalls the custom concerning the entombment of the early medieval Tibetan kings. In the year 1948, G. Tucci undertook to identify the place in Central Tibet where the tombs of the old kings had been built. It is in Phyang rgyas that he found the mounds where the bodies of those kings had been buried. According to G. Tucci, all *chos byung* (‘History of Buddhism’) texts give a good account of the way in which the mortal remains of the deceased kings were disposed.⁸ When the body of a king was placed in a tomb, it was put on a throne inside a closed copper box.⁹ He writes, “...the story of the burial of Srong btsan sgam po fully shows

⁶ Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama 1990, p. 231.

⁷ Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 214.

⁸ Tucci, G. 1950, p. 6.

⁹ Tucci, G. 1950, p. 5. – A description of the ruler’s last rites that became events of national significance and of the diverse practices surrounding the burial (pp. 9–11), and of the complex symbolism of the tomb as the ‘pole of the universe’ (p. 9) is beyond the scope of this inquiry.

that burial only was practised; no cremation.”¹⁰ In the early historic period of imperial Tibet, cremation and dismemberment of the corpse for its consumption by vultures, which were the two preferred practices among Tibetans in recent centuries, were apparently unknown.¹¹ Funerary rites, however, did play a central role in archaic Tibetan religion. It was already in that period that the rites of the dead were aimed in part at serving to guide the departed “...to a realm of happiness and to prevent the dead causing upset in the world of the living.”¹² A famous historical account, the *Sba bzhed* (‘The Testament of Ba’), credits the princess of Jincheng, married in 710 to Emperor Khri lde gtsug btsan, with introducing the Buddhist funeral service of seven weeks. It is this ritual period that would become established practice in later Tibetan Buddhism and elaborated in the fourteenth-century work known in the West as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹³

It comes as no surprise that, as P. Kvaerne has observed, Tibetan death rituals (‘*chi ba*), Buddhist and Bon po alike, are of extremely complex character. Their differences notwithstanding, all death ceremonies aim at guiding the consciousness (*rnam śes*) of the deceased person out of the cycle of rebirth and liberation.¹⁴ Death is considered a time of great crisis during which the opportunities to reach that very goal may be easily missed.¹⁵ In the Tibetan cultural realm there are several traditions and many different rituals which may be performed for the dead,¹⁶ and great care is devoted to their proper performance.¹⁷ Things get even more complicated among the diverse Himalayan groups that constitute an integral

¹⁰ Tucci, G. 1950, p. 9. According to ‘a later invention of the Buddhists’ the bodies of the king and of both his Nepali and his Chinese queens have disappeared into the statue of sPyan ras gzigs, see p. 9. Obviously, this kind of *ex post* invention serves to create a very close bond between the Buddhist Tibetan king (and his queens) and bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the patron saint of the Land of Snows.

¹¹ Cf. Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 31.

¹² Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 48.

¹³ Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 64f. For a thorough study of this significant introduction in Tibet refer also to his treatise ‘The Mark of Vermillion’ in M.T. Kapstein 2000, pp. 38–50, see p. 38f.

¹⁴ As G. Dorje (2006, p. 421, n. 22) has observed within the Tibetan tradition there are many diverse techniques of consciousness transference including those derived from *The Six Doctrines of Nāropā* (*Naro chos drug*), the *Innermost Spirituality of Longchenpa* (*Klong chen snying thig*), and the cycle of teachings contained in Karma gling pa’s cycle of texts known as *The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States* (*Bar do thos grol chen mo*).

¹⁵ Kvaerne, P. 1997, p. 494.

¹⁶ Cf. Skorupski, T. 1982, p. 361.

¹⁷ For Tibetan rituals, meditation, and beliefs concerning death see G.H. Mullin 1986; for an exposition of the channels, drops and winds which in Highest Yoga Tantra serve as foundations for the consciousness see Lati Rinpochoy and J. Hopkins 1980. On the conception of death and on death rites in the Tibetan realm see also G. Tucci 1988, pp. 193–199. – For a description of the death ritual as practised in the context of the rDzogs chen klong chen snying thig tradition see J. Winkler 1997, pp. 1069–1080; for a brief account of a Bon po death ceremony see M. Brauen 1978, pp. 53–64.

part of the Tibetan diaspora. As the results of research obtained in the last three decades have demonstrated, each of the Himalayan groups conducts the performance of mortuary rites in a distinct way of its own that frequently varies even differ from area to area.¹⁸

The *Bar do thos grol* ('liberation through hearing in the intermediate state' [i.e. between death and rebirth]) occupies a key position among the different texts from which Tibetan mortuary rites are derived. This compendium of texts is a spiritual treasure (*gter ma*) containing a set of instructions given by the Indian Tantric master and sage Padmasambhava. Karma Gling pa, an influential fourteenth-century treasure-discoverer of the rNying ma pa School, unearthed from Mount sGam po gdar in Dvags po, a region in Southern Tibet, the cycle of teachings known as the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities: A Profound Sacred Teaching, [entitled] Natural Liberation through [Recognition of] Enlightened Intention (*Zhi khro dgongs pa rang grol*).¹⁹ These teachings contain guidance and practices as to how to address the process of dying and the after-death state, and on how to help those who are dying. They include, among others, guidance for the recognition of the signs of impending death and a detailed description of the mental and physical processes of dying, rituals for the avoidance of premature death, the guide called 'The Great Liberation by Hearing' that is read to the dying and the dead, aspirational prayers that are read at the time of death, an allegorical masked play that dramatises the journey through the intermediate state.²⁰ It is of significance

¹⁸ For the death ceremonies as practised in La dvags and among Himalayan groups such as the Thakālis, in the Bon po village of *Klu brag* in gLo bo smad (South Mustang), and the Kham Magar see the contributions contained in the special issue of *Kailash – A Journal of Himalayan Studies* Vol. IX (1982), No. 4, which is dedicated to the study of death and mortuary practices in the Himalayan realm. For the funeral rites as practised among the Gurungs see S. R. Mumford 1989, pp. 182–186 and E. McHugh 1997, pp. 633–638; for Tamang mortuary practices refer to D. Holmberg 1989, pp. 189–236; for some stages of the death rites as conducted in Nub ri see G. Childs 2004, pp. 10–11, 144–147, 157–159; for a brief overview of the death rites in Dol po see C. Jest 1975, p. 234; in Yol mo see R. Desjarlais 1994, pp. 90–98 and 2003, pp. 99–302. In his recent book Ch. Ramble (2008) makes brief mention of death-rites (175, 234) and funerals and related feasts (153, 175, 231) as are practised in the Buddhist village community of lTe in Nepal's Mustang District. The relation between territory and ancestors as expressed in funerary rites among the Thangmi of Nepal is explored by S. Shneiderman 2002.

¹⁹ This is mentioned by Dudjom Rinpoche, Jikdre! Yeshe Dorje (1991, p. 801) and by G. Dorje 2006, p. XLVII and p. 482. Dudjom Rinpoche has given a brief sketch of Karma Gling pa's sacred life-story and his accomplishments (1991, pp. 800–801). This influential master who was revered as an emanation of the great translator lCog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan was born 'sometime during the sixth cycle [24 January 1327 to 20 January 1387] at Khyerdrup, above Takpo' in Southern Tibet (op. cit., p. 800). A fine line drawing of this eminent figure from the hand of Robert Beer has been provided by G. Dorje 2006, p. XLVI. – Since W.Y. Evans-Wentz and K.D. Samdup's first, but incomplete and selective translation of the year 1927 the row of translations into Western languages has been steadily increasing, especially in the last years. For a recent interpretation of this influential text see R.N. Prats 2002, pp. 31–42. G. Dorje (2006) has presented for the first time a complete translation of this cycle of teachings with all twelve chapters of the compilation of texts known as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'.

²⁰ Cf. G. Dorje 2006, 'Editor's Introduction', p. XXXIf.

that the bKa' brgyud pa, dGe lugs pa and Bon po Schools each have developed their own versions of this text.²¹ Translated as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' into Western languages, it has become one of the most well known Asian books in the West.

Although overwhelming importance is placed on the *Bar do thos grol* in the vast realm of Tibetan death ceremonies, the mortuary rites as practised among the Sherpas follow a variety of ritual cycles from different masters. Among others, the ritual texts of the *byang gter* tradition are practised. The *byang gter*, or Northern Treasure tradition, was founded by the famous treasure-discoverer, who adopted certain teachings of Padmasambhava, dNgos grub rgyal mtshan, well known as Rig 'dzin rGod ldem phru can (1337–1408).²² This tradition refers to the esoteric instructions that the Tantric master and sage had given to one of his 'five innermost disciples', sNa nam rdo rje bdud 'joms.²³ These instructions are said to be of vital importance for the protection of the descendants of King Khri Srong lde'u btsan (reigned from 755/756–797). It was this great treasure-discoverer (*gter ston*) who later had concealed them in the mountains as a spiritual treasure (*gter ma*) to be rediscovered at the appropriate time in the future for the benefit of both the welfare of the royal line and of Tibet.²⁴

Sherpa death ceremonies may be conducted either by a married tantric village *bla ma* (*sngags pa*) or by a celibate *bla ma*. The latter is usually assisted by some monks (*dge slong*, Sh. *tawa*) of his monastery²⁵. A group of those laymen who received some education either

²¹ E. K. Dargyay in her introduction to E. K. and Geshe L. Dargyay 1978, pp. 21–54, see p. 46. – On the *Bar do thos grol* see also G. Tucci 1988, p. 194; Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche 1991. *The Bardo Guidebook*. Kathmandu: Rangjung Yeshe. – B. Cuevas has provided a detailed account of the complex historical background of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2003). G. Dorje has written 'A Brief Literary History of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*' (2006, pp. XXXVIII–LI). D. Germano 1997 pp. 458–493, focuses on the less well-known literature and analyzes the question how a number of ritual practices and meditative techniques regarding dying and death formed around the *Bar do* concept. Among others, Germano highlights the tenth chapter of *The Treasury of Precious Words and Meanings*, which is devoted to the six intermediate states. This important text was written by the highly revered master and eminent scholar of the Old School, the 'omniscient' Klong chen pa (1308–1364).

²² For the life and accomplishments of dNgos grub rgyal mtshan see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 780–783.

²³ This important figure belonged to the delegation that was sent by both king Khri Srong lde'u btsan and abbot Śāntarakṣita to invite the powerful mantra adept called Padmasambhava to Tibet (refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 513). He was a treasure-concealer (p. 747). Important reincarnations of his were dNgos grub rgyal mtshan (see p. 780) and rDor brag Rig 'dzin Padma phrin las (1641–1717) (see p. 719).

²⁴ The center of the Northern Treasure tradition is Thub bstan rdo rje brag monastery. It was founded in 1599 by Ngag gi dbang po (1580–1639), the third incarnation of the *Byang gter*'s founder, in the central province of dBu on the northern side of the Tsang po river. Subsequently, it became one of the major monasteries of the rNying ma pa School with a range of affiliate monasteries. In exile, rDo rje brag monastery has been reestablished in Simla in Himachal Pradesh, India. – For the Northern Treasure tradition refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 782, 783, 802, 806, 808, 919; see also the first chapter on the 'The *Byang gter* tradition' in Boord, M.J. 1993, pp. 21–35.

²⁵ G. Samuel has observed that one of the main functions of Buddhist monks in Tibetan society was to become

from their village priest or in a monastery assist the tantric village priest in these rituals, and in all major religious ceremonies that are performed in their village temple. Moreover, it is common for monks to conduct some of the mortuary rites without *bla ma*. In fact, the performance of mortuary rites constitutes the monks' main duty outside the precincts of their monastery; it is often their primary source of financial support, provided they do not work seasonally as a trekking guide. The latter secular activity has become common among the monks of some monasteries in the Khumbu region, such as sTeng po che and Thang smad. All officials are indiscriminately called *bla ma* by laypeople.

“It is when death strikes a family that the surviving members set into motion a series of rites and ceremonies which, though embedded in a framework of social obligations and customs, are of essentially religious nature.”

In these words Chr. von Fürer-Haimendorf has characterised the chain of rites that make up the complex Sherpa death ceremonies.²⁶ The death rites are performed on the basis of those texts with which the officials or presiding *bla ma* are familiar (hence, both the rites and the ritual texts vary from *bla ma* to *bla ma*). In the local context the mortuary rites are performed in the shrine room (*chos khang*) of the house of the deceased, whereas in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodnāth they are mainly conducted in a separate cult room (*ro khang*). With but one exception, all ritual stages may be performed by more or fewer officials, the number of whom depending on the affluence of the deceased person and his or her family.

Popular belief holds that, unless these rites are properly performed, the deceased person on his or her way through the intermediate state might turn into a dangerous spirit called *pem* that may come back to the family in the future in order to exact revenge for its improper funeral. The spirit may haunt its members through mental illness and other forms of bad luck. As a result, Sherpas tend to insist that mortuary rites are to be conducted with utter care and performed on as lavish a scale as possible. This is considered the adequate way of making merit for the deceased, which is deemed necessary for the long and dangerous path through the *bar do*.²⁷ Through the performance of this complex mortuary rite, the consciousness

the performers of funerary rituals (1993, p. 447). – Before the emergence of celibate monasteries among the Sherpas from the beginning of the 20th century onwards, married tantric village *bla ma*-s and shamans (*minung*) were their only ritual specialists.

²⁶ Cf. 1964, p. 225.

²⁷ According to the traditions of the rNying ma pa and bKa' brgyud pa Schools, the term 'intermediate state' actually refers to six different forms each of them representing a key phase of life, see G. Dorje 2006, p. 479. Of these the latter three, 'the intermediate state of the time of death' ('*chi kha'i bar do*'), 'the intermediate state of reality' (*chos nyid bar do*) and 'the intermediate state of rebirth' (*srid pa'i bar do*) are of particular importance in this context.

of the deceased will be safely guided toward another rebirth or, at best, out of the cycle of rebirth and liberation. At the same time, the proper performance guarantees that the ‘good fortune’ (*g.yang*) of the family of the deceased will not be destroyed by the latter, who might otherwise turn into a *pem*.

T. Skorupski has emphasized four rituals, out of many different rituals that can be performed for the dead, are the most important and performed whenever possible. They are reading the *pho ba* (transference of the consciousness or soul) to the dead person, reading the *bar do thos sgröl* (liberation through hearing in the intermediate state between death and rebirth)²⁸, the ritual with an effigy card (*byang chog*)²⁹, and the cremation ceremony (*ro sreg*).³⁰ For the purpose of the performance of the mortuary rites, there are mainly four texts in use among the Sherpas. One text called *Thugs rje chen po ‘gro ba kun sgröl*, a *sādhana* focused upon the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, is from Rig ‘dzin rGod ldem phru can, the influential fourteenth-century treasure-discoverer who represents the *Byang gter* tradition; two texts are from Rig ‘dzin ‘Ja’ tshon snying po (1585–1656), among whom his cycle of teachings known as *dKon mchog spyi ‘dus* (‘Union of the Three Precious Ones’) has been in use among the Sherpas also for a range of other purposes; a text from the rDza sprul Rin po che Ngag dbang bstan ‘dzin nor bu (1867–1940) called *Jo wo thugs rje chen po* on the four-handed Avalokiteśvara, which has been in use among the Sherpas and particularly in the Shar pa dgon pa in Bodhnāth since every Sherpa bla ma and monk has once received a copy of this text from ‘Khrul zhig Rinpoche Ngag dbang chos kyi blo gros (b. 1924). All these texts also contain a *sādhana* for the ‘*pho ba* practice. Another important text for this purpose that is highly valued is the *Klong chen snying thig* (‘Innermost Spirituality of Longchenpa’). However, not many religious personages are able to practice it since only a few Sherpa bla ma-s have received the necessary empowerment (*dbang bskur*).

Here is not the place, however, for a lengthy discussion of the different ritual texts in use among the Sherpas and their diverse mortuary rites in detail. Instead, the following will offer a brief overview concerning the different major ritual stages that make up the full sequence of mortuary rites set into motion when death has occurred among the Sherpas. Included are

²⁸ See the detailed section on ‘Guiding the consciousness after death’ in D. L. Snellgrove 1957, pp. 262–274.

²⁹ This ritual in its different phases as is performed among the adherents of the Bon po School has been described and its ritual text translated by P. Kvaerne 1997, pp. 494–498.

³⁰ T. Skorupski gives a detailed description of the different stages of the rNying ma cremation ritual according to the text written by rDo rje brag Rig ‘dzin Padma ‘phrin las (1641–1718), the fourth incarnation of the *Byang gter*’s founder, entitled *Byang gter ro sreg lag len* (‘The practice of the cremation according to the Northern Terma’), see 1982, pp. 361–376. Skorupski observes that funeral ceremonies form one of the most important group of all Tibetan ritual performances. In consequence, there are many different rituals and also many different ritual texts according to which they are performed, op.cit., p. 361.

the range of activities in preparation for the death ceremonies and the surrounding secular practices in which the performance of Sherpa mortuary rites are embedded. The picture that emerges from participant observation of the public proceeding, as well as from the *bla ma*'s description and explanation of the solemn performance of death rites among the Sherpas, clearly shows one significant aspect: the death celebrations are not the private affair of the members of the household in which the death has occurred, but that of the wider community. A death is a major occasion when not only close relatives, friends, and neighbours, but both the entire local community and that of the clan (as represented by some more distant relatives) come together celebrating and reaffirming their respective unity in this context.³¹

While on a mountain trail that leads through an area inhabited by Sherpas, it is common to hear the sounds of the clashing of cymbals (*sbug chal*), the beating of big drums (*mchod rnga*), and the blowing of pairs of long-horns (*dung chen*) and oboes (*rgya gling*). This sound reaches from far away, depending on the strength and the direction of the wind. As these instruments rest, the sounds of a small hand drum (*damaru*) and a small high-pitched bell (*dril bu*), sometimes substituted by a thigh-bone trumpet (*rkang gling*) or a conch shell (*chos dung*), are played by the *bla ma* for a brief sequence, after which the sounds of the afore-mentioned instruments can be heard again. Once one has discerned and traveled in the direction whence the sounds come, a gathering of peoples at a Sherpa house, a flag-pole with a new prayer-banner in the courtyard, and the smoke of burning incense tell that death has struck a person. The same musical sounds can be heard at a house located in the urbanized areas around the Great Stūpa of Bodnāth, or in the wider region of the northwestern part of the Kathmandu Valley where most members of the Sherpas' valley community live on a more or less permanent basis.

The mortuary rites, as practised among the Sherpas, consist of a range of different stages; each one is performed through a particular ritual ceremony. Basically, they are all meant to serve the one and only purpose that consists in guiding the consciousness of the deceased person out of the cycle of rebirth toward final liberation. None of them are redundant; quite on the contrary, it is commonly believed that the performance of several different rites in a finely orchestrated sequence serving one and the same purpose provides the necessary guaranty for fulfilling its goal, since the opportunities for liberation can easily be missed if the full set is not conducted.

As soon as possible after death has occurred, either the tantric village *bla ma* (*sngags pa*) or a celibate *bla ma* from a monastery is summoned to the house by one of the deceased

³¹ In his sketch of death customs as practised in La dvags M. Brauen has emphasized this significant 'communitas aspect' that emerges in the course of the Tibetan death celebrations, see 1982, pp. 330-331.

Sherpa's relatives.³² The first activity that the *bla ma* performs on the first day is the '*pho ba* practice, i.e. the transference of the consciousness (*mam ses*) of the expired person directly from the cycle of rebirth to the state of liberation, which in most cases is believed to be Buddha Amitābha's western paradise.³³ The '*pho ba* is always to be performed right at the place where the person had passed away.

Usually, the performance of this task takes about half an hour only. In its course, Buddha Amitābha (Tib. 'Od dpag med or sNang ba mtha' yas), the Buddha of Boundless Light, is visualized and imagined to appear about a cubit's length above the crown of the deceased's head and remain there throughout the '*pho ba* practice. The crucial parts of the used text are whispered in syllables into the ear of the deceased. It is through this spiritual practice that the consciousness of the departed is raised from the center of his or her chest through the crane, whereupon it unites with the heart of Amitābha. Buddha Amitābha, with the departed's consciousness in union with his heart, leaves afterward for his heaven, which is called *bde ba can*, the 'Land of Bliss'. Having reached its very goal, the '*pho ba* practice has come to its end. My clerical informants place strong emphasis on the fact that, as a rule, the practice of the transference of the deceased's consciousness has to be repeated twice. The twofold repetition of this spiritual practice is to ensure that the specific aim of this spiritual practice is fulfilled.

Next, the mortal remains are taken to the shrineroom, where they are placed on the left side of the altar. The corpse is properly cleansed, mummified in a long white cloth, adorned with many extra-wide white ceremonial silken scarves (*kha btags*), and then placed on a bier in fetal position. A special mantra called *thak sgrol* is placed on the forehead of the deceased. Similar to the function of an amulet, it serves as protection on his or her difficult way to the intermediate state. Then the *bla ma* arranges the altar (*gtor cog*) for this particular purpose with a set of butter lamps (*mar me*) and differently shaped sacrificial cakes (*gtor ma*) made of roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*). Two or three monks usually do this preparation work. Eight painted scrolls (*thang ka*) that represent the large group of both peaceful (*zhi ba*) and wrathful (*drag po*) deities hang on the wall of the altar. In all these activities, the *bla ma* is

³² Among the present-day Sherpas, the population of villages and hamlets often has close ties with both their married tantric village *bla ma*, who is firmly associated with the village temple, and with the celibate *bla ma* and the monk community of a monastery in the vicinity.

³³ In the context of the mortuary rites, the practice of the '*pho ba* is a highly intimate affair in which only the performing *bla ma* is present. In contradistinction, a public teaching and conferral of the '*pho ba* in the context of a grand event of pilgrimage and festival of religious teaching has been held in 'Bri gung northeast of Lha sa since the first half of the Seventeenth Century. It is known as the '*Bri gung 'pho ba chen mo* ('the great [conferral of the yoga of the] transference [of consciousness] at 'Bri gung'). M. T. Kapstein, who has surveyed its history and development, gives also an account of its revival in 1992 (1998).

supported by young novice monks and at least one experienced male relative of the departed person. Moreover, the *bla ma* consults the astrological book (*rtsis*) in order to decide upon the appropriate day and time when the cremation is to be conducted. The *rtsis* book also tells which element the ashes following the cremation are to be delivered: it is given either to the water, the sky or the earth.

It used to be a common practice among more affluent Sherpas to save some of the ashes of the departed and to store them in a small container. Together with numerous valuable ornaments, usually personal items of the departed associated with gifts from his family, the box containing the ashes would be placed in a specific kind of private religious monument called *pur khang*. This is a structure made of stone and mud of between two and three meters height that resembles a small stūpa, the major differences being its quadrangular base and shape as well as the site where it is located. Usually a *pur khang* has been built on a remote piece of land that belonged to the deceased, but sometimes this private memorial monument is built in the midst of a mountain trail far beyond a human settlement, usually at a junction or a branching-off. However, this practice has been disappearing since the middle of the Twentieth Century. It was at that time that thieves began to devastate these monuments in search of the precious ornaments contained.³⁴ In consequence, the various gifts from the bereaved family were reduced to a certain number, usually one hundred and eight, of *tsa tsa*-s, i.e. miniature stūpas or statues of the Buddha or other eminent religious figure created of clay by means of a special mould. The *tsa tsa*-s made for such a purpose also contains some of the ashes of the departed, and are usually placed on the base or around the middle section of a *pur khang*.³⁵ Both my middle-aged and old informants vividly remember that it was around the end of the Sixties and into the Seventies that Sherpas began to do without the construction of a *pur khang*. Those that may still be encountered in the Solu-Khumbu region are all at least more than half of a century old and thus indicative of a common ancient practice that today has entirely faded away. Likewise, in the urbanised framework in which the Sherpa Valley community has taken its roots, there is simply no remote quiet place that would be suitable for the construction of a *pur khang*; the tradition has disappeared there as well.

While the *bla ma* performs the procedures of the funerary ritual, the sons and male relatives and friends of the departed cut a large fir tree in the vicinity and to transport it to the home

³⁴ Since for fear of grave retribution from the side of the spirit of the deceased no Tibetan Buddhist would ever touch a *pur khang* it has to be assumed that the thieves belong to the low Hindu caste groups and to other ethnic groups of whom more and more became involved as porters in the trekking and mountaineering business which at that time started to flourish.

³⁵ *Tsa tsa* may also be encountered in certain niches adorning certain slates in a maṇi wall with the contours of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara or his mantra engraved on it. Moreover, in the case of a religious figure a number of *tsa tsa* containing part of his ashes are usually arranged around the base of his memorial stūpa.

of the dead. After having cleaned it of the bark, the large stem is erected by a group of young men in the center of the courtyard where it serves as a huge flagpole (*chos dar*). It is adorned with a large prayer-banner (*rlung rta*) that consists of five pieces of cloth sewn together, each in one of the five Buddhist colours, and printed with the usual prayer-flag motif. The men perform these tasks with much supportive joyous shouting. They place a heap of juniper twigs (*shug pa*) and other herbs to be burnt as incense (*spos*) on one of the courtyard walls. This incense is meant as the fumigation offering (*bsang mchod*), indicative of the presence of death. It is regarded as a potent means to keep away the great number of evil spirits that might interfere. At the same time, its fine fragrant smell is regarded as pleasing to divinities, particularly the high and low protective deities.

The corpse has to be stored for the duration of at least three days on the left side of the altar in the shrineroom. Tibetan Buddhists believe that it is during this period that the person is not conscious of whether he or she is going to die or not. In the course of these three days, the chosen *sādhana* text has to be read by a minimum of at least eight monks from the second day onwards until the day on which the cremation is performed. This text is a meditation manual for the visualization of the respective deity to be worshiped in order to receive his kind help for the fulfillment of the goals associated with the mortuary rites. Usually, the cremation ritual is held not earlier than on the third day following the occurrence of death.

The second of the three-day period is also the day when the people of the locality gather and receive food and drink by the bereaved, who act as donator (*sbyin bdag*) in regard to those being hosted. Accordingly, this day is called *zab chang*, i.e. 'good food and drink'. Relatives and friends come to the deceased's home in order to pay a brief visit to the dead. Moreover, the numerous visitors console the widow or widower and the family members, and may also give the representative of the household either some food or two to four packs of tea as a gift. They then join the other guests who have been invited to the kitchen, where they are served *chang* and food. Thereafter, the guests enjoy each other's company in the courtyard. When there is a widow, her closest friends take care of both the guests and her, while she is free to mourn and weep instead of hosting the guests.

On the third day the reading practice is continued. On each of the three days the ritual recitation has to be concluded by the *gcod* practice, the spiritual practice of 'severance' of the clinging Ego. As *gcod mkhan po*, the bla ma performs this practice with the big *dā ma ru*, a small handheld double-sided drum frequently identified with the wrathful deities that is usually utilised in conjunction with a small hand bell (*dril bu*). Certain intervals are marked by the blowing of a human thigh bone trumpet (*rkang gling*).³⁶ On the third day after the

³⁶ Ma gcig lab gyi sgron ma (b. 1031, 1049 or 1055; d. 1126, 1129 or 1143), the great female master and famed

death, the ritual with an effigy card (*byang chog*) is conducted by the *bla ma* and two assistants. The purpose of this ritual is to secure the guidance of the consciousness of the deceased through the different stages on the path leading to liberation. It may last between two and three hours. In its course an effigy of the deceased made of dough of roasted *rtsam pa* is offered as a ‘ransom’ (*glud*) to malevolent spirits that might interfere with the ceremony. After its completion this effigy is taken outside and thrown away beyond the wall of the courtyard.³⁷

To effect progress toward liberation, the deceased first has to be ritually provided with both the satisfaction of all material needs through the presentation of various gifts and the mental disposition necessary for the progress on the path toward liberation.³⁸ A short ritual called *gnas spar* eventually marks the conclusion of the three-day period. It is executed in the *bla ma*’s capacity as the *lam ston mkhan po*, and serves to guide the consciousness of the deceased on the journey (*lam dren pa*) that leads to Buddha Amitābha’s heaven (*bde ba can*). Only then are the mortal remains of the deceased person to be cremated.

It is also on this third day that many local people show up to contribute financial donations to the widower or the widow. This act represents an integral part of a larger mutual help system called *sa rogs*. Other kinds of *sa rogs* are meant for quite different events and purposes, such as weddings or house constructions, in which considerable financial resources are involved.

To summarize these complex ritual proceedings, it is a veritable chain of carefully orchestrated rites that all serve to ensure the deceased realizes death really has struck him or her, so that the deceased stops clinging to this world (and possibly causing mischief among his family), and instead is guided safely on the path leading through the dangerous realm of the *bar do* to Buddha Amitābha’s ‘Land of Bliss’.

incarnation of Ye śes mtsho rgyal, contemporary of Mi la ras pa, is said to have initiated in Tibet the transmission lineage of the spiritual practice of *gcod* of Mahāmudrā in association with the Indian master Pha dam pa sang rgyas (d. 1117) who introduced the ‘Pacification of Suffering’ teachings (*zhi byed*) to Tibet. The practice of *gcod* means ‘cutting through’ ego-clinging and other kinds of attachment. In this practice, based on the view of the *Prajñāpāramitā-Sūtra*, one visualizes offering one’s body to the four classes of guests (*mgron po bzhi*). For a translation of her sacred life story, including a comprehensive overview of *gcod*’s historical and doctrinal origins in Indian Buddhism and its subsequent transmission to Tibet, refer to J. Edou 1996. The author provides the photo of a statue of Ma gcig lab gyi sgron’s main Shug gseb Nunnery near Lha sa (p. XII); his book’s cover is adorned with an impressive *thang ka* of Ma gcig lab gyi sgron whose name means ‘Only Mother Lamp of Dharma’.

³⁷ For a profound discussion of the notion of the *glud*, the myth behind it, the various forms it can take in Tibetan ritual and the description of the ritual for offering the *glud*, see Karmay, S.G. 1998, pp. 339–379.

³⁸ A short description of the different stages of this rite as it is practised among the adherents of the Bon po School, including the translation of a part of the respective text, has been given by P. Kvaerne 1997, pp. 494–498.

As mentioned above, it is according to the indications found in the *rtsis* book and following the period of at least three days that the date of the cremation is determined. The mummified corpse is placed on a bier in an upright position. All relatives, friends, neighbours and most of the local community silently gather to form a queue in order to individually bid farewell to the deceased. Each in turn makes an offering of a *bka thags*, which is carefully draped around the neck of the deceased while murmuring the six-syllable mantra. Quite a few persons, usually of the same age-group and closely related, bow down and utter some personal words of well-wishing into the ear of the deceased. These final acts of the assembled community are often associated with heart-breaking scenes. At their conclusion, the corpse of the departed is carried in a solemn procession to the cremation place (*dur khrod*) where the cremation ritual (*ro sreg*) is held. As is usual, neither women nor children nor outsiders, but only a small group of men, take part in the procession and the cremation ceremony. Men who are sons, relatives or close friends of the deceased usually carry the bier. For the cremation ritual (*ro sbyin sreg*), the corpse is built into the pyre in a sitting position.

Since death is regarded as an occasion of pollution, a thorough house cleaning has to be undertaken immediately after the corpse of the deceased has been taken out for the last farewell before the procession to the cremation place begins. For the task of house cleaning, mourners call a group of low-caste black smiths (*kāmī*).³⁹ Unlike the Newar, where even numerous religious specialists who belong to different castes are regularly required to remove the pollution, a separate cleansing ritual procedure requiring a *bla ma* or monk is not necessitated among the Sherpas.⁴⁰

Each village has a cremation place of its own that, as a rule, has to be situated at a far-away site that is located high above human settlements. Participants of the procession are family members, relatives, and friends under the leadership of the *bla ma* and the monks. The procession is headed by five people, each of whom carries one victory banner (*rgyal mtshan*) called a *char dar* (spoken Sh. *chab dar*).⁴¹ Each of the five victory banners is kept in one of the five Buddhist colours. Taken together, the five *chab dar*-s are indicative of the ‘rainbow way’ that shows the correct path to the consciousness of the deceased person.

³⁹ Formerly, solely low-caste Sherpas called *yemba* had performed this impure task. *Kāmī* groups have migrated from the mid-hills to Solu-Khumbu only in the recent four decades where they have settled down on a permanent basis and work for the more well-to-do Sherpas on their fields, in their forests, and on their new construction sites.

⁴⁰ As to the resp. practices among the Newar see G. Toffin 2007, pp. 350–352, see p. 350.

⁴¹ In this context each of the five colours represents one of the five Dhyani Buddhas who preside over the five Buddha families (*rigs lnga*), each of whom represents one of the five aspects of Buddhahood. The five Dhyani Buddhas are generally depicted in a *maṇḍala* arrangement as follows: blue Vairochana in the center (Tathāgata), white Vajrasattva in the east (Vajra), yellow Ratnasambhava in the south (Jewel), red Amitābha in the west (Lotus), and green Amoghasiddhi in the north (Action).

The cremation ritual is executed in the bla ma's capacity as *sbyin sreg mkhan po*. This ritual is conducted according to the 'Rite of Burnt Offerings' (Skt. *homa*), a *sbyin sreg* practice.⁴² For its performance the bla ma uses only a small hand bell (*dril bu*) and a vajra (*rdo rje*), both of which are symbols of indestructibility and of Vajrayāna. A long white silken *bka thags* is usually affixed to the latter and connected with the corpse.

After the cremation ceremony all monks and laypeople have to leave. Only one bla ma is invited by the bereaved family to perform the reading of the *Bar do thos grol* for the whole period of forty-nine days. The particular focus of the recitation practice is to offer guidance for the deceased regarding both the forty-two peaceful and the fifty-eight wrathful deities who the deceased will encounter, among others, on the difficult way through the final three realms of the intermediate state. Each of these deities is to be visualized.⁴³ Again, the text is being whispered in syllables into the ear of the deceased, thus guiding the dead step by step on his or her path during the transition period of forty-nine days between death and rebirth. Moreover, the bla ma has to mould the *gtor ma*-s needed for his practice. Every morning he has to perform an incense fumigation offering. Every afternoon he has to hold a ceremony in worship of the protector deities. The latter concludes with a *tshogs kyi 'khor lo* (Skt. *gaṇacakra*), or communal feast offering.⁴⁴ Whenever the bla ma takes food he also offers some consecrated 'ritual food', usually a mix consisting of *rtsam pa* and butter, to the consciousness of the deceased (*rnam śes*).

The Kathmandu Valley is warm over most of the year. Following the transference of the consciousness of the dead person, the mortal remains must be transported to the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodnāth, where they are stored on ice in a separate cult room. It is here that this recitation of the *Bar do thos grol* is performed throughout the three-day period before the cremation is held.

More bla ma-s might be invited on every seventh day of the seven weeks' period (*bdun tshig*), depending on the resources of the deceased's family. A special secular ceremony is held on the last day of either three weeks or the whole period of forty-nine days. It aims at

⁴² The two main *sbyin sreg* ceremonies are discussed by R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, pp. 527–532.

⁴³ Combined they are called the 'hundred enlightened families of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities' (*zhi khro rigs brgya*). This large group of deities represents the basic qualities of buddha nature, the transformation of the samsaric elements on the path, and the perfect virtues of complete enlightenment. A line drawing of 'The Mantra Circle of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities' is reproduced by G. Dorje 2006, p. 346. For a detailed explanation of the complex symbolism of this specific maṇḍala see op. cit., pp. 387–402. Colour plates of both 'The Assembly of the Forty-two Peaceful Deities (*zhi ba 'i lha tshogs*)' (plate 1) and 'The Assembly of the Fifty-eight Wrathful Deities' (*khro bo 'i lha tshogs*) (plate 9) are also given by G. Dorje 2006.

⁴⁴ In the course of this common ritual, one offers and consumes blessed food and drink as nectar (*bdud rtsi*) of wisdom (*śes rab*). In a larger ritual context, such as the performance of the mortuary rites, its performance usually marks the end of the ritual ceremony.

collecting merit for the soul of the deceased, and concludes with a generous distribution of food to all present. This ceremony, held for the welfare of the deceased and organized by the family, is simply called *dge ba* (lit. 'virtue').⁴⁵ For the guests, including bla ma-s and laypeople alike, this is the occasion to give a generous gift of money to the widow or widower of the deceased. This gift is meant not only to cover the costs of the mortuary rites and the funeral; in the case of a widow, its also helps her to bridge the following months of financial insecurity and find new avenues of income. As is common among the Sherpas, a member of the bereaved family keeps a proper record of both the givers' names and the amount of the respective gift. Representing an important form of mutual social obligation, the receiving of a gift has to be countered in the future by a gift of the same amount when death has occurred in the house of a benefactor. This kind of mutual help organization (*sa rogs*) is a typical feature of Sherpa society.

The performance of a last *gnas spar* ceremony marks the end of the seven weeks' period of Sherpa funeral rites. On the first, second, and third anniversary of the decease's passing, a ceremony similar to the merit-making ceremony is held either in the village *dgon pa* or in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodnāth. After a reading of the *Bar do thos grol*, the bereaved family hosts a feast for the officials and the villagers. Only after these three anniversaries do the ceremonies performed for a deceased Sherpa come to an end.

No one has ever attempted a detailed description from an ethnographic perspective of all the elaborate and expensive rites that precede, accompany, and follow the funeral of a deceased Sherpa.⁴⁶ In fact, only certain phases of the whole chain of death rites, and only those associated with a normal death, have been described. This gap comes as no surprise, since the performance of these rites involve the considerable time-span of three years. Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf has given the most extensive account in his 1964 book on the Khumbu Sherpas.⁴⁷ Here he describes, among others, the funeral procession from the house of the

⁴⁵ In fact, this ceremony, if organized by the family, is called *gshin dge ba*; however, an old person may have it performed in view of his or her impending death, which is called *gson dge ba*. A *dge ba* ceremony is briefly described by F.W. Funke 1969, p. 143 and by Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, p. 95; it is also briefly mentioned by Sh. B. Ortner 1978, p. 38 and p. 63, who calls it a 'funeral feast' and cites its Sherpa name as *gyowa*.

⁴⁶ The same must be said of all communities of the Tibetan cultural realm.

⁴⁷ Refer to the section entitled 'Rites of death', 1964, pp. 224–250; F. W. Funke described the death rituals (1969, pp. 138–147), in particular those of a deceased child in association with conceptions of the soul pp. 141–143; see also the short section on funeral rituals by Sh. B. Ortner, 1978, pp. 106–109. There she also focuses on exorcisms necessitated by the pollution caused by certain death cases. – Only brief mention of Sherpa funerals is made by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, p. 52; see also Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu 2000, pp. 34–35; Pasang Sherpa 2007, p. 19.

deceased to the cremation place, the rites accompanying the cremation, the rite with the card, and the *dge ba* feast.

Moreover, the procedure concerning those inauspicious death cases caused by accidents or sickness has only briefly been mentioned.⁴⁸ Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf also observes that only children are buried, whereas the corpse is cremated in all other death cases.⁴⁹ Likewise, the brief death ceremony of a child is performed by only one *bla ma*. The more complex ceremony is performed only for a firstborn son, since he is the holder of the patrilineage (*brgyad*), and for cases of what is considered an ‘unnatural’ death.⁵⁰

Certainly one of the most taboo spheres of Sherpa social life are the funerary practices. Unlike the cremation of Hindus at a public place, the cremation of a Sherpa is not a performance to be attended by outsiders. In the third section of his famed *Rhythms of a Himalayan Village*, American artist H.R. Downs provided a detailed photographic account of a Sherpa funeral performance, including the cremation ceremony. This took place in the small village of Tong phug in Solu, to which Downs had been invited. Downs had stayed in the area for two years in the 1970’s, studying with a renowned Sherpa monk, hermit and painter.⁵¹ The performance was executed by a Sherpa shaman, a celibate *bla ma*, and several married tantric village lamas (*sngags pa*).⁵²

Almost fifteen years later Italian Tibetologist A.M. Sacco observed some stages of a funeral ceremony in the same village, but performed by a younger generation of officials. Sacco provides a brief description of the funeral procession, the cremation, the guiding of the consciousness of the deceased according to the *Bar do thos sgröl* and a text of the *byang*

⁴⁸ Cf. 1964, p. 237f.

⁴⁹ Cf. 1964, p. 229.

⁵⁰ According to Ch. Ramble, the inhabitants of the Bon po village of Klu brag in South Mustang (*gLo bo smad*) bury the deceased new-born child; other deceased children up to the age of twelve may, according to the parents’ choice, either be cremated or dismembered and fed to the birds or thrown into the river. Deceased first-born sons are cremated; see 1982, pp. 343–345. A.M. Blondeau discusses different cases of children deceased at a very young age in which the mortal remains are mummified and thus kept in the house for a certain period (1997, pp. 193–220).

⁵¹ 1980, pp. 179–223.

⁵² The shared participation of these authorities in a ceremony is unusual. Today the shaman in Sherpa society (Sh. *minung*) has almost disappeared; see Ortner, Sh. B. 1995, pp. 355–390. Since the inception of monasticism among the Sherpas, celibate *bla ma*-s have been enjoying the greatest spiritual authority among the laity. From 1991 until the present day, I have been practising long-term ethnographic field research among the Sherpas. In this entire period, I have neither personally witnessed any form of collaboration between these three different kinds of religious practitioners, nor have I ever heard of it taking place somewhere in Solu-Khumbu. In fact, practising Sherpa shamans today may only be found on the margins of the Solu-Khumbu region bordering Nepal’s mid-hills.

ger, or Northern Treasures tradition, and the ritual with an effigy card.⁵³ Interestingly, the son of the deceased, whose funeral rites are described in the afore-mentioned book, led the ceremony. The son was founder and *bla ma* of the local temple, and passed away during a stay in the US in the year 2005.

Today, in the urbanized area of Bodhnāth and adjacent places in the Kathmandu Valley, most Sherpas pass away in a hospital. As is usual in cases of 'natural' death, a *bla ma* is invited there to perform the '*pho ba*' practice. This task takes about half an hour. Thereupon the corpse is taken to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, where the '*pho ba*' practice is continued until the third day in the room where remains are stored (*ro khang*). The second day still consists of a social gathering. It is held in a large hall on the ground floor of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* that is reserved for secular purposes. After the cremation, a *bla ma* or monk reads and chants from the *bar do thos grol* for a period of forty-nine days in the household of the departed. As usual, the social ceremony called *dge ba* is performed at the end of the seven-weeks period. This festive event usually brings together the members of the extended family, as well as some in-laws, other more distant relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and certain leading figures of the Sherpa community. To summarize, the performance of the mortuary rites also serves to maintain and cultivate the existing bonds between the Sherpas in Solu-Khumbu, in the Valley, and in the diasporic communities in Hong Kong, Japan, the UK and the US, contributing greatly to a strong Sherpa community.

⁵³ In *The Tibet Journal* Vol. XXIII (1998) No. 1, pp. 25–33.

Chapter Four

On the foundation of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* (SSK) community building complex and the different steps of its continuous expansion

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* was founded in the year 1978, the same year in which the ground for the construction of the SSK was bought in Bodnāth. The ground floor was built in the year 1982. The design was realised by the abbot of sTeng po che Monastery, Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu (Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin bzang po, b. 1935); in collaboration with Sonam Tshiring (bSod nams tshe ring) Sherpa, the former RPP minister; and the Kusho Tsechu (sKu shabs tshes bcu) bla ma.¹ A Newari architect, in other words a non-Sherpa, led the construction work of the initial building that now comprises the ground floor of the SSK. The construction committee organized the labour on an individual basis; the labourers were mainly Newari people. The circumstances that led to its construction and the respective labour conditions are still remembered well by some members of the old generation of the Sherpa Valley community. At times, the labour force amounted to between four hundred to five hundred people. Ang Dorje Lama acted as the head of the 'Shar pa dGon pa construction committee'. Due to lack of space, there was no spatial separation at that time between the facilities meant for religious and secular celebrations. A small room against the back side of the building was used for the performance of funeral ceremonies and for the storage of dead bodies.

The SSK was greatly expanded in 1989 through the construction of a second floor. Due to this considerable expansion the spatial separation between religious and secular celebrations could finally be realized. Thereafter, the hall and rooms on the ground floor have been used for secular events. The ground floor, including the kitchen facilities, can be rented by members

¹ A friend of former King Mahendra . this renowned bla ma had been greatly engaged in the revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism among Highland Nepal's Tibetan Buddhist communities. Among others, he established the 'Durgam Chetra Gonpa Vikas Samiti' ('Remote Area Gonpa Development Association'). In the beginning of the Nineties he built his own monastery in Kimdol/ Svayambhūnāth. He is a monk born in sKyid grong and educated in Bhutan, who has lived the last four decades in Kathmandu. The sKu shabs bla ma is responsible for the organization of the 'Lama Desh Darśan Seminar' (refer to C. Jest 1981, p. 11, p. 105f.)

of any ethnic or caste group for private secular purposes, such as marriage and birthday parties (the latter having been newly introduced in Nepal), and also for funeral ceremonies. The temple was shifted upstairs and occupies the large hall on the second floor.

The Sherpa temple, as the religious institution of the SSK, was named *Urgyen Palri Padma Choling* (O rgyan dPal ri Padma Chos gLing) *Shar pa dGon pa* by H. E. 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche (b. 1924) on the occasion of its 1996 inauguration ceremony (*rab gnas*). Two of the leading hierarchs of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism were also present: H.H. sGrub dbang Pad ma nor bu Rinpoche (b. 1932), who reestablished the dPal yul tradition through the construction of the great dPal yul Monastery at Bylakuppe, Mysore, India, and the late H.H. sMin gling Khri chen Rinpoche (1930–2007), the eleventh throne-holder of the sMin sgrol gling tradition, who was the head of the reestablished O rgyan sMin sgrol gling Monastery in Dehradun, U.P., India. H.H. sMin gling Khri chen Rinpoche has been the supreme head of the rNying ma pa tradition from the year 2000 until his death in 2007. The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is popularly called *Shar pa dGon pa* today. In fact, the SSK owns the *Shar pa dGon pa*.

The whole complex, which today is called *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, has changed its name several times in the course of its existence. In its initial years, it was given the Nepali name *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, which means *Sherpa Service Centre*. The name was changed first to *Sagarmatha Sevā Kendra*, or *Sagarmatha Service Centre*. After some years, the name was changed again to *Sherpa Ritirivas* [Nep. 'culture'] *Kendra*, or *Sherpa Cultural Centre*. Today, it is known by its original name, *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*.

The beautifully-crafted colossal Guru Rinpoche statue, which necessitates two stories to house, was erected in the year 1997. A group of Bhutanese craftsmen were called in the mid-eighties by H.H. Dis mgo mkhyen brtse (1910–1991) for the creation of all the parts of sacred art needed for the construction and completion of Zhe chen Monastery in Bodhnāth.² Today, these Bhutanese craftsmen have chosen to remain in Bodhnāth, and continue to make their living at this sacred place.³

A statue of Ang Dorje, one of the three main initiators and founders of the SSK, rests at the entrance to the premises. It was erected in the year 2005.

In 1998, two additional buildings were completed. Both are situated on the eastern side of the SSK premises. Pemba Sherpa, a patron member of the SSK, designed these two houses.

² For the circumstances that led mKhyen brtse Rin po che to the construction of Zhe chen bstan gnyi dar rgyas gling Monastery, one of the major monasteries around Bodnāth, see pp. 74–97 of his life-story as narrated by M. Ricard 1996; see also Helfer, M. 1993 a and b.

³ According to their own explanations, the state bureaucracy of the 'World's only Buddhist Kingdom' is 'dictatorial.' In consequence, both life and business in Nepal is incomparably preferable to them.

The ground floor of the first building contains two separate large kitchens, capable of catering either two parallel celebrations or one large festival. The upper floors contain the SSK office for the paid staff, as well as general storerooms. The second building contains facilities for the storage of dead bodies in packed ice. The performance of funeral pūjas takes place in these facilities over the reposed bodies. This area is used for deceased Sherpas only. The capacity of these storage facilities is limited; two to five dead bodies can be preserved at the same time.

The ice used in the facility has to be delivered frequently from a local ice factory. However, it is perfectly adapted to the circumstances of the Kathmandu Valley, where long and often-unexpected periods blackouts are common. Under these poor conditions, a modern electric cold storage facility would be useless. The choice to use ice cubes is not a matter of finances: different members of the SSK committee point to the fact that the financial capacity of the Sherpa Valley community is truly great, as testified by the continuous expansion of the SSK (as well as its future projects, which will be mentioned briefly below). Moreover, wealthy Sherpas and other 'big men' have time and again signaled their readiness to sponsor the construction of modern cold storage facilities. However, this construction would be futile as long as the utterly poor electrical power supply of the Kathmandu Valley continues to be based solely on an ancient infrastructure, one established more than three decades ago when the town of Kathmandu was still little more than a large village. The Sherpas will continue to resort to this outdated yet appropriate mode of storing the deceased members of their community until a continuous public power supply will be available in the area.⁴

The upper floors of these two buildings contain the dwelling places for each of the two permanent sacristans, or *dkon nyer*, of the SSK. One has to look after the *dgon pa*, while the other one is in charge of the facility beneath them containing the dead bodies. There are also several smaller rooms used as storerooms for ritual implements, etc. Apart from these buildings, a separate small house was constructed on the northeastern corner of the premises. It contains gendered bathrooms with six modern toilets.

In 2005, a large empty lot adjacent to the western side of the SSK was purchased. The SSK management committee has big plans for the future use of this newly acquired plot of land: the construction of a vast hall underground to be used for the celebration of communal secular festivals,⁵ and the construction of a huge public parking lot. The continuously

⁴ Mention must be made that also in the near future this poor state of affairs will prevail since the authorities have not even come up with plans of suitable hydro projects for the Kathmandu Valley to meet the coming serious crisis.

⁵ In recent years the celebration of mundane events became increasingly the cause of serious trouble in the wider neighbourhood, consisting of a mix of predominantly Tamangs and Newars, due to the uncontrolled

growing agglomeration of wider Bodnath is in dire need of such facilities. These two projects are meant to generate new streams of revenue for the SSK.

Again in 2005, a vast plot was bought by the SSK in Lumbinī, the historic site of the birth of Buddha Śākyamuni. A dharmasala will be built there for the Sherpa pilgrims who currently lack an affordable place to stay. A Sherpa dgon pa will also be constructed.

noise of merry party-goers and their music.

Chapter Five

Pars pro toto: the life history of a leading Sherpa ‘big man’ possessing the principles embodied in the founding of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and the movement to revitalise Sherpa Buddhism and culture

1. The life history of Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa (b. 1942), Chairman of the Sherpa Sevā Kendra working committee from 1979 until 2006, and main informant of this investigation¹

“I have always been convinced that the Sherpas’ religious organization must advance.”

“The Sherpas’ identity is religion, culture, and language, which we have to preserve.”

In both Himalayan Anthropology and in Tibetan Studies, recent years have seen a rapid accumulation of life histories of persons from different Himalayan communities. Each life account is unfolded from another perspective, offering different insights that develop and complicate one another.² Recently, Lhakpa (Lhag pa) Sherpani from Solu has provided the first autobiography of a Sherpa woman. She reminisces on the 1950s through the middle of the 1960s, and offers an account of the extremely poor conditions her childhood.³ Ani

¹ This research was carried out through three major interviews, held on 12.03., 09.07., and 10.07.07 in the office of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, and one interview conducted on the margin of a funeral pūja on 4.07.07. Moreover, I was fortunate to have had several conversations with him in the course of the three weeks long communal Vajra Guru prayer practice that is conducted just after *lo gsar*, always in the office of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*.

² K. S. March recounts the narratives of five Tamang women’s life stories belonging to a village community of ‘Western Tamang’ in the Nuwakot Distr. northwest of Kathmandu (2002). R. Desjarlais provides the life histories of a woman and a Buddhist tantric householder bla ma (*sngags pa*), both in their late eighties, from the Yol mo region (2003). K.R. Schaeffer presents the account of a Buddhist nun who lived in Dol po from 1675 until 1729, the earliest datable Tibetan woman autobiography as of this writing.

³ See Lhakpa Sherpani 1994. Born in 1950 in a small village near Trakshindo (*Brag shing thog*) Monastery, she joined the team of the German ‘Research Project Nepal Himalaya’ who had been working in that area. Later she moved to Germany with that organization’s leader, F. W. Funke, where she got married. Since the middle of the 1980s, she has been working as a tutor for the German Foundation for International Development. A short excerpt has been published in English (1997).

Jamyang Wangmo gives a detailed religious biography of her master, bla ma Thub bstan mzd pa Rin po che (b. 1945), who is now based in the US and heads a worldwide network of Dharma centers. Wangmo also authored a short biographical sketch of his master's predecessor, the first La og do bla ma.⁴ The sacred life history of Au Legs bshad (1900-ca. 1978), an internationally renowned Sherpa monk, hermit and thang ka painter, has been reconstructed by E. Berg.⁵ Before the publication of this treatise, Au Legs bshad had been nearly forgotten, even in the Solu region that was his home.

The following will provide the life history of Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa (bSod nams rgyal mtshan Shar pa), a well-known Sherpa 'big man'. He has been a leading figure in the Sherpa community for almost the last three decades, and a vocal proponent of the need to preserve the Sherpas' Tibetan Buddhist heritage. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa has played a key role in the process that led to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. This narrative intends to convey the richness and uniqueness of his life. At the same time, it is also reflective of developments of the last half-century of Sherpa history, which is marked by profound and ongoing cultural, societal and economical change. As is characteristic for a male Sherpa of his generation, his story spans from a monastic education in the Sherpa homeland, across migrations to Darjeeling and the wider area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth in the Kathmandu Valley, to the development of the trekking and mountaineering industry and the emergence of a Nepali- and English-speaking Sherpa elite.

Sonam Gyaltzen is commonly regarded as the Sherpas' living history book to whom the curious ethnographer has always been referred, as a witness to the growth of the Sherpa Valley community from the end of the 1960s onwards, and as a partner in the construction and the continuous expansion of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. He clearly expresses his happiness to allow his story to be recorded and published. He adds that this endeavour is, indeed, long overdue at this time of the Sherpas' global dispersal, when educated Sherpas are only slowly becoming aware that their traditional heritage is today almost broken. At the same time, however, he does not forget to refer to the irony that a part of the Sherpas' own affairs is being pursued by a foreigner. This notwithstanding, until now the majority of the young generation has only been interested in making a career in the trekking and mountaineering business in Nepal, or in developing a more permanent existence abroad, preferably in New York City. The young Sherpas, male and female, strongly yearn to modernize and thus to adopt Western values, all too often resulting in the neglect of their own tradition. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa expressed his strong hope that the ethnographer's project will support his

⁴ J. Wangmo 2005.

⁵ Berg, E. 2002. Au Legs bshad enjoyed a special reputation due to his fine drawings of *The Nyingma Icons*, first published in *Kailash* Vol. III (1975).

own endeavour toward preserving and revitalizing the Sherpas' rich cultural heritage. He and the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* working committee have devoted several decades to this end. He stressed that this record will be of great help for the Sherpas, especially for the young urbanized Sherpas in Kathmandu and abroad, who, more or less alienated from their own tradition, may rediscover the Sherpas' religion, culture, society and history.⁶

Deeply modest and religious, Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa answered my queries with great interest, patience, and intensity. Representing the successful English- and Nepali-speaking Sherpa elite, he preferred that our conversations be held in English. For the aforementioned reasons, he seemed to enjoy talking with the ethnographer about Sherpa history and the society he has known, the Sherpas' present he has helped to shape, and the future he imagines for the Sherpa community. In sum, he was extremely supportive of my endeavour to elicit and record his life story and, likewise, the preceding chapter on the recent changes in Sherpa culture. Owing to his candidness, my project to write a book on the contemporary Sherpa community, its current problems, and the development of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* was well received virtually by all Sherpas I encountered.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa acted as chairman of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* working committee from 1969 to 2006. After nearly twenty-eight years of service, he eventually resigned from this duty. As a faithful Tibetan Buddhist, he understands this considerable period of more than a quarter of a century of honorific engagement in the Sherpa community as necessary work devoted to the urgent revitalization of the Dharma among his own people. He never forgets to emphasize that he has always enjoyed the full support of his wife and family in this highly time-consuming endeavour.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa does not hold any official duty in the Sherpa community anymore. Nevertheless, he continued after his retirement from the chairmanship to be involved informally with the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, its management, and its future projects. Today, he remains in the background. However, owing to his immense experience, he is considered the primary advisor to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* working committee. He can be seen around at all major celebrations. During the long lunch breaks he is mostly occupied in discussion either with a bla ma, monk, *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* office holders, or with other leading 'big men' of the Sherpa community. Moreover, he is also commonly seen as the living history book of both the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and of the Sherpa Valley community. In the course of our conversations, he never forgot to mention that this history still remains to be written down and published.

⁶ Similar views were expressed by M. Vinding who wrote a brochure on 'Lha Phewa, the Thakali 12-Year Festival' (1992, preface) and by the compilers and editors L. Messerschmidt et al. of 'Stories and Customs of Manang' 2004, pp. VII-VIII.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa was born in the year 1942 in Ba gam, a small hamlet situated just half an hour's walk up on the way to the ridge above Salleri, the district capital of Solu-Khumbu, which is located in the Solu region. He recalls that, from his early childhood onwards, he was disposed to the Dharma. Some of the major indications of this inclination among Tibetan Buddhists are visions received in dreams. It was in numerous dreams that Sonam Gyaltzen received the vision of a deity who kept advising him to become a monk and devote his life to the Dharma. Hence, it was due to his own decision that at the age of ten Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa joined the monk community of the newly established Trakshindo (*Brag shing thog*) Monastery (1950), which was only a few hours walk from his home. Unlike other young Sherpas who chose the Dharma path but were refused this path by their parents, young Sonam Gyaltzen was strongly encouraged by both of his parents who, as lay people, were devout adherents of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷

It was in Brag shing thog Monastery that Sonam Gyaltzen took the novitiate vows (*dge tshul*; Skt. Śrāmaṇera) under the guidance of a fully ordained monk called Tobden Ngawang Tsultrim (*rTog ldan ngag dbang tshul khirms*). This learned and respected man of religion had been sent here from Tengboche (*sTeng po che*) Monastery in Khumbu by Ngawang Tenzin Zangpo (Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin bzang po, b. 1935), the *sTeng po che* bla ma, to found *Shedrup Tharling* (*bshad sgrub thar gling*) Monastery at Trakshindo (*Brag shing thog*) and oversee its construction. He successfully brought this task to its completion.⁸

The early days of Trakshindo Monastery, monastic life was conducted on a rudimentary level. It is worthwhile to briefly recall the typical circumstances that surrounded the construction of a Sherpa monastery in the middle of the last century. A major aspect is the

⁷ In fact, in the course of my long-term field research among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, I encountered several nuns and numerous monks of the older generation who had suffered from the fact that the parents were not at all happy about their girl's or boy's decision not to take over the family business and associated obligations, the most important being to take care of their parents at old age as is customary. In many cases, the parents even tried to sabotage their child's decision, thus creating many tragic hardships for the young woman or man of religion.

⁸ For this religious figure and his accomplishments, refer to J. Wangmo (2005, p. 260, 387 n.313). His *sprul sku*, Geleg Gyatso (*dge legs rgya mtsho*), who was born in 1962 in Pha plu (Solu region), subsequently has become an influential Gelug (*dge lugs*) monk, specialized in sacred architecture in Kopan monastery, situated half an hour's walk north and above of Bodhnāth, under bla ma Thub bstan mZod pa Rinpoche (b. 1945). His subsequent joining of a monastic community had been initiated by his mother, as well as the change of his religious adherence to the dGe lugs pa School. Being an expert on the life-history of bla ma mZod pa Rin po che and the history of Kopan monastery and its worldwide network of monasteries and meditation centers, Ani Jamyang Wangmo writes: "The boy had been enthroned at Tragshingto (*brag shing thog*), but his father did not want him to become a monk and sent him to a school instead. In 1972, after his father died in a mountaineering expedition on Manaslu, his mother took him to Kopan. Known in the monastery as Lama Babu, Geleg Gyatso has done outstanding work for Kopan Gompa." (p. 387, n. 313; see also the brief note on p. 260).

deep religiosity of the lay people and their disciplined approach to religious practice, their readiness to perform unpaid labour, and their generosity toward the clerics.

In his *Buddhist Himālaya* published in 1957, D. Snellgrove provided a brief account of these early days:

“The monastery of Tr’ak-shing-do... is even now in its very beginnings. Its head is a monk of Teng-bo-che, named Tok-den Tshül-trhim, who was in the habit of spending the winters here in a little hut that he had built. (...) for the last seven years, he has been surrounded by a circle of pupils, several of whom have been to Rong-phu⁹ to take proper monastic vows, subsequently returning to make Tr’ak-shing-do their own monastery. Buildings spring up as the need arises and during my stay some of the monks, assisted by villagers, were building a more worthy residence for their lama. To be witness of a process which is typical in every respect of the spread of Buddhism among Tibetan peoples is of enormous interest. It is just in this way that the first simple structures of clay bricks, stone and wood, arose in Western Tibet a thousand years ago. The motive is the same zeal for the religious life, which expresses itself in willing unpaid labour and in the bestowing of generous gifts. Nor do these believing lay-folk leave all the practice of religion to the monks, for many of them build for themselves little meditation-shelters well above the villages, where they withdraw from their families to read and meditate alone.”¹⁰

Having observed the joint efforts of monks and laity in the construction of a Sherpa monastery, as well as the people’s burning piety, D. Snellgrove felt as if a window had been opened up into ancient times. He became witness of the very conditions owing to which Buddhism could take roots in the land of snows. In other words, the observed circumstances seemed to mirror the impetus and the process that originally had led to the adoption and spread of Buddhism in Tibet. In this deeply religious atmosphere, lay people and their clerics share a close relationship. Young Sonam Gyaltzen spent the most important formative period of his life in this religious climate. Needless to say, these early experiences left their traces in his growing mind, forging a deeply religious character.

⁹ The monastery of rDza rong phu (founded in 1902) situated on the northern side of Mt. Everest in the Ding ri region was the seat of rDza sprul ngag dbang bstan ‘dzin nor bu (1867–1940) who, among others, inspired the introduction of monasticism and the building of celibate monasteries among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, the first being sTeng po che Monastery (1916–19) in the Khumbu region. For the latter’s immense influence on the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, refer to J. Wangmo (2005, pp. 79–86). His photo is provided on p. 80. – For the rDza sprul lineage see below.

¹⁰ Snellgrove, D. 1957, pp. 214–215.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa was to stay at Brag shing thog Monastery for a period of ten years. In the course of his decade-long stay in the monastic community of Trakshindo, he received a sound Dharma education. Today, he is able to reap the fruits of the seeds that had been sown during his stay as a novice at Trakshindo Monastery. He has the time to devote himself again fully to the Dharma, and thereby continue his religious path. Decades spent as householder in the worldly realm had interrupted this path for some time. Nevertheless, his progress never came to a full halt. He is able to read the ritual texts used as liturgy in the context of the religious festivals as celebrated in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. On these occasions he can often be seen during breaks reading the text of the meditational liturgy (*sgrub thabs*, Skt. *sādhana*, lit. 'means of achievement') in block-print, or engaged in discussion with a learned bla ma who explains or interprets certain significant terms or passages of the liturgy.

For reasons on which he refused to elaborate, Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa eventually left the monastic community and the Dharma path at the age of twenty, and instead chose a path in the worldly realm. Just like many other Sherpas of his generation, and still others before his time, he went to Darjeeling in search of work in 1962. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a Sherpa community was established in that busy trading town. Sherpas took work as manual labourers in the booming construction sector, and as expedition porters. The British had then been drawing on the Sherpa community in their efforts to climb Mount Everest since their first expedition in 1921. In Darjeeling, Sonam Gyaltzen worked for about a year as a woodcutter for a Sikkimese timber company. It was there that he had learnt from other Sherpas of opportunities in the growing Himalayan mountaineering business. However, he did not try to find a job in that sphere.

For reasons not disclosed to the ethnographer, Sonam Gyaltzen left Darjeeling in 1963 and went to Manali in the Kulu Valley, a small trading town in the North Indian federal state of Himachal Pradesh. At Manali, he joined the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute established under the auspices of the Indian Government. He learnt the art of mountain climbing through a six months training course, and subsequently worked there as a climbing instructor for a period of almost seven years.

Due to an unexplained 'serious change of mind,' Sonam Gyaltzen eventually left the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute at Manali. He moved to Kathmandu in 1970, where he resumed work as a climbing guide for seven years. He recalls the encounters with famous international climbers and the camaraderie he enjoyed with them in that adventurous phase of his life. He mentions with pride that he has climbed all major mountains in the realm of Nepal (his first ascent of Mount Everest was in 1973¹¹).

¹¹ His photo is included in the seven-pages-long list of Sherpa mountaineers who reached the summit of Mt. Everest, compiled by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, pp. 46-52, see p. 46, no. 5.

Sonam Gyaltzen relates the crucial episodes of his life with a matter-of-fact rhetoric. Any self-styling associated with his truly outstanding achievements, a rhetorical device too common among Westerners after the simplest trek through somewhere in Nepal, is completely absent from his elaborations. He challenges Western attitudes toward the spheres of climbing and mountaineering, and frustrates such expectations on the ethnographer's side, by untiringly emphasizing that it was for the considerable money that he assumed what he soberly calls the 'business' of a climber and mountaineer—not for adventure nor fame nor love of the majestic and serene mountain scenery. Instead, he insisted that he had made his choice at a time when other high paying jobs were simply not available to him and his people:

“At that time we Sherpas had no other options to make money, and I was in desperate need of it just like the other Sherpas of my generation—Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, Ang Hrita Sherpa, Apa Sherpa—who all took to climbing and mountaineering. I had and still have a family to support, but if I had had a better chance to make the same amount of money, I would never have risked my life for so many years. Think of how many Sherpas had to lose their lives in this business until now! Have you ever seen the site located on a ridge by the trail only a few hours away from Everest Base Camp? It is there that a heap of rocks and a signboard adorned with a *kha btags* [i.e. ceremonial scarf – E.B.] remembers only a few of those Sherpas who have lost their lives on an expedition while climbing.”¹²

His assertions are fully in line with the statements of other Sherpas of his profession I met over the years, and also with those recorded by J.F. Fisher whose focus has been exclusively directed upon the Khumbu region. The latter interviewed eight of Khumbu's most experienced and renowned climbers, who, “...unanimously agreed that virtually the only reason they climb is that they need the high income they cannot earn any other way. As one put it, if he had the education to qualify for a good office job, he would unhesitatingly choose that line of work. Sherpas see no intrinsic point in climbing: neither fame... nor challenge, nor adventure. Climbing is simply a high-paying job.”¹³

¹² It is worth noting that within the first seventy years of Everest-climbing (1922–1992) there has been a death-toll of 115 fatalities. 42 came from Nepal; 36 of them were Sherpas; an additional seven Sherpas appear in the total of 17 deaths from India. For this data, refer to Eguskitzka, X. 1993, pp. 198–199. The number of fatalities has steadily been on the increase since that publication.

¹³ Fisher, J.F. 1990, p. 129. Sh. B. Ortner devotes a short section to the fact that the Sherpas solely climb for money (1999, pp. 203–207).

In this context, Sonam Gyaltzen points out that the Western obsession ‘to conquer peaks solely for the sake of their own personal record’ is, in fact, diametrically opposed to the Tibetan Buddhist worldview, according to which the high mountain peaks are in many cases both the embodiment of a major deity and the seat or throne of this deity. In consequence, to stumble upon the peak of a mountain represents a serious impious act that, it is believed, may cause grave retribution. Sonam Gyaltzen had to make a living; hence, mountain climbing was a necessary occupation. Nevertheless, he being a pious Tibetan Buddhist never forgets to emphasize, at the same time, that he chose to make a living in a field of mundane activity inescapably linked to lasting desecration of landscapes, peaks, and places that are sacred to Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁴

In 1975, he started his own trekking and mountaineering company in Kathmandu that was run in a joint venture with Tenzing Norgay Sherpa (bstan ‘dzin nor rgyas). He enjoyed continuously increasing success in this venture. Yet the mountaineering and climbing business is, in fact, in full contradiction to his deeply religious worldview. He eventually gave up the dangerous profession of a climber forever.¹⁵ He eventually retired in the year 2004, when the turmoil of the civil war began to hit the capital and collapsed the tourism and trekking industry. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa emphasizes that there had been a close relationship between himself and Tenzing Norgay, and their respective families, throughout his whole life. This relationship is due in part to the fact that Tenzing Norgay’s wife’s father’s sister is Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa’s wife’s mother.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa, like many Sherpas who establish roots outside of Solu-Khumbu, still owns his family house and land. Since the time he had left, some members of his extended family take care of the house, land, cattle, and other belongings. However, he and his wife are happy to live in a house of their own in the outskirts of Kathmandu close to Bodhnāth. He visits his natal home only rarely; he feels at his age he must continue to devote his skill and experiences to the cause of the Sherpa community as represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, a service he understands to be his particular kind of work for the Dharma.

¹⁴ For the history, social and political meaning of the cult of mountain deities in Tibet and the Himalayas, see the contributions assembled in two anthologies edited by A.M. Blondeau 1996 and 1998; see also S. G. Karmay 1994, 1996, 2000; T. Huber 1999; K. Buffetrille 2000; G. Tautscher (2007) on the cult of sacred mountains and related pilgrimages as practised by the Tamangs at three different ritual sites; K.D. Mathes on the most sacred mountain of Dolpo and the cult of this mountain deity (1999).

¹⁵ It is a truism that for a faithful Buddhist this business not only means considerable worldly income, but also constant mental suffering at the same time.

2. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's life account: the story of emigration, personal gain and cultural loss, and an emerging awareness of the Sherpas' urgent need for cultural revitalization

As Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa himself admits, he clearly benefited from the flourishing trekking and mountaineering business. Through this work, he made his worldly fortune and became one of the leading 'big men' in the Sherpa community. Nevertheless, he is a soft-spoken and humble man, who remained a devout Sherpa Buddhist layman throughout his life. His life account clearly conveys the Sherpa Buddhist worldview, and reflects a man whose identity has been forged by Tibetan Buddhist ethics.

The narrative framework of Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's life story is similar to the rich tradition of Tibetan Buddhist hagiographic literature in at least one respect. This is a distinct literary genre that is called 'full liberation story (*rnam thar*) of oneself', as Janet Gyatso has illustrated in her recent treatise on the esoteric secret autobiographical poetry of 'Jigs med gling pa (1729–1798), the famed Tibetan Buddhist visionary. The entire purpose of this genre consists in describing for the faithful an exemplary Buddhist life, usually that of a saint, and thereby demonstrating the paradigmatic practices and accomplishments on the path leading to enlightenment (*byang chub*, Skt. *bodhi*).¹⁶ As to Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's life story, it was during the years of his childhood that he had repeatedly received in dreams the vision of a deity who told him to become a man of religion and devote his life to the Dharma.

Between the lines of Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's narrative, a complex kind of personal guilt surrounds his decision, in contradiction of the repeated advice of the deity who had disclosed him- or herself in his childhood dreams to choose the worldly path. But he did not only choose one of the worldly paths of a common Sherpa householder of his generation. Instead, Sonam Gyaltzen took up the 'higher' wage labour of climbing and mountaineering, which is of a double-edged character for the faithful Tibetan Buddhist. While it certainly paid well, it was associated inescapably with a permanent breach of Tibetan Buddhist ethics. This harmful action must have invariably affected him, like many Sherpa mountaineers, with a profound mental suffering.

'Confession of harmful actions' represents the third of the 'offering of the seven branches' that are associated with Guru Yoga.¹⁷ The kind of harmful action committed by tourist mountaineering may be counteracted through certain ritual performances, depending on the

¹⁶ Gyatso, J. 2001, pp. 102 ff., see p. 103.

¹⁷ See Patrul Rinpoche 1999, p. 322.

particular case.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Sherpas in the mountaineering business have conceded in conversations a sense of lingering accumulated bad karma. Sonam Gyaltzen's early Buddhist identity aided him in steering safely through the troubled realm of his professional life as climber and mountaineer. In consequence, his long and intensive engagement for the revitalisation of the Sherpas' cultural heritage and community is all the more understandable when viewed as a due act of religion.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's narrative looks back at an era that spans his culture's coexistence with modernity and the forces of globalisation that led to the Sherpas' engagement into Nepal's flourishing trekking and mountaineering business. This success brought considerable gain into the hands of relatively few individuals, while whole Sherpa communities, often located off the major trekking routes, began to suffer from impoverishment and depopulation. As is typical of the transformative process euphemistically called 'modernization' in Western social science discourse, the individual gains are necessarily coupled with a grave cultural and social loss. Sherpa culture has already lost much of its rich traditional Tibetan Buddhist heritage. This is largely due to the encroachment of Western norms and values that favour the individual as the ideal. Such encroachment leads to the severing of communal bonds, and the withdrawal of readiness to assume the customary role of the benefactor for the Dharma and the clerics, etc.

Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's life account covers the last half-century of the Sherpas' history. It reflects major processes and profound changes that the Sherpas had to face following the opening up of Nepal to foreigners in the early years of the 1950s. Moreover, the Sherpas' recent history has been one of continuously increasing emigration, a search for work containing three different waves. The first emigration movement led from their high-altitude homelands to Darjeeling. The second movement led to Kathmandu, where many began to settle down in the northwestern part in the Kathmandu Valley, in the area extending between the Svayambhūnāth Stūpa in the west and the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth in the east. The third and current movement brings Sherpa emigrants to diasporic communities in Japan and the US, most frequently in New York, California, and Oregon. Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa's individual life history can largely be understood as representing 'pars pro toto' in all major aspects of the Sherpas' recent history. Hence, his life story presents its readers with the

¹⁸ According to my information as obtained from clerics, there may be performed a common ritual, *bskang gso*, an 'atonement ritual', addressed to the protective deities. For its regular performance among the Solu-Sherpas, see E. Berg (1998, pp. 24–25). *Skang bshags* is offered either to the *gzhi bdag*, the 'ruler of the place', or to the *gnas bdag*, the 'ruler of a holy site', none of whom are pleased by the climbers' disturbances. They are meant to ensure that neither the former nor the latter will cause harm to the intruders. There also exists certain *Bsngo smon*, i.e. prayers considered beneficial to those who have accumulated bad karma through the committing of negative deeds.

complex history of the contemporary Sherpa community that successfully carved out a niche in the global economy. At the same time, he was one of the first and leading spokesmen of the Sherpas' current cultural crisis. He realised that Sherpa religion, culture, and society, formerly consisting of distinct local cultures widely scattered across the Himalayan high valleys, suffered from a crippling lack of organization. In consequence, he has pleaded for two measures: for an all-inclusive revitalisation of Buddhist culture, society, and language, and also for an encompassing religious and social organisation. The realisation of this two-fold endeavour is embodied in the subsequent establishment of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. It is here that all Sherpas, hitherto compartmentalized within their clan, locale, and region, can meet together for social gatherings and, most importantly, to perform and celebrate their major annual religious festivals. Through the performance of their ritual celebrations, they succeed in creating an all-embracing unity while maintaining a distinctive identity within the modern globalised world of today.

Chapter Six

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building ensemble¹: a detailed description of both the sacred and the mundane place and space and the distinctive socio-cultural feature of the novel ‘temple and community center’ (*mi ‘dzom sa*) of the entire Sherpa community

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*,² or *Sherpa Service Centre*, is situated at just about three hundred meters’ distance from the famous Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth on its southwestern side and only two hundred meters south of the Sa skya monastery of the late Ven. Bco bryad khri chen Rinpoche (1920–2007). The Sherpa community’s major present-day’s institution is located just off the main road that leads from Sankhu via Chabahil to Kathmandu only two hundred meters away from the main entrance to the sacred area of and the *skor lam* or circumambulatory path that leads around the Great Stūpa. Of significance for the Sherpa community was also the fact that, until the year 2005, the private residence of H. H. ‘Khrul zhig Rinpoche was located in the vicinity. Highly respected among the Sherpas, he lived just a few hundred meters further along the main road to Kathmandu.³

The SSK complex situated within a huge courtyard is reached through a massive metal entrance gate at its southeastern corner.

On the left or southern side just next to the entrance gate is placed the big stone bust of Ang rDo rje Lama. It is sheltered by a metal roof construction which was constructed in the

¹ The following description is based on my own observations, notes, measurements, and photographic records of images and architectural features. It is supplemented by the information I obtained in the course of my fieldwork from February until May 2006 and again in the same period in 2007 through numerous interviews with leading clerics and casual conversations held with certain Sherpa ‘big men’ and several Sherpa elders who, as contemporaries, witnessed the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Since there does not exist an inventory (*dkar chag*) of the novel edifice, the resulting picture is necessarily incomplete. I hope that it may be corrected and supplemented with further details in the future by the Sherpas themselves.

² To simplify the following description, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* will only be mentioned in the abbreviated form as SSK.

³ Since the year 2005, ‘Khrul zhig Rinpoche’'s new monastery is being built at Sitapaila, a location situated on a descending ridge to the southwest of the Svayambhūnāth Stūpa that offers a breathtaking overview over the KTM Valley but suffers from an acute water shortage.

year 2005. On the pedestal of the bust is a shining metal plate adorned with an adamantite thunderbolt representing unchanging indestructible wisdom (Tib. *rdo rje*, Skt. *vajra*), the symbol of Vajrayāna.⁴ On this plate is written in English:

Late Ang Dorje Lama (Sherpa)
(1997–2049)
The founder of the Sherpa Service Centre
Expressed

“Religion is the most powerful agency of social service
and all the activities of the people
are guided by the idea of the religion”⁵

Behind the bust of Ang rDo rje follows an unadorned two-storey building (10 x 4 m). Its upper floor contains just one room. It is intended for the placing of butter-lamps (*mar me*), which are regarded as an offering to the deities. Consequently, the upper part of this structure is called *mar me lha khang*. Its main characteristic is the reigning darkness that contrasts with the glowing of the light – and heat – of the butter-lamps, which are innumerable on occasion of major religious festivals. A nun takes care of it; it is her duty to keep the room clean, to clean the mass of small brass containers to be used as butter-lamps, to refill them with ghee and a wick, and, most important, to perform the daily butter-lamp offering at dusk. – The ground floor consists of two rooms. One is used as a store-room whereas the other is used by members of the permanently employed staff such as the security guard on duty, the Newari manager of the SSK, and his assistant.

The wide courtyard is paved with big stone slabs. During the great annual festivals the outer space of the courtyard is packed by the audience, the members of the Sherpa community. Its inner part just in front of the portico is fenced off when being used as a stage for the performance of the sacred masked dances (*'chams*) that represent the climax of the *lo gsar*

⁴ A major ritual instrument, always associated with the small hand bell (*rdo rje dril bu*, Skt. *vajra ghaṇṭā*), the symbol of wisdom and emptiness, the vajra is the symbol of indestructible reality and of Vajrayāna, in general. Both instruments are employed in Vajrayāna ritual by the Vajra master (*rdo rje slob spon*), the *bla ma* who, initiated in certain ritual cycles of Vajrayāna, presides over a ritual performance. In this function at the beginning and at certain breaks of a ritual ceremony he holds the vajra in his right and moves the bell in his left hand.

⁵ The term ‘religion’ has been translated somewhat inadequately. When asked, all my Sherpa informants, clerics and laypeople alike, emphasized that what is actually meant is the cosmic order governed by the law of karma and rebirth and certainly not the general Western term. It is the teaching of the Buddha Śākyamuni; ‘law’ stands for the teaching that expresses the ‘universal truth,’ which is understood as Dharma (Tib. *chos*).

celebration. In the centre of the courtyard are placed two objects of particular symbolic significance. Firstly, there is a huge flagpole or *chos dar* that is always erected anew on occasion of the Tibetan New Year festival. The flagpole is adorned with a special kind of prayer-flag or wind-horse (*rlung rta*). It is a long piece of cotton consisting of five small pieces, each fifty cm in size and kept in one of the five Buddhist colours; on each one is printed a mantra and a prayer. According to S. G. Karmay, this is an ancient Tibetan symbol of the idea of well-being or good fortune (*g.yang*).⁶ On occasion of the major annual festivals, many long strings adorned with small prayer-flags in the five Buddhist colours are suspended from the roof-beams of the northern and the southern corner of the temple. These numerous strings are either connected with the top of the flag-pole in the center of the courtyard or with the roofs of neighbouring houses thus creating a dense network that covers a great part of the whole courtyard thus lending the sacred compound (*chos 'khor*) a very colourful and lively atmosphere, particularly when the strings are being moved by the wind.

Secondly, there is the oven-like construction made of stone, one and a half meters in height, which can be seen in the courtyard of all monasteries and village-temples but also of many private houses of the well-to-do Sherpas. It is in this kind of furnace, called *bsang thab*, that twigs and leaves of juniper (*shug pa*) are burnt as incense (*spos*) fumigation offering (*bsang mchod*). The incense fumigation offering is indicative of the beginning of any kind of religious celebration. As the purificatory ritual (*bsang*) of the site of a sacred ceremony, it is considered an important fumigation offering (*bsang mchod*). In this context, it is understood as an offering directed to both the high (*lha bsang*) and low protective deities (*klu bsang*).⁷

The space of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex is surrounded by a row of neighbouring four storey houses on its eastern and southern side. Its western and northern side, however, are demarcated by a common metal fence. Behind it is still a considerable unused space of

⁶ Karmay, S. G. 1998, p. 415; for the ritual of the wind-horse or *rlung rta* and the myth associated with its origin see his illuminating article in 1998, pp. 413–422. – The principle feature of the *rlung rta* are the horse, often with a wish-fulfilling jewel (*nor bu*) on its back, in the centre, an eagle and a dragon in the upper corners and a tiger and a lion in the lower corners, see op.cit., p. 415, for a depiction see the plate on p. 416. Karmay draws attention to the fact that prior to the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet the Tibetan term had no religious connotation, see p. 413. The *rlung rta* constitutes an important part of the fumigation ritual (*bsang*), see op.cit., p. 417.

⁷ According to S.G. Karmay the fumigation offering is perhaps the most widely practiced among Tibetan popular rituals, its primary function being purification. It is performed daily both in monasteries and at family homes, in the context of all kinds of festivals, lay and religious. In Tibet and among the Sherpas the *bsang* ritual is performed annually as a celebration of its own by the entire community at the foot of the mountain believed to be the abode of the local deity; for a discussion of these aspects, for the conception of ritual purification, and for the myth associated with the *bsang* ritual, see Karmay, S.G. 1998, pp. 380–412.

land that lies fallow since years. Formerly, this plot of land had been used for rice cultivation, as was common around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth before the urbanization of the last three decades had transformed the wider sacred space into a huge unplanned, continuously expanding agglomeration of more or less uniform houses. It was into that empty space that the premises of the SSK could expand in the course of the last decade in at least two steps until it reached its present size of about ten ropani.

Two four-storey houses on the eastern side, both of the same size, belong to the SSK. Their entrance is reached from the courtyard. One house contains store-rooms and the SSK office in the upper levels. Its ground floor consists of two spacious kitchens which may also be combined for the catering of huge audiences; in the case of two parallel events each of the two groupings is able to prepare its food separately. The other building houses, a.o., the facilities for the storage on ice of the mortal remains of deceased Sherpas, a cult room for the performance of the mortuary rites, and the living rooms of the two sacristans of the SSK. Adjacent to it is a small one-storey structure: it contains the well-equipped bathrooms, one for women and one for men. This is also indicative of the intentions of those responsible for its architectural planning, who deliberately designed it to cater for the needs of the huge festive gatherings of the Sherpa community hitherto unknown in the Sherpas' traditionally localized cultural framework.⁸

The SSK building complex facing east consists of two main levels. The temple occupies the major part of the second floor. It is reached through a staircase that leads up from the portico on the ground floor.

A flight of six steps leads to the slightly raised ground floor. The entrance portico (*sgomchor*) has an outer row of four large stone pillars fronting the courtyard and an inner row of two slim stone pillars fronting the building. It is here that the presiding *bla ma* and his officials used to be seated during the public part of important religious ceremonies. On its left or southern side is a staircase leading up to the first floor of the building. Attached to the building on its right or northern side is an independent small structure. It contains only a square room that houses a big prayer-wheel or *maṇi dung 'phyur* ('a hundred million *maṇi*'), that is an important means of expressing faith when being propelled by the faithful. As is usual its walls are covered with paintings of a religious nature. Its big cylinder containing consecrated printed prayers has the considerable diameter of 1,60 m and a height of about 2 m.

The major part of the building's ground floor consists of a large hall. It is accessible from both sides of the entrance portico through a big double-door each. The wall separating the

⁸ This facility, in particular, which is by no means a common facility in a big institution such as this in present-day Nepal, is reflective of the truly far-sighted mind-set that is characteristic of the SSK management committee.

entrance portico from the large hall is covered by several notice-boards. On them are stuck various sheets of typewritten paper which provide brief information on the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and its administrative organization. In strict order according to the existing hierarchy, the names, phone numbers, etc, of its nineteen members' management committee beginning with the chairman, its president, general secretary, and treasurer are listed. Moreover, it is here that important news of exclusively religious character concerning the affairs of the Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley, particularly the different religious celebrations and the name of the presiding *bla ma*, are put on display.⁹

A grid of two parallel rows of four pillars each capped with brackets carry the main beams that support the ceiling. It is this large hall which is used solely for the celebration of any kind of secular private occasion big or small the majority being life-cycle events and, increasingly, newly adopted festivities such as birthday parties. On its northern wall there may be erected a small altar for the performance of a *tshogs* or feast offering ritual (Skt. *gaṇacakra*). Adjacent on its southern side are three store rooms and a small kitchen. In the latter, easy to reach, not food but mainly salted butter tea is prepared and usually served in great quantities during religious celebrations; here may also the dishes may be washed. On the southern wall, numerous big boards lined up just below the ceiling show the photos and give some details of each of the patron members of the Sherpa Sewa Kendra who presently number one hundred and sixty-four. To be displayed at such a prominent place within the secular part of the community's ceremonial center is considered to be a great honour by both the patron members themselves and all members of the entire Sherpa community.

A verandah overlooking the courtyard precedes the main hall of the temple. The open façade of the porch is supported by two pillars; during ceremonies a tent roof made of white cloth with the usual religious motifs of blue deer printed on it gives shelter from the hot sun and protects from wind, rain, hail, or snow. In the course of great religious festivals this space just as the staircase, the balconies and even the roof construction of the opposite two houses is densely packed by the faithful who have come to watch the performance of the important ceremonies below. During the three weeks long Vajra Guru prayer, mainly old Sherpa people including a small section of faithful aged Tibetans, many of whom have to remain close to the bathroom, sit on the verandah throughout the whole day during the daily communal prayers. They spin a small prayer-wheel (*maṇi lag 'khor*) in the right hand and move the beads of a rosary (Tib. *'phreng ba*, Skt. *māla*) through the fingers of the left hand after having murmured the respective short mantra.

⁹ Significantly, any information of political nature such as the names, local and e-mail addresses, etc. of Sherpa political associations (e.g. *Nepal Sherpa Association*, *Nepal Sherpa Students Organization*) and on their respective activities can be found on boards hung on the brick-wall along the left side of the short dead-end road that leads from the main road to the SSK's entrance gate.

The temple occupies the major part of the second floor. Apart from the temple there is an office, two store-rooms, and another kitchen alongside the southern wall. Moreover, adjacent to the temple there is a small room which is the Protector's Chapel (*mgon khang*) housing the guardian deities of the temple. It is accessible only from the side of the altar. Apart from the sacristan, only *bla ma*-s and certain monks have access to this separate, strictly secret sanctuary. Just above the small room housing the big prayer-wheel there is the room of the temple's sacristan. It is here that most of the sacred objects to be used on occasion of the great celebrations are kept permanently.

Two large double-doors lead into the temple. Actually, the *Shar pa dgon pa* consists of only one large hall that conforms to what is called an assembly hall (*'du khang*). Significantly, there is neither an entry hall (*sgo khang*) nor an apse containing a cellar (*dri gtsang khang*) with an ambulatory (*skor lam*) of its own as is characteristic of great Tibetan Buddhist temples such as the one in the famous ancient Tabo (*ta pho*) Monastery in the Spiti Valley in the Western Himalayas.¹⁰

The walls of the assembly hall are painted above a 1.50 m high skirting board. The lower part is painted brown. The entire hall is decorated with fine murals (*ldebs ris*). Among them the most prominent is the forty-two peaceful deities (*zhi ba'i lha zhe gnyis*) on the right or western side and the fifty-eight wrathful deities (*khro bo lnga bcu lnga brgyad*) on the left side (as seen from in front of the altar).¹¹ Other motifs are the 'Wheel of Life' and the 'Guardian Kings of the Four Quarters' (*rgyal chen rigs bzhi*).

The assembly hall is lit by four windows each on the eastern and on the western side. Again the ceiling is supported by a grid of two rows of four finely decorated pillars each, upon which rest the beams and joists.¹² The altar (*gtor cog*) occupying a great part of the length of the entire wall is situated in the middle of the southern wall. It is made of stone up to about 1.20 m high. On both sides of the assembly hall's main statue there is a series of finely carved wooden shelves which are painted and contain the volumes of the *bKa' 'gyur* and the *bsTan 'gyur*.

In the middle of the altar is placed as its main icon the enormous statue of Padmasambhava, ca. 6 m in height. He is usually adorned with numerous white silken ceremonial scarves (*kha*

¹⁰ Refer to the description provided by D. E. Klimburg-Salter in D. E. Klimburg-Salter (ed.) 1997, see pp. 71–171.

¹¹ For an enumeration of the 'forty-two peaceful deities' refer to G. Dorje and M. Kapstein 1991, p. 184; the authors have given only some of the names of the 'fifty-eight wrathful deities' called blood-drinkers, op. cit., p. 185. When combined they represent the 'Hundred Families' (*rigs brgya*).

¹² For a Tibetan Buddhist sacred artist's depiction of a pillar, capital and the woodwork above them typical of a Tibetan Buddhist temple with all ornaments and all Tibetan technical terms see Thubten Legshay Gyatso 1979, p. 37.

btags). The Indian Tantric master and sage who is known to the faithful under the name ‘Precious [master from] Odḍiyāna’ (O rgyan Rin po che) is seated on a huge lotus throne which is placed on a raised platform. On it, surrounding the lotus throne, are placed butter lamps and other offerings which are carefully tended.

Here, Padmasambhava appears in the fierce form of Guru Nang srid Zil gnon which means ‘Glorious Subjugator of Appearance and Existence.’¹³ With his right hand, Padmasambhava displays the taming (*‘dul ba*) mūdra through which all negativities are suppressed so that the entire sacred space continuously remains purified. Moreover, Guru Nang srid Zil gnon holds in his right hand a golden vajra, symbol of the power of compassion, skillful means and awareness. In his left hand resting on his lap in the gesture of meditation he holds a kapāla or skull bowl. It is filled with the wisdom nectar of immortality and contains a long-life vase (*tshe bum*) with a sprig from the wish-granting tree on its top. In the crook of his left arm the Tantric master holds a trident (Skt. *khaṭvāṅga*). The trident’s three prongs symbolize the essential nature, natural expression, and compassion.¹⁴ Below them are three severed heads in different stages of decay: a dried-up one representing the dharmakāya, a rotten one representing the sambhogakāya, and a fresh one representing the nirmāṇakāya.¹⁵

The statue of Padmasambhava is graced by big-sized photos of three former supreme heads of the rNying ma pa School H.H. Bdud ‘joms ‘Jigs bral ye śes rdo rje Rinpoche (1904–87), H.H. Dis mgo mkhyen brtse Rinpoche (1910–1991), and H.H. sGrub dbang Pad ma nor bu Rinpoche, and of H. H. ‘Khrul zhig kun bzang mthong grol rdo rje Rinpoche. Each of these photos is also adorned with a white silken ceremonial scarf. The ceiling above the statue is raised considerably higher than that of the main ceiling of the temple; it is topped by a separate construction with pillars and a lintel carrying the roof.¹⁶

¹³ H.H. Dis mgo mkhyen brtse Rinpoche built a separate Guru Nang srid Zil gnon temple which is located behind Zhe chen Monastery constructed from 1980 onwards; this is mentioned in his short hagiography in the *Nyingma Mirror 2007*, pp. 31–32, see p. 31.

¹⁴ For the form of the vajra, the skull-bowl and the trident and the associated symbolism see the line drawing of Guru Rinpoche and the lineage of the Heart-Essence of the Vast Expanse, in Patrul Rinpoche 1991, p. 315.

¹⁵ The three kāyas (Tib. *sku gsum*; Skt. *trikāya*, lit. the ‘Three Bodies’ are the three aspects of Buddhahood: Dharmakāya (Tib. *chos sku*, lit. Dharma Body) represents the emptiness aspect of Buddhahood; sambhogakāya, Body of Perfect Enjoyment, represents the spontaneously luminous aspect of Buddhahood; and nirmāṇakāya (*sprul sku*; lit. body of manifestation, the aspect of Buddhahood which manifests out of compassion to help ordinary beings; see Patrul Rinpoche 1991, ‘Glossary’; and Dorje, G./M. Kapstein 1991 p. 110.

¹⁶ My description of the ‘inner sanctum’ is inevitably inaccurate; as is usual, it is dimly lit, and the two rows of pillars make it impossible to get an overall idea of the whole ensemble. Moreover, the numinous atmosphere forbade simple worldly activities such as much photography and inhibited intensive inspection such as repeated measurements.

During the ritual performances, the monks are seated in front of the altar in two opposite rows parallel to the two rows of pillars according to the existing hierarchy among the clerics. Their number varies from eighteen to twenty-four depending on the particular celebration. The presiding *bla ma* occupies a slightly elevated seat next to the altar and heads the row of monks on his side, the second *bla ma* sits opposite to him at the head of the other row of monks. On a row of small tables before them are placed the sacred text used as liturgy which is to be recited, and the usual musical instruments to be played by the *bla ma*-s and monks. At the end of each row of officials there is usually a monk who beats the big suspended drum (*rnga*); depending on the particular need of additional officials, they may occupy a seat in the row following the big drum.

During the public part of major ceremonies the participating lay-folk take seat, always in more or less strict order according to the existing social hierarchy, along the walls; moreover, the members of the laity occupy the whole space between the three walls and the two rows of officials in the middle of the large assembly hall. As a rule, men and women are always separated. Every newcomer who joins the solemn scene first offers full-length prostrations (*phyag 'tsal ba*) on the floor in front of the main statue of Guru Rinpoche after having silently clasped the hands to forehead, throat, and heart. Then she or he offers a *kha brags* to the second Buddha, and thereupon receives a blessing from the presiding *bla ma*. Only then she or he takes seat among the respective gender group. Usually, this act takes a little while since it almost invariably causes some reshuffling of the existing seating order.¹⁷ In this context everybody receives plenty of salt or sweet butter tea which is served by the wives and daughters of the ceremony's sponsors (*sbyin bdag*); in their performance of any kind of duty they are assisted by specially employed staff that, as a rule, is of non-Sherpa origin. And during lunch breaks everybody present is served with plenty of food from the big communal kitchen opposite to the temple building. On this occasion wide spaces of the courtyard are occupied by groups of participants enjoying the food and thereafter indulging in conversation with each other either in the midday sun or in the shade depending on the season.

Around the whole building complex, an open circuit called temple circumambulation path (*dgon skor lam*) has been built. The wall side of this circuit is lined with a total of hundred and eight in-built prayer-wheels and seventeen finely made small bronze statues. All four corners of the building are marked by one bigger prayer-wheel, each one about 35 cm in height, whereas the numerous small prayer-wheels are circa twenty-five cm high. At certain intervals along the circumambulation circuit there are small niches protected by iron bars. Each of them contains the small bronze image of various deities.

¹⁷ A useful description of the complex machinations of the customary seating arrangement on occasion of a private event in a household including a diagram has been provided by Ortner, Sh. B. 1978, pp. 74–75.

The most important mode of worship is the clockwise circumambulation (Tib. *skor ba*, *pradakṣiṇā*) of a sacred monument such as a stūpa, a temple or a monastery. The circumambulation of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth is almost an integral part of everyday life for many of those in residence and also those who stay in the Valley for only a few days who perform it in the early morning hours and again in the afternoon. In contradistinction, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building containing the *Shar pa dgon pa* is usually circumambulated by the faithful on occasion of the big festivals as the first religious act by those who have newly arrived. Some people perform the circumambulation also after the conclusion of a festival. Young people seem to like to perform this act of worship in smaller or bigger groups of friends, girls usually in the company of a group of girls and boys together with other boys; in contradistinction, especially old people use to perform this ritual act individually at least three times or more. In many cases those belonging to the latter group of faithful are equipped with a rosary in the left and a prayer-wheel is turned by the right hand while proceeding on the circuit. The reigning silence is broken only by the metal sound of the rattling of the prayer-wheels and the murmuring of om̐ maṇi padme huṃ, i.e. Om̐, Jewel in the Lotus, Om̐, the six-syllable mantra of sPyan ras gzigs, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the Tibetan Buddhist patron-saint of the Land of Snows, who is a Tibetan form of Avalokiteśvara, one of the most important Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna.¹⁸

The wall constructions of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building are made of stone. The roof structure has a metal covering. As is customary, the roof of the portico and that of the porch are modeled according to pagoda-style. The roof of the verandah on the first floor is adorned with a great golden Wheel of the Dharma (*chos kyi 'khor lo*; Skt. *dharmacakra*) that is flanked by a deer on either side (the *ri dvags pho mo*). This motif is of profound symbolic significance throughout the world of Buddhism: it is reminiscent of the 'first turning of the Wheel of the Law' that took place at the Deer Park in Sarnāth about fifteen km east of Vārāṇasī. It was there that the Buddha Shākyamuni gave his first sermon to an assembly that consisted of his first five disciples.¹⁹ Its content was the Four Truths (of suffering, of its origin, of its cessation, and of the path) and the Eightfold Path.²⁰

¹⁸ The first Tibetan Dharma king Srong btsan sgam po (reigned from 627–649) is only the first in a long chain of reincarnations (*skyes rabs*) that includes, a.o. , the lineages of both the Dalai bla ma and the Karma pa. – A recent substantial overview of the complex tradition of the cult of Avalokiteśvara and the introduction of the first Buddhist relics from Nepal to Tibet through Mang yul Gung thang, a major 'cultural corridor' between Tibet and the South, is contained in Ehrhard, F.-K. 2004a.

¹⁹ For an authoritative account of this important episode as understood and described from the perspective of the 'Old School' of Tibetan Buddhism refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 Vol. 1, p. 153.

²⁰ For the content of these two basic teachings see the brief overviews provided by Dorje, G. & M. Kapstein 1991, p. 139 and p. 159.

The symbol of the pair of deer worshipping the Wheel of the Law referring to both the site and content of the origin of the Buddha Shākyamuni's teaching can be found on any monastery portal thus indicating a place of the teaching of the Dharma. Moreover, the motif of the pair of deer in association with the Wheel of the Law can also be found on numerous chaityas or stūpas in the Kathmandu Valley, as architecture historian N. Gutschow has demonstrated in his magnum opus that meticulously documents the Valley's Buddhist cultural heritage.²¹

Significantly, unlike both the traditional Tibetan and Sherpa Buddhist monastery and the Sherpa village-temple as well, the whole structure of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex lacks any wooden material such as is the case of the beams and the whole part sustaining the roof-construction. Of course, all these parts are finely crafted and painted according to established ancient religious norms. Moreover, the temple windows, the main door leading into the temple, and their frames are usually set in a finely carved framework.

As has already been mentioned, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex contains both a large temple that makes up most of the first floor and a spacious profane hall below it occupying the ground floor. Thus, the edifice combines the necessary facilities for the celebration of all mundane events as well as those necessary for the performance of the Sherpas' major communal annual festivals. Hence, for the first time in their history the Sherpas have created a structure that unites a temple and a community center (*mi 'dzom sa*) in one place and space. Significantly, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex represents a historically novel religious and secular building complex that is meant to meet a variety of newly arisen needs which made their influence increasingly felt when the Sherpas began to migrate to Kathmandu around the turn to the Seventies where they settled down in the environs of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth and formed a new kind of community beyond the narrow traditional bonds of the locality. It will be shown in the following that this novel structure clearly transcends the traditional norms and building rules that have been governing the construction of Tibetan Buddhist edifices such as a stūpa or a Tibetan Buddhist temple sanctuary.

The idea of building a temple including a communal center of their own for social gatherings arose from the new geographical and socio-cultural environment as represented by the Kathmandu Valley and novel existential circumstances. The project has emerged from historically new needs that arose in the context of the Sherpas' encounter with modernity,

²¹ Gutschow, N. 1997, pp. 56–67. In fact, the examples given relate to the details of the Mahābaudha temple in Patan, consecrated in 1601, that was built according to the original Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gayā (Vajrasāna, Tib. rDo rje gdan) in Bihar, North India, the site where the Buddha Shākyamuni obtained Enlightenment underneath the sacred Pipal or Bodhi Tree. The Mahābaudha temple was reproduced twenty-two times and promulgated over the entire territory of the city-state of Patan and even beyond its limits, see pp. 56–58.

i.e. through their increasing successful involvement in the growing trekking and mountaineering industry. These needs have been felt particularly by all those Sherpas who in search of new avenues of financial income have migrated since the end of the Sixties from the Himalayan high valleys down to the warm Kathmandu Valley. Having settled down in the new geographical and socio-cultural environment the Sherpas felt the urgent need of having both a religious site of their own where they could unite, regardless of their particular local belonging, to celebrate their great religious ceremonies, and a place for holding any kind of secular feast.

In their home locality the village temple is the site for the performance of all kinds of communal religious celebrations. In contrast, the stage for all other festive events occurring in a Sherpa locality, sacred (i.e. solely the performance of mortuary rites) and mundane alike, is one of the family houses including its courtyard which are constitutive of a local Sherpa community. Other kinds of community institutions do not exist in the traditional set-up of Sherpa culture and society. Hence, in the traditional local framework there did not exist a separate multi-purpose institution for both religious performances and social gatherings such as is represented by a community or municipal hall in modern industrialized societies. In view of its characteristic features throughout the entire Tibetan cultural world E. K. Dargyay has summarized the traditional local setting with its complete lack of anything resembling a modern 'public sphere' – in the sense as philosopher J. Habermas coined this important notion in his well-known treatise (1962) – as follows:

“The Tibetan village never offered such facilities as an inn, a town-hall, a dancing hall or any other lasting social centre. All this had to take place within the private sphere of one’s own house. People congregated for the most part in the large houses of the governmental tax-payers [in the context of the Sherpas it is mainly the large houses of the ‘big men’ – E.B.] to discuss village affairs and drink a lot of *chang*, Tibetan beer. This system made it necessary for each person to keep his social life from serious conflict unless he was to be cut off from social contact.”²²

Today, the majority of Sherpas dwelling in the Kathmandu Valley has settled down in the symbolically highly charged wider sacred space of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. This important fact notwithstanding, their new center of life is situated within the alien socio-cultural world of the heart of the world’s only Hindu nation-state which is dominated by Hindu values and norms, accordingly. Significantly, the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā*

²² E.K. Dargyay 1982, p. 15.

Kendra as the locus of religious performances and the site of communal meetings is the logical response of an ethnic community that has had to make its living in new and alienating surrounding. The Sherpas have had to adapt and strongly feel the need to make a deliberate effort at revitalizing and thus preserving their severely endangered cultural heritage.

In traditional Sherpa society, a local community is constituted by a certain number of families of either one or several clans (*rus*) linked by kinship, which makes it possible to take concerted action for the general organization of both the agro-pastoral and the religious activities. In the traditional order such as it exists in their homeland, the different members of a Sherpa locality unite in the village temple to celebrate their great religious festivals according to their distinct local traditions which had been founded by a mythical ancestor. Whereas the major religious festivals of a Sherpa locality are strictly exclusive affairs of the local clan or group of clans, the performance of the grand annual ceremonies as they are held among the Sherpas of the Kathmandu Valley community include all Sherpas regardless of their particular locality of belonging thus uniting for the first time the Sherpas from all areas where Sherpas have firmly been rooted. This setting is new to the Sherpas, and certainly not only to them, but to the members of all ethnic groups who have migrated from their homeland to other places such as the Kathmandu Valley.

Most Sherpa festivals are basically ‘cults of gods of place’ reflective of the local community’s distinct tradition and its close attachment to a distinct territory.²³ In its course community solidarity within a distinct territory and, in close association, Sherpa identity is being celebrated and reaffirmed. This conforms to the observation of Ch. Ramble who has referred to the fact that the identity of ‘Nepal’s Tibetan enclaves in modern times’ is best understood in terms of the ‘cult of gods of place’.²⁴

However, the Sherpas’ major annual festival, the masked dance drama known as *Dumji* – a contraction of *sgrub mchod* and *sgrub chen* rituals – is set in the framework of ‘high religion’ as represented by a certain ritual cycle on the basis of which it is enacted in the temple of the locality. In most cases, the solemn performance represents a combination of

²³ In recent years scientific interest has been drawn increasingly to mountain cults as practised in Tibet and the Himalayan region; for some significant finds see the contributions contained in the anthology by Blondeau, A.M./E. Steinkellner (eds.) 1996 and in Blondeau, A.-M.(ed.) 1998. For the *bsang* ritual and its relation to the cult of the local deities see Karmay, S.G. 1998(1995); for the relation of the mountain cult and Tibetan national identity see Karmay, S.G. 1998(1994). – For the cult of territorial divinities such as mountain gods and its close relation to identity refer to the anthology by Buffettrille, K. and H. Diemberger (eds.) 2002. – For a recent treatise on the Himalayan mountain cults as practised by Nepal’s Tamangs at three different sacred mountain sites see Tautscher, G. 2007.

²⁴ Ramble, Ch. 1997a, pp. 377–413, see p. 398. It is in this treatise that Ch. Ramble provides a broader discussion of the significance of local cults such as cults of mountain gods in forming the distinctiveness of the cultural identity of ethnically Tibetan groups in the realm of Nepal-Tibetan borderlands.

both the sMin sgrol gling and rDo rje brag traditions within the rNyin ma pa school. Nevertheless, the 'cults of local gods' have been incorporated in the *Dumji* celebration, their cult figuring prominently on the first day.²⁵ Hence, this festival represents a good example of how Buddhism and local tradition combined provide and strengthen the local Sherpa group's unity and identity.²⁶

In the case of the Sherpas living in the Kathmandu Valley, their new community it is not a community of families, linked by kinship. Instead, it is a wider community uniting the members of all the Sherpa clans hailing from Solu-Khumbu and from all other areas where Sherpas live. This all-embracing community, as represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, makes it possible to take concerted action for the general organization not of the festivals of the traditional local agro-pastoral, but instead of all religious ceremonies that are not firmly associated with the local village community and its cults. In consequence, given this new framework, there has been a significant shift from the traditional, i.e. local, to a wholly new concept of community that is being created in this context. In close association emerges an extended notion of identity inclusive of all Sherpas hailing not only from Solu-Khumbu but from all over Nepal where Sherpas dwell.

It is in the course of these more recent processes that, as has been observed by Ch. Ramble in a different context, people's primary allegiance is being shifted away from an identity shaped by locality through the performance of cults of place gods to one based on 'more abstract religious ideals' that conforms to the 'overarching concerns of high religion.'²⁷ This significant change is being achieved through the performance of grand ritual celebrations that are not tied and restricted to a particular locality and its distinct tradition but instead belong to the range of orthodox Tibetan Buddhism's great annual festivals. Their fundamental differences notwithstanding, both kinds of religious festivals have something of crucial importance in common: each of them, through its distinct religious performances, serve to ensure the protection, unity, well-being and prosperity of the celebrating community.

²⁵ For a full description of the *Dumji* festival as celebrated in the locality of dGon pa Zhung in the Solu region refer to Berg, E. (2008).

²⁶ Unlike Ch. Ramble (1997a, p. 398) I hold that in the case of the Sherpas 'the unity provided by the sense of a common religion' is not 'opposed by a close attachment to a limited territory' as expressed in cults of local gods. The influence of Buddhism has certainly been increasing especially since the establishment of celibate monasteries among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu from the beginning of the 20th century onwards (see Ortner, Sh B. 1989; Berg, E. (2008). Among the Sherpas there has been instead a fruitful co-existence of a local tradition and Buddhism as the two decisive factors in the formation of their identity. Even, or better: particularly in their present-day context, the individual Sherpa's local identity persists while he or she has to cope with new layers of identity which combine according to the given context of social interaction.

²⁷ 1997 a. p. 398; 404.

Chapter Seven

The tradition of Tibetan Buddhist architecture and the novel architectural design of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building ensemble, an example of a new kind of Tibetan Buddhist edifice

In the world of Tibetan Buddhism, a religious structure is invariably built according to the traditional norms and building rules of sacred architecture. Consequently, traditional Sherpa religious architecture is firmly rooted in the architectural tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. This will be demonstrated in the case of the *Shar pa dgon pa* which represents an integral part of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building.

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, however, represents a novel architectural ensemble of the Sherpas' own making; this is evident from its planning, design, and funding to its very construction. In fact, the new communal ceremonial center of the Sherpas becomes the locus for grand ritual performances as well as for any kind of social interaction, representing a significant transformation of traditional Tibetan Buddhist architectural concepts. The new edifice marks the emergence of new living conditions as an adjustment to the Sherpas' new socio-cultural and geographical environment. At the same time, it is a telling example of the sacred Tibetan Buddhist architectural tradition's unbroken vitality, as expressed in its admirable capacity for innovation, renewal and adaptation to novel circumstances.¹

According to the Tibetan architect who provided the French anthropologist C. Jest with the Tibetan Buddhist building rules and rituals to be observed when constructing religious edifices for his ground-breaking survey of the 'Monuments of Nepal,' the very historic prototype of a sacred edifice is the great three story central temple of bSam yas, Tibet's first Buddhist monastery.² This sacred complex was established circa 779 by the emperor Khri

¹ In a valuable essay, architect M. Dujardin focuses on the way ordered space and built form are dealt with in Bhutan, and the way they relate to a larger spatial whole: the sacred landscape of the Himalayan range. To illustrate this issue, he presents two cases of architectural transformation in a village settlement in central Bhutan. Thus, he sheds some light on the cultural role of contemporary Bhutanese sacred architecture 'as a culture-integrating and creative force within a world of uninterrupted challenges and transformations' (p.38).

² Jest, C. 1981, pp. 25–28, see p. 25.

Srong lde'u btsan (742-c.797), who had adopted Buddhism as the religion of his court. It is this famous ancient sacred structure that, at the heart of the origin of Buddhism in Tibet, occupies a central place in Tibetan Buddhist cultural memory. M.T. Kapstein has drawn attention to the fact that Tibetans remember the foundation of the first full-fledged Buddhist monastery in Tibet, where monks could receive ordination and state patronage for the realization of immense translation projects, as the crucial event in the conversion of their nation to the religion that had been adopted from India.³

According to Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the grand and elaborate architectural design of bSam yas Monastery was created on the model of the Indian Buddhist monastic university of Odantapurī.⁴ This great monastery, located in ancient Magadha within walking distance of Nālandā, another famous Buddhist monastic centre of learning, is situated in present-day Bihar. Founded in the early half of the eighth century by Gopāla I of the Pāla dynasty, it was a flourishing center of Buddhist learning for four and a half centuries. Just like all Pāla centers of learning such as Nālandā and Vikramaśīla, Odantapurī was completely destroyed and the monk community was massacred by Afghan soldiers during the Muslim invasion from 1175 onwards.⁵ Some great monks of the Tibetan tradition have been associated with Odantapurī Mahāvihāra, the most famous being Atīśa (982–1054). The great Indian master and scholar studied here for two years before he became the head of Vikramaśīla. There he taught until his departure for Tibet where he stayed for the last twelve years of his life.⁶

bSam yas Monastery is situated about a hundred and fifty km to the southeast of lHa sa near the northern bank of the gTsang po river, in a valley embedded in a landscape of sand dunes with only scant vegetation. This great ensemble of Buddhist temples was destroyed and reconstructed several times. Its full name is *bSam yas mi 'gyur lhun grub gtsug lag khang* or 'The Inconceivable, the Monastery of Unchanging Spontaneous Presence'.⁷ The

³ Kapstein, M.T. 2000, p. 60.

⁴ A brief historic sketch of Odantapurī and its association with bSam yas, its Tibetan replica, is contained in the treatise of the reputed Indian Buddhist scholar S. Dutt 1988, pp. 354–358.

⁵ For the circumstances of this devastating invasion of ancient Magadha and northern Bengal and the story of the assault on Odantapurī as reported by an eye-witness to the Persian historian Minhaz. refer to Dutt, S. 1988, pp. 357–358.

⁶ For the life and accomplishments of Atīśa and his spiritual lineage refer to 'The Blue Annals' transl. by G.N. Roerich 1988, Book V, pp. 241–327. – Atīśa's disciples initiated the Kadampa (*bka' gdams pa*) school. His teaching tradition exerted a major influence on Tibetan Buddhism, particularly on the school of rJe Tsong kha pa (1357–1419).

⁷ The authoritative version of the circumstances that had led to the invitation of the Indian sage and Tantric master Padmasambhava and to the successful construction of bSam yas as seen from the perspective of the rNying ma pa School has been given by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 512–515. – G. Tucci 1988, pp. 1ff. describes the founding of bSam yas Monastery in the context of the first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet which came to an abrupt end in the middle of the ninth century. Interestingly, emperor Khri Srong lde'u btsan made

Indian paṇḍita Nain Singh provided a brief but valuable account of the remains of Tibet's most ancient Buddhist monastery. One of A. Waddell's collaborators in Tibet, he had resided in bSam yas, which had fallen into ruins some centuries earlier, for some time in 1874. A. Waddell has reproduced his account.⁸ In the course of his expedition to Central Tibet, G. Tucci visited bSam yas in the year 1948. In his report he gives a short history and provides a detailed description of the monastery and of the environs, and a short mention of the performance of a sacred dance.⁹

K. Buffetrille paid four visits to bSam yas Monastery between the years 1986 and 1989. In two short articles she provides a brief account of its present state, discussing mainly two important subjects.¹⁰ Firstly, she discusses the five-year restoration project of bSam yas Monastery, which was financed largely by the Chinese government, with its underlying motivation for this kind of demonstrative support. Ironically, in sponsoring this restoration project, the Chinese occupants assumed the role of patron of the Dharma and its representatives. They thus continued the ancient Tibetan Buddhist relationship between 'priest and patron' (*mchod yon*).¹¹ Secondly, she analyses the slow revitalization of religious life in bSam yas, which had been prohibited from 1963 until 1983.

Sherpa clerics and educated lay people alike use the account to draw attention to the fact that the Shar pa dgon pa in the Sherpa *Sevā* Kendra building complex was deliberately designed according to the norms of this ancient architectural tradition; it thus clearly represents an interesting contemporary example of Tibetan Buddhist architecture.

According to C. Jest's Tibetan informant, the rules and associated rituals are laid down in the *bsTan 'gyur*, the Indian commentaries to the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni, and in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* ('*Jewel Treasury*'), an enormous 19th century compilation of texts of various sorts by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas (1823–1899). The latter was one of the

hundred-fifty families responsible for the support of bSam yas Monastery and the performance of the prescribed rituals (p. 9). – D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson have given a short account of the temple complex and the circumstances which had led to its construction (1986, p. 78). – R. A. Stein makes only brief mention of bSam yas Monastery (1987, p. 35).

⁸ Waddell, A. 1985, p. 267.

⁹ Tucci, G. 1987, pp. 158–163. He provided two photos, one of the central temple, the other showing a general view of bSam yas.

¹⁰ Buffetrille, K. 1989 and 1992.

¹¹ This is the main subject of K. Buffetrille's article of 1989. Here and in 1992, she provides a plan of bSam yas Monastery with its numerous buildings. Several photos of restored edifices are given in 1992, see pp. 383–385.

greatest masters and scholars in nineteenth-century Tibet and one of the small group of six scholar-saints who initiated the nonsectarian (*ris med*) movement of eastern Tibet.¹²

A Tibetan master and scholar of the Śākya Order, the late Ven. Bco brgyad khri chen Rinpoche (1920–2007) wrote a general introduction to the monastic culture and life of Tibetan Buddhism.¹³ It is meant to serve Tibetans in exile, in particular the younger generations, in their efforts at preserving their cultural heritage.¹⁴ Among others, this eminent religious personage elaborates on the characteristic art forms, the major ceremonies, and the ritual procedures to be followed when building a temple. Moreover, he provides a sketch of the details of beams and of the arrangement of paintings and images. As for the distinctive design of Tibetan Buddhist sacred architecture, Hugh Richardson, the last representative of the British Government in India, provided a full description of the Jo khang in Lha sa, which was founded in the year 642 by King Srong btsan sgam po (617–649/50). The temple of the Crowned Buddha, known as ‘The Precious Lord’ (Jo wo Rinpoche), is regarded as the most sacred of Tibet’s holy places. It is situated in the gTsub lag khang, a group of buildings in the centre of Lhasa which also contains government offices.¹⁵

As mentioned above, the establishment of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex is the result of strongly felt new needs. These needs are due to the Sherpa’s novel living circumstances and their ongoing encounter with modernity and the forces of globalization. This new type of communal institution is a place where the diverse Sherpas can unite to celebrate the major Buddhist annual festivals. In addition to this, it provides the spacious facility to hold any kind of private event. Significantly, the novel structure is deliberately designed so that the sacred and the profane spheres are neatly separated: while the large

¹² Jest, C. 1981, pp. 25–18, see p. 25. – E. G. Smith has drawn attention to the fact that the *Rin chen gter mdzod* is sometimes inaccurately described as a collection of ‘treasure’ texts. According to him this vast collection consists of smaller basic texts, important supplementary works, newly written liturgical texts devoted to the initiations and propitiations, and introductory instructions for the majority of the authoritative *gter ma* cycles that had been revealed up to Kong sprul’s own time, see 2001, p. 263. – For ‘Jam mgon and the Nonsectarian movement see E.G. Smith 2001, pp. 235–272.

¹³ Thubten Legshay Gyatso. 1979.

¹⁴ For a summary of the goals of this valuable treatise from the hand of his teacher refer to D. Jackson’s preface to the English translation, in Thubten Legshay Gyatso. 1979, pp. IX-X.

¹⁵ Richardson, H. 1998, pp. 237–260; see also Richardson, H. 1993, pp. 38–41, 44–48 for a map of the Jo khang and a description of its use on occasion of important ritual celebrations. – As to Sherpa religious architecture refer to the brief description of few Sherpa monasteries in the Solu-Khumbu region provided by C. Jest. 1981, pp. 91–110. – D.L. Snellgrove (1957) has given an account of the important Chiwong (Tib. *spyid dbang*, ‘Universal Consecration’) Monastery in Solu and its history (pp. 217–227), and a detailed description of its main temple (pp. 227–245) including a detailed overview of the major Tibetan ceremonies held at Chiwong (pp. 245–274). – A short description of sTeng po che monastery in the Khumbu region is included in the booklet written by its abbot, Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu (Ngag dbang bstan ‘dzin bzang po) in collaboration with Fr. Klatzel, 2000, pp. 62–64.

room on the ground-floor is to be used for secular celebrations, the large hall on the upper floor containing the altar is strictly reserved for the performance of any kind of religious ceremony. In fact, the sacred hall on the first floor which is reserved for religious purposes is an assembly hall ('*du khang*). Housing the altar with the statues of the deities, it actually represents a *lha khang*, i.e. a 'residence of the deities.' It is this part of the whole structure that basically conforms to a temple. Clerics, in particular, strictly reserve the name *Shar pa dgon pa* for the denomination of this sacred component of the entire edifice. The laity, however, calls the entire architectural ensemble *Shar pa dgon pa*, thus not making any distinction between the religious and the mundane realms. This expression mirrors not only the laity's understanding of the major function of the communal center but also the fact that their traditional conception has simply been transposed to a new framework. However, in the Tibetan cultural world the term *dgon pa* actually designates a monastery which, according to traditional norms, has to be located at a place remote from the dwellings of the laity, which supports the monastic community.¹⁶

Moreover, according to C. Jest's informant, the temple is always located in the most advantageous position. That is to say, it is usually situated considerably higher than the neighbouring houses.¹⁷ Just as is the case with many of the thirty odd Tibetan monasteries that emerged in the last decades within the wider area of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth, this does not hold true of the *Shar pa dgon pa*, located within the new building ensemble of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Commonly, this seemingly significant breach of norms is explained by reference to the fact that the wider space around the Great Stūpa is particularly sacred, due to its immense symbolic significance for the Tibetan Buddhist world. Therefore it in fact is a privileged place for a temple or monastery to be built.

Moreover, just like the Great Stūpa today that is surrounded by a ring of houses which have continuously been rising in height in the course of the last fifteen years, many of the Tibetan monasteries of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex are situated not higher, but lower than most of the neighbouring houses. In fact, today they cannot even be seen from the main road any more.¹⁸ With ironical humor, Sherpa clerics and community elders alike use this fact to demonstrate that, at least within the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building, their upper level temple is, indeed, situated higher than the profane part of it.

¹⁶ E.g., see the definition given by S. Ch. Das, 1989, p. 275. – Among the Sherpas, a village-temple is also called *dgon pa*.

¹⁷ Jest, C. 1981, p. 36.

¹⁸ In fact, the Great Stūpa can only be seen from a very short section of the main road just opposite the main gate. Today, it is even increasingly difficult to catch a glimpse of this extraordinary monument from a plane shortly before landing or after take-off.

According to tradition, the choice of the grounds of the building ensemble is governed by religious considerations. In the case of building a religious edifice in alien, i.e. non-Buddhist territory, the place and its spirits first need to undergo a ritual act of ‘taming’ (*‘dul ba*).¹⁹ It is through this procedure that ‘uncultivated nature’ is transformed into a sacred site (*gnas*), which is often translated as ‘power-place.’²⁰ The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex combines a temple and a community center in one place and space for the first time in the history of the Sherpas.

According to my clerical informants, in the case of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex, the ritual act of ‘taming’ was simply redundant: this site owes its ‘empowerment’ as a sacred place and space to the particular symbolic importance of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth, due to its legendary origin is at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism as will be discussed below.

In the Sherpas’ traditional setting, a distinctive feature of the courtyard of both a village temple and a monastery is represented by its finely built wooden gallery. The latter frames the courtyard on its southern, western, and northern sides – while the temple entrance, as a rule, always faces east – thus forming an enclosed spatial sacred entity. This gallery rests upon several massive wooden finely carved pillars and is sheltered by a simple roof construction with small wooden shingles. Into the outer wall are built some ‘windows’ set in a wooden and finely carved framework which, as a rule, do not contain any glass until the present day for obvious reasons. Access to either side of the gallery from the temple is provided by some steps made of stone, while from the courtyard it is reached via a wooden staircase that connects the gallery from the space below it. During the performance of the grand annual festivals it is here that a great part of the audience is seated on long benches placed along the gallery. The space behind those seated is normally packed by those standing for the duration of the festival.

Commonly, the members of the wealthy and influential families of the locality have their privileged seat on a bench covered with cushions in the middle of the eastern gallery just

¹⁹ Ch. Ramble has aptly expressed this transformation process in 1997b, see p.133: “Savage nature does not represent an ideal state to the Tibetan mind. It may even be said that part of the aspiration of Tibetan religious ideology is to eliminate wilderness by subjugating it. An image that is sometimes used to express this untamed nature is that of cultivation (cf. Aris 1990) But this remains only an image, because uncultivated nature too may be seen as tame once it has been included within the sphere of Buddhist (or Bon) influence. The paradigm of nature so converted is the *gnas*, the sacred site.”

²⁰ M. Aris (1990) has shown the semantic complexity of the concept of taming (*‘dul ba*) in northern Buddhism, see p. 94; to name but a few examples: a. the Buddhist notion that man has to tame his mind, b. the term is used to refer to the code of monastic discipline, c. in the sense of a field prepared for planting as the ‘tamed ground’ (*sa thul*), d. the term refers to the subjugation of local demons and their forcible conversion to Buddhism, which takes place during the legendary introduction of the faith to Tibet and the Himalayas, and is the subject of continuous ritual re-enactment.

opposite to the temple entrance. It is from there that the best view of all public ritual activities is obtained. On either side, the less well-to-do families are seated. Underneath the three sections of the gallery the lowest strata of the Sherpa locality, curious members of clans belonging to neighbouring localities and of other ethnic and caste groups stand and share the space. It is during the public part of the major religious festivals that all these spaces are densely packed with onlookers all of whom, unless they are drunk, are fully concentrated on the observation of the solemn ritual procedures.²¹

In contrast, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* courtyard is not framed by a beautiful wooden gallery which gives shelter from the sun, wind, rain, hail, and snow. Here, the audience is seated in the wider courtyard beyond the 'inner' section adjoining the temple cum gathering hall edifice. During the public part of major religious celebrations the space for the audience is usually fenced off from the 'inner' section, thus reserving it for the religious practitioners. It is also here that, on occasion of the Tibetan new year festival, masked dances ('*chams*) are performed. Until today, no shelter is provided in this modern context whereas the courtyard of both a local village-temple and a monastery is always covered with a tent roof for the duration of a ritual celebration. In view of the long performances many of the spectators are equipped with their own umbrellas, cushions, and blankets.

Most significant, however, is the fact that the strict seating order in accordance with the social hierarchy that prevails in a traditional setting cannot be reproduced in this novel framework. Instead, all participants take seat somewhere in the wide courtyard, thereby following their own predilection. This does not mean, however, that traditional social distinctions are blurred. In fact, as seen from some elevated place such as a balcony or a roof, 'big men' and their families when seated always form a nucleus of a larger grouping around whom others of either equal or lower social status assemble. In any case, in this novel context the leading figures and their families still do not occupy a privileged place within the audience as it is customary in a traditional set-up in which the existing social hierarchy is enacted and thus demonstrated on occasion of a religious festival.

²¹ The gross abuse of *chang* was common among laypeople, women and men alike, and many of the religious practitioners on occasion of all festivals throughout those areas where Sherpas dwell. It was due to severe abuse of *chang* being a ceremonial drink in this context that the religious ceremonies were increasingly badly performed. According to common opinion this was the cause of a severe loss not only of the ceremonies' intended efficacy but also of the religious practitioners' morals. In consequence, the consumption of *chang* has dramatically lost ground in the last fifteen years. Nowadays, its consumption is practically restricted to few of the old generation; contrary to them, the absolute majority of the young generation of Sherpas firmly refuse it when being offered ceremonially in a festive context.

Moreover, among the Sherpas a village-temple is owned by the local community, i.e. a village and associated hamlets or a group of villages.²² As a rule, the entire local community is responsible for the building of the temple, its upkeep, and any improvement. The married tantric village bla ma (*sngags pa*) and his assistants, the customary religious practitioners of the local community, are responsible for the organization of the ceremonies. It is the duty of a special temple committee to care for the administration of the temple funds and income as well as for the maintenance of the buildings.

Usually, a man from the locality, belonging to the local clan or to one of those constitutive of a locality, is appointed guardian, *dkon gnyer*, of the village-temple. He has the responsibility of morning and evening attendance with the divinities in the temple; in particular, the caretaker has to replace the lustral water daily and offer butter lamps. In a monastery a monk with a simple religious education normally performs these duties.

In Sherpa monasteries there is always a living quarter for the abbot. It is usually located on the temple's first floor next to the shrine-room of the guardian deity (*srung khang*). As is characteristic, the members of the monastic community live in their privately owned houses which are usually scattered on one side of the temple building. In the new context as represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, however, there is no monastic community that is to be supported by the lay community.

In some cases such as sPyi dbang dgon pa, the first and major Sherpa monastery in the Solu region (founded in 1923), a monastery has been endowed by its patron-founder with lands and all members of the monastic community with life-long basic food supplies. This was a customary mode of support from the laity, particularly from the hand of wealthy lay benefactors.²³ In the new context in which the Sherpa Valley community is embedded, this kind of traditional support for a monastic institution and its community has not been practiced yet, according to my information. But also in this novel framework it is the whole, all-embracing, Sherpa community itself as represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* which alone is solely responsible for the maintenance and any expansion of their temple and community building complex.

With great pride all Sherpas who I had the opportunity to interview as to these and related matters put strong emphasis on the significant fact that the Sherpa temple cum community institution in Bodhnāth has been constructed and expanded solely on the initiative and

²² A temple can also be privately owned by a single family but it is never the stage for communal festivals.

²³ For the endowments from the side of the tremendously wealthy and powerful Sangs rgyas bstan pa bLa ma Ser ba (1856–1939), popularly called Sangye Lama, refer to Snellgrove, D.S. 1957, p. 218; for the Sherpas' readiness to act as benefactor see p. 218. – For further details as to the former example refer also to Ortner, S.B. 1989, p. 139; Jamyang Wangmo 2005, p. 92, 320.

through the financial means of the Sherpas themselves, predominantly by the Sherpas of the Valley community. Hence, there has not been and still is no involvement of foreign money or any outsider. In particular there has been no involvement by Westerners, who in many cases used to interfere and push their own politics and ideas concerning the architectural design, etc. when giving financial and technical assistance.²⁴

²⁴ Such was and still is the case with many renovation and new building projects alike in Nepal. A good example of the intricacies of renovation and new construction projects concerning sacred edifices is the case of the people of Mustang (gLo bo) who renovated a 15th century temple in the capital of gLo bo sMon thang and built a new temple for their Kathmandu Valley community in Svayambhūnāth. For the particular circumstances of each case see the useful account provided by S. Craig 2004.

Chapter Eight

Ownership, administration, income, and other services provided by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* for the members of the entire Sherpa community

The Sherpa Sevā Kendra owns the community building cum temple. The novel Sherpa institution is maintained and improved through its administrative body. All financial matters including all decision-making concerning new ventures such as the building of a new house or the purchase of new land and its use are in the hands of its members.

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is governed by a special body called the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee. It is comprised of a total of nineteen members. The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee is led by a president who is assisted by a group of ten advisors. Other important duties performed are those of the secretary and of the treasurer. None of these services are paid since the jobs are solely honorific.¹ New members are proposed from some leading figures of the community and then appointed by *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* committee in unison. Members do not serve on a rotation basis but instead remain in office as long as they are able to fulfill their role properly. Today, all committee members have been active in their respective functions for more than six years; some of them have been fulfilling their roles for more than a decade. The present president has been in office since the year 2006.

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is devoted solely to the organization of all major religious affairs concerning the Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley and hence it is a strictly non-political body. Owing to the fact that practically all Sherpas are members of the *Sherpa Association of Nepal (SAN)*, these two different spheres of activity can clearly be kept separate.²

¹ Since all these honorific duties are highly time-consuming only the truly wealthy Sherpas are, in fact, capable of fulfilling the role of a *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee member.

² The most important general political organization in Nepal in which Sherpas are active is called NEFIN or *Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nations*, an association being presently presided by the rather radical chairman Pasang Sherpa. Apart from the political there are also the economic organizations in which Sherpas clearly dominate the scene such as the influential *Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN)*.

Since it is generally regarded by the Sherpas as both a duty and an honour to be formally a member of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, almost every man representing a household is actually a member. Referring to this double aspect as membership is concerned all my informants emphasized that actually there are only very few non-members among those Sherpas living in the Kathmandu Valley.

Another form of membership is that of a 'patron member.' In order to become a patron member of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, one has to pay a sum of 50,000 NRs. It is solely an honorific service to the community from which no special status whatsoever can be derived. However, each patron member enjoys the privilege of having a small card containing his name and some personal data, including his photo, stuck on a board containing eight to ten of these cards. The board is hung on the southern wall in the big hall on the ground floor where it joins a row of more than a dozen boards displaying the data and pictures of a total of one hundred and sixty patron members at present.³

The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* derives financial income from three kinds of sources. The majority is obtained from those private parties to whom the large hall on the ground floor is rented out for the celebration of their secular festivities. Apart from this mode of revenue the main bulk of the income consists of the regular annual membership fees, the money from those who become patron members, and the irregularly flowing donations from the laity, particularly from wealthy Sherpa men and women. It is mostly on occasion of the grand religious performances that donations are given. To become formally a member of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, one has to pay an initial sum of 1,500 NRs for the first year; thereafter, the yearly cost of the renewal of membership amounts to only 100 NRs.

All additional projects of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* are financed out of the interest on saved capital. The latter gives loans and advancements to any member of the Sherpa community with firm credentials and grants financial support to bereaved family members of a deceased Sherpa.

In its role as a mutual-aid association (*skyid sdug*) that serves exclusively the members of the Sherpa community, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* gives loans and advancements to those with firm credentials. The interest derived from this service goes into its own organization for the support of the festival economy and of extra activities. The latter consist mainly in the organization of religious teachings for the revitalization of the Sherpa community's religious knowledge by different Sherpa and Tibetan bla ma-s such as 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche, rDza sprul Rinpoche and sTeng po che Rinpoche. Significantly, the latter bla ma holds his teachings

³ Whereas the status of general membership is strictly reserved to Sherpas only, anyone, Nepali citizen and foreigner alike, may become a patron member.

in Nepali language as well, since the command of their own language by many young Sherpas has been severely on the decline in the last two decennia.

Other fixed assets are directed towards a health program and support for a home of the needy elderly. During the great festivals, an ambulance including a driver is paid for its duration. A generator is rented out in order to cope with potential electricity power cut. Moreover, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* pays the salaries of the staff of a total of eight people – six of them being laypeople, two are clerics – who are permanently paid.

Both of the clerics are sacristans (*dkon nyer*). One monk is the caretaker of the temple, the so-called *Sherpa dgon pa*. The other monk is the caretaker of the cult room in the house where dead bodies are stored and the main part of the mortuary rites is held. The two sacristans have been appointed by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee. The one hails from the Dolakha area situated to the east of the Kathmandu Valley, the other comes from the southern part of the Solu region. Each of them received a simple degree of religious education in a small monastery in his home region.

The rest of six persons are laypeople of non-Sherpa origin. This group consists of the technical manager⁴; an assistant of the manager; two security men, one for the duty over daytime, the other for the nighttime; one woman who has to care for the cleaning of the whole *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex; and one driver.

Basically there are two different kinds of celebrations that are held at the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*:

- a. secular private family events/parties and the rituals of the life-cycle and
- b. any religious festival of communal importance

All celebrations are controlled by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* committee. For the holding of any kind of private event the organizer has to make a formal request and is responsible to the committee in case of any inconveniences. After the event, he has to pay the whole cost including the rent of the large hall on the ground floor to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*.

At present there are twelve religious practitioners who are firmly associated with the *Shar pa dgon pa*. All of them hail from Solu-Khumbu. One bears the maroon and white robe of a married tantric village priest (*sngags pa*). The other eleven figures are all monks with a simple degree of religious education which each of them received in a small monastery in his

⁴ This man is a Newari who, originally from Dolakha Distr. which is situated to the east of the Kathmandu Valley, has been living with his family in Bodnāth since more than thirty years; he has been doing this job since the very beginning of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in the year 1978. This man has been another major informant since he has accompanied the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in all these years during all its expansions and knows all the Sherpa 'big men' who had been involved in its construction from the time of its very beginning onwards until the present day.

home area. Each left his monastery many years ago on his own decision. Each of these religious practitioners moved to the Kathmandu Valley where he settled down in the Bodhnāth area renting a room of his own. Most of them have joined some relatives who either live in an apartment or own a house. Significantly, none of them is associated with a rNying ma pa monastery in the wider area of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth.

It is this group of officials who represent the permanent pool of religious specialists of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. They are called by Sherpa families to perform the usual 'rites de passage', mainly funeral pūjas, in the *Shar pa dgon pa*. For its performance, each religious specialist receives 250 NRs per day from the instigator. Certainly, this salary is not much, but it is enough to make one's own living. In addition, the practitioners are usually hosted with food and drink during the ritual performance; each practitioner also receives some small monetary gifts from certain members of the family.

A major worldly by-product of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee's activities is represented by the Sherpas' census. The *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is the only institution in Nepal's Hindu nation-state that keeps the continuous and proper record of almost all households of the entire Sherpa community.⁵ This record does not only include the data concerning the Sherpa households in the Kathmandu Valley. Since basically all Sherpas are somehow connected worldwide, the record also includes data concerning all Sherpa communities scattered across the different high altitude areas and many other regions in Nepal as well as those of the diverse diasporic communities abroad.⁶ According to my information, there are currently about 900 households in the Kathmandu Valley, and there are few non-members (the number of which is difficult to discern but it is estimated to be not of any significance).⁷ According to differing sources, the Sherpa community that is rooted in the Valley numbers between 3,000 and 3,500 persons.

Membership is not individual, but instead comprises the household. Every year, the members of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee have to visit every Sherpa household in the Valley in order to personally collect the annual membership fee. Before this duty can be performed, a formal written invitation card has to be handed over to the head of

⁵ The Hindu state census has always been wholly unreliable especially as to Himalayan Buddhist and ethnic groups since it used to be the political means through which was officially documented that the Hindu population represents the majority in this country which it is not according to the latter who hold that their own numbers had always been kept considerably lower.

⁶ As has already been mentioned above, the preferred countries of out-migration are 1. USA, a. New York, b. California, c. Oregon; 2. UK; 3. Japan; 4. Hong Kong. There they join the respective diasporic community. Ad. 1a.: ca. 1,000 Sherpas are at present living in New York City and State.

⁷ This information was collected during the two periods of field research conducted in the course of the present investigation from February through May 2006 and again in the same period in the year 2007.

the household, his wife, or another representative in case the former two are absent as is often the case. This task is highly time-consuming. In many cases a household has to be visited several times in order to effectively meet its head or his representative. There, the collector has to respect the customary rules of Sherpa hospitality. Practically in every household he is kindly hosted with food, butter tea and/or alcohol such as *chang*, beer or whisky.

Hence, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* holds all data concerning the different households and all the members each household consists of. Moreover, this data includes valuable information on the origin of the respective families of both husband and wife, and of relatives who have migrated elsewhere or who have emigrated abroad. Most important is the fact that this data is updated annually. Thus, the Sherpas organize their own population census. It should not be forgotten, however, that this task is not always easy to realize: since many Sherpas are highly mobile, a number of them does not take the pain to report to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* via its representative in case they shift from one place to the other either within the Valley or out of the Valley, or in case they leave their country in search work abroad where many of them settle down on a more or less permanent basis.

Chapter Nine

Description of the economics of ritual celebration as practiced in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* – two traditional modes of festival patronage among the Sherpas as employed in the new setting at Bodnāth

Characteristic of both Tibetan local groups and those in the Himalayan region, a peripheral area of Tibetan culture, each local group has developed a distinct and complex form of festival economy that governs the organization of its major annual festivals. The individual differences notwithstanding, the festival funding and organization rests upon the important institution of the patron. Depending on the particular religious festival the latter can, in most cases, assume either the sole duty of a benefactor or that of an organizer and steward.¹

It is in the course of the majority of important annual festivals that the religious experts of the celebrating local community employ and display their spiritual knowledge and magical powers over the malignant forces. This is done for the well-being of the entire local community which sponsors its major annual festivals and takes part as audience. In many cases even if they are closely connected through paternal kinship relations, the religious practitioners contribute to the fulfillment of the local community's goal. Meanwhile the laity, as

¹ Brief mention as to the performance of ritual duties in Tibet on behalf of the village which rotates between full village-member households is made by G. Samuel (1993, p. 128). For recent detailed contributions on festival patronage in different contexts in Tibet see the papers by M. Schrempf 2000, pp. 317–357 on the two forms of lay sponsorship of communal rituals and the sponsors' involvement in the revival of Bon monasticism as practised in A mdo Shar-khog; and by J.A. Ardussi on the significant category of wealth distribution rituals (mang 'gyed) as are practised by individuals and important institutions at the conclusion of larger celebrations in both traditional Tibet and Bhutan (2003). – Concerning different forms of festival patronage in the context of the major communal festivals as practised among Himalayan Buddhist groups see that described by G. Childs (2004, pp. 104–06; 2005, pp. 41–48) in a village in the Nu bris valley; by C. Jest (1975, pp. 346–351) in the village communities in Dol po; by M. Kind (2002) on a newly established festival in a Bon po village community in Dol po; by Ch. Ramble (1984, pp. 285–335) on the 'economics of ritual and patronage' in the Bon po householder village community of Klu brag in Nepal's Mustang dist.; by M. Vinding on the organization of the "Lha Phewa," the main festival of the Thakalis as celebrated once every twelve years in the Thak Khola valley in Nepal's Mustang dist. It is based on the voluntary contributions from the local Thakali associations in Pokhara, Kathmandu, Bhairawa, and Galkot (1992, p. 35).

represented by a fixed annual number of sponsors in rotation, provides the organization labour or the material resources necessary for the staging of a ritual ceremony.

It is of particular significance that in his function, the festival patron acts as the representative of the celebrating community, inviting the performing clerics and hosting them throughout the religious celebration. And it is the presiding bla ma who, through employing certain Tantric practices and assisted by a group of simple religious practitioners, invites, hosts, and worships the respective deities whose cult is performed on that occasion and whose benevolence and protection is sought. Thus, the Tantric bla ma ‘oblige’ the invoked deities to offer their powerful help to the celebrating community to exorcise malignant spirits, protect from natural disasters and ensure the future well-being of the celebrating community as a whole and the individual – male – member including his family as its elementary constituents. It is of importance that the festival patrons, at least in their role as festival organizers, have also to assume certain ceremonial roles as hosts and stewards of the community’s protective deities who are invited, worshiped, and invoked in the course of a ritual ceremony.

Both the clerics and the assembled lay community are beneficiaries of these religious ceremonies since the former ensure the future well-being of the entire community and generate religious merit (*bsod nams*, Skt. *punya*) for personal salvation. And it is common knowledge that special merit accrues to the patrons and their wives and families in organizing a major communal festival. It is the secular activities of the lay community as represented by the festival patrons’ labour that make the performance of the major annual festivals possible.

In the following, firstly a brief glimpse shall be provided on the historical origin of the social institution of the festival patron in Tibetan Buddhist culture and society. Secondly, the social institution of the festival patron as it prevails in the Sherpas’ festival economy of the local community shall briefly be discussed. Thirdly, the new form of festival funding and organization that has been developed and practiced in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* as representative of the entire Sherpa community shall be highlighted. In the latter two cases, the social and institutional framework in which the performance of the major annual festivals are embedded shall shortly be mentioned.

1. The ancient Tibetan priest-patron (*mchod-yon*)–relationship as the historical model for the customary duty of the festival patron as practised among the Sherpas

Just as in the Tibetan cultural world in general, in Sherpa culture practically all communal celebrations are based upon the social institution generally called *sbyin bdag*

(Skt. *dānapati*).² S.Ch. Das renders the term as ‘patron, more especially a dispenser of gifts, a layman manifesting his piety by making presents to the priesthood.’³ This relationship is by no means a one-sided affair. While the patron offers gifts of material kind to the clerics, the latter, depending on the particular case, lend their ritual expertise to either the entire community or an individual family and thus ensure its future well-being and protection.

It is of significance that the influential notion of the *sbyin bdag* is conceived in terms of the ancient Tibetan relation between a lama, i.e. official/counselor/spiritual preceptor, as recipient (*mchod gnas*) and his royal or princely lay donor (*yon bdag*).⁴ In his profound treatise, D. Seyfort Ruegg comprehensively highlighted this ancient Tibetan relationship. This important relationship has its historic origin in the generous royal patronage of Buddhism as performed by the ‘first of the Tibetan religious kings,’ the emperor Srong btsan sgam po (ca. 617–649/650), and his Buddhist successors of the sPu rgyal dynasty until the sudden end of the phase of the ‘early diffusion’ of Buddhism (*snga dar*).⁵ And it was resumed immediately with the beginning of the ‘later diffusion’ (*phyi dar*) in the middle of the tenth century thus contributing to the revival of monastic Buddhism in Central Tibet.⁶

As to the specific characteristic of the *mchod yon* dyad, D. Seyfort Ruegg observes that it is ‘not official and institutional but personal and religious.’ Moreover, D. Seyfort Ruegg hints at the fact that in both Buddhist theory and practice the notion of ‘patron’ is problematic, as it implies the subordination of the religious to the temporal order.⁷ According to S. G.

² For a detailed account of the institution of the *sbyin bdag* in Sherpa society as representative of the festival economy in the context of the *Dumji*, the major annual festival in Sherpa society, as performed in dGon pa gZhung in the Solu region pa refer to E. Berg (2008, ch. 4, sect. 5); for the institution of the *sbyin bdag* in Sherpa society in general cf. Sh. B. Ortner (1998, see pp. 23–29; 1999, pp. 83–88). – On the recent significant and consequential transformation of the relationship between Sherpas and Westerners into *sbyin bdag* bonds refer to V. Adams (1992, p. 541f.; 1996, pp. 164–170; 1997, pp. 91f.); in 1997 V. Adams discusses this novel mode of *sbyin bdag* relationship as one of the major forces that lead to what she has coined as ‘the making of virtual Sherpas’.

³ S.Ch. Das 1989, p. 939.

⁴ For recent investigations as to the ancient spiritual relationship between worldly rulers and religious preceptors, see F.-K. Ehrhard on the three journeys of the Bengali paṇḍita Vanaratna to Tibet (2004b, pp.245–266); and K.-H. Everding on ‘rNying ma pa Lamas at the Court of Mang yul Gung thang (2004, pp. 267–289).

⁵ This has been noted, a.o., by G. Dorje and M.T. Kapstein in their introduction to the volume entitled ‘Reference Materials’ which is Book Two of Dudjom Rinpoche’s *History of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism* (1991, pp. 393–394).

⁶ For the importance of this relationship in this early phase of the ‘second diffusion’ and its diverse protagonists refer to the detailed treatise by H. Stoddard (2004, pp. 49–104.).

⁷ Cf. D. Seyfort Ruegg 1995, p. 7 and p. 8. The author emphasizes, however, that the search for theoretical models in the Tibetan context “...is no simple matter, for our sources are not as explicit on the subject as we might wish.” Instead, he suggests that neither ‘Phags-pa in his relation with Qublai Khan nor his uncle Sa skya Paṇḍita (1182–1251) in his relation with the Chinggisid prince Köden was in a position to elaborate in writing

Karmay the distinctive feature of this *mchod yon* relationship is the fact that both parties are considered equal.⁸ In a recent short paper, D. Seyfort Ruegg takes up this subject again, adding an important clarification. Here, he emphasizes that “...the superiority of the one over the other, or alternatively their equality of status, will depend on the exact circumstances prevailing contingently at a given historical time and place.” Hence, “...in a specifically religious context, (...), it was naturally the preceptor-official, the Hierarch, who has been thought of as superior; while in a secular political situation, the lay donor could well be regarded as predominant. In practice, the relationship between the two orders appears often to be fluid, sometimes even kaleidoscopic.”⁹

It was this particular preceptor-patron relationship which Tibetan *bla ma*-s had successfully established with their worldly lay donors to their mutual advantage not only internally with Tibetan rulers. Also with regard to its neighbours this concept became the basis of their foreign policy which began with their foreign relations with the Mongol overlords in the thirteenth century and lasted to the end of the Manchu dynasty in the early twentieth century.¹⁰ The significance of the important latter relationship has been summarized by M.C. Goldstein as follows: “Tibet’s lama provided religious instruction; performed rites, divination, and astrology; and offered the khan flattering religious titles like ‘protector of religion’ or ‘religious king’. The khan, in turn, protected and advanced the interests of the ‘priest’ (‘lama’).”¹¹ It is a distinctive feature of this relationship between spiritual power and temporal power in Tibet that it binds the laity and the clergy into a common frame of interaction. In this relationship, however, the lay donor is usually referred to as *sbyin bdag* (Skt. *dānapati*).¹² As D. Seyfort Ruegg points out, only a king or prince is referred to as *yon bdag*, which is an honorific term meaning ‘master of ritual gifts.’¹³ Another important term for the ideal Buddhist king – the worldly power that protects the Buddhist doctrine and provides the material support for the *bla ma*-s as its representatives – is *chos rgyal* (Skt. *Dharmarājā*‘).

a full theory of the ‘constitutional’ relation between the Official/Preceptor and the Donor King.” (p. 152). In a following paper D. Seyfort Ruegg discusses this relationship in 13th century Tibetan society and polity, its inner-Asian precursors and Indian models (1997, pp. 857–72.).

⁸ S.G. Karmay 1998 (1997), p. 504.

⁹ D. Seyfort Ruegg 2004, p. 10.

¹⁰ Owing to the importance of the preceptor-patron relationship in Tibet T.W.D. Shakapba has devoted a separate chapter to this subject titled respectively as ‘Lamas and Patrons’ (1967, pp. 61–72).

¹¹ M.C. Goldstein 1997, p. 3.

¹² On the lay and princely donor see D. Seyfort Ruegg 1995, pp. 56–59; G. Tucci 1988, p. 10. – S.Ch. Das 1989, p. 940 has rendered the term *sbyin bdag* as “a patron, (...), a layman manifesting his piety by making presents to the priesthood.”

¹³ D. Seyfort Ruegg 1995, p. 15.

Interestingly, in the realm of Tibet, the semantic range of the term *sbyin bdag* was extended and applied, among others, to the worldly relationship between landlord and tenant. According to E. K. Dargay, the term implied that the person called *sbyin bdag* actually behaved in accord with Buddhist ethics, its core norm being compassion towards all beings (*snying rje*): “If the landlord expected his tenant to execute his duties, he himself had to behave like a sponsor.”¹⁴ Consequently, it was due to this norm that their mutual relationship was kept within certain bounds: while the landlord had to comply with the tenant’s request as much as necessary in order to keep his image as *sbyin bdag* the tenant had humbly to bring forward his supplication and should never burst out with rebellious remarks.¹⁵

2. The social institution of the festival patron as it prevails in the Sherpas’ traditional festival economy of the local community

Sponsorship of the annual local celebrations is considered to be one of the main communal duties of each male head of a new nuclear family household once he has become father. As is customary the sponsors are exclusively male, whereas women, usually a wife or a sister, can act as a sponsor’s substitute in case he cannot assume his task as *Dumji* patron owing to other obligations. This case is clearly on the increase since more and more Sherpas, particularly those belonging to both the middle and the young generation, live more or less permanently in Kathmandu or even more far-away places such as in Japan, the US, and the UK.

Most of the communal ceremonies in the ritual calendar, such as, in chronological order, *lo gsar*, the Tibetan New Year festival, *lha gsol*, the festive gathering at a sacred place situated not on but below the mountain close to the village in worship of the protective local mountain deity, *bskang gsol*, the ceremony of propitiation of the guardian divinities of the Doctrine, or *smyung gnas*, the fasting rite, have one or several sponsors who serve by rotation for the duration of the festival. The respective number of festival patrons constitutes a distinctive characteristic of each local tradition. All these ceremonies last only one day. In the case of some other festive events such as the relatively recently introduced Buddha’s birthday, however, there is no prescribed schedule for sponsoring the ceremony; instead, people get together spontaneously to act as the celebration’s patrons.

In contradistinction to the afore-mentioned mode of sponsorship and organization, it is rather different in the case of the *Dumji* festival. The *Dumji* is the Sherpas’ most important annual celebration in village ceremonial life and extends over a period of four to eight days

¹⁴ E. K. Dargay 1982, p. 30, see also p. 29.

¹⁵ E. K. Dargay 1982, p. 30.

depending on the particular local tradition. It serves to unite and ensure the future health, wealth, and progeny of the local community through the employment of certain Tantric practices and is based on certain ritual cycles of sMin grol gling tradition.¹⁶ In this framework the duty of the *lawa* or *spyi pa* involves considerable resources so that many householders have to save money for quite a few years in advance to meet the expenses involved.¹⁷

Each of the nine local communities where *Dumji* is celebrated among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu has a traditionally fixed set of patron organizers, in most cases in Solu four, in Khumbu eight. These patron organizers are called *sbyin bdag*, which is a general term for designating a benefactor for the well-being of both the Dharma and its representatives and the local community. The specific term for the office of the patron of any of the communal festivals used in the Khumbu region is *lawa*,¹⁸ whereas in the southern Solu region the usual designation is *spyi pa*. Both are terms for the duty of the patron who is in charge of the full preparation and organization of one of the communal festivals, in other words, he offers his time and labour. S.Ch. Das renders the term *spyi pa* as ‘head, chief, leader, superintendent.’¹⁹

In the context of the *Dumji* the *lawa* or *spyi pa* acts as patron organizer and also as host and steward such as it has been translated by Ch. Ramble.²⁰ According to Ramble, the term ‘steward’ relates his main role which is regarded as being ceremonial.²¹ It is this role that he has to fulfill, in particular, in the course of the first day’s ritual activities. Apart from that, the duty of the *lawa* or *spyi pa* consists in the management of the festival and in the organization of all the provisions and the preparation of food and drink either for the whole community such as is practiced in the Khumbu and in three localities in the Solu region or for the religious experts only such as in dGon pa gZhung.

The office of the *Dumji* patron and steward rotates annually according to the differing schemes of the local traditions among the number of households which constitute the local

¹⁶ For these important aspects refer to E. Berg (in press, ch. III).

¹⁷ Descriptions of the *Dumji* festival have been provided by Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf (1964, pp. 185–208; 1984, pp. 97–100) as held in the twin-villages of Khumjung-Khunde in Khumbu and by E. Berg as celebrated in dGon pa gZhung in the southern Solu region. The *Dumji* festival is briefly mentioned by Sh. B. Ortner (1978, p. 96, 130) and J.F. Fisher (1990, p. 59, 63, 138f., 169f.).

¹⁸ For the Khumbu term *lawa* meaning patron organizer and host/steward refer to Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf (1964, pp. 185–208; 1984, p. 97f., 102) who provided a description of the *lawa*’s duties in this context. – On the social institution of the patron organizer and host/steward or *spyi pa* of the *Dumji* festival as held in dGon pa gZhung cf. E. Berg (2003, pp. 205–218; in press, ch. IV.5).

¹⁹ S.Ch. Das 1989, p. 806.

²⁰ In the context of the Mukthinath Yarthung festival (1987, p. 228); in the context of the *mdos rgyab* ceremony as performed in the monastery of Lubra (Klu brag) (2000, p. 303). On the meaning and the office of the *spyi pa* in the context of the festivals of Lubra (1984, p. 274f.)

²¹ Ch. Ramble 2000, p. 303.

community. It is the temple-committee (Tib. *dgon pa tshogs pa*) that usually selects the customary set of *lawa* or *spyi pa* for the following year's festival. The selection is done on occasion of the official *chang* test which is held in the week before the beginning of the festival. In a book called *tho*, which S. Ch. Das translates as 'register, list' all the patrons' names are continuously recorded as proof in potential conflicts over the selection of the customary set of *lawa* or *spyi pa* for the next *Dumji* festival.²² This register is kept in the temple, and the secretary of the temple-committee is the man-in-charge.

Usually, the individual householder is informed on the last day of the festival when the temple-committee meets and reaches its decision that his turn as patron of the next year's *Dumji* will come. That meeting also offers the opportunity for others to inquire when their turn is likely to come in the future. This knowledge is important, as many householders have to save for quite a long time to be able to cover the considerable expenses involved. In case someone is not able to meet these obligations the order of rotation may be changed for some years. But permanent exemption from the 'civic duty' to act as a patron in this context is impossible, as it implies the loss of full membership in the local community.²³ However, according to my informants, this has never occurred yet neither among the Lamaserwa people in Gonpa Zhung nor in any of the other eight localities in Solu-Khumbu where the *Dumji* festival is performed. Certainly, it is also due to the special merit that accrues to the *Dumji lawa* or *spyi pa* and their wives and families in fulfilling that duty that the office of the patron organizer and host/ steward has been held in high esteem until the present day.

The lavishness of the catering of either the whole celebrating community or solely the officials depending on the distinct local traditions may vary depending on the material resources of the individual *spyi pa*. But according to both my observations and their own statements, it is obvious that every Sherpa householder considers it as his personal duty before the celebrating community to perform the honourable task of the *spyi pa* as 'money givers' in the most generous way possible. In all cases the sponsors reported that they had to save for several years to meet the expenses for the enactment of the *Dumji* festival.

Significantly, a *Dumji lawa* or *spyi pa* obtains no special status through his activity. Among the Sherpas to act as both a patron organizer and host and steward of the *Dumji* festival brings religious 'merit' (*bsod nams*) but no heightened prestige or even an improved

²² S. Ch. Das 1989, p. 588.

²³ The same kind of punishment for not fulfilling his duties in relation to his local community has also been reported by Chr. von Fürer-Haimendorf in the context of his description of the customary obligations of the *Dumji lawa* in Khumjung-Khunde (1964, p. 187). M. Schrepf notes as to Tibetan communities in general that fulfilling the duty of sponsorship of religious festivals in rotation gives 'the right to group membership' (2000, p. 321).

social status. As afore-mentioned, the task of the *lawa* or *spyi pa* represents a major 'civic duty' for every Sherpa householder. This is clearly in contrast to the lay-monk relations in Helambu as described by G.E. Clarke or among the Bon po community in present-day Amdo Shar khog in Eastern Tibet as described by M. Schrempf. In both cases, the status of the individual villager is directly dependent on his sponsoring activity.²⁴ Owing to the traditional rotation principle as practiced among the Sherpas every male householder be he rich or poor, high or low, has to perform the same task as *lawa* or *spyi pa* of the *Dumji* festival once, sometimes even twice in his life-time. Consequently, unlike in the Bon po community described by M. Schrempf, in this particular ceremonial context the accumulation of 'symbolic capital' in P. Bourdieu's sense and thus any kind of status improvement is not to be achieved.²⁵

3. The new system of festival funding and organization that has been developed and practiced in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* as representative of the entire Sherpa community

In their new urbanized environment in the Kathmandu Valley, the Sherpas have created a new system of festival funding and organization. Significantly, this system makes use of the afore-mentioned two different traditional Tibetan and Sherpa forms of festival sponsorship and management. Each of the major festivals is based on one of the two modes of either festival patronage or festival organization. The two different kinds of festival duties are that of the *lawa*²⁶ and that of the *sbyin bdag*. Whereas the fulfillment of the former office requires a significant investment in time, the latter necessitates significant financial resources.

The duty of the *lawa* is threefold. Firstly, they have to arrange the full program of a celebration about three months in advance and distribute it to all member households.

²⁴ Compare G.E. Clarke 1989, p. 233; and M. Schrempf 2000, p. 318, 320f.,324.

²⁵ For a short English version of his influential concept of 'symbolic capital' see P. Bourdieu 1994, pp. 166–178. To be clear as to this important issue the crucial aspects that define Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic capital' are summarized as follows: "The acquisition of a clientele, even an inherited one, implies considerable *labor* devoted to making and maintaining symbolic *investments*, in the form of political aid against attack, theft, offense, and insult, or economic aid, which can be very costly, especially in times of scarcity. As well as material wealth, *time* must be invested, for the value of symbolic labor without reference to the time devoted to it, *giving* or *squandering time* being one of the most precious of gifts. "This concept clearly conforms to the sponsorship of colourful grand ritual ceremonies as instituted by Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa (1357–1419) in the context of the *smoṅ lam chen mo* or Great Prayer Festival and later by the Fifth Dalai bLa ma ((1617–1682) which were being performed until 1959 for the well-being of the Tibetan state that had been founded in 1642. It was in this particular framework that sponsorship was one of the major factors for ascending in rank, cf. J. Karsten on the *Ya sor* (1983, pp. 117–149); see also T. Huber 1999, pp. 159–161.

²⁶ Interestingly, this is the term for the festival patron used among the Khumbu Sherpas.

Secondly, it consists in collecting the financial resources necessary for the performance of the religious ceremony from all member households of the Sherpa Valley community, the majority being scattered across the greater part of the north-western half of the Kathmandu Valley including a small group living in Patan. This job is highly time-consuming since each member household has also to be formally invited by means of a finely designed and printed invitation card. To achieve both duties a household has to be visited several times, which also implies the acceptance of being hosted formally. The amount of the donation to be collected is related somehow to the number of members the household consists of at that time. Thirdly, the office of the *lawa* entails the organizing of all the work for the preparation and the conducting of the performance as well as for the cleaning up after it. The latter two aspects of work, in particular, represent a full-time job. The main bulk of the menial work is done by the regular kitchen and cleaning staff; it is the *lawa*, who together with his wife, sons, and daughters, supervises the former's work, and lends a hand especially with distributing tea, when need arises. Moreover, it is his duty to maintain the orderly functioning of the ritual celebration.

The duty of the *sbyin bdag* or 'sponsor for religious affairs,' on the other hand, not complex at all, consists solely in donating a significant sum of his money for the performance of certain religious festivals.

Each festival is organized or financed by a particular number of either *lawa* or *sbyin bdag*. For the performance of each annual festival, a special committee (*tshogs pa*) has to be constituted anew. It is of importance that the respective festival committee chooses and invites the presiding bla ma and the group of other religious practitioners which varies in size according to the festival. They are usually accompanied by a certain group of monks from his monastery. They are supplemented by the twelve monks who are formally associated with the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Each festival committee, as represented by its head, is responsible for all its activities to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee and its president.

Five major religious festivals are held annually by the entire Sherpa community in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. The five festivals are:

1. *dGu gtor*, a powerful rite of catharsis consisting in a ritual dance ('*chams*) that culminates in a spectacular kind of exorcism (*sbyin sreg*) which is held on the 29th of the twelfth lunar month, and *lo gsar*, the complex Tibetan New Year festival which is the most important religious celebration in the annual cycle. Its festival committee consists of a group of six *lawa*.
2. *Vajra Guru* prayer, Tib. *Vajra Guru dung sgrub*, the communal meditation and prayer of a 'Hundred Million mantras.' It begins twelve days after the *lo gsar* festival and

lasts three weeks. Owing to its importance and length, its festival committee is comprised of group of nineteen *lawa*. This group of nineteen *lawa* is the same the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee consists of.

3. *Druk pa tse bzhi*; the festival committee consists of a group of fifteen to twenty *sbyin bdag*.
4. *sMyung gnas*, the collective fast and purification ritual focused on the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Tib. sPyan ras gzigs), the patron saint of Tibet. It was founded by the great eleventh-century Kashmiri Buddhist nun who is called dGe slong ma dPal mo in Tibetan. The festival committee consists of a group of twenty to thirty *sbyin bdag*.
5. *Buddha Jayanti*, the birthday of Buddha Śākyamuni; its celebration consists mainly in a procession that leads from the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* via the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth to Svayaṃbhūnāth Stūpa and back gain to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*; in its course both stūpas are solemnly circumambulated. Since Buddha Jayanti is an occasion for which people gather spontaneously it has neither a fixed set of *lawa* nor of *sbyin bdag*.

In the new environment the duty of both the *sbyin bdag* or festival patron and the *lawa* or organizer, host, and steward is not a 'civic duty' such as that of the *lawa* or *spyi pa* in the traditional local setting. In that context, this duty strictly follows a customary rotation basis according to the more or less fixed number of households of a locality. In the novel framework, however, there does not exist a more or less fixed number of households which is always relatively small. In the Valley there are more than nine-hundred Sherpa households, and the number continues to be on the increase. Consequently, the festival register (*tho*) that is kept in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is not based on a closed number of households that have to assume the duty of a festival patron or organizer in rotation. Instead, this list has been started with the foundation of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in the year 1978, and it is necessarily open. In other words, the assumption of any kind of *lawa* or *sbyin bdag* activity for the performance of those festivals which are celebrated annually in the framework of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* is strictly voluntary.

Only in recent years, the Sherpas have started their new system of either festival funding or festival organization. Until now, common practice was that either a wealthy leading figure has been asked by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee or someone who can afford and is willing to do so has offered to assume the duty of either a *lawa* or a *sbyin bdag*. Both the *lawa* and the *sbyin bdag* are formally appointed for this service, which each of them is expected to perform only once in his life-time.

What can be the deeper reason for someone to assume a very costly or highly time-consuming service for the well-being of the entire community provided there is no customary 'social obligation' to perform it as a 'civic duty'? The novel system of festival patronage and management represents not an established, i.e. 'binding' tradition but a novel tradition-in-the-making in a culture and society that is currently being reconstituted and reorganized in this novel existential framework. Consequently, in this new setting valuable 'symbolic capital' in the form of heightened prestige resulting from a strictly voluntary service for both the Dharma and the entire Sherpa community seems to be its predominant impetus. This has been confirmed time and again in the conversations I had the chance to hold with both former and present *lawa*-s and *sbyin bdag*-s. Needless to mention the special religious 'merit' that accrues to the festival patrons or organizers and their wives and families for the performance of their voluntarily assumed festival duties, thus very positively affecting their karmic situation.

All religious festivals are highly valued, provided they are properly performed, for their crucial role in warding off economic and other kinds of calamities and ensuring the health, welfare, and prosperity of both the celebrating community as a whole and the individual member including his family as its elementary parts. At the same time, a new kind of all-embracing communal solidarity, unity, and identity of the Sherpas is created, strengthened, and reaffirmed through these annual ritual performances. Hence, it is also in this novel context at the time of the Sherpas' global dispersal that the customary duty of the festival patron or organizer and steward assumes a key role.

Chapter Ten

A novel tradition of Sherpa Buddhism in the making:

On the five religious festivals presently held annually in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth and on the ongoing establishment of new ceremonies in their novel framework

1. Orientation

In the following chapter we will attempt to provide a detailed account of the performance of each of the grand ceremonies that are being celebrated annually by the entire Sherpa community in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth. The hope is that this portrayal of the five religious festivals that have been introduced into the novel framework in the course of the last two decennia will contribute to our understanding of the ongoing process of revitalization of Buddhism in a Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan community. In essence, the festivals described in the following trace out the process of how the Sherpas' deliberate effort at recreating and strengthening their religio-cultural heritage is being achieved. In other words, which ritual performances that the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism has to offer for that particular endeavour have been selected and are used in Sherpas' present-day context.

Through each of the festivals' accounts will be exposed in greater detail, both the individual differences as well as the crucial general social purpose that all of them serve: to ensure well-being of the Sherpa community in the era of their encounter with modernity, their global dispersal, and their formation of diasporic communities. At the same time, each of the different ritual performances is illustrative of the Sherpas' ways of newly forging and articulating their own cultural tradition within the present day's larger, i.e. 'globalized' context.

The following account of the religious ceremonies is based upon what I as an ethnographer saw in the process of participant observation in two consecutive years (2006 and 2007) and on what both my clerical and lay informants have explained to me. The findings thus obtained were later compared and supplemented with respective data as contained in publications within the realm of both old and recent Tibetan studies and Himalayan anthropology. Owing

to certain reasons, however, I have neither been able to participate in the performance of the *smyung gnas* ritual nor in that of the *druk pa tse bzhi* celebration as they are now being held annually in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth.¹ Consequently, my description of the latter two is inevitably incomplete in some respects. Moreover, since there is usually so much movement that tends to blind the foreign observer's view, it takes considerable work of reflection from a distance until the very structural order underlying each Tibetan Buddhist ritual performance is unveiled behind the usual seemingly tumultuous happening. Hence, the following accounts may contain certain equally inevitable inaccuracies.

The present chapter is divided into the following two sections. First, an overview of the five annual religious festivals is provided. This includes a brief mention of the intended establishment of the *Dumji* festival which is reflective of the Sherpa community's ongoing endeavour at revitalizing and preserving their cultural heritage and thereby strengthening the unity of their community. Second, a description with attention to detail of each of the grand ceremonies, including a glimpse on each one's legendary background that sanctified it, will be provided.

2. Overview of the five major religious festivals held annually in the Shar pa dgon pa in Bodhnāth and on the intended introduction of *Dumji*, the grand public Sherpa festival traditionally performed in the village temple

It is of importance that only one out of the five religious celebrations – the collective *Vajra Guru* prayer – has been newly established in this novel framework, whereas it has never been held traditionally among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. *Buddha Jayanti* has been introduced among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu as well as in the Shar pa dgon pa only from the beginning of the Nineties onwards. Hence, the *Vajra Guru* prayer as well as *Buddha Jayanti* have only recently been introduced into the body of Sherpa Buddhism. It goes without saying that the incorporation of the two kinds of religious celebrations is indicative of a significant extension of the Sherpa Buddhist heritage. In contradistinction, the other three festivals have been celebrated traditionally among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu.

¹ In fact, I have participated several times in the *smyung gnas* ritual as it is being held in the temple of dGon pa gZhung, the Sherpas' spiritual center in the Solu region. Moreover, I have only participated twice (in July 1995 and 1998) in the *druk pa tse bzhi* ceremony as it is being celebrated in gSer logs monastery located about a short hour's walk above dGon pa gZhung. Hence, I am familiar with the performance both kinds of ritual ceremonies, their respective legendary background and special features, and the complex symbolism involved in each one. The latter ceremony I have also seen twice as it is being performed in Zhe chen monastery in Bodhnāth popularly simply called mKhyen brtse Rin po che Dgon pa after its renowned founder (1910–1991) and former head of the 'Old School' (1987–1991).

The five festivals – in association with a brief mention of each of the distinct festival committees responsible for either the festival organization or the whole festival economy – are as follows:

a. *dGu gtor* and *lo gsar*.

dGu gtor, the powerful rite of catharsis consisting in a ritual dance ('*chams*) that culminates in a spectacular kind of exorcism (*gtor zlog*) and a burning sacrificial rite (*sbyin sreg*, Skt. *homa*). *dGu gtor* is held on the 29th of the twelfth lunar month, and, closely associated with it, *lo gsar*, the complex Tibetan New Year festival which is by far the most important religious celebration in the annual cycle. Usually drawing in between seven and nine thousand people, *lo gsar* as it is held in this new place brings together the largest crowd of Sherpas that ever gather at one and the same site.² Its festival committee consists of a group of six *lawa-s*.

b. *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* ('One Hundred Million Mantras').

The *Vajra Guru prayer* represents a highly meaningful kind of collective prayer in worship of Guru Padmasambhava in the course of which is performed the recitation of 'One Hundred Million Mantras.' It begins twelve days after the *lo gsar* festival and lasts three weeks. Owing to its particular symbolic significance the *Vajra Guru prayer* draws a considerable number of participants; due to its lengthy duration the majority of the lay participants belong to the old generation. In consequence, its festival committee is comprised of a group of nineteen *lawa-s*. This team of nineteen *lawa-s* is identical with the members of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee.

c. *Buddha Jayanti*, the celebration of the birthday of Buddha Śākyamuni.

Apart from prayers and sermons in honour of the historic founder of Buddhism, the performance of the *Buddha Jayanti* celebration consists mainly in a solemn procession. It leads from the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* to the ancient Chabahil Stūpa and from there via Mahankal road to the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth and back gain to the temple in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. In the course of the procession both stūpas are solemnly circumambulated. Despite its profound

² In traditional Sherpa society as being lived in Solu-Khumbu the Sherpa New Year festival just like all other annual festivals are solely the affair of the population of the locality. Hence, in Namche (Nags po ched) Bazaar, the largest settlement in the whole region of Solu-Khumbu, *lo gsar* draws several hundred people.

symbolic significance, Buddha Jayanti is understood as a sacred occasion on which people only gather spontaneously. In consequence, it has neither a fixed set of *lawa*-s nor of *sbyin bdag*-s upon whom the festival organization or economy is based.

d. *sMyung gnas*, the popular collective fast and purification ritual.

The performance of *sMyung gnas* focuses on the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *sPyan ras gzigs*), the patron saint of Tibet. *sMyung gnas* was founded by the great eleventh-century Kashmiri Buddhist nun who in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism is venerated as dGe slong ma dPal mo. The committee responsible for the festival economy of the *smyung gnas* ritual consists of a group the number of which may vary from between twenty and thirty *sbyin bdag*-s depending on the decision of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee according to the respective needs.

e. *Druk pa tshes bzhi*.

As the ceremony in commemoration of the significant occasion when Buddha Śākyamuni began to turn the ‘Wheel of Dharma’ (*‘chos skor dus chen*) for the first, time *druk pa tshes bzhi* celebrates a key point in the history of Buddhism. The festival economy is represented through a group that, depending on the prevailing particular circumstances, may number between fifteen and twenty *sbyin bdag*-s.

Apart from these five grand annual festivals, there is only one ceremony performed in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* that is held monthly but attracts only a few laypeople. The tenth day (*tse bcu*) of each lunar month is consecrated to Padmasambhava. This celebration in worship of Guru Rin po che is performed in all rNying ma pa monasteries. In the *Shar pa dgon pa*, the *tse bcu* celebration is exclusively performed by sixteen lay tantric practitioners (*sngags pa*) who belong to the *tse bcu* committee in the *Shar pa dgon pa*. It concludes with a communal feast ritual (Tib. *tshogs ‘khor*, Skt. gaṇacakra).

Significantly, the management committee of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* has decided upon the introduction of the *Dumji* festival of but one day’s length in 2008 into the annual festival schedule. Held in the local village temple throughout Solu-Khumbu in worship of the local founding ancestor, the local and higher protective deities, and of Guru Padmasambhava in different manifestations, this grand masked dance festival extends over five days in the

Khumbu region whereas in Solu it usually lasts for four days.³ The introduction of the Sherpas' most important annual religious festival in their new framework is meant to unite all Sherpas and thus to successfully overcome the various local characteristics of different traditional Sherpa cultures and societies. This is clearly reflective of the fact that the Sherpas' novel tradition continues to be in the making. As I am informed, it is planned to expand the length of the *Dumji* accordingly to safeguard both its complex symbolism, as expressed in the rites the *Dumji* festival as performed in the context of the village temple, and the goals associated with its celebration.

Dumji will be held in *sa ga zla ba*, the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. This is considered to be a special month for spiritual practice and performing virtuous actions (*dge ba*), since the birth, enlightenment, and pariṇirvāna of Buddha Śākyamuni all fall in this month.

3. The five religious festivals and the detailed description of each one's performance

In what follows a more or less detailed description of the performance of each of the five religious celebrations shall be provided. To convey an appropriate understanding the general history of each festival and its symbolic significance, the history of its establishment among the Sherpas shall be provided. Only in two cases – *smyung gnas* and Buddha Jayanti – the ritual text is given upon which the respective performance is based since both have been commonly in use among the Sherpas. In the other three cases the use of the liturgical texts usually depends on the presiding *bla ma*-s' individual choice.

As has been mentioned above, the performance of both the *dgu gtor* and the *lo gsar* celebration as the major annual Tibetan Buddhist festival is the domain of either the rDza rong phu sprul sku, the sTeng po che sprul sku, or the Tolokha sprul sku. Whereas in this case the prominence of the major three incarnation and two teaching lineages among the Sherpas is ensured as to the performance of the other four festivals the management committee of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* pursues a wise and farsighted policy: it regularly entrusts each of the ritual performances to one of the steadily growing number of young Sherpa *mkhan po*-s who are in need of an adequate place where the acquired spiritual learning can be put into practice, after having graduated in recent years from the monastic college (*bshad grwa*, lit.

³ An exception is the *Dumji* as it is being performed in dGon pa gZhung where it extends over five days. For a detailed description of this grand celebration see E. Berg (2008).

'seminary for textual exposition') either in Mysore, in Dehradun, or in Sikkim, which are currently the usual sites of higher learning for young Sherpa monks.⁴

I. *Lo gsar*, the Tibetan New Year celebration, the major Tibetan and Sherpa annual grand festival

The complex Tibetan New Year festival is commonly regarded as the most important celebration in the Tibetan Buddhist annual cycle.⁵ Usually among the Sherpas, *rgyal po lo gsar* or King's New Year is celebrated on the first day of the first Tibetan lunar month.⁶ It is on occasion of this colourful ceremony that practically all Sherpas who are present in the Valley and can afford the time gather in the temple-courtyard of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Hence, the collective celebration of the beginning of the new year brings together at one sacred site a maximum of Nepal's entire Sherpa community. To give just an idea of the approximate size of this grand gathering: in 2006 and 2007 the New Year festival was attended by between six and seven thousand Sherpas. During its celebration it is simply not possible to move since the space of the courtyard and the verandahs and rooftops of the surrounding houses are being thickly packed with participants.⁷

Such an enormous gathering is a new phenomenon in Sherpa history which is only possible due to their novel living circumstances that eventually gave rise to the need to construct the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex with their own temple in its center. It is only this novel spacious sacred and secular site that offers the necessary framework for grand gatherings of such comparatively enormous size. For more than five years, a video documentary of the New Year festivities has been regularly produced by a team of young Sherpas. At the same time this event has been attracting Nepalese TV team for several years.

⁴ In the last decade numerous of the Sherpa monks who graduated from one of their three places of higher learning are regularly being sent by their spiritual teacher to remote Himalayan areas such as Solu-Khumbu where they have to serve as *mkhan po* at one of the monasteries for certain duration.

⁵ For a description of the New Year celebration as it has been practiced in Tibet, refer to N. Norbu 1966, pp. 147–153; an overview of both the surrounding secular activities as well as the ritual practices performed by the monks in the service of the theocratic state (*chos srid zung 'brel*) is given by T. Rigzin 1993, pp. 1–8; for an account of the celebration of *lo gsar* as held among the nomads of Eastern Tibet see N. Norbu 1997, pp. 54–59. – For a valuable detailed description of the complex *lo gsar* celebrations as they were held in Lha sa in the last millennium of Tibet's independence before it came to the brutal end of the traditional order through the disastrous Chinese occupation in 1959 see H. Richardson 1993. – A detailed account of the Tibetan New Year celebration as it is being held in La dwags has been provided by P. Dollfus 1987, pp. 63–96.

⁶ In certain cases, however, the Sherpas celebrate the New Year festival either on the second or even on the third day of the first Tibetan lunar month.

⁷ These figures are estimations made by several members of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee. In certain cases these estimations ran up to a total of even nine thousand participants, doubtlessly a rather overestimated figure which may be due to a certain ethnic pride.

The fact that in recent times even some Hindu state representatives devote some interest in the Sherpas' New Year celebration clearly helps to raise the Sherpas' ethnic pride as numerous informants have emphasized.

Around the same time *lo gsar* is being celebrated in all monasteries in Bodhnāth, and each performance is attended by a crowd of Tibetan Buddhist laypeople hailing either from Nepal's Himalayan Buddhist communities or from certain areas in Tibet or, in certain cases, from both. In the early afternoon *bla ma*-s, monks, and nuns from several nearby monasteries gather for a colourful procession around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth that is being performed under the leadership of Chini bla ma who acts as the stūpa 's custodian.

A detailed description of the *lo gsar* performance as it is being held in the *Shar pa dgon pa* will first be provided in the following. This will be followed by a section in which an account of the highly complex character of the Tibetan New Year and its history shall be given. In that context, the significant socio-political service the Tibetan New Year festival has been fulfilling for the Tibetan world until the present day shall also be discussed.

a. *Lo gsar* as it is held among the Sherpas in their temple in
the Shar pa dgon pa in Bodhnāth

Preliminary remark

It is of importance that in each year numerous Sherpas, *bla ma*-s, monks and nuns as well as laypeople attend the revitalized *smon lam chen mo* celebrations of the rNying ma pa School at Bodh Gayā. This particularly auspicious event for all Tibetan Buddhists is held annually in the twelfth Tibetan lunar month (usually in January), extending over the considerable period of ten days. Only after a few days following their return to Bodhnāth from this extremely edifying solemn *smon lam chen mo* celebration, the Sherpa New Year festival starts in Bodhnāth. This preliminary remark is necessary since it sheds some light on the reigning atmosphere characteristic of its celebration. It is at least partly due to those who, after having attended the Great Prayer Festival at Bodh Gayā, return to Bodhnāth in high spirit. Today, almost every Sherpa has been at Bodh Gayā for the *smon lam* at least once in her or his life-time.⁸

⁸ It was in the year 1409 that the *sMon lam chen mo* or Great Prayer Festival was inserted into the framework of the Tibetan New Year festival by the great monk rJe Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, (1357–1419), the famous great reformer of Tibetan Buddhism and founder of the dGe lugs pa order. It is held in commemoration of Buddha's defeat of the Six Non-Buddhist Teachers at Śrāvastī from the 1st to 15th of the second Tibetan month. – The *smon lam chen mo* has been of great spiritual significance for all Tibet and represents the most important ritual ceremony of the year all over the country. In Lhasa it was held from the fourth to the twenty-fifth day of the first month (for a full account refer to H. Richardson 1993, pp. 20–30; see also T. Rigzin 1993, pp. 8–14; P. Yeshi and J. Russell 1987, pp. 83–90). – In exile, Dar thang Rinpoche, the renowned rNying ma

Significantly, the Tibetan New Year festival is preceded by the performance of the *dGu gtor* ('nine *gtor ma*') rite, which is held on the afternoon of the 29th of the twelfth lunar month. The *dGu gtor* is a powerful rite of catharsis consisting in a particular ritual dance (*zor 'chams*) performed by the presiding bla ma. His ritual activity culminates in a spectacular kind of exorcism (*gtor zlog*). In its course two different kinds of highest tantric ritual activity are performed. The first is conducted with a *sgrol gri* or ritual sword by means of which a *nya bo* or liṅga eventually is hacked to pieces. This is followed by the shooting of a '*mda* or ritual arrow,⁹ by means of which an artfully piled-up pyre is eventually lit onto which had been thrown a set of ritual cakes (*gtor ma*) made of the dough of roasted barley flour and butter. This important fire ritual is called *sbyin sreg*, Skt. *homa*).¹⁰

The *dGu gtor* ritual consists in the worship and invocation of the nine high protector deities (*chos skyong*) of the rNyingma school. It has a twofold meaning: firstly, to give thanks to the protective deities high and low for the benevolent help and protection received in the course of the old year; and secondly, to request their protection not only for the coming year, but actually for the whole time 'in between' (*bar do*), in other words, for the larger period that is needed until ultimate enlightenment (*byang chub ma thob bar do*) may finally be obtained.

It is through the preceding tantric spiritual practice that all the negativities that accumulated in the old year had been summoned ritually into both the *nya bo* (Skt. liṅga) and the set of *gtor ma* each of which is finally being destroyed through highest tantric means. The *dgu gtor*, including the particular fire ritual called *sbyin sreg*, is aimed at purging the accumulated

pa teacher and author based in Berkeley, CA, founded the *sMon lam chen mo* in 1989 at Bodh Gayā. He is also the founding father of the 'Nyingma Monlam Chenmo International Foundation' and a principal patron of the annual *sMon lam* celebrations. Moreover, it was this influential master who inspired the other three Buddhist schools to also reintroduce and celebrate the Great Prayer Festival. According to Dar thang Rinpoche the objectives of the revitalized *sMon lam chen mo* as celebrated by the 'Old Translation School' are to propagate and preserve the Buddha Dharma in general and the Nyingma tradition in particular. It is also aimed at establishing global peace. For the history of the revitalized *sMon lam chen mo* in exile refer to the booklet on *The 9th Ngagyur Monlam Chenmo* [1998], pp. 13–15. A photo of the monks praying under the huge Bodhi tree on this occasion is provided by M. Ricard 1996, p. 73.

⁹ H. Richardson has provided a detailed description of the *rTse dGu gtor* performance held at the very end of the ceremonies of the Lhasa year as they used to be celebrated before the disastrous Chinese occupation in the year 1959 (1993, p. 118, 121).

¹⁰ According to R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz there are basically two main types of *sbyin sreg*: a. the one being performed in honour of a deity and b. the other one consists in the burning of an evil spirit (1993, p. 528) as it is the case in the present context. – For the four different ways the *sbyin sreg* may be performed (ibid.). – For an adequate understanding of the basic principles of the ritual fire offering refer to the 'Manual of Ritual Fire Offerings' provided by Sharpa Tulku and M. Perrot 1987. – For a brief authoritative account of the four different types of fire offering, a description of their respective preparation, a comment on the ritual preliminaries, and the performance of a fire offering refer to Panchen Ötrul Rinpoche 1987.

sins of the past in order to clear the way for the year to come, thus ensuring a new beginning through the use of a significant rite of exorcism. As is usual, the *dgu gtor* is performed in the open at a separate site behind the Shar pa dgon pa.¹¹ Interestingly, only very few laypeople are present on the occasion of the *dgu gtor* ritual performance as is first held in the temple and thereupon, its final exorcism, executed in the open.

Preceding the public performance of the *dgu gtor* ritual, a minimum of three to four days of meditation on the deities to be invoked is necessary. However, the public performance itself lasts for only about forty-five minutes. The major tasks to be achieved by the group of *lawa*-s consist in preparing and organizing the ceremony and collecting both the financial resources and those in kind needed for the creation of the *gtor ma*-s. For the proper performance of all activities involved in the solemn execution of the *dgu gtor* rite beginning with the meditation practice of the *bla ma*-s about for days in advance, a week's time is necessary.

According to their tradition the *lo gsar* celebration among the Sherpas was introduced by gSang ba rdo rje, their founding ancestor, when this charismatic *bla ma* began to hold it in the village temple of sPang bo che in the eastern part of the Khumbu region. sPang bo che dgon pa was founded by gSang ba rdo rje in the first half of the seventeenth century. It is the first village temple in that area where the immigrating ancestors settled down and only then became the Himalayan ethnic community known as the *Shar pa*-s, i.e. the 'people from the east' [of Tibet – E.B.]. Today, the Sherpas' area in northeastern Nepal is known as Solu-Khumbu.

The distinctive feature of the Tibetan New Year is the performance of extensive rites in worship of the protective deities. The sequence of both secular and religious rites that make up the Sherpa New Year celebration in the Shar pa dgon pa within the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* will briefly be described in the following.

The festival is opened up by a short welcoming ceremony (*bsus wa*) of the presiding *bla ma* at the entrance gate to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* courtyard. This ceremony is conducted by one or two ladies – each one the wife of a socially influential *lawa* – dressed in their finest ceremonial garments. They, acting as the representative of the celebrating community, are the hosts of the *bla ma* invited to preside over the ritual performance. Holding in their left hand a bunch of burning incense sticks tied together with a simple ceremonial scarf she or they present the *bla ma* with a finely made long white silken ceremonial scarf (*kha brags*) and greet him with a formal “bKra ‘shis de legs!” thus expressing the collective wishing for a happy, prosperous, and peaceful coming new year.

Moreover, the duty of the ladies acting as the hosts includes formally welcoming the

¹¹ After a relatively brief tantric meditation practice inside the temple the climax of the *dGu gtor* rite is performed on the only recently acquired premises on the western side of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex.

individual members of the celebrating Sherpa community. The head of each household, each of whom acting as sponsor of the Sherpa New Year festival, has personally received a formal invitation card through one of the team of organizing *lawas* two or one weeks beforehand. The lay participants are welcomed by the lady or ladies first with a formal “bKra ‘shis de legs!” and then with some drops of *chang* – in this context called *bsus chang* (i.e. *chang* to be used in the welcoming ceremony). The *bsus chang* that had first been ritually blessed by the bla ma and then filled in a ceremonial wooden flask is given into the palm of the right hand of the person to be welcomed. Thereupon she or he takes a sip of the blessed *bsus chang* while the hand containing the rest of the *bsus chang* in its palm moves across the head from the forehead down to the beginning of the neck. This gesture is understood as ensuring good health and well-being to the actor. Moreover, a bit of *rtsam pa* powder is placed on the right shoulder the symbolic meaning of this being ‘good luck and prosperity.’

Usually from around eleven o’clock onwards, i.e. after having been served with dal bhat, the officials conduct the ritual performance that involves no higher tantric meditation and visualization but is restricted to only a general spiritual practice. The ritual performance of the New Year celebration consists of several distinct parts. As is usual a ritual performance is preceded by a juniper fumigation offering (*bsang mchod*) directed to both the local and the higher protective deities (*klu* and *lha bsang*).¹² Its smell is said to placate the deities invoked, and at the same time it serves to purify the space to be used for the performance of the ritual celebration.

Then a Black Hat (*zhva nag*) dance is only briefly performed.¹³ This is followed by either two or four *gser skyems* dances performed by a group of masked dancers. The number of sacred dances (‘*chams*’) depends upon the available number of dancers.¹⁴ In the course of the

¹² A detailed account of the performance of the juniper burning offerings directed first to the local and then to the high protective deities (*klu* and *lha bsang mchod*) as performed as the beginning of the *Dumji* festival in dGon pa gZhung in Solu in association with its symbolic meaning and its history is given by E. Berg (2008, ch. 5, Day One, parts 1 – 3). – It seems that R.R. Kunwar is the only scholar who has, at least, mentioned the performance of the *lha bsang mchod* as practised among the Sherpas (1989, p. 236). The *bsang* rite is mentioned by S.B. Ortner as it is performed in the context of the *smyung gnas* fast as practised in a village temple (1978, p. 35).

¹³ The description of the important Black Hat dance as performed at night on the second day of the *Dumji* festival in dGon pa gZhung in Solu is provided by E. Berg (2008, ch. 5, part 6). In this context the Black Hat dancer ‘buries’ (*mnan pa*) the *dam sri* spirits thanks to powerful tantric practices. – For an authoritative account of the dance-steps and bodily movements of the Black Hat dancers see the ‘*chams yig*’ contained in R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1997, p. 119ff. For a description of different kinds of Black Hat dances in the course of which a *liṅga* is stabbed refer to R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1997, pp. 44–46; see also H. Richardson 1993, p. 122f. and E. Pearlman 2002, p. 41.

¹⁴ The masked dancers belong to the group of sixteen lay tantric practitioners (*sngags pa*) who belong to the *tse bcu* committee in the Shar pa dgon pa. Their domain is, as afore-mentioned, the performance of the *tse bcu* feast ritual which, as the name indicates, is held on the tenth day of each lunar month. It is consecrated to Guru

sacred masked dances a *gser skyems* or Golden Libation offering that is repeated several times is directed to both the Protectors of the Doctrine and the local protective deities.¹⁵ The conclusion part of this ritual performance consists, as is usual, of three different parts. Firstly, the dedication of the collected merit obtained through the performance of the ritual celebration (*bsngoba*) is directed to the benefit of all sentient beings on their way leading to enlightenment. Then, a wish prayer (*smon lam*) for a happy, prosperous, and peaceful new year is conducted. And in the final act called *bkra 'shis*, the wish for the general well-being of the celebrating community for both the present and the future is articulated.

The end of the ritual ceremony inaugurating the new year is marked by the throwing of *rtsam pa* (roasted barley) flour skywards from the hands of hundreds of participants accompanied by the collective shouting of 'Ki Ki So So Lha rGyal Lo' ("May the virtuous gods be victorious"). This is the usual formal Tibetan New Year greeting which is being offered to the deities as the shower of *rtsam pa* slowly settles down over the joyous gathering.

Next follows the mundane part of the festival in the early afternoon which is being held in the courtyard in front of the building complex. This is marked by an interesting change of roles. Now it is the officials with the presiding *bla ma* who having come down from the temple inside take seat on the entrance portico (*sgo mchor*) thus joining the audience whereas quite a number of participants begin to assume the actors' role. The secular half of the New Year festival consists of mainly two parts.

The first part is reserved for a series of speeches from both leading – male – dignitaries of the Sherpa community as well as from distinguished – male – members of the young generation.¹⁶ The major content of these most often very long speeches revolves around the praise of the unity of Sherpa community and of their leaders in view of all their successful activities devoted to the deliberate preservation and cultivation of the Sherpas' rich religio-cultural heritage including their language.

Padmasambhava.

¹⁵ A full description of the Golden Libation offering (*gser skyems*) performed as welcome ceremony in honour of both the Protectors of the Doctrine and the local protective deities as held as the first of the set of masked dances in the context of the *Dumji* festival in dGon pa gZhung in the Solu region is provided by E. Berg (2008, ch. 5, Day Three, part 2). For brief descriptions of the *gser skyems* offering in different contexts see R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, p. 401, p. 498; R.J. Kohn for that one that is being performed in the course of the first of the sacred *Mani Rimdu* dances as held in sPyi dbang monastery in the southern region of Solu (2001, p. 191f.); M. Ricard as it is being practised in different ritual contexts at Zhe chen monastery in Bodnāth, Kathmandu (2003, p. 76).

¹⁶ This rule is only modified when the festive event is also attended by the only Sherpani who since quite a few years has been acting as a renowned member of parliament. – In fact, it remains to be seen how long it will take until eventually also the female half of the Sherpa society will be accepted and thus be able to raise their voice in the socio-political context that continues to being the exclusive domain of the male gender.

Their pointed speeches are only understood appropriately once the Sherpas' new existential framework in the Kathmandu Valley is taken into consideration. The latter is made up by the traditionally dominating and alienating Hindu environment of the capital of the 'Hindu kingdom of Nepal' which on the ground of its very constitution has been gravely discriminating invariably all ethnic (and lower caste) groups since its very formation until the present day.¹⁷ In obvious contradistinction to those of the preceding years the speeches held now in the post-civil war era are being outspoken as the long overdue necessary criticism of the Hindu nation-state and its distinctive upper caste politics, particularly its blatant neglect of all ethnic groups and their under- or, as is in many cases, simply not-representation in the different bodies of state administration in the de facto multi-ethnic, -religious, and -lingual state is concerned. Occasionally in this context, awards are given either to Sherpas who have greatly contributed to the realization of the goals of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* as representing the whole Sherpa community or to Sherpas of the young generation who have succeeded in obtaining a PhD or similar academic degree in Nepal or abroad. This is always the cause for a certain kind of ethnic pride.¹⁸

The second section of the mundane part of the New Year festival as it is held among the Sherpas in the Shar pa dgon pa within the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth consists of the performance of the *shya bro*, the well-known Sherpa round dance. In the performance of the *shya bro* a great deal of those present – particularly female, but also male, particularly old, but also many young Sherpas – all dress in their respective ceremonial garb do participate. In this context the participants gather to form a wide half-circle around the structure (*bsang thabs*) to be used for the performance of the incense burning offering which, in this context, is placed in the center of the courtyard.

As is typical, the dancing is accompanied by the singing of traditional Sherpa songs. A significant feature of the *shya bro* performance is its open character which means that anyone is free to join and also to leave again any time. A recent innovation in this framework consists in the brief appearance of distinct groups of specially trained and predominantly young

¹⁷ For the history, distinctive character and very content of the 'Muluki Ain' and its translation see the invaluable work provided by A. Höfer 1979. The kingdom was abolished only in 2008, the Hindu nation-state, however, continues to exist.

¹⁸ This is only understood adequately from a historical perspective. Only the recent years have seen a due awareness among the Sherpas as to the validity of a sound modern and complete school education. For several decennia many parents used to encourage their sons to engage in the then flourishing trekking and mountaineering business as soon as possible. This resulted in a severely high rate of school drop-outs and, in long term, in the more or less complete lack of an own intelligentsia. The consequences of this grave short-sightedness have been felt only in the most recent years (refer to the sobering paper on present-day's poor educational status in the Sherpa community from the hand of young female lecturer Pasang Dolma Sherpa 2007).

female and male *shya bro* dancers whose performances in competition with each other are always greatly appreciated and especially honoured thereafter.¹⁹

All actors as well as all spectators of the audience, the *bla ma*, and the group of assisting monks included clearly enjoy being ‘off-duty’ and get great pleasure, especially from this joyful concluding part of the New Year festival. In its course *chang* and white silken ceremonial scarfs (*kha btags*) are distributed to each of the dancers by the same two ladies who already performed the welcoming ceremony in the late morning through which the festival had been formally opened up.

The lay population regards the *lo gsar* celebration primarily as a joyful social event. It is on this day that they also pay a visit to their *bla ma*(s). And a *bla ma* such as ‘Khrul zhig Rin po che usually sends *kha btags* to the leading monks of his monastery and also to some of his major donators (*sbyin bdag*). In many cases laypeople are only aware of the fact that the New Year festival marks the beginning of the first Tibetan lunar month; mostly, however, they are not conscious of the fact that the first half of the first Tibetan lunar month is commemorative of some key events in the history of early Buddhism and is thus symbolically highly charged.

According to tradition the first fifteen days of the year commemorate the fifteen days on which Buddha Śākyamuni displayed a different miracle each day. Consequently, the first Tibetan lunar month is called *chos ‘phrul dus chen*, i.e. the month when the ‘dharma miracles’ were performed. These miracles Buddha Śākyamuni performed in contests with diverse Indian ‘heretics.’ In the course of these contests Buddha Śākyamuni, of course, remained victorious. He thus clearly demonstrated the power and superiority of the Buddhist Dharma. Hence, the performance of these miracles proved to be a crucial means to both defeat the ‘heretics’ and increase the devotion of his disciples and his wider following. It is with these significant occasions that the Tibetan *lo gsar* celebration is closely associated.

b. A brief glimpse on the complex history of the *lo gsar* festival and its significant socio-political function

Since the Tibetan *lo gsar* festival is by far the most important celebration in the annual Tibetan Buddhist ritual cycle there shall be shed some light in the following on both the diverse activities involved in its performance and on its complex history. Two aspects that

¹⁹ The appearance of these Sherpa dance groups began in the course of the last decennium in the framework of both village temple festivals as they are being held in Solu-Khumbu as well as in the urban context of the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth. This phenomenon is but one important element of the present profound process of revitalization of Sherpa religion and culture since the overwhelming part of the members of the younger generation has, indeed, to re-learn the *shya bro* just as particularly the knowledge concerning all ritual performances, their respective history and symbolic meaning, to name but a few significant aspects characteristic of this ongoing current process of revitalisation among the Sherpas.

are of particular significance in the present context will be shown. Firstly, the Tibetan New Year festival entails certain archaic indigenous festivals which have been superseded and incorporated by Tibetan Buddhism. Subsequently, the great 'public' festival was created and remains characteristic of the Tibetan New Year celebration until the present day. Secondly, the Tibetan New Year festival represents a major large-scale Buddhist 'public festival' and serves to fulfill a highly important socio-political function for Tibetan society at large.

G. Tucci has drawn attention to the fact that in Tibet many festivals, which have been held up to the present and are also being performed in exile, have their historic origin in old local celebrations. Buddhism in Tibet, instead of abolishing the ancient festivals centered on the annual worship of the diverse local deities such as the *yul lha*, *sa bdag*, and *klu*, to name but only a few, has rather adapted them to its own world by way of grafting its own features on to the old autochthonous ceremonies. Hence, as those indigenous rituals and festivals were admitted into the Buddhist annual festival cycle, these ancient traditions were allowed to continue within the framework of the new religion adopted from India and to preserve its essential features.²⁰

This creative process of adaptation of ancient traditions to Buddhism's own ends through incorporation can best be exemplified by those new large-scale so-called 'public celebrations' which had been introduced into the annual festival calendar in the context of the New Year Festival in various phases of later Tibetan history due to the combined initiative of the spiritual and the temporal power. Buddhism made deliberate use of the ancient highly popular non-Buddhist New Year celebration, which has been held all over Tibet, and progressively inserted different kinds of 'public ceremonies' into the festival framework.

As some of *lo gsar*'s central features the most significant one being the temporary reversal of the existing social order, G. Tucci notes horse races, archery competitions, athletic games, and sacred dances with awe-inspiring masks. In the course of the masked dances, for instance, the actors brandish weapons in their hands. All these different kinds of activities, each of them representing integral parts of this framework, are explained as being indicative of very ancient, doubtless pre-Buddhist traditions in a archaic society in which an agonistic and military character predominated.²¹ R.A. Stein mentions dances and the singing of songs alternatively between men and women in which the creation of the world is evoked. The descent on a rope recalling the legendary descent of the mythical kings and ancestors from heaven to earth on a celestial rope also constitutes the occasion of an exchange of singing between the acrobat and the crowd of spectators.²²

²⁰ G. Tucci 1988, p. 149.

²¹ G. Tucci 1988, p. 153.

²² R.A. Stein 1987, p. 149.

The diverse activities as are characteristic of the performance of the Tibetan New Year festival reach their climax in the exorcist rite of driving out the harmful spirits and the evils which had accumulated in the course of the preceding year (*gtor bzlog*).²³ A. Waddell has summarized the meaning of the respective activities involved as "...Bacchanalian orgies for expelling the old year and ushering in good-luck for the new..."²⁴ Interestingly, according to A. Waddell, the original motive of those activities seems to have been to expel the old year with its demons of bad luck, and to propitiate with human sacrifice and probably some acts of cannibalism the war-god and the guardian-spirits.²⁵

Despite the subsequent changes in the form of new additions, the ancient tradition of the New Year festival with its archaic *rites de passage* on occasion of the change of the year is still clearly discernible into which it was inserted and thus appropriated by and incorporated within the Buddhist system. Moreover, it has to be emphasized that ancient customs such as the exorcism of harmful spirits and the sacred masked dances have been adopted in Buddhist ceremonies as reflected in their respective liturgies. However, the victims of the performance of the ancient human sacrifices have been replaced by anthropomorphic effigies (*gtor ma*) made of the dough of roasted barley flour (*rtsam pa*).²⁶ It is since then that a wide variety of *gtor ma* occupy a special place in practically all of the diverse kinds of ritual performances that have been celebrated in the four Buddhist schools until the present day.

It has to be recalled that the newly established public festivals represent a spectacular demonstration of both the state's temporal and of the Buddha's, the bla ma-s' and monks' spiritual power.²⁷ Other major functions of large-scale public ritual ceremonies in this context consist in the exorcism of evil spirits and the calling up of good fortune for the beginning new year or for ushering in a new and better era. The monks are responsible for the ritual performances, while the laity do not participate directly but are present as spectators who are free to move. Their presence, however, guarantees the exertion of the whole community's positive forces in the realization of the ritual celebration's goal as performed by the monastic community.²⁸ As to their deeper motivation, it has to be noted that both the lay-people as mere spectators and the clerics as the sole performers are always beneficiaries of these religious ceremonies, since, representing highly positive activities of body, speech and mind, they generate merit (*bsod nams*, Skt. *punya*). The merit is generated not only for personal

²³ G. Tucci 1988, p. 149 and p. 151.

²⁴ A. Waddell 1985, p. 518.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

²⁶ See G. Tucci 1988, p. 151 and L.A. Waddell 1985, p. 518).

²⁷ A.W. Macdonald 1987, pp. 10–11; G. Dreyfus 1995, p. 124.

²⁸ G. Tucci 1988, pp. 146–7, 150–1.

salvation but for the whole community whose future well-being the public ritual seeks to ensure. Hence, by participating in the sacred ceremonies, the faithful feel encouraged to actively contribute to their spectacular performance and its efficacy through donations and other kinds of services; in other words, it is through this kind of large-scale public ritual ceremonies that the faithful feel encouraged to assume, as has been and still is customary in the Tibetan cultural world, the role of a donator or *sbyin bdag* (Skt. *dānapati*) for the Buddhist dharma and its representatives.²⁹

As G. Tucci has emphasized, the performance of these grand public ceremonies for the welfare of both the individual and the whole community, in which both the clergy as well as the laity take part, "...integrates the monkhood and the layworld into a social totality."³⁰ Thus the establishment and the annual performance of these spectacular public ritual ceremonies serve to strongly reaffirm, strengthen, and, in certain contexts also restructure the existing Tibetan socio-political and religious order while, at the same time, they greatly serve to revitalize and fortify Buddhist norms and values. Consequently, their respective performances represent a significant factor that strongly contributes to the ongoing successful revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism in exile and the creation of unity and identity among the diverse communities in exile that constitute the present-day's Tibetan diaspora.

Needless to say that this holds true also of the performance of the Sherpa New Year festival as performed in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex in Bodhnāth, the different celebrations of which are all understood as important means through which the greatly needed revitalization of Buddhism among the Sherpas may be achieved as well as their new all-embracing unity and identity be created, strengthened and affirmed.

II. *Vajra Guru prayer*, Tib. *Vajra Guru dung sgrub*, the communal worship of Guru Padmasambhava, of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and of Buddha Amitābha as practiced in annual rotation in the context of the prayer of 'One Hundred Million Mantras'

Twelve days after the Tibetan New Year festival, actually in the first Tibetan lunar month on *tse bcu*, i.e. the tenth being the special day consecrated to Guru Rin po che in each Tibetan lunar month, numerous Sherpas gather in the Shar pa dgon pa to perform the communal meditation on Guru Padmasambhava in the course of the collective prayer of 'One Hundred Million Mantras.' It lasts for the considerable time-span of three weeks.³¹

²⁹ Refer to G. Tucci 1988, pp. 146–7, 150–1.

³⁰ G. Tucci 1988, p. 150.

³¹ In the year 2006 its duration was from March 12th until April 1st ; in 2007 it started on February 27th and lasted until March 20th.

According to tradition, this spiritual practice dates back to the time when, after the activities of the Indian tantric sage at bSam yas and in Tibet at large had to come to their successful completion Guru Padmasambhava announced his departure from the Land of Snows to Zang mdog dpal ri, the Glorious Copper-coloured Mountain. Upon his disciples' request to stay in Tibet he established, among others, the practice of *Vajra Guru dung sgrub*, which was meant as a deliberate act of ritual commemoration of the Lotus-born Teacher from Oḍḍiyāna (*o rgyan padma 'byung gnas*) who, particularly among the adherents of the rNying ma pa School, is commonly regarded as the Second Buddha. Needless to say that it is also meant, of course, to be an incentive to seek the Dharma and strive for obtaining Buddhahood. This ritual practice has been performed in monasteries of all the four Buddhist schools, particularly in the monasteries of the rNying ma pa order.

Among the Sherpas it has been until today only the Sherpa community in Bodhnāth, however, who established the *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* in the Shar pa dgon pa as a public festival for lay people. In the course of a meeting of most of the Sherpa clergy of both celibate bla ma-s and married tantric householder bla ma-s (*sngags pa*) in the year 1999 following the proposal of the sTeng po che Rin po che the practice of 'One Hundred Million Mantras' was introduced in the year 2000 as a regular annual 'public' ritual in worship of Guru Padmasambhava. As such it is particularly designed to suit the capability and the needs of lay people: similar to the fasting ritual (*smyung gnas*), to be described below, it is on this occasion that they are given the opportunity to practise the Dharma through reciting solely the ten-syllable mantra associated with Padmasambhava as often as they are able to. There is not involved any kind of visualization of a deity through highly complex tantric meditation the spiritual practice of which would necessitate a long process of learning that is actually the usual domain of yogins, bla ma-s, and monks. Instead, good motivation is the only prerequisite to participate. One is also free to leave for a while and also to indulge in conversation with others outside the temple. Consequently, the absolute majority of the participants are people of old age, most of them female. Only members of this particular age group are able to devote themselves fully to a spiritual practice that is performed for the considerable duration of three weeks; in contrast, those of the middle and young generation simply cannot afford the time necessitated by this extensive spiritual practice. The absolute majority of the participants are truly serious spiritual practitioners continuously reciting a mantra, numerous of them turning the prayer-wheel in the right hand while moving the beads of the rosary with the thumb, index, and at times also with the middle finger of the right hand. To briefly describe the atmosphere reigning over the collective Vajra Guru prayer: The steady murmur of the mantra pervades the solemn scene while the prayer-wheels are kept spinning continuously and the beads of the rosaries move and click through the fingers to make a record of the mantras recited.

Presided by a *bla ma*, who is assisted by the permanently available group of sixteen monks, the participants assemble in the temple after the performance of the *bsang* fumigation offering from around nine to ten o'clock to recite the mantra until after four o'clock in the afternoon. There is only one short break around noon, when a full lunch is served. Tea is provided several times per day. Usually, several *lawa-s* assume the honorific task of organizing the worldly affairs of the religious event on one day. Many participants contribute a number of packets of tea as donations, which are received by one of the organizers who have to keep a respective list. Interestingly, as is usual, this particular context is also used to collect donations of money for a new project the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee seeks to realize: presently, the financial donations are meant for the construction of two thousand small Guru Padmasambhava statues which will be placed along the four walls of the temple.

At the end of each day, the number of mantras recited by each participant is totaled and the day's total is recorded in a list. The particular spiritual goal of the three weeks' *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* practice is, as its name indicates, to complete the recitation of one hundred million mantras in worship of Guru Rin po che. On the average, between three hundred and three hundred and fifty people participate per day.³² Apart from worldly success and a favourable rebirth, this spiritual practice serves the two accumulations (*tshogs gnyis*) of merit (*bsod nams*) and of wisdom (*ye śes*).

At the end of the last day's mantra recitation a speech of thanks-giving is held in the temple by both the acting and the former long-term president of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee. Thereupon, in a solemn ceremony, white ceremonial silken scarves (*bka btags*) are distributed to the organizing *lawa-s* by the presiding *bla ma*. In turn, each of the officiating clerics is given a certain amount of money from the president on behalf of the management committee as the representative of the Sherpa community. In the early afternoon of the following day, a long-life blessing ceremony (*tshe dbang*) is performed in the temple by the rDza sprul Rin po che. As is usual in the case of the celebration of a long-life blessing, which is always highly valued by laypeople, it is attended by so many Sherpas that the temple is packed. It is this ceremony that marks the formal end of the collective *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* mantra recitation practice.

The Vajra Guru prayer is performed in slightly different form in rotation in the course of a three years' cycle. According to the teachings of the Mahāyāna (*theg pa chen po*), the

³² In fact, in the beginning as well as towards the end of the prayer celebration it is attended by considerably more people, whereas during the middle of the three weeks' time span there are markedly less participants. As is usual on occasion of any kind of religious festival in any sacred site in Bodhnāth a small section of the participants are Tibetans who always seem to be eager not to miss any chance to collect religious merit.

vehicle of the Bodhisattvas that aims at full Buddhahood for the sake of all beings, the transcendent reality of perfect Buddhahood is represented in three different bodies or kāya-s (Tib. *sku gsum*, Skt. Trikāya).

In his threefold manifestation as Trikāya bla ma each representing one of the three different levels of existence Guru Padmasambhava, the Lotus-Born Teacher, embodies the body of worldly existence or Nirmāṇakāya (*sprul sku*), i.e. the Body of Manifestation.³³ This is the aspect of Buddhahood which manifests out of compassion to help ordinary beings. Avalokiteśvara (*spyan ras gzigs*), the Bodhisattva (*byang chub sems dpa'*) of Great Compassion (*mahākārunika*), who is the patron saint of Tibet, represents the Sambhogakāya (*longs sku*), Body of Perfect Enjoyment.³⁴ This is the spontaneously luminous aspect of Buddhahood, only perceptible to highly realized beings. Buddha Amitābha (Tib. *'od phag med* or *snang ba mtha' yas*), lit. Boundless Light, the Lord of the Pure Land or of the Western Paradise (*bde ba can*, Skt. Sukhāvātī, represents the Dharmakāya (*chos sku*), lit. Dharma Body.³⁵ This is the 'emptiness' aspect of Buddhahood. It can be translated as Body of Truth.

An adequate understanding of the complex symbolism involved in the image of Guru Padmasambhava as the Trikāya bla ma is conveyed through a fifteenth-century painted scroll from Eastern Tibet. Significantly, the *thang ka* is from the hand of the X. Karma pa, Chos dbyings rdo rje (1605–74).³⁶ It has been reproduced by G. W. Essen, the collector of Tibetan sacred art, and the renowned Tibetan scholar T.T. Thingo in their anthology on 'The Deities of the Himalayas.'³⁷ The deities representing the Trikāya are arranged in hierarchical order. In the center Padmasambhava is depicted as Indian paṇḍita wearing a monk's robe and the hat of a scholar. Above his head, Padmasambhava is floating on a cloud in the form of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara-Ṣaḍakṣarī as 'Master of the Six Syllables,' who mercifully looks down to the world of sentient beings. Enthroned on a rainbow above him is Padmasambhava in the form of the red Amitābha.

As to its performance each year, the Vajra Guru prayer focuses upon one particular kāya as represented by Padmasambhava. In the year 2005 the mantra (*sngags*) of Buddha Amitābha

³³ A *thang ka* of Padmasambhava in his form as Padmakāra (Tib. padma 'byung gnas), the emanation buddha-body, seated in the center of his palace, can be found in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate 13.

³⁴ A painted scroll of Avalokiteśvara, 'the compassionate bodhisattva of perfect rapture', seated in the center of his palace, is contained in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate 12.

³⁵ A *thang ka* of Amitābha, the buddha body of reality, showing the Lord of Boundless Light seated in the center of his palace is provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate 11.

³⁶ The X. Karma pa was a renowned painter who belonged to the Karma sgar bris school, refer to D. and J. Jackson 1994, p. 12, 148, n. 30.

³⁷ G. W. Essen and T.T. Thingo 1989, 'Tafelband', see p. 10.

as Dharmakāya. Amitābha's mantra is 'Om āh mī devā hrīh' was recited. In consequence, this particular prayer performance is also called 'od phag med dung sgrub.

In the year 2006 the mantra of Avalokiteśvara (*spyan ras gzigs*), the Bodhisattva (*hyang chub sems dpa'*) of Great Compassion (*mahākāruṇika*) was recited. His mantra, the most widely recited one in Tibet, is 'Om māṇi padme hūṃ'. Avalokiteśvara represents the Sambhogakāya. Accordingly, that kind of prayer performance is also called *spyan ras gzigs dung sgrub*.

In the year 2007, Guru Padmasambhava's mantra was recited. This is 'Om mā hūṃ ba dzra gu ru padme siddhi hūṃ'. Guru Padmasambhava represents the Nirmāṇakāya. Consequently, this particular prayer practice is also called *Guru Rin po che dung sgrub*. With the following year (2008), a new three years' cycle of the Vajra Guru prayer will begin. Hence, in that year the mantra of Amitābha will be recited again.

III. Buddha Jayanti, the birthday of Buddha Śākyamuni

Buddha Jayanti, the special feast day, that commemorates the birth anniversary of Buddha Śākyamuni, is celebrated on the fifteenth of the fourth Tibetan lunar month which coincides with full moon.

Its celebration begins in the early morning with a juniper leaves fumigation offering (*klu* and *lha bsang mchod*) to the protective deities local and high to please them and to ensure their benevolent protection and help and to purify the site of the sacred performance as is the usual ritual prerequisite for any kind of religious performance. As is common among the Sherpas, the *bsang mchod* ritual is held according to the *sādhana*, i.e. meditation manual, of the treasure-text (*gter ma*) called *Ri wo bsang mchod* ('Mountain Incense Offering'), which is read by the presiding bla ma and his assistants. In fact, this text represents a 'mind treasure' (*gong gter*) which had been unearthed by the 'treasure-finder' (*gter ston*) Lha btsun nam mkha 'jigs med, b. 1597–1655.³⁸

That recitation is followed by a collective prayer (*smon lam*) in worship of the historical Buddha. Thereupon a part of the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* ('Embodiment of the Precious Ones') is briefly chanted by the bla ma and the group of assisting monks.³⁹ This important treasure-

³⁸ This ritual text is contained in the list of Tibetan sources in R.J. Kohn 2001, p. 354. – For the spiritual biography and the achievements of this 17th century master, who, among others, had been instrumental in the restoration of bSam yas monastery refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 818–20. – For the treasure category of *gong gter* refer to the work of the rNying ma pa scholar T. Thondup Rinpoche 1986, p. 61.

³⁹ According to Dudjom Rinpoche Rig 'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po extracted the *Utterly Profound Gathering Of All Precious Jewels* (*yang zab dkon mchog spyi 'dus*) from the iron gate of Hom 'phrang in Brag lung in Kong po in the Southwest of Kham province (1991, p. 810). For the life and spiritual achievements of this eminent treasure-revealer see op. cit., pp. 809–812: a line drawing is provided on p. 810. The *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* teaching cycle has been adopted by numerous rNying ma pa communities in the Himalayan Highlands of Nepal

cycle which is being used among the Sherpas until the present day for a wide range of purposes was discovered by the eminent master Rig 'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585–1656) from Kong po in the year 1620. Its recitation culminates in the celebratory feast commonly called *tshogs 'khorlo* (Skt. *gaṇacakra*), in the course of which consecrated food is consumed by the assembled participants.⁴⁰

Then a religious discourse on the life-story of Buddha Śākyamuni is held by the presiding bla ma. The sacred narrative focuses on the extraordinary life of a young man of royal descent, who eventually renounced the pleasures of the privileged worldly life of a kingly householder to devote himself fully to an ascetic life. It then tells of his numerous spiritual practices owing to which he assumed supra-human powers and thus was able to perform countless miraculous feats throughout his life time and finally to obtain enlightenment (*byang chub sems*). According to the clerics, although quite a few of the lay audience at whom they are directed certainly may not fully grasp the particular profound and complex symbolic meaning of the different episodes told, the edifying tales clearly mirror Buddha Śākyamuni's marvelous spiritual powers. These powers were gained through a wide range of deliberate spiritual practices that eventually made possible his victories over numerous 'enemies' of the Dharma, thus overcoming a series of obstacles to its successful establishment and further spread. Hence, the stories of the historical Buddha's extraordinary feats are designed to demonstrate the supremacy of the Dharma through the diverse stories of his spiritual success.

As is characteristic of the literary genre of hagiography, it does not deal with 'historical truth,' but instead is first and foremost concerned to illuminate 'religious truth' as exemplified the extraordinary life of the historical founder of Buddhism. In extension of J.B. Robinson's discussion of the lives of Indian Buddhist saints 'religious truth' is the genuine insight anyone

bordering Tibet. To the Sherpas of Northeastern Nepal it was transmitted in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries from South Tibet by the influential Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837) who had, among others, quite a few disciples among the Sherpas. For the transmission and spread of the teachings of this important treasure-cycle among the Sherpas which has been practiced by them until the present day refer to F.-K. Ehrhard 1993. In his paper he also provides both the original text of an 'accession list' (*thob yig*) of the teachings of Rig 'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po and its translation (op. cit, pp. 81–89). – In his detailed account of the main temple of sPyi dbang dgon pa, the renowned Sherpa monastery in the Solu region D. L. Snellgrove has provided a description of the different sets of divinities who feature in the maṇḍala (*dkyil 'khor*) of the *dkon mchog spyi 'dus* (1957, pp. 228–234). They are painted as frescoes on the right wall in association with the forty-two tranquil and the fifty-eight fierce (*zhi khro*) protector deities. A diagram of the maṇḍala is given on p. 295.

⁴⁰ In the morning delicious foods, beautifully arranged on the offering table by the altar, have been ritually consecrated in four different steps, offered to the deities, local spirits, and sentient beings. Marking the end of the *tshogs mchod* they are consumed as sacramental food by the members of the audience; for some information on the *tshogs mchod* refer to J. Makransky 1996, p. 326.

gets from merely hearing the account of Buddha Śākyamuni's sacred life story.⁴¹ Thus, for the faithful, the diverse wonderful episodes provide a 'living focus for devotion.'⁴² Moreover, it is by his example that Buddha Śākyamuni points to higher possibilities in the human existence. This serves to prompt those who are living an ordinary life to make the requisite effort, practice the Dharma, and engage in meditation. J.B. Robinson aptly summarizes the main goals of the religious sermon, what the clerics regard as a major act of collective 'remembering of the three jewels' (*dkon mchog rjes dran*), as follows : "The life of the Buddha illuminates the origin of the tradition and provides a model for understanding both what it means to be a Buddha and what it means to be a Buddhist."⁴³

Whereas the clerics see the religious discourse as the most significant activity performed in the context of the Buddha Jayanti celebration, the laity clearly regards the following procession (*chos skor*) as its major distinctive element. The solemn procession leads from the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* to the old Chabahil Stūpa and from there via Mahankal to the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth and back gain to the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*.

On the back of a van leading the procession are seated most of the assisting monks. Two monks each perform the blowing of the high-pitched oboes (*rgya gling*), while two other monks blow an impressive long horn (*sang dung*) each thus clearing the way of the small statue of Buddha Śākyamuni decorated with a fine ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*). It is held by a monk above the cabin of the following so that it can easily be seen by the faithful and the huge crowd lining both sides of the road the procession takes. Another monk holds a big coloured drawing of the young Buddha of our present times seated on a lotus throne; one monk shelters the statue and the picture with a huge ceremonial parasol (*gdugs*), others hold long victory banners (*rgyal mtshan*) as is characteristic of a religious procession. Other monks wave small Buddhist flags with the five typical colours. The presiding *bla ma* is seated in the cabin next to the driver. While the convoy moves on the statue and the picture are warmly welcomed by the huge crowd of spectators assembled all along the procession way who also shout: "Long live the Dharma!" and "Victory to the Dharma!" Interestingly, with completion of the procession, the Buddha Jayanti celebration has come to its sudden end, hence all participants return home.⁴⁴

It has to be recalled that the outlined sequence of religious activities that make up the present-day's Buddha Jayanti celebration is performed in both local temples and monasteries

⁴¹ J.B. Robinson 1996, pp. 65–67, see p. 66.

⁴² Cf. J.B. Robinson 1996, p. 67.

⁴³ J.B. Robinson 1996, p. 66.

⁴⁴ In other words, unlike numerous other grand festivals the end of Buddha Jayanti is not marked by a long-life blessing (*tshe dbang*) or any other kind of blessing.

all over the Sherpa area. With only little differences the Buddha Jayanti festival is practiced in all four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. However, it does not represent an old tradition such as is the case of the New Year festival, the *smyung gnas* rite, and the *Druk pa tse bzhi* performance. Instead, the introduction of this elaborated kind of the Buddha Jayanti celebration is only of recent date. According to my information, among the Sherpas as well as among all four schools, in general, its establishment began only slowly from the middle of the Seventies onwards. In the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth the Buddha Jayanti festival was only introduced at the beginning of the Nineties.⁴⁵ In fact, representatives from the four schools in Nepal had been invited by the Theravāda Buddhists at Svayambhūnāth Stūpa. Since ancient times until the present, Theravāda Buddhists have been performing the Buddha Jayanti festival. Subsequently, it was from them that a part of the elaborated chain of religious activities, the procession in particular, had been adopted. Around the procession, each of the four Tibetan Buddhist schools subsequently created a tradition of its own.⁴⁶

IV. *sMyung gnas*, the fasting ritual

On the thirteenth of the fifth Tibetan lunar month a great many laypeople gather for a period of three days at the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth to celebrate *smyung gnas*. The *smyung gnas* celebration is a highly popular public Buddhist ritual throughout the Tibetan cultural world particularly for the laity.⁴⁷

In Tibet the fasting ritual is held in *sa ga zla ba*, being the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. According to tradition the birth, attainment of enlightenment, and the passing away of Buddha Śākyamuni into parinirvāṇa all fall in this month.⁴⁸ Consequently, *sa ga zla ba* is considered to be a special month for performing virtuous actions in order to accumulate merit and to attain one's spiritual goals. *sMyung gnas* is associated with a key episode in the life of Buddha Śākyamuni that preceded his gaining of enlightenment. As E. Lamotte writes for six years (536–532) "...he devoted himself to the most severe austerities, stopping his

⁴⁵ To give but one example from remoter Sherpa areas, according to my informants, the establishment of the Buddha Jayanti festival in the southern Solu area began only in 1992, i.e. about the same time when it was introduced in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth.

⁴⁶ At Bodh Gaya, the site of Buddha Śākyamuni's enlightenment, today's Buddha Jayanti festival is celebrated in grand style. Its visit is being propagated and profitably marketed by major Indian travel companies, for this refer, a.o., to www.festivalsofindia.in.

⁴⁷ A very brief, but rather confused mention of the fasting practice in Tibet can be found in A. Waddell 1985, p. 501.

⁴⁸ According to K. Gutschow at the dKar cha nunnery in central Zangs dkar the three days' *smyung gnas* fast, inserted in the three weeks' Great Prayer Festival (*smoṅ lam chen mo*), is held in the fourth Tibetan lunar month (1997, p.42). This is a telling example that in many cases a local community performs a major ceremony according to its own local tradition.

breathing and undergoing fasts so prolonged that they endangered his life.”⁴⁹ However, it was during the period of these austerities that he discovered a new method of spiritual exercise.⁵⁰ He abandoned his ascetic practices including the fasting practice, began to eat normally again, and thus regained his physical strength. Thereupon he went to Bodh Gayā. In the evening he reached the Tree of Enlightenment, sat at its foot and began meditating. During this night, the full moon day of the month Visākha (April/May), he attained full enlightenment (*mngon par sangs rgyas pa*) which represents the tenth of the ‘Twelve Deeds performed by an Enlightened Buddha’ (*mdzad pa bcu gnyis*).⁵¹ Hence, as T. Rigzin emphasizes, the fifteenth of the fourth Tibetan month is ‘the most important day for Tibetan Buddhists’ which is the occasion of a special festival in Lha sa.⁵²

Among the Sherpas, however, *smjung gnas* is performed on the fifteenth, i.e. the day of full moon, of the fifth lunar month.⁵³

sMyung gnas is a practice of collective fasting focused upon Avalokiteśvara, the Great Bodhisattva of Compassion, in his eleven-faced and thousand-armed form. G.W. Essen and T.T. Thingo have placed strong emphasis on the fact that this particular kind of Avalokiteśvara belongs to the most complex of the manifold forms of the bodhisattva of compassion who is highly popular among Tibetan Buddhists. His eleven heads rise like a five-storied tower above his body and thus let him overview the ten cardinal directions.⁵⁴ The thousand arms extend his helping hands toward all beings. Each of the thousand hands have in the palm an eye of wisdom that symbolizes Avalokiteśvara’s compassionate concern for all living beings and their sufferings. In their description of a painted scroll of this particular form of Avalokiteśvara (Western Tibet, Gu ge, 15th century) art historian M.M. Rhie and Tibetanist R.A.F. Thurman offer valuable additional explanations. According to the two authors ten of this form of Avalokiteśvara’s faces indicate his attainment of the ten Bodhisattva stages,

⁴⁹ Cf. E. Lamotte 1988, p. 16.

⁵⁰ For this discovery see E.J. Thomas 1992, p. 70.

⁵¹ This has been described by E. J. Thomas 1992, p. 62; E. Lamotte 1988, p. 16; T. Rigzin 1993, pp. 31–32.

⁵² T. Rigzin 1993, p. 26. The *sa ga zla ba* festival is described in op. cit., p. 35f.; a brief account of this festival is also provided by H. Richardson 1993, p. 85f.

⁵³ This date conforms to the information given by Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, p. 180 and Sh. B. Ortner 1978, p.33. – As to the reasons for the choice of that particular date my informants gave me differing explanations a discussion of which is beyond the limits of the present investigation. – In the region of Dol po, *smjung gnas* is held in the first Tibetan lunar month; see C. Jest 1975, p. 332. Unfortunately he does not provide any explanation for the choice of that time for the performance of the *smjung gnas* rite.

⁵⁴ Cf. G.W. Essen and T.T. Thingo. 1989. Vol. I, p. 78 [no. I-40] in their description of a bronze statue (Northeast India, 11th century) of Ekādaśamukha-Avalokiteśvara (*sPyan ras gzig bcu gcig shal*). – For another bronze statue of this particular form of Avalokiteśvara (Tibet, 15th century) see op. cit., p. 77. – Moreover, the photos of three different bronze statues of this form of Avalokiteśvara are provided by the authors in Vol. II., p. 62.

with the eleventh, the face of Amitābha, the Buddha of the Lotus Family, indicating his being the incarnation of the universal compassion of all Buddhas.⁵⁵

In order to understand the popular tradition of the fasting ritual as practiced throughout the Tibetan cultural world let us briefly turn to the life-story of that personage who is commonly regarded as the initiator of this public Buddhist ritual and thus occupies a special place in Tibetan Buddhist religious history. According to tradition, the famed Kashmiri nun dGe slong ma dpal mo is credited with having both founded and introduced the *smyung gnas* lineage in India.⁵⁶ Subsequently, it was transmitted via the Kathmandu Valley and the sKyid grong area in Southwest Tibet to the Land of Snows.⁵⁷

dGe slong ma dpal mo is said to have been born as Lakṣmīṃ[karā], the beautiful daughter of Dharma pa la, king of U rgyan, and sister of Indra bodhi, a figure well-known from the tales of Indian tantric saints.⁵⁸ Afflicted with leprosy, she devoted her body, speech, and mind to the worship of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion who revealed to her a fasting ritual. Most important she employed the practice of this fasting ritual as a means of purification and atonement. Avalokiteśvara cured her, and out of her instilled faith and deep gratitude she took full ordination as a Buddhist nun. Thereafter, dGe slong ma dpal mo practiced this ritual for the benefit of all sentient beings, and finally she attained supreme accomplishment through the spiritual practice of Avalokiteśvara. It is due to her impressive tale of suffering, asceticism, perseverance, and final liberation that dGe slong ma dpal mo

⁵⁵ M.M. Rhie and R.A.F. Thurman. 1991, see pp. 326–329 [nos. 129 and 129.1–4]. – For more information on this significant form of Avalokiteśvara refer to G. Tucci 1949, Vol. II, P. III, pp. 361–63 in his discussion of the West Tibetan Gu ge school of *thang ka* painting (op. cit., pp. 347–368).

⁵⁶ It has to be emphasized, however, that according to contemporary discourse within Tibetan studies the origin of the fasting rite in India still remains obscure; refer to R. Jackson 1997, p. 273, R. Vitali 2006, p. 230, F.-K. Ehrhard (in press, ts. p. 3). – As above mentioned Buddha Śākyamuni practiced the fasting rite in the course of a six-year meditation retreat. Interestingly, E. Lamotte mentions that the ‘discipline of fasting’ was observed by “...the great majority of Indian orders before being adopted by the Buddhists.” (1988, p. 70). Hence, in the era of the historical Buddha fasting had been a common practice among religious practitioners of different adherence. Fasting as a spiritual practice is a recurrent theme throughout the ‘Jātaka or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births’ ed. by E.B. Cowell 1997, orig. 1895–1907.

⁵⁷ R. Vitali has traced the transmission of the *smyung gnas* practice in India, its spread to the Kathmandu Valley, and its subsequent transmission to Tibet via the sKyid grong region just north of the Kathmandu Valley (2006, pp. 234–254). Significantly, this movement of the fasting lineage from India via the KTM-Valley to Tibet took place during the 10th – 12th centuries.

⁵⁸ A detailed investigation concerning the textual tradition associated with her life as exemplified by several hagiographies has been provided by I.M. Vargas-O’Brian 2001, pp. 157–166. – K.R. Schaeffer retold her life-story based on a version of her biography that was composed in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century by a master from Central Tibet (2004, pp. 62–66).

became a highly inspiring figure for the faithful whose example, although most probably impossible to match, is nevertheless essential to be followed.⁵⁹

As has already been mentioned, in Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist societies such as the Sherpas the *smyung gnas* or fasting ritual is the occasion of an important public Buddhist celebration which is held annually.⁶⁰ It is on this occasion that among the Sherpas numerous members of the laity gather at the local temple for the duration of three days. In their course the lay participants chant prayers and perform prostrations and certain ascetic practices to express their devotion to Avalokiteśvara (Tib. *sPyan ras gzigs*). For the period of the three days the faithful – women, men, and children – sleep separately in the local temple. Occasionally, *smyung gnas* is also performed in private houses where it is celebrated in the shrine room (*chos khang*). The major purposes of the *smyung gnas* rite are the confession (*bshags pa*) of sins (*sdig pa*) and their purification, the generation of merit (*bsod nams*), and the development of a virtuous attitude (*dge ba*).⁶¹

The *smyung gnas* celebration among the Sherpas is based on the text that focuses upon the practice of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara called *Jo wo thugs jre chen po*. It is from ‘Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros (1893–1959), one of the most eminent masters of the twentieth century.

⁵⁹ Among the many miracles she performed in order to both counter the unfaithful and inspire faith, the episode in which she cut off her own head, stuck it upon her walking stick and then began a tantric dance is most commonly recounted in Tibet and the Himalayan Buddhist communities, see R. Vitali 2006, p. 231; and K. R. Schaeffer 2004, p. 64.

⁶⁰ C. Jest has provided an interesting description of *smyung gnas* as it is held in Dol po in the first month (1975, pp. 332–335). – Descriptions of *smyung gnas* celebrations as they are being performed in Zangs skar and by the Gurungs of Nepal have been provided by K. Gutschow 1999 and S.R. Mumford 1989, p. 4, 25, 57, 82, 111–113; among the Nye shang pa in present-day Manang and also in the Manang Gonpa at Svayambhūnāth near Kathmandu it has been conducted only since about fifteen years, see L. Messerschmidt et al. 2004, p. 99f. As to the Sherpas a brief account of *smyung gnas* held in Thang smad monastery at the end of the 19th century has been given by Kun bzang ye śes. the first Lawudo bla ma (1865–1946), in Jamyang Wangmo 2005, pp. 54–56; descriptions of *smyung gnas* celebrations as they have been performed among the Sherpas in the Khumbu region in the early Sixties have been given by Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, pp. 181–85. – Sh. B. Ortner has provided a detailed ethnographic description of the celebration as it had been held in dGon pa gZhung in the Solu region in the middle of the Seventies (1978, ch. 3). Then, the participation of the local lay people had been severely on the decline, hence the picture she conveys is somewhat sad since it unmistakably indicates the severe decline from that Sherpa Buddhism was suffering at that time. – In her later book on ‘High Religion’ (1989, pp. 180–181), however, Ortner only briefly mentions the *smyung gnas* which mainly reflects her own stance but does not help much to analyze and understand the ritual. – See also the short account provided by R.R. Kunwar 1989, p.218, 232. – A recent brief description is from the hand of sociologist P. Sherpa (2007, p.21). However, he describes only shortly the celebration as it is held in village temples in the Khumbu region where it extends over a period of four days. This contradicts Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, pp. 183f. according to whom it lasts for three days which is in line with my own information and its duration in the Solu area and in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodnāth.

⁶¹ Refer to Jackson, R. 1997, p. 274.

sMyung gnas as it is held in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* follows a structure that is common not only among the Sherpas, but throughout Tibetan and Himalayan Buddhist communities. On the morning of the thirteenth, which is the first day, a fumigation of juniper leaves as an offering to both the local and the high protective deities (*klu* and *lha bsang*) is performed. Its smell is believed to please the deities and to purify the site of the solemn celebration. The inside of the temple as well as the surroundings including the wide courtyard are cleaned by the numerous participants already present. The altar (*gtor cog*) is decorated. The set of offerings of seven substances – drink, purified water plus the five kinds of offerings (*phyi mchod lnga*) which are used in certain rituals consisting of food, water, butter lamp, incense and flowers – is prepared and butter lamps (*mar me*) refilled, all of which to be used later as an offering to Avalokiteśvara in his eleven-faced and thousand-armed form. Painted scrolls depicting this kind of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion are hung and decorated with a fine ceremonial scarf (*kha btags*). Moreover, the throne of the presiding *bla ma* has to be made and the two rows of large tables for his assistants and their seats have to be arranged.

At noon sharp the gathered celebrating community eats lunch that has been provided by the donors and prepared by the usual kitchen team. Thereafter the participants observe eight vows (*smyung gnas kyi sdom pa*) against killing, stealing, lying, sexual activity, intoxicants, eating after noon, worldly entertainment, and occupying an exalted seat.⁶² The presiding *bla ma* gives a religious discourse on the history of the *smyung gnas* rite which, already practiced by Buddha Śākyamuni in the course of a six-year meditation retreat, is said to have been introduced by dGe slong ma dpal mo. Her life-story of suffering, asceticism, and final liberation is told as example for others to follow. The beginning of each of the following two days is opened up by this kind of religious discourse. Only then the participants engage in the practice of the *sādhana* of the Eleven-faced and Thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara.⁶³

The *smyung gnas* practice is considered as an important ritual means of purification of body, speech, and mind that includes a number of both physical and mental exercises. The ritual practice concerning the purification of the body is not eating – which is understood as to avoid killing – and the performance of prostrations (*phyag 'tsal ba*); that of the speech consists in praying, reciting his famous six-syllable mantra, and strictly refraining from any conversation; and that of the mind is meditation (*sgom pa*) on this particular form of

⁶² For an enumeration of the eight vows and their discussion refer to R. Jackson 1997, pp. 271 ff. The author emphasizes that the eight vows may also be taken for life by men or women who wish to renounce the world outside the monastic context, or by women who desire to live a monastic life “...but are barred from doing so by the loss of the lineage of ordination.” (p. 271)

⁶³ R. Jackson briefly mentions the history of this particular form of Avalokiteśvara (1997, pp. 272f.) to which the fasting ritual is devoted.

Avalokiteśvara. While the presiding *bla ma* and his assistants mainly perform the chanting and praying the participating laypeople are predominantly occupied with reciting Avalokiteśvara's mantra 'Om māṇi padme hūṃ' ('Om, Jewel in the Lotus, hūṃ'). This is basically the ritual practice as performed during the afternoon of the first day and on the following two days. Whereas on the second day at noon a meal is taken collectively, on the third, the *smyung gnas* day, fasting is to be practiced and absolute silence as to any kind of personal conversation is to be observed.⁶⁴

sMyung gnas is the major public Buddhist ritual on occasion of which the members of the laity for a limited time-span may assume what they think resembles a monk's or nun's lifestyle and thereby also may gain access to the religious power of the clergy.⁶⁵ Commonly, lay people see the involved practices of fasting, silence, and celibacy as the central features of the *smyung gnas* ritual. It has been performed by both monks and lay people, although 'it really is a layperson's practice' and the majority of the participants are middle-aged or older, as R. Jackson observes.⁶⁶ To this day, the fasting ritual enjoys great popularity throughout the Tibetan Buddhist cultural realm, is practiced among all different schools, and particularly attracts women.⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, there is also an important social dimension to the practice of the fasting ritual.⁶⁸ First of all it unites the lay community and their *bla ma*-s in one common frame of action. As a significant ritual practice the benefits of which are performed collectively but go to the individual practitioner, it serves to strengthen or renew the sense of community and its social cohesion. Moreover, for older people representing the major segment of the celebrating community, the performance of the fasting ritual serves to ease the transition to a less active life.⁶⁹

V. *Druk pa tse bzhi*, lit. 'The Fourth Day of the Sixth [Tibetan Lunar] Month'.

Having continued his meditation practice in Bodh Gayā for either four or seven weeks – depending on two differing traditions – after having obtained enlightenment (*byang chub*) under the Bodhi tree, in the course of which he also subdued Māra, the Buddha Śākyamuni

⁶⁴ In great monasteries *smyung gnas* is practised for sixteen days in an alternating sequence of eight pairs of two days (*smyung gnas cha brgyad*) – on the first day one meal is consumed, on the second fasting is practised, and so on.

⁶⁵ See Jackson, R. 1997, p. 275.

⁶⁶ Jackson, R. 1997, p. 273.

⁶⁷ See Jackson, R. 1997, p. 271, p. 273; Vargas-O'Bran, I.M. 2001, p. 157.

⁶⁸ For the following social aspects refer to Jackson, R. 1997, p. 271, p. 275.

⁶⁹ This conforms to the observation noted by Jackson, R. 1997, p. 275.

went to the Deer Park at Sarnāth.⁷⁰ This small town is located about a dozen kilometres to the east of the ancient city of Vārāṇasī on the northern banks of the Ganges. It was here that he preached the discourse on *Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma*. In this sermon the ‘Four Noble Truths’ (*bden pa bzhi*) are given and explained. Therein are laid out the fundamental principles of Buddhism. These are as follows: 1. The Truth of suffering, 2. of the origin of suffering, i.e. the obscuring emotions, 3. of the cessation of suffering, and 4. of the spiritual path to achieve this cessation.⁷¹

Hence, the fourth day of the sixth lunar month is commemorative of the day (*chos skor dus chen*) when Buddha Śākyamuni, in his thirty-fifth year, started to turn the ‘Wheel of the Dharma’ through the teaching of the ‘Four Noble Truths.’⁷² In Tibetan religious history this key event in the history of Indian Buddhism is regarded as the eleventh (*chos kyi 'khor lo bskor*) in the sequence of the ‘Twelve Deeds performed by an Enlightened Buddha’ (*mdzad pa bcu gnyis*).

Tradition holds that Buddha Śākyamuni gave his first teaching to the group of his ‘Five Noble Disciples,’⁷³ five sons of noble families, at the Deer Park at Sarnāth.⁷⁴ Hence, this auspicious day has become the occasion of a special religious festival that has been held in the whole realm of Tibetan Buddhism.⁷⁵ Its performance has been reestablished in exile.

In Tibetan Buddhist monastic life this day marks the beginning of the summer meditative retreat of three months. In exile, big monasteries such as Zhe chen Monastery in the vicinity of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth occasionally celebrate a *sgrub chen* (great liturgical performance) in the late morning which is followed in the afternoon by a communal feast

⁷⁰ For an authoritative account according to which it was seven weeks after having gained enlightenment refer to the ‘Chronology of the Buddha’s Life’ as has been told by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 946f. E.J. Thomas draws attention to the fact that according to the Vinaya Buddha Śākyamuni remained only four weeks under the Bodhi tree (1992, p. 85).

⁷¹ For an abbreviated translation of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ refer to E.J. Thomas 1992, pp. 87f. – In the section entitled ‘The Discourse at Vārāṇasī’ E. Lamotte has given a detailed explanation as to the content of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ (1988, pp. 26–47).

⁷² As to the circumstances that led to the preaching of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ see E.J. Thomas 1992, ch. VII; E. Lamotte 1988, p. 17; a brief mention of this key event in the history of Buddhism has been made by D.L. Snellgrove 1987, p. 6 and p. 10 as is provided in the context of a short overview of the Buddha’s life-story. For the circumstances, particularly the numerous deities who gathered for this occasion – surrounding the preaching refer to T. Rigzin 1993, pp. 44–47.

⁷³ An enumeration of the names of his first five disciples can be found in T. Rigzin 1993, 46 and p. 47; they are also provided by E. Lamotte 1988, p. 17.

⁷⁴ Owing to this particular symbolic significance Sarnāth is counted as one of the four major pan-Buddhist places of pilgrimage

⁷⁵ Some aspects of how it has been celebrated in Lha sa and which sacred places have been visited in its course are mentioned by T. Rigzin 1993, pp. 47–48.

ritual (Tib. *tshog 'khorlo*, Skt. *gānachakra*). In monastic colleges (*bshad grwa*) this is generally the beginning of higher teachings. In Sherpa monasteries *Druk pa tse bzhi* also marks the start of higher teachings.

In the Shar pa dgon pa in Bodhnāth *druk pa tse bzhi* is celebrated as follows. In the morning following the performance of the usual *bsang* or juniper fumigation offering to both the lower (*klu*) and the higher protective deities (*lha*), special prayers and offerings (*mchod pa*) directed to Buddha Śākyamuni are performed by the presiding *bla ma* and the group of assisting monks. This is the major part of the solemn celebration. The performance of the *druk pa tse bzhi* is concluded in the afternoon through a *tshogs 'khor* or communal feast ritual. Since at this time of the year the absolute majority of male Sherpas are occupied by the trekking or mountaineering industry or by business ventures abroad, their participation in this festival is usually comparatively low. In consequence, the main section of the audience is represented by women of all age groups including small children. The *druk pa tse bzhi* celebration is usually attended by around hundred-fifty participants.

Although *druk pa tse bzhi* is basically a monastic event it is celebrated as well in village temples where it is performed under the guidance of the married tantric householder *bla ma* (*sngags pa*) and his assistants. On this occasion all lay people of the local community gather in the temple. Unlike that of the Shar pa dgon pa in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth the festival organization as practised in the context of a village temple is based on a *lawa* rotation system. Its number varies according to the distinct tradition of each locality. The participating lay people contribute food, drink, and some payment for their performing village *bla ma*-s. – Only occasionally, *druk pa tse bzhi* may also be celebrated in the *chos khang* or altar room of a private house where it is also performed by the tantric village *bla ma* and his assistants.

Chapter Eleven

Forging a novel tradition beyond local culture: Revitalizing Sherpa Buddhism through both the performance of religious celebrations traditionally held in the local community and the incorporation of new ritual performances

In this chapter, the way the Sherpas recreate their tradition in a new framework will be highlighted. This entails a discussion of the worship of Buddha Śākyamuni, the cults of three different deities including the particular circumstances that led to the emergence of each cult and to its adoption in Tibet, and the significance of the treasure movement in this context.

It comes as no surprise that the Sherpas' deliberate recreation of their Buddhist tradition in a novel sacred place and space is firmly rooted in the tradition of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism which itself, as is well known, has adopted rather much of its corpus from ancient Indian Buddhism. Three out of the five religious celebrations – *lo gsar*, the Tibetan New Year festival, *druk pa tse bzhi*, and Buddha Jayanti – focus on the worship of Buddha Śākyamuni. *Druk pa tse bzhi*, commemorating the Buddha's first turning of the 'Wheel of Dharma', is an old festival in Tibet. The celebration of Buddha Jayanti in commemoration of Buddha Śākyamuni's birth, however, has been adopted by the four schools in exile from Theravāda Buddhism only in the last two decades. In contrast, *smyung gnas*, the fasting rite, focusing upon Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion who is venerated as the patron saint of the Land of Snows, has been celebrated since the introduction of his cult in Tibet.

Three out of the five religious festivals – *lo gsar*, *druk pa tse bzhi*, and *smyung gnas* have been celebrated traditionally among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. By contrast the *Vajra Guru dung sgrub*, the newly introduced religious festival, belongs to the wider rNying ma pa tradition within Tibetan Buddhism and was practised mainly in monasteries. Its establishment in this novel setting represents a significant extension of the Sherpas' Buddhist tradition. It clearly extends the limits of traditional Sherpa Buddhism that until the present day has existed solely in the diverse forms of local tradition as embodied in the local temple and the

history of its founding which is also the history of the appropriation and settlement of the area by the founding ancestors.

In sum, the present ongoing revitalisation of the tradition of Sherpa Buddhism and culture represents a significant move beyond local culture. The latter's distinct character has been defined by R.A. Stein: "...each community living at a given site recognizes itself in its ancestor and in its sacred place [transl. mine]."¹ The extended tradition of Sherpa Buddhism as practised in a novel setting is associated neither with a common ancestor nor with the sacred place of a locality. Instead, the entire Sherpa community's novel sacred site has been constructed in the pan-Buddhist holy space of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth.

Moreover, all religious festivals which are being performed in the *Shar pa dgon pa* in Bodhnāth are focused upon the leading deities in the pantheon of the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism. Hence, this is a clear indication of the fact that in their new geographical setting the Sherpas' focus has been shifting "...from cults of place to the overarching concerns of high religion," as has been noted by Ch. Ramble in a paper on the identity of Nepal's Bhotiyas.² It is of significance, however, that this consequential shift did not take place at the expense of local cults and their tantric ritual specialists. In fact, the cults of local gods, of gods of place continue to occupy the central role in the local context. As has been mentioned above, sngags pa-s are represented in the novel framework where they perform the monthly celebration in worship of Guru Padmasambhava on the tenth day.

Significantly, among the five religious celebrations, it is only the *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* that focuses on the worship of Guru Padmasambhava, who is venerated as the Second Buddha solely in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. This is particularly true among the rNying ma pa School. As to its particular symbolic complexity, the performance of the collective recitation of 'One Hundred Million Mantras' occupies a special place in Tibetan Buddhist ritual ceremonies since in this particular context three deities and their respective cults are interwoven. In this particular framework Padmasambhava is venerated in his threefold manifestation as Trikāya bla ma, each one representing one of the three different levels of existence.

An adequate understanding of the complex symbolism involved in the image of Guru Padmasambhava as the Trikāya bla ma is conveyed, to give one example, through a fifteenth-century painted scroll from Eastern Tibet. Significantly, the *thang ka* is from the hand of the

¹ R.A. Stein 1987, p. 143.

² Ch. Ramble 1997a, p. 404. It has to be added, however, that in the case of the Sherpas it was not a 'relatively weak Buddhist tradition' as compared to other Tibetan groups of Nepal that had been responsible for that significant shift but, instead, a relatively strong Buddhist tradition.

X. Karma pa, Chos dbyings rdo rje (1605–74).³ It has been reproduced by G. W. Essen, the collector of Tibetan sacred art, and the renowned Tibetan scholar T.T. Thingo in their anthology on ‘The Deities of the Himalayas.’⁴ The deities representing the Trikāya are arranged in hierarchical order. In the center Padmasambhava is depicted as Indian paṇḍita wearing a monk’s robe and the hat of a scholar. Above his head Padmasambhava is floating on a cloud in the form of the four-armed Avalokiteśvara-Ṣaḍakṣarī as ‘Master of the Six Syllables’ who mercifully looks down to the world of sentient beings. Enthroned on a rainbow above him is Padmasambhava in the form of the red Amitābha. Hence, this *thang ka* mirrors Padmasambhava in three different forms. It is in the framework of the *Vajra Guru dung sgrub* performance that Padmasambhava, Avalokiteśvara, the Great Compassionate One, and Amitābha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, are combined in a distinct mode.

In this context a brief explanation concerning the close relation that associates both Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava with the Buddha Amitābha⁵ including the respective legendary background – D.L. Snellgrove speaks of Padmasambhava’s ‘sacred lineage’⁶ – may be appropriate. Since the cults of Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava figure prominently in the ritual performances of the Sherpas, and also the figure of Amitābha occupies a special place therein, the emergence of their cults shall shortly be traced.

Shortly before his passing into nirvāṇa, Buddha Śākyamuni predicted that he would return to this world after twelve years by means of a miraculous birth in order to expound the esoteric teachings of the tantras which he had not taught extensively since he had been born as a human being in this life.⁷ This rebirth was Guru Padmasambhava, who emanated from the heart of Buddha Amitābha⁸ and appeared in the form of an eight-year old boy seated upon a lotus on Dhanakośa lake in the land of Oḍḍiyāna.

In his well-known ‘History of the Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism’ Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–87), the eminent master, teacher, scholar, poet and late head of the ‘Old

³ The X. Karma pa was a renowned painter who belonged to the Karma sgar bris school, refer to D. and J. Jackson 1994, p. 12, 148, n. 30.

⁴ G. W. Essen and T.T. Thingo 1989 (‘Tafelband’, p. 108).

⁵ A beautiful *thang ka* of Amitābha (13th/14th century) is provided by Chr. Luczanits in his contribution to *Tabo, a Lamp for the Kingdom*, ed. by D. E. Klimburg-Salter 1997, p. 224.

⁶ D.L. Snellgrove 1957, p. 228.

⁷ This is recorded, a.o., in the *Sūtra of Great Nirvāṇa*, see M. Ricard 1994, p. XXVI, n. 17.

⁸ In the collection of Tibetan sacred art published by M.M. Rhie and R.A. Thurman one of the earliest known *thang ka*-s of Padmasambhava is provided in which he is also shown as emanation of Amitābha. In the left he holds the white skull bowl symbolizing the realization of absolute emptiness. In this latter is placed a vase containing the elixir of immortality symbolizing his being a manifestation of both Amitābha and Amitāyus, the Buddha of Immortality (1991, p. 169 and p. 170 for a partial view of this painted scroll).

Translation School,' recounts two versions of Padmasambhava's life-story. It is only one of them that tells the mentioned episode of his miraculous birth, which is mainly mentioned in certain spiritual texts contained in the vast corpus of *gter ma* literature. And it is only in this particular version that Padmasambhava is associated with Amitābha from whose heart he manifested. In his authoritative volume the rNying ma master and scholar gives the two versions and mentions the significant details of the circumstances surrounding Padmasambhava's miraculous birth as told in the latter. The two versions are as follows the emphasis of the narrative being clearly put on the latter one:

“Some say that he appeared in a lightning flash on the meteoric summit of Mount Malaya. But here, I will follow the well-known tale found in the revealed treasures, et cetera, which speak only of his miraculous birth. According to them, the land of Oḍḍiyāna, which is to the west [of India] is surrounded by great oceans to the east, south, and north. In the southwest, towards the Land of Ogres, there is an island in a lake. There, in the bud of a multicoloured lotus, which had sprung up by the buddha's blessing, a golden vajra marked with the syllable Hrīh emanated from the heart of Amitābha, the lord of the Sukhāvātī paradise. From it, there emanated forth an eight-year-old boy, who was adorned with the major and minor marks, and held a vajra and a lotus. The boy remained there teaching the profound doctrine to the gods and ḍākinīs of the island.”⁹

The Buddhist scholar E. Lamotte has observed in his 'History of Indian Buddhism' (1958) that Amitābha is a Buddhist or Hindu replica of an Iranian solar god.¹⁰ This latter figure has been identified by D.L. Snellgrove as *Ahura Mazda*, Supreme God of Light of the Zoroastrian religion; it was by the third century C.E. that an already well-established cult of Amitābha had spread from the northwest of the Indian subcontinent across Central Asia to China. Snellgrove also points out the significant philosophical shift that goes with this cult and its spread. In his view the cult of Amitābha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, represents a 'popular and orthodox form of Buddhism' in that its religious aspiration is

⁹ For the particular circumstances of Padmasambhava's miraculous birth see also his hagiography as composed by Ye šes mtsho rgyal, his main spiritual consort who is said to have concealed most of the spiritual 'treasures', unearthed and revealed by Nyang ral nyi ma 'odzer (1136–1204), one of the major treasure-discoverers (*gter ston*), edited and translated by E.P. Kunsang: "...the lotus flower (...) had been fused with the combined light rays of compassion of Buddha Amitābha and all the Buddhas of the ten directions." (1993, p. 8)

¹⁰ E. Lamotte 1988, p. 498.

“...directed primarily to rebirth in Amitābha’s paradise and thus is largely unconcerned with the winning of nirvāṇa, the true goal of early Buddhist practitioners, or with cultivating the thought of enlightenment and leading the sacrificing life of a Bodhisattva as taught by other Mahāyāna sūtras. Amitābha becomes well-known in later Indian and certainly in Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism...”¹¹

It is since the adoption of Amitābha’s cult in early medieval Tibet that he occupies an eminent role in Tibetan Buddhism. Amitābha is the Buddha of Boundless Light (*sangs rgyas ‘od dpag med / snang ba mtha yas*) and within the Five Enlightened Families (*buddha rigs*) he represents the Buddha of the Lotus-Family (*padma rigs*, Skt. *padmakula*), i.e. the supreme embodiment of enlightened attributes. In St. Beyer’s detailed study of Tibetan tantric liturgy, *sādhana* (*sgrub thabs*, i.e. ‘means for accomplishing’), and practice the special position that Amitābha occupies in the context of Tibetan Buddhism is revealed. It is after taking tantric vows that the disciple takes the five ‘ancillary pledges’ attributed individually to each of the Five Families. According to his clerical informant the pledge of Amitābha is “...to be faithful to the higher and lower Tantras and to the Three Vehicles...”¹² Hence, it is in the context of tantric practice that Amitābha has his special position in Tibetan Buddhism. However, he also figures in an important political relation. This is mirrored by a famous statue the photo of which is provided by M.T. Kapstein. It shows a statue of the emperor Srong btsan sgam po (c. 617–649/50) in the Po ta la Palace in Lha sa, his turban crowned by the head of Buddha Amitābha, with the images of bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara and his son and heir, prince Gung srong gung btsan, behind him.¹³ As has been mentioned before in the description of the mortuary rites as performed among the Sherpas, Amitābha figures prominently in that context, and after the deceased’s soul has been finally ‘liberated,’ it is he who leads it to Sukhāvātī, the Western Paradise.

Avalokiteśvara is equally an emanation of Buddha Amitābha. Illustrative of their close relationship in Tibetan Buddhism is the fact that in Tibetan Buddhist sacred art regularly

¹¹ D.L. Snellgrove 1987, p. 55. – In his preface to G. Tucci’s investigation as to ‘The Temples of Western Tibet and Their Symbolism’ (1935) [= *Indo-Tibetica* III.I] L. Chandra notes: “In the north-west of India the triad of Śākyamuni, Brahmā and Indra was replaced by Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta. (...). The cult of Amitābha represents transcendental tendencies in Buddhism, Śākyamuni the Man was replaced by Amitābha. His historic enlightenment was transcended into Supreme Enlightenment whose illumination became the new dynamic centre reflected in the new Tathāgata Amitābha.” (1988b, pp. XIII-XLIII. see p. XXVII).

¹² St. Beyer 1988, p. 406.

¹³ M.T. Kapstein 2006, p. 57, photo no. 9.

appears a small figure of Buddha Amitābha above the head of Avalokiteśvara.¹⁴ In a paper on a sādhana concerning the four-armed Avalokiteśvara composed by the famous treasure-discoverer Thang ston rgyal po (1385–1464 or 1361–1485) based upon a vision he experienced of the bodhisattva, J. Gyatso mentions that “...the buddha Amitābha sits on his crown because Avalokiteśvara belongs to the ‘family’ headed by that buddha.”¹⁵

The particular circumstances of how Avalokiteśvara became an emanation of Amitābha are described in a popular legend referring to the Lord of Compassion in his eleven-faced form (*thugs rje chen po bcu gcig zhal*) upon whom is focused, among others, the performance of the *smying gnas* or fasting ritual to be described below. As a bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara was once able to liberate all beings reborn in the hell realms. But at another look there were just as many new beings in the hells as there had been before. Overwhelmed by the infinite sufferings of beings, his head burst into thousand pieces. Amitābha reassembled these pieces into eleven heads, upon which Avalokiteśvara promised again to work for the liberation of all beings until the very end of ‘cyclic existence’ (*‘khor ba*). Moreover, in this particular form Avalokiteśvara has thousand hands with an eye on each one. Thus he is able to see the suffering of every being in the universe and to help each of them.¹⁶

According to D.L. Snellgrove, Avalokiteśvara became the most popular of all the great Bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna period. By the end of the third century C.E. his cult was ‘very well established.’ Significantly, it was even before that time that “...the tradition of the great Bodhisattvas, who preach, convert and save with all the powers of a Buddha, is already established as one of the main distinguishing marks of Mahāyāna Buddhism.”¹⁷ The cult of Avalokiteśvara extended across Central Asia and subsequently the figure of Avalokiteśvara became the popular Bodhisattva in Tibet.¹⁸ In the Land of Snows his cult began to spread from the seventh century onward.¹⁹

Recently, however, Snellgrove’s latter observation has been modified considerably by M.T. Kapstein. The latter notes that the first great figure to have actively promoted the practice of meditational techniques focusing on Avalokiteśvara was Atiśa (982–1054), the renowned Bengali master and scholar, who after having taught at the university of Vikramaśīla

¹⁴ This significant aspect has been noted by D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, p. 156f.

¹⁵ J. Gyatso 1997, p. 268.

¹⁶ For the content of this legend see the brief summary provided by M. Ricard 1994, p. 35, n. 15.

¹⁷ D.L. Snellgrove 1987, p. 60.

¹⁸ The popular legend of the bodhisattva’s first glimpse of Tibet in the distant past in which he gazed upon our world with the intention of saving the creatures of the Land of Snows is recounted by M.T. Kapstein 2006, pp. 2–4.

¹⁹ D.L. Snellgrove 1987, 60.

(in present-day eastern Bihar) as one of its main teachers stayed in Tibet from 1042 until the end of his life.²⁰ Hence, whereas early medieval Tibet only ‘had some familiarity with the bodhisattva,’ the much elaborated cult of Avalokiteśvara is actually a product of the ‘later spread of the doctrine’ (*bstan pa phyi dar*) that began in the late tenth century.²¹

There is only one figure in the Tibetan pantheon whose popularity rivals the ubiquitous Lord of Compassion and his cult. This is Padmasambhava, the Precious Guru (Gu ru Rin po che), who is the focus of an equally popular cult in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. The cult of Padmasambhava began its ascent in the period between the collapse of the Central Tibetan royal dynasty and the fall of the empire following the assassination of gLang Dar ma (reigned from 838–842) and the late-tenth-century renaissance.²² Both the characteristic similarities and differences of the two cults are aptly characterized by M. T. Kapstein as follows:

“Padmasambhava, like Avalokiteśvara, is an emanation of the buddha Amitābha, and Tibet is his special field. Both are strongly associated with Tibet’s glory days under the old empire. The tales of their compassionate intercession in the Tibetan world are elaborated in epic narratives that were discovered as revealed treasures (*gter ma*), and in the early development of this literature the twelfth-century treasure-finder Nyangrel Nyima Özer and his successor, Guru Chöwang (1212–1270), emerge as central figures for the formation of both cults.

The most striking disanalogy between the two (besides the fact that one is supposed to be a cosmic bodhisattva and the other an historical individual), is that whereas we know that

²⁰ M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 148

²¹ M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 148. The author identifies the *Maṅ i bka’ ’bum* as major source for the elaborated cult. This corpus is described as a ‘heterogeneous collection of texts ascribed to King Songtsen Gampo and primarily concerned with the bodhisattva Mahākāruṅika- Avalokiteśvara...’ This text is discussed pp. 144–155. He presumes that the ‘original’ text “...consisted solely of the discoveries of Dngos-grub and .Mnga’bdag Nyang, as assembled by the latter or one of his school.” (p. 262, n. 33). Kapstein renders the title as “The Collected Works of King Srong-btsan sgam-po Concerning the Six Syllable Mantra (Om ma ṅi padme hūṃ).” (p. 262, n. 41). – For a brief account of the cult of Avalokiteśvara refer also to M.T. Kapstein’s most recent treatise (2006, pp. 225–227). – According to F.-K. Ehrhard the cult of Avalokiteśvara that came from India and the Nepal Valley spread in Tibet via Mang-yul Gung-thang in South West Tibet at the Nepal border from the 12th century onward (2004, p. X; pp. 140–150). – For the cult of Avalokiteśvara in the tradition of the rNying ma pa School see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 510–512.

²² For the dating of the ascent of the cult of Padmasambhava see M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 157. As to the development of the great guru’s cult see pp. 155–160. In contrast to this, G. Tucci observes it was only after the Second Diffusion that “...the figure of Padmasambhava the miracle worker grew to gigantic proportions, and that was regarded as Second Buddha (1988, p. 7). – For a detailed investigation on the emergence of the ‘Tibetan Renaissance’ refer to R.M. Davidson 2005.

Avalokiteśvara was an important figure in the Indian Buddhist pantheon, whose following had come to extend throughout much of Asia long before Buddhism ever became established in Tibet, nothing similar can be said of Padmasambhava.²³

As has been noted in the quote above, both cults are closely associated with the glorious Tibetan empire and the representatives of the royal dynasty. There is but one significant difference between the two.²⁴ The cult of Avalokiteśvara is related with the first of the ‘three ancestral religious kings,’ the great king Srong btsan sgam po (c. 617–649/50), who is regarded as the emanation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. M.T. Kapstein mentions the popular legend which tells how Avalokiteśvara became the special divine protector of Tibet. According to this legend, Avalokiteśvara took birth as a monkey, who, having united with an ogress, became the father of the Tibetan people. After the barbarian Tibetans had matured so that they were receptive to the Buddha’s teaching, Avalokiteśvara took birth once again as King Srong btsan sgam po. Hence, this complex figure represents at once the progenitor of the Tibetan people, the highest spiritual principle, the bodhisattva of compassion, and the king of Tibet.²⁵

According to tradition, it was Srong btsan sgam po who initiated the Buddhist tradition in Tibet. D.L. Snellgrove and H. Richardson observe that Buddhism during the reign of Srong btsan sgam po was “...probably restricted to the court, and its priests were Indian or Chinese.”²⁶ Srong btsan sgam po married both a Nepalese and a Chinese princess, each of whom brought as present a sacred statue of Buddha Śākyamuni to Lha sa.²⁷ Moreover, it was he who built the first Buddhist temples in Tibet, established a code of law based on Dharma principles, and had his minister mTon mi sam bho ta create the Tibetan script. And it was during Srong btsan sgam po’s reign that the translation of Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan began.²⁸

²³ M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 155.

²⁴ This important difference is discussed by M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 48.

²⁵ M.T. Kapstein 1997, p. 70. It has to be mentioned that the successive Dalai Bla ma-s as contemporary emanations of Avalokiteśvara are also identified with King Srong btsan sgam po (ibid.). – For that important chapter of Tibetan history refer also to D.L. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, pp. 73–78; G. Tucci 1988, p. 1.

²⁶ D.L. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, p. 77.

²⁷ The Nepalese princess Bhrikuti brought the *Jo bo mi bskiyod rdo rje*, the crowned Buddha image installed in the Ra mo che Temple at Lha sa; its photo can be found in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate no. 41. The Chinese princess Weng cheng presented her husband with the statue of *Jo bo Rin po che*, the famous image of the crowned Buddha Śākyamuni in the Jo khang; specially built to house it, the Jo khang has been Tibet’s greatest center of pilgrimage; its photo is provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate no. 37.

²⁸ These details are related in the brief ‘hagiography’ of Srong btsan sgam po provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 510–512. A line drawing of the latter can be found in op. cit. on p. 511. See also D.L. Snellgrove 1987, ch. V in which he offers a full overview of the conversion of Tibet.

In contradistinction, the cult of Padmasambhava is associated with the figure of Khri srong 'lde'u btsan (742-ca. 797), who is regarded as the second great Dharma king of Tibet. During the years of the first century, the fate of Buddhism was marked through various historical ups and downs. The fundamental change began in the year 761/762 when the young emperor adopted Buddhism first as the 'religion of his court.'²⁹ Khri srong 'lde'u btsan then invited first Śāntarakṣita (*mkhan chen zhi ba 'tsho*), the abbot of Vikramaśīla who introduced the monastic lineage to Tibet, and later Padmasambhava, the Lotus-Born teacher from Oḍḍiyāna (*o rgyan padma 'byung gnas*), to build the sacred complex of bSam yas (ca. 779). This is the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet. It was here that Tibetan monks could receive ordination for the first time. Moreover, he supported great translation projects and arranged for Indian paṇḍitas and Tibetan *lo tsā ba*-s to translate sacred texts.³⁰

Padmasambhava is credited with having subjugated the evil forces hostile to the propagation of Buddhism in Tibet and bound them by oath thanks to his superior tantric powers, spread the teachings of the Vajrayāna (*gsangs ngags rdo rje theg pa*) in the Land of Snows, and having hidden innumerable spiritual treasures (*gter ma*) for the sake of future generations.³¹ According to tradition, it is due to the combined efforts of Khri srong 'lde'u btsan, Śāntarakṣita, and Padmasambhava that Buddhism became firmly established in Tibet.³²

M.T. Kapstein draws attention to the fact that following the collapse of the Central Tibetan royal dynasty in the middle of the ninth century, there remained a 'power vacuum' persisting for a full four hundred years until, owing to the support of China's Mongol rulers, the Sa skya pa hegemony emerged during the late thirteenth century which lasted from 1260 until 1358.³³ Hence, it was a highly critical period in Tibetan history that represented the setting for the ascent and establishment of both cults. In a deliberate process of 'reinvention of

²⁹ Cf. M. T. Kapstein 2000, p. 61. The circumstances and the deeper reasons for the royal conversion to Buddhism are highlighted and discussed in *op. cit.*, ch. 4.

³⁰ Refer to M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 60.

³¹ For the history of the treasure-movement, the content and the different categories of *gter ma*, the modes of their unearthing, etc. refer to the detailed study provided by the rNying ma pa scholar Tulku Thondup 1986; for the distinct genre of *gter ma* literature see J. Gyatso 1996, for the logic of their legitimating refer to J. Gyatso 1993; for the question of them representing apocrypha or revelations see A.-M. Blondeau 2002; the recent detailed study of the new treasures of mChog 'gyur bde chen gling pa (1829–1870) has been published by A. Doctor 2005

³² A common motif in Tibetan Buddhist *thang ka* painting is represented by the triad of *mkhan slob chos gsum*, i.e. Śāntarakṣita, the abbot, Padmasambhava, the spiritual teacher, and Khri srong 'lde'u btsan, the religious king. Painted scrolls depicting Śāntarakṣita and Khri srong 'lde'u btsan are provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, plate nos. 14 and 15 respectively.

³³ M.T. Kapstein 2000, pp. XVIIIff.

tradition', to borrow the renowned late historian E. Hobsbawm's influential notion (1983), the cults of Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava greatly contributed to the mythologizing of the old Tibetan empire. This kind of mythologizing of the imagined greatness of ancient Tibet and its religious kings served as an important ideological means through which the creators aimed at inspiring the rebuilding of a centralized strong state structure based on Dharma principles analogous to the glorious Tibetan empire. This very goal of both cults is summarized by M.T. Kapstein:

“The emerging cults of Avalokiteśvara and Padmasambhava from the twelfth century onwards thus both engendered a mythical reconstruction of the Tibetan world and set forth in their sādhanas and precepts the means by which one might live in the world thus created, a way which affirmed that the same creative, spiritual ground from which the empire drew its power might be actualized within every individual.”³⁴

As already noted before, the aims as expressed in the cycles of the spiritual treasures were equally strongly associated with the project of mythologizing the ancient Tibetan empire and its religious kings at a time when the Land of Snows was undergoing a profound and long crisis. In other words, their propagators (or creators) followed the same endeavour that represented the driving force of those who propagated the cults of Avalokiteśvara in their country. The ideal harmonious religio-socio-political order as has been imagined and articulated in the literature of the *gter ma*-s that is to be re-established on truly Buddhist principles according to the prophecies and aspirations of their proponents is described by Dudjom Rinpoche in the following:

“In accord with their [= Ye śes mtsho rgyal, Bi ma la mi tra, Bai ro tsa na, and all those figures who are said to have concealed *gter ma*-s – E.B.] prophecies and prayers, the king and his subjects have appeared as an ongoing, magical play of fortunate individuals and emanations, of varied class and life-style, who have acted on behalf of the teaching and of living beings.”³⁵

³⁴ M.T. Kapstein 2000, p. 161.

³⁵ Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 747.

Chapter Twelve

On the three main bla ma-s officiating in the context of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* temple festivals and their respective hagiographies and incarnation lines in the context of the current re-making of the tradition of Sherpa Buddhism

1. Introduction

As has already been mentioned above, following a deliberate policy, four out of the five main festivals held annually in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* are performed by one of the increasing number of young Sherpa monks who having studied for nine years and then graduated as mkhan po in the monastic college of either gNam sgröl gling Monastery near Mysore in Karnataka, India, or sMin grol gling Monastery in Dehradun, U.P., India. These young Sherpa mkhan po-s are usually sent by their teachers back to their home region to assume a suitable teaching post for a certain duration.¹ Their choice is usually dependent upon an *ad hoc* decision by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* management committee. In contradistinction, for the performance of *lo gsar*, the Tibetan New Year celebration, being the major festival in the Tibetan Buddhist annual cycle, either the rDza Rong phu sprul sku or the sTeng po che sprul sku is invited, as a rule. In case none of these two eminent Sherpa bla ma-s is able to preside over and perform the great festival due to some other obligation, the Toloka sprul sku is invited for its performance.

It is these three 'lines of rebirth' (*skyes rabs*) to whom, through their present representatives, is attributed a prominent position among the Sherpas. This is reflected by their quasi 'monopoly' hold of the *lo gsar* (including the preceding *dgu gtor*) celebration as it is performed in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Thus, a wholly new setting has been created. In the traditional framework of the local community all major and minor festivals

¹ The *bshad grwa* or 'seminary for textual exposition' of one of these two monasteries is the usual site of higher learning for young Sherpa monks. gNam sgröl gling represents the tradition of dPal yul, one of the four great rNying ma pa monasteries in Khams (founded in 1665) in exile; it has been built and has been headed by H.H. Drub dbang padma nor bu Rin po che (b. 1932). sMin grol gling in exile has been headed by the late eleventh throne-holder of sMin sgröl gling, sMin gling khri chen XI, 'Gyur med kun bzang dbang rgyal Rin po che (1930–2007).

are performed by the hereditary married tantric householder priest (*sngags pa*), whose position is inherited in the paternal lineage (*rigs*), and his assistants. Incarnation among the Sherpas is a historically new phenomenon that, as will be discussed below, began to emerge only at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. From then onwards lineages of tantric village priests coexisted with incarnation lines. Their respective members observe a certain division of ritual work. Usually, a reincarnate bla ma is celibate, acts as head of a monastery, and presides over the range of monastic celebrations. It is only in the last two decades that, owing to a seriously increasing lack of tantric village priests that has been making its influence gravely felt among the local population throughout the Solu-Khumbu region, it has become a common practice to invite a celibate reincarnate bla ma to perform the rituals of the life-cycle, mainly the mortuary rites.

Only in recent history, in the context of the major annual festivals as performed in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* temple, the reincarnate bla ma and the associated incarnation lineage have gained prominence, if not to say, the leading position in the context of Sherpa Buddhism.² Thus, it is in this novel framework that the former coexistence of tantric village bla ma-s and celibate incarnate bla ma-s which continues to exist in Solu-Khumbu, although the tantric village priesthood has truly been in decline in recent years, has transformed into a hierarchy that is being topped by the incarnate bla ma and his lineage.

By presenting the hagiographies of the three main bla ma-s in the novel framework, their respective incarnation lineages, and the different figures each one entails, I seek to highlight the ritual practices and devotional approaches that Sherpa Buddhism adopted in the last two centuries. It was partly through the representatives of the three incarnation lineages, that in two different movements, one sprang from Brag dkar rta so in the middle of the 19th century, the other in the first half of the 20th century from rDza Rong phu, Sherpa Buddhism reaffirmed its close links with the teaching tradition of sMin grol gling within the larger tradition of the rNying ma pa School in Tibet thereby greatly invigorating and enriching itself.³ Two eminent figures of the rDza sprul incarnation lineage, the major one among the Sherpas, occupy a special place in the larger narrative of Buddhism's introduction in Tibet. Hence, their life-stories closely associate them with the heart of Tibetan religious culture. Some of them are

² It has to be added, of course, that, as Sh. B. Ortner has emphasized repeatedly throughout her recent texts on the Sherpas, the emergence of Sherpa monasticism was coupled in popular thinking with a higher reputation attributed to the bla ma and his monks on the ground that only they have received the sound spiritual knowledge which enables them to perform any kind of ritual ceremony adequately. This thinking proved to be, to a certain degree, detrimental to the tantric village bla ma.

³ The second category of actors responsible for this development were, of course, village priests who traveled to places of learning in Tibet to study with masters such as the great Brag dkar rta so Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837); on this is elaborated below in the context of the third incarnation lineage.

eminent masters of the ‘Ancient School of the Early Translations.’ In their midst is the figure of gSang ba rdo rje, the Seventeenth-Century culture hero of the Sherpas. As to the other two incarnation lines, all figures occupy a more or less important place in Sherpa Buddhism’s narrative.

gSang ba rdo rje’s sacred life-story reveals how the process of ‘Buddha-isation’ of alien territory was achieved through the ‘taming’ and subjugating of the local divinities by means of tantric practices which had been introduced to Tibet and successfully put into practice by Guru Padmasambhava in his effort to convert the land of snows into a Buddhist realm. When combined, the hagiographies offer unique insight into the ways the Sherpas adopted certain of Tibetan Buddhism’s teachings and thus are illustrative of the formation and the stages of growth of Sherpa Buddhism.⁴ The historical overview thus gained is of greatest significance for an adequate understanding and the further study not only of Solu-Khumbu’s complex culture history but also of the Sherpas’ greatly expanded ‘modern-day ritual activity’. At the same time, the Sherpas’ sacred landscape of Solu-Khumbu unfolds. As M. Kapstein concludes his observations in an early paper on Sherpa religion and the printed word:

“In sum, then, the story of Sherpa Buddhism is that of a people living on the periphery of a great civilization who gradually adopted the traditions of that civilization and made them their own.”⁵

Basically this chapter seeks to demonstrate the presence of the teaching tradition of sMin grol gling as transmitted through certain members of each of these three incarnation lines. The ritual and meditational cycles of this major rNying ma pa monastery in Central Tibet have remained popular among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu through both village temple and monastic festivals and the construction of temples and stūpas until the present day.⁶ This tradition is also firmly upheld in the novel framework as represented by the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. The first section focuses on the questions of hagiography, reincarnation, and of both incarnation lines and transmission lineages in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism. The ground for understanding thus prepared in the following sections are presented and

⁴ In an early paper on Tibetan ritual literature and spiritual genealogy among the Sherpas Franz-Karl Ehrhard has already posited: “Once one knows the ritual literature that a particular area was acquainted with at a particular time, one can automatically draw conclusions concerning the diffusion of the cycle, its topicality and popularity.” (1993, p. 79)

⁵ Cf. 1983, p. 43.

⁶ As F.-K. Ehrhard has emphasized recently, Sherpa Buddhism is characterized, like most local Himalayan Buddhist cultures, by the founding temples and monasteries (2005, p. 1235).

discussed, in more or less detail, the hagiographies of the members of the three incarnation lines with whom this chapter is mainly concerned.

2. A brief look at the Tibetan literary genre called *rnam thar*, i.e. sacred life history or hagiography, the phenomenon of reincarnation, and at the institution of incarnation lines and different kinds of transmission lineages in Tibetan Buddhism in general and as they prevail among the Sherpas

The rich tradition of Tibetan Buddhist hagiographic literature represents a distinct literary genre of its own. Janet Gyatso has discussed the characteristic features of this genre called “full liberation story (*rnam thar*) of oneself” in her recent treatise on the esoteric secret autobiographical poetry of ‘Jigs med gling pa (1729–1798), the famed Tibetan Buddhist visionary who is regarded as being one of the most important masters of the rNying ma pa school. The entire purpose of this important literary genre consists in serving as the model of an exemplary Buddhist life, usually that of a saint or a great master, for the edification – and delight – of the faithful demonstrating the paradigmatic practices and liberating accomplishments on the path leading to enlightenment (*byang chub*, Skt. *bodhi*) thus inspiring them to practice the Dharma as the great masters have done.⁷ In consequence, stories of heroic perseverance, of obstacles surmounted, of weaknesses and fear overcome are usual features characteristic of the sacred life-stories of eminent masters and yogins of the Buddhist tradition. Needless to mention, the life-story of more simple bla ma-s such as the ones of the three Sherpa clerics in question is usually modeled according to the outstanding examples given in the life-stories of eminent masters and famed yogins such as those of Padmasambhava or Mi la ras pa.⁸

The text of the *rnam thar* of a reincarnate bla ma (*sprul sku*, i.e. emanation embodiment) usually contains, among others, two crucial constitutive elements. Woven together in one single narrative these elements, are of particular significance in the framework of the present inquiry. The one is the incarnation chain (*skyes rabs*) spanning over a period of time through a distinct series of members, i.e. a particular chain of reincarnations. The other key component

⁷ Gyatso, J. 2001, pp. 102 ff., see p. 103. E.G. Smith draws attention to the fact that scholars make a threefold division into the external (*phyi*), internal (*nang*), and esoteric (*gsang ba*) aspects which, in most cases are interwoven, refer to 2001(1969), p. 14). – Most of the information given in the hagiographies in question belong to the external aspect.

⁸ J. Wangmo (2005) has collected and provided the sacred life stories of two Sherpa bla ma-s, Kun bzang ye śes, the first La og do (Sherpa: *Lawudo*) bla ma (1865?-1946), and Thub bstan bZod pa Rin po che (b. 1945), the second La og do bla ma who was to become an eminent master of the dGe lugs pa School and who today, being based in the United States, controls a world-wide network of Dharma centers and takes care of his numerous disciples and projects.

concerns the lineage of a certain body of teachings which have been transmitted in a chain of a given number of eminent masters from a teacher to his disciple, who later in turn becomes the master of his own disciple to whom he imparts the respective teaching. In order to obtain an adequate understanding of the meaning and importance of each of the two notions some mention concerning their respective history shall be made in the following.

Originally, the institution of the *sprul sku* emerged within the Karma and 'Bri gung bka' brgyud lineages from the late fourteenth century onwards.⁹ Eventually, this form of succession came to be adopted by all other Tibetan Buddhist schools.¹⁰ G.E. Smith has noted that the gradual acceptance of the priority of the claims of the rebirth (*yang srid*) over those of the ancient religious lineages in the transmission of accumulated religious prestige and wealth was "...the most important structural development throughout the Tibetan cultural world during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries..."¹¹ H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Bla ma has placed strong emphasis on the fact that, according to Tibetan Buddhist understanding, the whole purpose of reincarnation, given the belief in the principle of rebirth, is to enable the continuity of a compassionate being's efforts on behalf of all suffering sentient beings.¹²

According to M.T. Kapstein this particular innovation, in contradistinction to Indian Buddhism from which so much had been adopted by Tibetans, "...was Tibet's unique form of ecclesiastical succession, in which a child is identified as the reborn emanation embodiment (*trülku*) and legal heir of a deceased master."¹³ This complicated task entails, firstly, to locate the reincarnation of the deceased spiritual master. Moreover, it requires a complex formal procedure following the decease of a religious hierarch in the course of which the location and the very character of his infant successor could be identified. The latter task involves various tests. Only then the infant is entitled to the rights and properties of his predecessor. Usually the birth of an incarnate bla ma is surrounded by a range of miraculous omens. Common marvelous accompaniments are, for instance, the shooting star, strange dreams, visions of certain divinities, mysterious messengers, painless birth, the appearance of celestial beings and of other wonderful portents. Later on during the time of the early religious

⁹ The Karma pa III, Rang byung rdo rje (1284–1339), was the first person to be recognized and enthroned as a *sprul sku* in 1288. He was the reincarnation of Karma pa II, Karma Pak shi (1204–83) who himself was the *sprul sku* of Karma pa I, Dus gsum mkhyen pa (1110–93). – For the history of the institution of the *sprul sku* refer to T.V. Wylie 1978. – For a recent discussion of this institution and its history refer to Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 109.

¹⁰ The most famous lineage within the dGe lugs pa school is that of the Dalai Bla ma-s the formation of which is closely associated with the Great Fifth Dalai Bla ma, Ngag dbang Blo bzang rGya mtsho (1617–1682).

¹¹ E. G. Smith 2001(1969), p. 123.

¹² Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama 1990, pp. 236–37.

¹³ Cf. Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 109.

education the young child demonstrates its usually outstanding personality through its particular inclinations and talents such as a great intellectual capacity of learning to read and write Tibetan, the easiness in understanding and making correct use of grammar and in memorizing long passages of certain important scriptures. Hence, these particular characteristics clearly serve to underline the doctrine of karma whereby all these features as they manifest in a single life time are all attributable to previous causes.

The discovery of the reincarnation of a distinguished master continues to represent a particularly important feature of Tibetan Buddhist culture.¹⁴ A most fascinating and detailed account of the complex set of ritual procedures that were set in motion after the demise of an eminent spiritual master – here: the case of the Great Thirteenth Dalai Bla ma – in order to locate and identify his successor has been provided by H.H. the Fourteenth Dalai Bla ma in his autobiography published in 1990.¹⁵ According to him the first step that the task of identification has to take consists in a simple process of ‘elimination.’ First it must be established when and where a spiritual master has passed away. In Tibetan belief the new incarnation will usually be conceived a year or so after the demise of his predecessor. In consequence, the new incarnation will be born around eighteen months to two years later. Hence, the child to be searched for is likely to be between three and four years of age. Next, the place for the reincarnation to appear has to be established. It is only then that finally the task of identification may successfully be undertaken.

In order to accomplish the two tasks of locating and identifying the reincarnation of the Great Thirteenth, the search parties dispatched to different parts of Tibet followed a number of auspicious signs and other indications that guided them in their search. One of these auspicious signs concerned the head of the embalmed body of the Thirteenth Dalai Bla ma rGyal ba thub stan rgya mtsho (b. 1876) who had died in December 1933. During its usual period of sitting in state it was discovered that the deceased’s head had turned from facing south to north-east. Later, in the summer of 1935, the Regent Rwa sgreng rin po che, himself a senior bla ma, set out on a pilgrimage to Lha mo bla mtsho, the famed sacred lake located in the border area between ‘Ol kha and Dvags po in Southern Tibet that is associated with the vital force of the Dalai Bla ma-s.¹⁶ Following a series of visions he had received there he

¹⁴ A glimpse through the booming literature and videos on anything Tibetan from the hand of the enormously increasing number of Western Buddhists and sympathizers clearly demonstrates that it is the topic of ‘reincarnation’ that preoccupies the ‘occidental imagination’ most. A telling example is P. Moran’s ‘Buddhism Observed’ in which actually predominantly Western Buddhists in Bodhnāth are observed (2004).

¹⁵ For the detailed account of the complex search and identification process undertaken in this context that also involved the use of the powers of clairvoyance (*ngon ses*) of an oracle (*sku bstan*) refer to pp. 237f.

¹⁶ ‘[dPal ldan] Lha mo bla mtsho’ is the ‘lake of the vital force of [dPal ldan] lha mo’. dPal ldan lha mo is the chief protector of the dGe lugs pa School and of the incarnation lineage of the Dalai Bla ma-s, in particular. –

divined that the reincarnation was to be found in the north-eastern province of A mdo where he would be born in the vicinity of a three-tiered temple built in Chinese style. This particular temple clearly conformed to the one of the famous sKu 'bum byams pa gling, the Monastery of the One Hundred Thousand Icons [of Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom – E.B.] that had been founded in 1506 at the birthplace of rJe Tsong kha pa blo bzang grags pa, 1357–1419.¹⁷

Finally, in the year 1937, it was in the village of sTag tsher that the search party that had been dispatched to this area identified a two-year old boy named Lha mo don grub. He was remarkably able to recognize possessions of the Thirteenth Dalai Bla ma even under difficult conditions. But first the child correctly recognized the leader of the search party as the Se ra bla ma which, indeed, was his monastery.¹⁸ This ultimately convinced the members of the search party that they had identified the right child. In consequence, in February of 1940, the new Dalai Bla ma (b. on 6th July 1935) was formally enthroned in the Po ta la in a grand ceremony as the Fourteenth of his incarnation lineage under the new name bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho.¹⁹

The other key component of a *mam thar*, the 'tale of liberation' being an account of spiritual endeavour and achievement, is the 'teaching lineage' (*brgyud pa*; Skt *paramparā*) that the respective master represents. The 'teaching lineage' refers to an unbroken line of successive teachers through whom the Buddhist teachings have been transmitted from the guru to his disciple over a certain series of generations until the present day. As Sam van Schaik has emphasized in a treatise on the teachings received by the renowned Tibetan Buddhist treasure-revealer, visionary and saint 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798) in Tibetan Buddhism the bestowal of textual transmission is a prerequisite to the study of religious texts. And he draws attention to the fact that the concepts of transmission and lineage occupy a special place in Tibetan Buddhism which is mirrored by the existence of an entire literary genre in which the author establishes the lineage for each of the texts for which he holds

The iconographic forms of dPal ldan lha mo, according to R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 'the chief guardian goddess of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon' (1993, p. 23), in her different manifestations are discussed by the latter in detail (op. cit, pp. 22–37). A brief mention as to the lake's history as the [dPal ldan] Lha mo bla mtsho can be found in K. Dowman 1988, p. 259f.

¹⁷ These circumstances have also been related by M.T. Kapstein. 2006, p. 274.

¹⁸ Se ra (founded in 1419), located in the immediate vicinity of Lha sa, is one of the three major monastic universities of the dGe lugs pa School in Central Tibet.

¹⁹ A detailed description of the ritual procedures surrounding the enthronement ceremony of reincarnate masters as exemplified by the investiture of the tenth Tā'i Situ Padma nyin byed dbang po (1774–1853) by the 14th Karma pa has been provided by 'Jam mgon kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas. yon tan rgya mtsho (1813–99), the eminent 19th century *ris-med* master, scholar, writer, poet, and artist (1997).

transmission.²⁰ According to F.-K. Ehrhard, this separate genre of writing is known as *thob yig*, i.e. a ‘record [of teachings] heard’ or *gsan yig*, a ‘record [of teachings] obtained.’ Significantly, the latter term seems to have been introduced in the thirteenth century. Both terms are reflective of the efforts of Tibetan authors from the eleventh century onwards to establish the authenticity of the Buddhist texts received from India and thus establish different lineages of transmission. It was by this means that they “...were able to trace back any specific teaching either to the historical Buddha or to such representatives of Buddhahood as Vajradhara or Samanthabhadra.”²¹

The most common form of the transmission of a teaching or a textual cycle is that of the ‘direct instructions’ (*dmak khrid*). Usually, the full instructions for a certain spiritual practice are bestowed in a mouth-to-ear transmission from the master to his disciple(s).²² The transmission to his disciple(s) through reading is known as *ljags lung* (lit. ‘transmission by tongue’) or *dpe cha’i lung*, but commonly it is simply called *lung*.²³ The latter must have given evidence of his or her commitment to the Dharma, of his or her capacity for their reception, and of the proper motivation for their implementation. Usually, the teacher imparts his teachings in the following three steps: a. initiation (*dbang bskur*; Skt *abhiṣeka*), b. ‘reading authorization’ as to a certain text (*lung*), and instructions (*khrid*). It is only after these requirements have been fulfilled a teaching thus received by the disciple may be fruitfully put into spiritual practice.

As to the tantric teachings, the Ancient School of the Early Translations follows a system of scriptural and oral transmission based on three different kinds of lineage (*brgyud pa gsum*, ‘The Three Lineages, also called ‘The Three Great Descents’²⁴. It consists of the ‘Distant Lineage of Transmitted Precepts’ (*ring brgyud bka’ ma*), the ‘Close Lineage of the Treasures’ (*nye brgyud gter ma*, and the ‘Profound Pure Vision Teachings’ (*zab mo dag snang*).²⁵ In addition, according to G. Dorje, close disciple and collaborator of Dudjom Rinpoche (1904–87), the eminent master and first supreme head of the rNying ma lineage after exile from Tibet, the rNying ma pa School acknowledges six kinds of lineage. Through the lineage, in an unbroken line of successive teachers, the Buddhist teachings are transmitted.

²⁰ See Sam van Schaik 2000, p. 3.

²¹ Refer to F.-K. Ehrhard (in press b). – For the study of *thob yig*-s see Sam van Schaik 2000, pp. 4–8.

²² For the present purpose it may suffice to mention but this most common form of transmission from teacher to disciple.

²³ See Sam van Schaik 2000, p. 3.

²⁴ Compare G. Dorje and M. Kapstein 1991, 117.

²⁵ As to this system see A. Doctor 2005, p. 17 and 196. n. 2. – For the ‘Distant Lineage of Transmitted Precepts’ (*ring brgyud bka’ ma*), and the ‘Close Lineage of the Treasures’ (*nye brgyud gter ma*) refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 599–739 and pp. 743–881.

Of particular interest in the present context, however, is only the third kind of lineage which is named the ‘aural lineage of mundane individuals’ (*gang zag snyan khung gi brgyud pa*) through which accomplished masters orally transmit the teachings from generation to generation.²⁶

The highest teachings of Tibetan tantric Buddhism are those relating to the abstract realization of the ultimate nature of the mind. In the rNying ma pa tradition these are primarily represented by the teaching of *rDzogs chen* or *Ati Yoga* which is rendered as ‘The Great Perfection’.²⁷ As to the ‘Three Inner Classes of Tantra’ (*nang pa rgyud sde rnam pa gsum*) it is differentiated between the ‘Lineage of Mahāyoga’ as a. the ‘Class of Tantras’ and b. as the ‘Class of Means for Attainment,’ the ‘Lineage of Anuyoga,’ the perfection stage, and the ‘Lineage of Atiyoga,’ the Great Perfection.²⁸ The spiritual path of *rDzogs chen* is directed upon the abstract and visionary approach to contemplation. As to its decisive characteristics G.E. Smith has observed as follows:

“For the Rnying ma pa there is a process beyond those of emanation (*bskyed rim*) and realization (*rdzogs rim*): the great perfection (*rdzogs chen*). The Rnying ma pa approach to the process of uniting with the pervading spirituality of ultimate reality, or rather to the process of complete realization of unity that has always existed, is of extraordinary directions. Rnying ma pa devotees often compare the *Rdzogs chen* approach to rocket travel.(...).

The emphasis of *rdzogs chen* is upon primordial mind rather than upon specific mental activity of any sort, e.g., the methodology of the “stages” [of contemplation and visualization – E.B.]. *Rdzogs chen* is simultaneously the approach, the process, the sum of the stages, and the realization itself.”²⁹

²⁶ The first two lineages are 1. ‘the intentional lineage of the conquerors’ (*rgyal ba’i dgongs pa’i brgyud pa*) through which the ‘Buddha-body of Reality’ communicates the teachings to the ‘Buddha-body of Perfect Resource’ and 2. ‘the symbolic lineage of awareness-holders’ (*rig ‘dzin brda’i brgyud pa*), through which non-human and human awareness-holders of the highest spiritual accomplishments symbolically receive the teachings from *bodhisattvas* of the tenth level. The fourth and fifth kind refer to two different lineages through which a treasure-finder of concealed texts is identified while the sixth kind refers to the ‘lineage of the *dākinī*’s seal of entrustment’ (*mkha’ ‘gro gtad rgya’i brgyud pa*), through which a treasure-finder is granted codified teachings by the lords of the treasure in fulfillment of the concealer’s former aspiration. For these six lineages including the given brief explanation concerning each one refer to G. Dorje (2006, p. 483f.)

²⁷ In contradistinction, for the bKa’ brgyud pa and dGe lugs pa traditions the highest teachings are represented by the ‘Great Seal’ (*phyag chen*) system; for the latter system refer M. T. Kapstein 2006, p. 228.

²⁸ For the authoritative account of these three lineages into which the three inner classes of tantra are classified refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 458–501.

²⁹ Cf. E.G. Smith 2001, ‘Notes’, p. 273f., n. 4.

The early – human – lineage masters include dGa' rab rdo rje (Prahevajra), 'Jams dpal bshes gnyen (Manjuśrīmitra), Shri sing ha (Śrī Siṃha), Bi ma la mi tra (Vimalamitra), Padmasambhava and Bai ro tsa na (Vairotsana). Most rDzogs chen teachings were concealed as spiritual treasures (*gter ma*) by these masters and revealed in later centuries. It is these teachings that are transmitted personally as oral instructions from a master to a qualified disciple.

In one of his most famous works, the commentary on the preliminary practices of the *Klong chen snying thig* ('Heart Essence of Infinite Expanse') which represents the innermost practice of rDzogs pa chen po, Patrul Rinpoche (rDza dPal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808–1887) gives an account of history of how the teachings came down to us today. As one of the most eminent masters of the 19th century, he is known not only for his scholarship and learning but also for his practice of renunciation and his example of compassion. In his account he focuses on the history of the teachings in general as well as those of the three inner yogas of the Old Translation School known as Mahāyoga, Anuyoga and Atiyoga, in particular. In the larger context of the history of Buddhism and the transmission of the core parts of the Doctrine – as seen from the rNying ma pa perspective – Patrul Rinpoche differentiates between three different kinds of lineages of transmission.³⁰ The first transmission lineage of the general rNying ma Inner Tantras is 'the mind lineage of the Conquerors' (*rgyal ba-s*, Skt. *jina-s*, i.e. the many Buddhas). This lineage starts with the Buddha Samantabhadra (*Kun tu bzang po*, 'enlightened from the very beginning'), whose circle of disciples consists of the 'spontaneously accomplished Vidyādhara of the five kāyas, and of inconceivable, infinite hosts of Conquerors'. It was in this world that Buddha Śākyamuni turned the Wheel of Dharma, and taught, a.o., the outer Mantrayāna.

The second transmission lineage is 'the symbol lineage of the Vidyādhara' (*rig 'dzin*, knowledge holder). It was at the time of his passing away into nirvāṇa that Buddha Śākyamuni predicted the coming of the Secret Mantrayāna that encompasses the generation and perfection phases and the Great Perfection. It is through the different vidyādhara that the transmission of each lineage of the inner tantras of the Old School passes.³¹

The third lineage of transmission in this context is 'the hearing lineage of ordinary beings'.³²

³⁰ 1999, p. 332, for a detailed elaboration on the three kinds of transmission lineage refer to pp. 332–347.

³¹ For a detailed account of the lineages of the Three Major rNying ma pa Inner Tantras and its lineage masters see Tulku Thondup 1999, pp. 23–37.

³² These three kinds of transmission lineages are also discussed by Tulku Thondup 1999, pp. 18–23. The third transmission lineage is here called 'Oral transmission of the Ascetics', op. cit., p. 22. For the third kind of transmission lineage refer also to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 456f.

It was due to the emergence of divergent views concerning the authenticity of the Buddhist texts received from India from various places of learning at different times that in the course of especially the 'Later Translation period' there arose much disunity and debate among the different schools. Hence, as Franz-Karl Ehrhard has observed in a recent paper, it was from the eleventh century onwards that it became one major concern of Tibetan authors to determine the authenticity of the Indian Buddhist texts and thus establish lineages of textual transmission. It was this hermeneutical endeavour that enabled them

“...to trace back any specific teaching either to the historical Buddha or to such representatives of Buddha hood as Vajradhara or Samantabhadra. These efforts resulted in a specific literary genre known as the “record [of teachings] heard” (*gsan yig*) or “record [of technical teachings] obtained” (*thob yig*). The term *gsan-yig* seems to have made its appearance in the thirteenth century.”³³

In the realm of Sherpa Buddhism solely the third lineage of transmission, 'the hearing lineage of ordinary beings,' is of importance since it has only been followed this form of lineage that accomplished masters orally have been transmitting the teachings from one generation to the next.

The third category of transmission lineage is the above mentioned lineage of reincarnated masters based on the concept of karma and rebirth. It is of great importance that in Sherpa Buddhism the *sprul sku* system is only a relatively recent innovation that had been initiated by the rDza Rong phu sprul sku Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin nor bu (1867–1940). Having been adopted by the Sherpas at the beginning of the Twentieth century its introduction was more or less coupled with the establishment of the first celibate monastery in sTeng po che (1916–19) in the Khumbu region which had also been inspired by the charismatic 'Buddha of rDza Rong phu.'³⁴

M.T. Kapstein has drawn attention to the fact that the distinct religious traditions of the different Buddhist orders (*chos lugs*, i.e. different 'Dharma systems') must not be confounded with 'teaching lineages.' In contradistinction, the latter represent “...continuous successions

³³ This paper was first presented at the 14th Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, London, 19 August to 3 September 2005; the quote is from p. 1 (in press b).

³⁴ For the particular circumstances of the establishment of the *sprul sku* system among the Khumbu Sherpas refer to Jamyang Wangmo 2005, p. 73f. – It seems that it was with the rDza Rong phu bla ma's confirmation of Ngag dbang yon tan rgya mtsho (d. 1936), who later became known as sKu zhabs sprul sku, as the reincarnation of bla ma Rat na tshabang, the son of the founder of 'Ja' sa monastery in the southeastern part of the Solu region, that the *sprul sku* system had been introduced among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu; for this refer to Jamyang Wangmo 2005, p. 73 and p. 361, n. 171.

of spiritual teachers who have transmitted a given body of knowledge over a period of generations but who need not be affiliated with a common order.”³⁵ In reality, however, the boundaries that theoretically separate teaching lineages from each other are continuously being blurred. As will be discussed in the context of the Sherpa reincarnate bla ma-s below it is in the course of his (or her) religious education the spiritual practitioner of a given Tibetan Buddhist school usually obtains instructions and explanations from and initiations or empowerments in a row of differing teaching lineages. Moreover, the spiritual practitioner is exposed to several philosophical systems (*sgrub mtha*'), the traditions of different Buddhist schools (*chos lugs*), and those of certain monasteries. As will be demonstrated below, in the case of the Sherpas it is predominantly the sMin sgrol gling tradition (*sMin lugs*).³⁶

Hence, bla ma-s and monks learn the methods of tantric rites, the chanting of the liturgical texts of ritual cycles, the playing of cymbals and other musical instruments, the practice of the different mudrā, i.e. sacred hand gestures, the performance of religious dance (*'chams*), the art of drawing the lines of a maṇḍala, to name but a few significant fields of learning, according to different teaching traditions. In due consequence, each Sherpa monastery represents a distinct mix of different teaching traditions depending on the respective religious career of the bla ma and the monks. This is the very reason why, in many cases, for the performance of one and the same religious celebration – as they are being held in both the village temple of a given locality in Solu-Khumbu as well as in the Shar pa dgon pa in Bodhnāth – different ritual cycles may be practiced depending on the particular predilection of the presiding bla ma.

To conclude the elaborations on the two key elements constitutive of the hagiography of an important religious personage (*rnam thar*): in reality, both the lineage of previous and distinguished incarnations and the teaching lineage a given important master represents are, most often, closely related with each other. As in the case of the two incarnation lineages in Sherpa society the infant *sprul sku* is commonly educated within the teaching tradition his

³⁵ Kapstein, M.T. 2006, p. 232. Moreover, he recalls that lineages may be highly specific, for instance the line of teachers through which the study of a certain text or ritual method has been transmitted; there are also the 'lineages of attainment' (*sgrub brgyud*) "...which have conserved significant bodies of religious tradition, including textual learning, liturgy, practical disciplines, iconographical knowledge, etc." (ibid.).

³⁶ For this important aspect see M.T. Kapstein 2006, p. 232. – The example of gTer bdag gling pa may as the major embodiment of the sMin sgrol gling teaching tradition may be illustrative of the very complexity of this subject. Among others, this eminent master restored 'the distant lineage of transmitted precepts' of the Old School. The stream of various lineages such as the 'sMin sgrol gling lineage of transmitted precepts, the 'sMin sgrol gling lineage of Atiyoga' and the 'lineage of the collected tantras' descended through gTer bdag gling pa. The 'distant lineage of transmitted precepts' of the sMin grol gling tradition was transmitted in a continuous succession without decline from Lo chen Dharmaśrī up to bDud 'joms Ye śes rdo rje, see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 733–735.

predecessors represent. As M.T. Kapstein has underlined: "Institutional, lineage-based, and philosophical or doctrinal ways of thinking about religious adherence in Tibet were thus complementary, and to varying degrees intersected with or diverged from one another."³⁷

The long incarnation line of the rDza rong phu bla ma is connected through its first two important masters with the heart of Tibetan Buddhism. It entails some great meditation practitioners, eminent masters, and distinguished teachers of the rNying ma pa School but only few key figures in the history of Sherpa Buddhism. By contrast the relatively short incarnation line of the Toloka sprul sku encompasses solely key figures in the history of Sherpa Buddhism who had been active as distinguished teachers as well as builders of temples, stūpas and other kinds of religious monuments.³⁸ The sTeng po che Rin po che is the reincarnation of the rDza rong phu bla ma's major Sherpa disciple, Ngag dbang nor bu bzang po, popularly called bla ma dGu lo (1850–1934), the main founder of sTeng po che, the Sherpas' first celibate monastery and the first sub-station of the sMin grol gling teaching tradition in the Sherpa area. It is especially for this accomplishment that bla ma dGu lo has been held in particularly high esteem among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. Hence, this very short incarnation chain entails one reincarnation.

When combined both the incarnation line and the teaching lineages constitute an important source for investigating the establishment and spread of Tibetan Buddhism among the Sherpas as is reflected in the historical development of Buddhist institutions and the transmission of teachings in their area.³⁹ The picture that thus unfolds provides a useful introduction to the intricate network of religious, social and spatial relationships that prevails among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu until the present day. Numerous of the religious personages that make up the incarnation line of the rDza rong phu bla ma manifested as great meditation practitioners and teachers of the rDzogs chen tradition of the rNying ma pa school who were thus key figures in its transmission to and dissemination among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu.

Through the members of the incarnation line of the Toloka sprul sku whose first figure had been a disciple of the famous teacher Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Mi pham Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837) the teaching tradition of sMin grol gling in dBus was transmitted

³⁷ Cf. M.T. Kapstein 2006, p. 232.

³⁸ F.-K. Ehrhard has written the only article on an important edifice of Sherpa Buddhism and its history, the Enlightenment Stūpa in dGon pa gZhung (Nep. Junbesi) in its twofold function as commemorative monument and as container of relics (2004c).

³⁹ For the most comprehensive account of the coming of Buddhism to the Sherpa area of Nepal and the 'Buddha-isation' of the Solu-Khumbu region refer to mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin's book 'History of the Sherpas' (*shar pa'i chos byung*) (1971); a brief sketch of the latter book's content has been provided by A.W. Macdonald 1987, pp. 67–74; see also the outline given by E. Berg (2008, ch. One and Two).

to the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. A number of its ritual cycles are performed throughout the village temples as well as in some Sherpa monasteries until the present day. Moreover, the different figures of this incarnation line also transmitted the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle of *gter ma* teachings from the famous revealer of *gter ma* Rig'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585–1656) which had also been received from Chos kyi dbang phyug. The *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle is of particular importance among the Sherpas since it is being used for different purposes in quite different contexts such as, for example, the performance of mortuary rites, the ceremony associated with the construction of houses or the celebration of *tshe bcu* on the tenth day of each lunar month in worship of Guru Padmasambhava.

It is of significance that in the case of each of the two long incarnation lines, both of the two kinds that make up the Sherpa clergy are represented. According to Dudjom Rinpoche it was King Khri srong lde btsan (reigned 755/756–797) who “...established the twofold division of the religious community, consisting of the shaven-headed followers of the sūtras [the monks], and the followers of the way of mantras, who wore long, braided locks.”⁴⁰ Throughout its history the rNying ma pa School has relied on familial lineages of tantric lay priests (*sngags pa*), i.e. married householder bla ma-s who are usually associated with the temple of a given locality. Before the introduction of monasticism among the Sherpas at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, tantric lay priests had been the only category of religious practitioners. Only then the categories of the celibate monk and nun began to emerge in Sherpa Buddhism.

3. The present XIIth rDza sprul, Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan (b. 1959)

In a short note titled ‘Self-Introduction in Brief’, contained in a small booklet on the rDza sprul lineage, its history, and the chain of births of former rDza sprul incarnations the present lineage holder Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan elaborates on the circumstances surrounding his birth. Moreover, he names the eminent masters who recognized him before his birth and also the prominent dignitary who formally enthroned him and gave him his Dharma name. The fact that not only the leading dignitaries of the rNying ma pa School, but also the Karma pa XVI devoted their attention to the recognition, enthronement, and education of the present XIIth rDza sprul clearly testifies to the importance that is attributed to the rDza sprul lineage by some major Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs.

⁴⁰ Cf. Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 519f.

Unfortunately, however, in his brief auto-biography, the present XIIth rDza sprul neither mentions his special attainments nor which kind of teaching lineages he holds as is typical of the Tibetan literary genre of a sacred life-story (*rnam thar*).⁴¹ Instead, as is characteristic of a religious auto-biography he repeatedly emphasizes that he neither possesses the supreme knowledge nor any special attainments thus clearly demonstrating his humbleness. As is usual in this context particular attention is devoted to the conception, the miracles at the time of his birth, and the normal tests that aim at confirming that he is, indeed, the twelfth reincarnate of the rDza sprul lineage.

Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan was born of Tibetan parents on May 25th, 1959 in Phyag ma'i steng, a small hamlet located between sTeng po che and sPang po che in the north-eastern part of the Khumbu region. It was only three days before he passed away that the previous rDza sprul Rin po che came to his parents' house and asked them to let him stay in their place. In conversation the bla ma inquired, among others, his mother's name and age. Finally, he offered to her a ceremonial scarf 'as a sign of auspiciousness.' Moreover, his mother had many auspicious dreams before his conception. In one of her dreams, he recalls,

“... she saw three lions ornamented with finest silk of different colors, the center one being ridden by Guru Rinpoche and the right one by the previous dZatul Rinpoche, while on the left lion there were some unknown lama. They came flying from the front mountain sparkling with radiant lights towards her house and finally dissolved into her body giving a great feeling of peace and calmness. After that she got pregnant.”⁴²

At the time of his birth, the neighbours saw that a rainbow appeared just above his parents' house. Moreover, they realized the growing of three different kinds of unknown flowers.

Still in his mother's womb he was recognized as the reincarnation of the 11th rDza sprul Rin po che, Karma dGe legs bzang po, by H.H. the Karma pa XVI, Rang byung ye ses Rig pa'i rdo rje (1929–1981), and by H.H. rDzong gsar 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse Chos kyi bLo gros (1893–1959).⁴³ It was the latter, then a leading dignitary of the Old School, who

⁴¹ This booklet is titled 'Birth Series History of Dzatul Rinpoche: A Lineage of Devotional Luminaries.' Published by Dzatul Rinpoche, Vajra Yogini Temple, Pharping, Nepal. The short note mentioned above is on pp. 20–22. – Due to his usual staying in Taiwan throughout most of the year I had only two short encounters in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, in both cases in the context of the *lo gsar* celebration (2006 and 2007).

⁴² Quoted from 'Birth Series History of Dzatul Rinpoche', p. 21 (see fn. 38)

⁴³ Cf. p. 20. The latter is one of the most outstanding and influential Tibetan masters of the twentieth century. An authority on all traditions and holder of all traditions he was one of the key figures of the ecumenical

gave him the name Ngag dbang bsTan'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan. Moreover, he was recognized by 'many other' high bla ma-s the most important being sTag lung rTse sprul, one of the three hierarchs of sTag lung Monastery in dBu. In the year 1964, at the age of five, he was formally recognized and enthroned by H. H. 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche Ngag dbang chos kyi blo gros (b. 1924) in sPyi dbang Monastery in the Solu region.

For a decade the twelfth reincarnate of the rDza sprul line studied at the re-established sMin grol gling Monastery in Dehradun, U.P., India.⁴⁴ The following two years he studied with mkhan po Thub bstan in Manali, H.P., India. At the age of eighteen he returned to Nepal to study with the two eminent masters and leading dignitaries of the rNying ma pa School H.H. bDud 'joms 'jig bral ye śes rdo rje Rin po che (1904–1987), the first head of the Old School, and H.H. Dis mgo mkhyen brtse Rin po che (1910–1991) who acted as the second head of the Old School until he passed away.

Today, Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan has a monastery in the vicinity of the village of Pharping located on the southern side of the Kathmandu Valley close to the Cave of Yang le shod.⁴⁵ Moreover, he built two Dharma centers in Taiwan where he spends the major part of the year.

3.I. The rDza sprul incarnation line (*skyes rabs*)

The rDza sprul incarnation lineage has become popular in Tibet and Nepal from the tenth lineage holder onwards who is known as rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu (1866–1940). Its major characteristics are as follows: Whereas the early figures of this eminent incarnation lineage as holders of the rDzogs chen teachings refer to the heart of Tibetan Buddhism, it also includes gSang ba rdo rje (17th century), the heroic ancestor of the Sherpas, and sMin gling Lo chen Dharmaśri thus closely associating the teaching tradition of one of the two major rNying ma pa monasteries in Central Tibet with Sherpa Buddhism.

According to Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan rDza rong phu located in the southwestern part of Tibet is a place where, as is mentioned in the

(*ris med*) movement of Tibet – For a detailed 'tree' of all mkhyen brtse incarnations, their close interrelatedness and Dis mgo mkhyen brtse (1910–1991)'s principal teaching lineages refer to M. Ricard 1996, p. 150.

⁴⁴ The following facts are not contained in the booklet. Instead, they are given by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 325.

⁴⁵ The Upper Cave is also known as Asura Cave. This is the famous sacred place where Guru Padmasambhava accomplished the vidyādhara (*rig 'dzin*, knowledge holder) level of Mahāmudrā (*phyag rgya chen po*, lit. the 'Great Seal') by means of the practice of Vajra Kilaya. This he did in association with Shakyadevi, the daughter of the Nepalese king Punyedhara, who was one of the five chief disciples of the Lotus-Born master. For this refer to ch. V of Guru Padmasambhava's hagiography (E.P. Kunsang and M. Binder Schmidt 1993). For the figure of Shakyadevi see op. cit., p. 282.

*Padma bka' i thang yig*⁴⁶, Padmasambhava stayed for a month for spiritual practice. Due to his former presence rDza rong phu has been recognized as a Guru Rin po che place. It is to this sacred site that the rDza sprul lineage refers to and owes its name. rDza is the name of both the place and the monastery.⁴⁷ The Tibetan term '*phu*' designates the upper part of a valley as opposed to '*mda*', the lower part. The word '*rong*' generally designates valleys with cultivated spaces populated by farmers in contradistinction to '*brog*' which means pasture lands inhabited by nomads. In certain cases such as this one, however, '*rong*' means 'gorge' rather than 'valley', hence in this particular context '*rong phu*' means 'the upper part of the gorge.'⁴⁸

In what follows first a short summary of the sacred life of the lineage's founder, rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu, shall be provided. Next, the different figures constituting the rDza sprul incarnation line shall be briefly introduced. Then a separate section each will be devoted to the mentioned early masters of the rDzogs chen teachings, to gSang ba rdo rje, the famous Sherpa ancestor venerated as their culture hero, and his activities, and to the sMin grol gling tradition which the Sherpas mainly follow until the present day.

3.II. rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu (1867–1940), the founder of rDza Rong phu monastery and of the rDza sprul incarnation line: on his life and accomplishments

Being a key figure in the context of the evolving modern form of Sherpa Buddhism, the charismatic rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu was the abbot of rDza rong phu monastery. Called '*mDo ngag zung 'jug chos gling*' ('Sūtra and Tantra Dharma Chakra Island') rDza rong phu monastery is located in the southern area of Ding ri in La stod just below the massif of Jo mo glang ma (Mount Everest, Nep. Sagarmatha) on its northern

⁴⁶ The *Padma bka' i thang yig* was written by the renowned treasure-discoverer O rgyan gling pa (1323–60). This voluminous text belongs to the considerable *thang yig* literature, i.e. the textual tradition of the biography of Padmasambhava. Transmitted as treasure-texts (*gter ma*) this textual tradition has been founded in the fourteenth century mainly by O rgyan gling pa and Sangs rgyas gling pa.(1340–1396).

⁴⁷ Unfortunately, I have not been able to locate rDza rong phu in the *Padma bka' i thang yig* as translated by G.-C. Toussaint (1933). In chant XCI the hundred-eight treasures Guru Padmasambhava is said to have hidden in Tibet are enumerated; at a site called 'Ding-Chung' in Ding ri, the area under consideration, he hid 'le yoga' (p. 375). In chant XCV the Indian tantric master enumerates the numerous places of pilgrimage each commemorative of his stay and the respective spiritual practices. In chant XCVII is given his prophecy according to which he will revisit Tibet after three thousand years. Here he lists the places he will visit but rDza rong phu is not mentioned among them. – According to J. Wangmo Padmasambhava spent seven months in Rong phu meditating in a small cave and subduing local divinities the major one being Mi g.yo glang bzang ma; but unfortunately she gives no textual reference for this statement (2005, p. 15).

⁴⁸ As to the definition of the two terms and the extended semantic meaning of '*rong*' compare A.W. Macdonald 1987d, p. 1, n. 3.

side.⁴⁹ The industrious bla ma, a native of the mKhar rta area, succeeded to secure the patronage of wealthy Ding ri agriculturalists and traders for the construction in the year 1902 and the subsequent upkeep of the big monastic complex of rDza rong phu which also included five nunneries located in other parts of the Ding ri region. Later rDza rong phu monastery was also subsidized by the Lha sa government for political reasons since it is located in the Tibetan-Nepalese borderlands.⁵⁰

In an interesting brief paper A.W. Macdonald quoted from the recollections of British climbers C.K. Howard-Bury (1921) and C.G. Bruce (1922) as to their encounter with the widely respected rDza sprul bla ma. Moreover, he made use of the 'guide' (*gnas yig*) to this region that had been composed by the rDza rong phu bla ma and what the latter noted in his autobiography as to the coming and passage of these strangers who, in their early efforts to ascent Mount Everest, used to establish their base camp in the monastery's vicinity and to request the bla ma's blessings for their ventures. Among others, A.W. Macdonald quoted at length from C.K. Howard-Bury's description of rDza rong phu Monastery, the monastic community, the associated hermitages, and the monastery's environs as well as the rDza sprul bla ma's general attitude towards both the strangers and their undertaking which are of particular interest in our context. As was usual at that early stage in the history of Everest climbing the base camp

“... was pitched close to the Rongbuk Monastery, where there lived a very high re-incarnated Lama who was in meditation and not allowed to see anyone. (...) the legend was that from this valley there used to be a pass over into the Khumbu Valley, but the high Lama who lived here forbade the use of it, as it disturbed the meditation of the recluses and hermits of which there were several hundred here. At first these good people did not at all approve of our coming into this valley, as they thought we should be likely to disturb and distract their meditations.

⁴⁹ The front cover of Sh. B. Ortner's book on 'High Religion' (1989) shows a well-known big-sized photo of 1922 of the rDza sprul Rin po che which has been reproduced in numerous more recent treatises on the Sherpas. It must have been shot in the course of the early British attempts to climb Mount Everest. – A photo each of rDza rong phu monastery and of Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu has been provided by H. Diemberger 1992a on 3–5 (pagination acc. to chapters). A photo of rDza rong phu monastery in ruins devastated by the Chinese can be found in J. Wangmo 2005, no. 60.

⁵⁰ For the history of rDza rong phu monastery and the life, achievements, and spiritual influence of the charismatic rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu among the Sherpas who inspired his disciples to found monastic establishments in Solu-Khumbu and who was instrumental in the spread of monasticism in that region see B.N. Aziz 1978, pp. 209–211; A. W. Macdonald 1987d, pp. 1–10; Sh. B. Ortner 1989, pp. 130–134; H. Diemberger 1992, chapter 2–5, 3–4 and 3–5 (pagination acc. to chapters); Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu, Tengboche Reincarnate Lama, and F. Klatzel 2000, pp. 55–56; R.J. Kohn 2001, p. 4, 51–3, 55ff.

The Rongbuk Monastery lies at a height of 16,500 feet, and is an unpleasantly cold spot. This monastery contains twenty permanent lamas who always live there together with the re-incarnated Lama. Besides these, there are three hundred other associated lamas who come in periodically, remaining there for periods of varying length. These associate lamas are mostly well-to do, and having sufficient money to support themselves are not a drain upon the villagers.”⁵¹

rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu was initiated in the *byang gter* or ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition by the sKu ye bla ma, a married tantric lama and head of sKu ye bla brang, located in the region of mKhar rta stod.⁵² Moreover, he had undergone the rigorous religious training at sMin grol gling Monastery in the central Tibetan province of dBus for which this famous monastery has been well-known. It was here that he became holder of the sMin grol gling teaching lineage which he subsequently spread among a steadily growing number of disciples in Southern Tibet as well as among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu.

Hence, due to the eminent spiritual authority that the rDza rong phu bla ma enjoyed among his wide following who was popularly known as ‘Rong phu sangs rgyas’ or the ‘Buddha of Rong phu’ rDza rong phu Monastery became a major spiritual center for the people of Ding ri and subsequently also for the Sherpas in adjacent Solu-Khumbu just south of the great Himalayan divide.⁵³ rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu eventually also received the patronage from some leading Sherpa families. Throughout the first four decades of the Twentieth Century many Sherpas and even some Newar traders, attracted by the Buddha of Rong phu’s outstanding reputation, went there to take their vows or to receive teachings and/or ordination from him.⁵⁴

rDza rong phu represents the second monastic site from which the teaching tradition of sMin grol gling reached the region of the Sherpas located on the periphery of the Tibetan culture area thus contributing to a significant revitalization and fortification of Sherpa Buddhism at that time. It is the influential rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu who was instrumental in inspiring the establishment of the monastic tradition among the Sherpas of

⁵¹ A. W. Macdonald 1987d, pp. 1–10; the quote is from p. 1f.

⁵² A brief history of the sKu ye bla brang, an important rNying ma pa monastery practising the tradition of the *byang gter*, has been provided by H. Diemberger 1992 chapter 3–3; she also mentions shortly the history of the sKu ye lineage that has its mythical origins in an Indian hermit and whose 33rd incarnation today resides in Kathmandu; a short note on the history of the sKu ye bla brang and the lineage of the sKu ye bla ma-s may also be found in J. Wangmo 2005, p. 362, n. 176.

⁵³ A map of the wider region is contained in H. Diemberger & G. Hazod 1997, p. 263.

⁵⁴ On the growing influence of the rDza rong phu bla ma among the Sherpas refer to J. Wangmo 2005, p. 74 and pp. 80–86.

Solu-Khumbu. This recent innovation occurred at the beginning of the 20th century as is reflected in the subsequent construction of monasteries throughout the region of Solu-Khumbu.⁵⁵ In all cases their building was sponsored by influential 'big men' who had been his disciples and who kept on coming there for teachings on certain ritual cycles and to receive the respective instructions, explanations, and empowerments.⁵⁶ One of his most important disciples among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, *Bya stang chos dar*, popularly called *bla ma dGu lo* (1850–1934)⁵⁷, became – in association with a group of three other benefactors – the founder of *sTeng po che* Monastery in the Khumbu region. This was the first celibate monastery in the Sherpa area (founded 1916–1919). It was the 'Buddha of Rong phu' who performed the consecration of the new monastery and also gave an empowerment of a ritual cycle associated with *Ratna gling pa* which was meant to revive the influential treasure-discoverer's lineage among the Sherpas.⁵⁸

A key element that mirrors the enormous and enduring influence the 'Buddha of Rong phu' has exerted upon the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu is the sacred masked dance festival which they call *Mani Rimdu*.⁵⁹ This name is the Sherpa pronunciation of the Tibetan term *maṇi ril sgrub*, i.e. the practice of *maṇi* pills. *Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu* brought the *Mani Rimdu* traditions from *sMin grol gling* to *rDza rong phu* monastery.

Having edited the *Mani Rimdu* traditions into their present form, *Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu* used this particular *Mindröling* tradition as basis of the liturgy for the creation of the

⁵⁵ Detailed accounts as to the founding of monasteries among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu have been provided by S.B. Ortner 1989a, 1989b, 1990; Ortner has also devoted a separate treatise to the founding of the first Sherpa nunnery at *sDe po che* in the year 1925, a significant event in the history of Sherpa Buddhism which took place six years after the construction of *sTeng po che* Monastery was completed (1996).

⁵⁶ According to B.N. Aziz the still existing monasteries of *Thang smad*, *sTeng po che*, *sPyi dbang* and *Brag shing thog* were established as 'extensions of *Dza-rong*' (1978, p. 211). As to this profound influence of *rDza rong phu* monastery and its charismatic abbot on the emerging monasticism among the Sherpas S.B. Ortner has observed that "...almost all clerics who played a role in the founding of the first celibate establishments took their vows in Rumbu..." (1989, p. 179). Refer to D.L. Snellgrove (1957, pp. 213–223) particularly for its influence on the monks and the monasteries of *sPyi dbang* and *Brag shing thog*; see also Ch. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, p. 134f.; 1984, p. 86f..

⁵⁷ A photo of *bla ma dGu lo* whose Dharma name was *Ngag dbang Nor bu bzang po* and who lost his life in the course of the fatal earthquake of 1934 that destroyed, a.o., *sTeng po che* Monastery, has been provided in *Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu, Tengboche Reincarnate Lama*, and F. Klatzel 2000, p. 55. The photo of his statue in *sTeng po che* Monastery can be found in Sh. B. Ortner 1989, p. 133.

⁵⁸ For the circumstances that led to the construction of the first Sherpa monastery refer *Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu, Tengboche Reincarnate Lama*, and F. Klatzel 2000, pp. 53ff.; to Sh. B. Ortner 1989, pp. 134–138; and to the memories of the first *Lawudo bla ma* as cited by J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 81–85.

⁵⁹ According to R.J. Kohn *Mani Rimdu* belongs to a genus of Tibetan rituals known as *ril sgrub*, sacred pill practices. In fact, there are practised several *maṇi ril sgrub* among them being the one that the Dalai bLa ma performs (2001, p. 4).

Mani Rimdu festival that is celebrated in present-day Solu-Khumbu.⁶⁰ The *Mani ril sgrub* festival which originated in rDza rong phu monastery and has been practiced in public rituals in the region of Solu-Khumbu until the present day is based on a particular form of Mahākāruṅika, the little-known form of Avalokiteśvara called ‘Lord of the Dance’ (*gar dbang*) which has as its textual source the treasure-cycle called ‘Thugs rje chen po bde gshegs kun ’dus’ unearthed by gTer bdag gling pa.⁶¹

As to the sacred dances of the *Mani Rimdu* festival Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu took the majority of the ‘chams from a monastery in gTsang province in Central Tibet to which he added some of the sacred dances from the sMin grol gling tradition.⁶² According to R.J. Kohn, the performance of the *Mani Rimdu* at rDza rong phu began between 1907 and 1910, and from there it was transmitted to Solu-Khumbu around the year 1940.⁶³ It is enacted in public rituals annually at different times at only the three monasteries of sTeng po che (October) and Thang smad (May) in the Khumbu and of sPyi dbang Monastery (November) in the Solu region.⁶⁴

3.III. The rDza sprul incarnation lineage 65

1. The translator (*lo tsā ba*) gTsang Legs drub, eighth century

The monk Legs drub of gTsang province accompanied Bai ro tsa na on his mission to India. According to the renowned rNying ma scholar T. Thondup both figures were ‘two of the first missionaries.’⁶⁶ After having received some teachings, the monk Legs drub departed for Tibet while Bai ro tsa na requested more teachings from Shri Simha. On his return journey, however, gTsang Legs drub got killed by border or road guards.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ For Ngag dbang bstan dzin nor bu’s creation of the *Mani Rimdu* festival see R.J. Kohn 2001, p. 4, 51–3.

⁶¹ As to the full title of this text including its rendering into English refer to R. J. Kohn 1997, p. 364.

⁶² Cf. R.J. Kohn 2001, p. 51f..

⁶³ Cf. R.J. Kohn 2001, p. 52f.; Ch. von Furer-Haimendorf 1964, p. 211.

⁶⁴ As R.J. Kohn observes although the liturgical text and the complex set of rituals are the same, the ritual performance of the *Mani Rimdu* differs slightly at each monastery (see 2001, p. 4). For the tradition of the *Mani Rimdu* and the *Dumji*, two traditions of sacred masked dances as performed among the Sherpas refer to E. Berg (in press, ch. III, section 7a).

⁶⁵ The following outline is based on a short enumeration of the twelve incarnations that make up the rDza sprul lineage until the present day. Written by the present rDza sprul it is a separate chapter ‘Brief Birth Chain of former dZatrus’ in his booklet titled ‘Birth Series History of Dzatul Rinpoche: A Lineage of Devotional Luminaries’ (pp. 16–19). Here, the given data are supplemented by those provided J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 323–325.

⁶⁶ Cf. 1999, p. 103

⁶⁷ This has been observed by T. Thondup 1999, p. 103. See also J. Wangmo 2005, p. 323.

2. The great scholar and translator gYu sgra snying po (eighth/ninth century)
 Born as a prince of rGyal mo Tsha ba rong in the far east of the eastern province of Khams gYu sgra snying po was accepted by the master Bai ro tsa na as his student. The great translator happened to live there in exile. The senior consort of King Khri srong lde'u btsan, btsan po yum dMar rgyan, had tried to seduce the great translator during her husband's absence but Bai ro tsa na resisted the temptation, managed to escape and fled into exile to rGyal mo rong.⁶⁸
 gYu sgra snying po became a great scholar and translator. He provided important translations in collaboration with Vimalamitra, one of the most learned Indian Buddhist masters who became the second-most influential teacher in Tibet. His most important teaching is known as the *Vima sNying thig*, one of the Heart-Essence teachings of the Great Perfection.⁶⁹
 According to tradition the translator gYu sgra snying po is one of the twenty-five foremost disciples of Guru Rinpoche⁷⁰, a major teacher, and Bai ro tsa na's chief lineage holder of the Mental Class (*sems sde*) of the rDzogs chen teachings.⁷¹ Moreover, he is one of the hundred-eight translators of the early era and is regarded as the reincarnation of the afore-mentioned *lo tsa ba* Legs drub of gTsang.⁷²
3. gTer ston bSam gtan gling pa, fourteenth century
 Known as Byang gling gter ston, he was prophesied in the *Padma bka' i thang yig* as the reincarnation of gYu sgra snying po.⁷³ Born in Kong po, he is credited with the discovery of many treasure-cycles (*gter ma*).
4. Rig 'dzin sTag sham Nus ldan rdo rje, (1682-?)
 Also known as bSam gtan gling pa, he was a great treasure-discoverer (*gter ston*) and an emanation of the Nepalese Atsara Sale, Ye shes mtsho rgyal's disciple and consort.⁷⁴
5. sNgags 'chang (Skt. *mantradhara*) gSang ba rDo rje (17th century), the heroic ancestor of the Sherpas

⁶⁸ The particular circumstances that had forced Bai ro tsa na to pass some time in exile are mentioned in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 p. 540; these are also discussed by P. Kvaerne 1980, pp. 185–191.

⁶⁹ As to the great master Vimalamitra, his accomplishments, and the *Vima sNying thig*, in particular, see T. Thondup 1999, pp. 34–36; 68–73.

⁷⁰ Cf. T. Thondup 1999, p. 105 where are given some biographic details.

⁷¹ See T. Thondup 1996, p. 31.

⁷² These two aspects have been mentioned by Kunsang, E.P. and M. Binder Schmidt 2005. p. 432. See also J. Wangmo 2005, p. 323.

⁷³ This has been noted by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 323.

⁷⁴ For few data as to this master refer to Ricard, M. 1994, p. 9 and 12 n.40.

A.W. MacDonald called this charismatic bla ma ‘the first great Buddhist figure in Khumbu’.⁷⁵ gSang ba rDo rje founded the first Sherpa village temple in sPang po che in the Khumbu region (consecrated in 1667). He was a highly accomplished master, great meditator and influential teacher who also had great magical powers. Through him the tradition of the great treasure-finder Ratna Gling pa (1403–1478) has been transmitted to his many disciples among the Sherpas.⁷⁶ It was predominantly Ratna Gling pa’s teaching tradition that the Sherpas practised from the time of their settlement of Solu-Khumbu in the course of the Sixteenth Century until the Thirties of the Nineteenth Century when some of their tantric householder priests came into contact with the sMin grol gling teaching tradition first through Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837).⁷⁷

6. sMin gling Lo chen Dharmaśrī (1654–1717), representative of the sMin grol gling teaching tradition⁷⁸

sMin gling Lo chen Dharmaśrī, Ngag dbang Chos ‘phel rGya mtsho was the younger brother, ‘inner, spiritual son,’ and main collaborator of Rig ‘dzin Gter bdag gling pa, Padma Gar dbang ‘Gyur med rDo rje (1646–1714), also known as sMin gling gter chen, who founded sMin grol gling Monastery in 1676, the great rNying ma pa center in Central Tibet. Recognized as an emanation of gYu sgra snying po⁷⁹ (see above) the great translator Dharmaśrī was ordained by the Fifth Dalai Bla ma, Ngag dbang bLo bzang rGya mtsho (1671–82). Thanks to the initiative of the two brothers Rig ‘dzin Gter bdag gling pa and Lo chen Dharmaśrī and owing to their close spiritual connection to and cooperation with the ‘Great Fifth’ the sMin grol gling teaching tradition became one of the major traditions within the rNying ma pa School of Tibetan Buddhism. The Sherpas follow mainly the sMin grol gling teaching tradition until the present day..

7. bsTan ‘dzin zla ‘od rdo rje, eighteenth century

Born in Kong po, he built a monastery in the hidden land (*sbas yul*) of Padma bkod in southeastern Tibet and opened many hidden places.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Cf. 1987a, p. 57.

⁷⁶ His hagiography has been provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 793–795.

⁷⁷ According to M. Kapstein this consequential encounter occurred ‘shortly before 1850’ (1983, p. 42). It was already in the year 1837, however, that the Brag dkar rta so sprul sku passed away.

⁷⁸ The sacred life-story and the attainments of this eminent master have been given by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 728–732.

⁷⁹ This is mentioned by Dudjom Rinpoche in the detailed hagiography of Rig ‘dzin Gter bdag gling pa (1991, pp. 825–834, see p. 833).

⁸⁰ These scant data have been provided by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 324.

8. 'Gyur med o rgyan bstan dar, eighteenth century
Born in mDo smad, i.e. the northeastern province of A mdo, he was ordained as a monk by sMin gling Khri chen V, Phrin las nam rgyal.⁸¹ He meditated at rDza Rong phu and taught in the mKhar rta area in the district of Pha drugs which is located to the south-east of rDza Rong phu in the southern part of La stod.⁸² Significantly, this figure was a teacher of 'Khrul zhig kun bzang mthong grol rdo rje (d. 1922) whose reincarnation is H.H. 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche, Ngag dbang Chos kyi bLo gros (b. 1924), among the Sherpas one of the most venerated masters.
9. 'Gyur med o rgyan bstan 'phel, nineteenth century
Born in mKhar rta, he was recognized as the sprul sku of O rgyan bsTan dar. His parents wanted him to marry, but he escaped to sMin grol gling and received layman vows from sMin gling Khri chen VII, Sangs rgyas kun 'dga.⁸³ Some years later, he returned to mKhar rta, where he renovated two temples and eventually married. Some time later, however, he renounced family life and went to meditate in Rong phu.⁸⁴
10. Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin Nor bu, 1864–1940, the founder of the rDza sprul lineage
In 1902 this charismatic bla ma founded the monastery of rDza rong phu in the Ding ri area on the northern side of Mount Everest. Owing to his spiritual knowledge he became a great teacher in the Nepal-Tibetan borderland of that region. Having received his religious education in sMin grol gling the highly learned master who had also been an accomplished rDzogs chen practitioner made his monastery an important site for the transmission of the sMin grol gling teaching lineage in southern Tibet and among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. It was Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin Nor bu who inspired the construction of celibate monasteries and the introduction of the *Mani Rimdu* masked dance festival among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. He is the root-teacher of H.H. 'Khrul zhig Rin po che.
11. Karma dge legs bzang po, 1940–1958, popularly called Khum sprul⁸⁵

⁸¹ This sMin grol gling throne holder is mentioned by Dudjom Rinpoche twice as a lineage-holder of a. 'the sMin grol gling lineage of the transmitted precepts' and of b. 'the sMin grol gling lineage of Atiyoga' (1991, p. 733 and p. 734).

⁸² These few data have been given by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 324.

⁸³ The seventh sMin grol gling throne holder is mentioned by Dudjom Rinpoche as a lineage-holder of 'the sMin grol gling lineage of the transmitted precepts' (1991, p. 733).

⁸⁴ This scant information can be found in J. Wangmo 2005, p. 324.

⁸⁵ Interestingly, there are actually two reincarnations of Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin Nor bu of whom only the one named above has been mentioned in the 'Brief Birth Chain of former dZatrus' written by Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan. The other one is mentioned by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 324. Today, he is the representative of H.H. the Dalai Bla ma in Japan (ibid.).

Born in Khumbu to Sherpa parents, he studied in sPyi dbang and Rong phu under H.H. 'Khrul zhig Rin po che. After a stay of few years in Pha 'drug, he passed away.

12. Ngag dbang bstan'dzin 'jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan (b.1959), the present lineage-holder of the rDza sprul incarnation lineage

3.IV. The early figures of the rDza sprul incarnation line: eminent knowledge holders of the rDzogs chen teachings

The first two religious figures of the rDza sprul incarnation line lived in the era of the early dissemination of Buddhism in Tibet (bstan pa snga dar) before the reign of King Glang Dar ma (838–842). It has to be recalled that it was Śāntarakṣita (*mkhan chen zhi ba 'tsho*), the abbot of the famous Buddhist monastic university of Vikramaśīla, who, invited by King Khri srong lde'u btsan (reigned from 755/56–797), introduced the unbroken lineage of monastic ordination and ordained the first Tibetan monks. Guru Padmasambhava, the Indian tantric master and sage, bestowed Vajrayāna initiations and imparted essential instructions. According to tradition as formulated by Dudjom Rinpoche, it was after the completion of glorious bSam yas (ca. 779), the 'Temple of Unchanging Spontaneous Presence,' that King Khri srong lde'u btsan decided, "...to introduce the foundations of the sūtra and mantra teachings by translating the true doctrine [from Sanskrit into Tibetan]."⁸⁶

Thus, it happened that on the advice from both Śāntarakṣita and Guru Padmasambhava, King Khri srong lde'u btsan ordered the translators Bai ro tsa na⁸⁷ and Nam mkha'i snying po⁸⁸ (both 8th century) to travel to India. There they were to receive certain teachings in Sanskrit, to bring them to Tibet, and to provide accurate translations of the respective Buddhist Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. According to M. Ricard et al. "...Tibetan translators, led by Vairocana, along with Indian panditas, led by Vimalamitra, translated into Tibetan the entire Tripitaka – the 'Three Baskets' of the Buddha's words – as well as countless tantras, commentaries, and ritual texts used in meditation practice."⁸⁹

Doubtlessly, this immense translation project, the fruit of centuries of close cooperation between Indian masters and Tibetan translators, represents an outstanding achievement of almost incomparable historical dimensions. The immense achievements of the Tibetan

⁸⁶ Cf. 1991, p. 515.

⁸⁷ As to the hagiography of Bai ro tsa na see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 538–540; a line drawing is provided on p. 539. For his life and accomplishments see also T. Thondup 1999, pp. 103f.

⁸⁸ As to the hagiography of Nam mkha'i snying po see T. Thondup 1999, pp. 101f. Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p.535 briefly mentions this translator, a line drawing is provided on p. 534.

⁸⁹ Cf. M. Ricard et al. 1994, p. XVII.

translators, in particular, cannot be overestimated. In view of their own translation work in the present circumstances, G. Dorje who in collaboration with M. Kapstein translated Dudjom Rinpoche's voluminous 'The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism' (1991) has noted their own 'total absence of inner realization' that would actually be the spiritual precondition of the task of providing accurate translations. By contrast, as he notes: "In the past, Tibetan scholars of the caliber of Vairocana and Kawa Peltsek could translate the Sanskrit Buddhist texts with great accuracy because they had fully realized the essence of enlightened mind."⁹⁰

Bai ro tsa na lo tsā ba of the Pa gor clan, who translated numerous texts of sūtra and tantra is regarded as Tibet's greatest translator⁹¹ and belongs to the group of the first seven monks to be ordained in Tibet.⁹² Moreover, he was one of the principal disciples of both Padmasambhava and Shrī Siṃha.⁹³ Bai ro tsa na⁹⁴ as well as Nam mkha'i snying po belong to the Twenty-five Disciples (*rje 'bang nyer lnga*), the group consisting of the most outstanding of Padmasambhava's Tibetan disciples.⁹⁵ The most famous figures were Khri srong lde'u btsan, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, Padmasambhava's main spiritual consort who is said to have concealed most of the treasure-cycles, and Bai ro tsa na lo tsa ba. It is of great significance that all of these major disciples attained supreme accomplishments, and many of the great masters of Tibetan Buddhism are emanations of one of the twenty-five disciples. It is here that the rDza sprul incarnation lineage takes its origin.

In India, Nam mkha'i snying po studied the doctrines of Yangdak Heruka under the great master Hūṃkara who, born into a brahmin family in Nepal and ordained at Nālandā, was the first to have received them.⁹⁶ Bai ro tsa na was to receive teachings of rDzogs pa chen po (Ati Yoga) or Great Perfection, the highest of the 'Three Inner Tantras', the special tantras of the rNying ma School, from the accomplished master Shrī Siṃha whom he met in the sandalwood forest of Dhanakośa.⁹⁷ During his stay in India, he also met dGa 'rab rdo rje

⁹⁰ In the preface to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. XXX. – sKa ba dpal brtsegs is another of the great Tibetan translators belonging to the group of Padmasambhava's Twenty-Five Disciples, for that see the following.

⁹¹ See, e.g., T. Thondup 1999, pp. 103, 104.

⁹² For an enumeration of the first group of 'seven men who were tested' who were the first monks in Tibet refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 515.

⁹³ See Patrul Rinpoche 1999, p. 439.

⁹⁴ As to the hagiography of Bai ro tsa na see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 538–540.

⁹⁵ For an enumeration of the group of Twenty-Five Tibetan Disciples of Padmasambhava refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 534–536; for a detailed overview of the group of Twenty-Five Tibetan Disciples including each one's hagiography refer to T. Thondup 1999, pp. 99–108.

⁹⁶ On the accomplishments of the great master Hūṃkara see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 475–77.

⁹⁷ For the circumstances that led to receiving the requested rDzogs chen teachings from Shrī Siṃha including

(Prahevajra) in the great charnel ground of Dhūmasthira.⁹⁸ The latter two masters are key figures in the transmission and further development of the rDzogs pa chen po teachings. dGa 'rab rdo rje is the first human teacher of rDzogs pa chen po in human form that was originally revealed by Vajrasattva (rdo rje sems dpa'). This deity is the Buddha who embodies the Hundred Families (*rigs brgya*), i.e. the forty-two peaceful and the fifty-eight wrathful deities. In the lineage of the Great Perfection Vajrasattva is the Sambhogakāya Buddha, which is the luminous aspect of Buddhahood.⁹⁹

dGa 'rab rdo rje spent three years on Mount Malaya to record in writing these precepts with the help of three wisdom ḍākinīs. In collaboration with them he also arranged them along with the emanation writings, which were 'self-originated and naturally established.'¹⁰⁰ Later, it was at the great Śītavana charnel ground that dGa 'rab rdo rje met Manjushrīmitra, whom he gave all the instructions and further advice and who thus became the second human teacher of the Great Perfection. The Khotanese master Shrī Siṃha is its third human teacher following Manjushrīmitra.¹⁰¹

Each of the two Tibetan translators who occupy the first two places in the rDza sprul incarnation lineage – Bai ro tsa na and Nam mkha'i snying po – had attained the spiritual accomplishment necessary so that they were able to propagate the respective received teachings in Tibet.

3.V. gSang ba rdo rje (17th century), the heroic ancestor of the Sherpas who is regarded as the major figure responsible for the 'Buddha-isation' of the formerly non-Buddhist region of Solu-Khumbu

In the course of the sixteenth century the ancestors of the Sherpa people have migrated in small units from various areas in Eastern Tibet to the high valleys in the area south of Mount Everest. Being holders of the teaching lineage of the treasure-revealer Ratna gling pa

the respective instructions and empowerments see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 538–39. – On the lineage of Atiyoga or rDzogs pa chen po, as it was propagated in heaven, and how it came down to earth where it was first received by dGa 'rab rdo rje see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 490–501.

⁹⁸ Mentioned in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 539.

⁹⁹ Cf. Patrul Rinpoche 1991, p. 440. He also notes that the practice of Vajrasattva and the recitation of his mantra are particularly effective for purifying negative actions (ibid.). For a detailed explanation of sambhogakāya refer to T. Thondup 1999, pp. 51f. – For Vajrasattva refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 20–21. Here, illustration no. 3 is the photo of a painted scroll depicting Vajrasattva.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 493.

¹⁰¹ For these lineage holders and their respective contributions in the context of the Atiyoga or rDzogs pa chen po lineage refer to T. Thondup 1999, pp. 29ff.

(1403–1479),¹⁰² their bla ma-s were engaged in the search for ‘hidden valleys’ (*sbas yul*). Following the predictions contained in Ratna gling pa’s treasure-texts these ancestors first entered the Khumbu¹⁰³, later also the southern Solu area. It is here that they settled down on a permanent basis and eventually became the Sherpa ethnic group we are familiar with today.¹⁰⁴

Principally, to all of the central figures in the history of Sherpa Buddhism holds what Ngag dbang bstan ‘dzin bzang po (b. 1935), the sTeng po che rin po che, has noted in view of the achievements of the charismatic bla ma gSang ba rdo rje, the Sherpas’ culture hero, and his equally two powerful brothers (17th century):

“They taught religion, started gompas in the village and organized the communities. (...). The scattered settlements in the Khumbu valley had no permanent leaders until the three sons of Lama Buddha Tsenchen¹⁰⁵ started the village gompas and organized the communities. Sangwa Dorje was in Pangboche, Ralpa Dorje in Thame and Khyenpa Dorje in Rimijung“.¹⁰⁶

Hence, the Sherpa bla ma-s’ eminently important function in view of their following was basically threefold: they acted as teachers, founders of village temples and builders of other Buddhist monuments such as stūpas, and as sociopolitical leaders who established a certain order in their highly fragmented communities.¹⁰⁷ During his stay in Tibet for religious studies, bLa ma gSang ba rdo rje is said to have been a disciple of a certain Rig ‘dzin Jigs ‘bral bzang po who is described as the fifth in a succession of teacher and disciple from Ratna gling pa.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² One of the major treasure-discoverers of the rNying ma School who is also famous for his compilation of the *rNying ma’i brgyud ‘bum*; for his biography and accomplishments see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 793–795.

¹⁰³ According to the ‘Sherpa pilgrimage guide’ which the renowned teacher and learned scholar mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan ‘dzin (1924–1990) composed at the request of K. Buffetrille, “...the region of Khum bu is one of the ‘hidden lands’ as predicted by Master Padma.” To this note is even added that a place of meditation (*sgrub gnas*) of an important master had been situated in the Khumbu area: “This is the meditation place of the treasure-revealer Ratna gling pa...” (K. Buffetrille 2000, pp. 255–285, see p. 277). In note 97, p. 279 she summarizes the existing confusion among scholars such as Fürer-Haimendorf, Oppitz and Ortner 1989 as this master in his relationship with the Sherpas is concerned.

¹⁰⁴ A detailed account of the early phase of Sherpa history has been provided by E. Berg (in press, ch. One).

¹⁰⁵ The Sherpa ancestor bla ma Buddha mTshan can had three sons. Born in a small hermitage in Khumbu below Khumbu’i Yul lha, the holy mountain of this region, all three sons became bla ma-s.

¹⁰⁶ Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu and Fr. Klatzel 2000, p. 24 and p. 25. For similar activities of some other major Sherpa bla ma-s see op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁰⁷ Similar observations have been made by F.-K. Ehrhard 2005, p. 1235.

¹⁰⁸ Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu and Fr. Klatzel 2000, p. 25.

According to A.W. Macdonald Buddhism among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu “...was imposed locally by what one might term highly individualistic frontier lamas filled with a crusading spirit....”¹⁰⁹ The process of appropriation of their new cis-Himalayan territory by means of certain ritual practices reenacted Padmasambhava’s successful ritual taming and subjugating of the local spirits in Tibet which were hostile to the new belief system:

”Exactly as in the proto-exploits of Padmasambhava, the Sherpa founding lamas vanquished the local spirits and transformed their dwellings into strongholds of the Buddhist order. The very countryside became Buddhist, its geography re-named when sanctified by their victories”.¹¹⁰

In a short but influential article, A.W. Macdonald has called the “...great ideological drama [that – E.B.] was played out in the local landscape...” a process of ‘Buddha-isation’ which is typical of the Buddhist conversion of formerly non-Buddhist peoples and areas.¹¹¹ Accordingly the Sherpas’ settlement in the northern region of Khumbu was possible only after their religious and political leaders, the major one being the charismatic bla ma gSang ba rdo rje, endowed with great miraculous powers, had tamed the diverse local spirit powers, bound them by oath and transformed them into local Buddhist protective deities.¹¹² It was bla ma gSang ba rdo rje who, among others, founded the first Sherpa village temple in sPang po che where he also instituted the *Dumji* festival.¹¹³ Since then, this site remained the Sherpas’ main place of learning within their own territory of Solu-Khumbu until the beginning of the construction of monasteries (sTeng po che 1916–19) in this region.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ A.W. Macdonald 1987c, p. 69.

¹¹⁰ A.W. Macdonald 1987a, p. 57.

¹¹¹ A.W. Macdonald 1990, p. 203. – S.G. Karmay shares this conviction: “The subjugation of the spiritual inhabitants of the country is an extremely important part of the process in the Buddhist conversion of the people who believed in their existence. It was mainly for the need to create a sacred environment in accordance with Buddhist ideals of the universe.” 1998(1996), p.446. – The best-known example in Tibetan Buddhist historiography is the miracle contest between Tibet’s great yogin Mi la ras pa and the Bon priest Naro Bhun Chon on Mt. Ti se, cf. G.C.C. Chang 1999, p. 215–224.

¹¹² For the activities and accomplishments of gSang ba rdo rje refer to A.W. Macdonald 1987c, p. 69 and Ngawang Tenzin Zangbu and Fr. Klatzel 2000, pp. 24–25. In fact, gSang ba rdo rje was the ‘first great Buddhist figure in Khumbu’, cf. A.W. Macdonald 1987a, p.57. His fifth incarnation was rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan ’dzin nor bu, the afore-mentioned abbot of rDza rong phu monastery.

¹¹³ The coloured photo of a painted scroll depicting bla ma gSang ba rdo rje has been provided by J. Wangmo 2005, picture no. 61.

¹¹⁴ A coloured photo of the present sPang po che temple can be found in Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, p. 1.

The main disciples of bla ma gSang ba rdo rje were bla ma 'Phags rtse and bla ma bTsun chung bkra shis.¹¹⁵ After their studies with gSang ba rdo rje both went south to present-day Solu. They stayed at a place which bla ma 'Phags rtse called kLu mo'i steng.¹¹⁶ Among others, they invoked the Nāgā goddess kLu mo dkar mo and performed an offering of purification to this divinity (*klu bsang mchod*). They decided that this site is the appropriate place for the Nāgā goddess, requested her to be their Dharma protector (*chos srung*), and she gave her consent.¹¹⁷ Thus, the 'Buddha-isation' of the southern region of Solu began to take place.

3.VI. The teaching tradition of sMin grol gling in the context of the rNying ma pa School and in the larger political framework of the later Seventeenth Century

After Guśrī Khan of the Koshot tribe had conquered all of Tibet in the year 1642, he established the Fifth Dalai Bla ma, Ngag dbang blo bzang rgya mtsho (1617–1682) as the ruler of the reunified realm. Characteristic of this newly instituted form of governance is the 'conjunction of "religious law" (*dharma*) and government (*chos srid zung 'brel*).¹¹⁸

The political development that led to the settlement of 1642 and that continued to predominate until the Dzungar war of 1717–18¹¹⁹ did not only favour a marked upsurge in the influence of the dGe lugs pa School. Thanks to the Fifth Dalai Bla ma whose strong sympathy for the rNying ma pa tradition was publicly known and who had frequently made

¹¹⁵ For these important figures concerning the 'Buddha-isation' of the Solu region refer to mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin's and A.W. Macdonald's book "History of the Sherpas" (*shar pa'i chos byung*) (1971, fol. 29).

¹¹⁶ This site is located close to Sho rong'i Yul lha (Nep. Numbur), the holy mountain which is the protector deity of the Solu region.

¹¹⁷ See the 'History of the Sherpas' (*shar pa'i chos byung*) (1971, fol. 30).

¹¹⁸ Refer to D. Seyfort Ruegg 2004, p. 9. The relation between religion and state in traditional Tibet was the subject of a seminar held in Lumbini in March 2000; the proceedings have been edited by C. Cüppers 2004.

¹¹⁹ For the circumstances that led to the invasion of 1717 of the Mongolian Dzungar tribe, on the subsequent short, but brutal terror regime of the Dzungars in Lha sa and Central Tibet under which the rNying ma pa School suffered severely from systematic persecution and their monastic institutions from being attacked, looted and damaged which was only brought to an end by the Chinese army in 1720 refer to T.W.D. Shakapba 1967, pp. 136–39; D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, pp. 217–218; L. Petech 1950, pp. 25–61; as to the persecution of the rNying ma pa School refer to op. cit., pp. 44–45. These resulted in the execution of Lo chen Dharma śri of sMin grol gling, Rig 'dzin Padma Phrin las of rDo rje Brag, and others: for this chapter refer to E.G. Smith 2001, p. 18. After the disappearance of the Dzungars both rDo rje Brag and sMin grol gling were restored with the help of Tibet's new leader, Pho lha gnas bsod nams tob rgyas (1689–1747), and their former relationship with the Dalai Bla ma-s was resumed, see E.G. Smith 2001, p. 19. The rest of the 18th century saw what E.G. Smith has described as 'the rNying ma pa spiritual renaissance', and due to his diplomacy Pho lha gnas bsod nams stob rgyas, who had studied with the martyred sMin gling Lo chen Dharma śri, managed to restore 'the Tibetan tradition of religious tolerance', op. cit., p. 20.

use of certain tantric ritual cycles of the ‘Old Translation School,’ these favourable circumstances also benefited the rNying ma pa Order greatly as to both the material as well as the spiritual aspect.¹²⁰ Like rDo rje Brag, the other of the two primary rNying ma pa monasteries in Central Tibet, sMin grol gling received strong support from the new government of the Fifth Dalai Bla ma.¹²¹ It has to be recalled that among the adherents of the ‘Old Translation School,’ the ‘Great Fifth’ is highly revered as a major revealer of treasure texts which he had transmitted ‘mainly’ to the holders of the rNying ma pa tradition, the most eminent among them being the two charismatic masters ‘the king of doctrine’ Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa and the famed Rig ‘dzin IV of rDo rje Brag, Padma ‘Phrin las (1641–1717).¹²² Thus the Fifth Dalai Bla ma has contributed significantly to the development of the rNying ma pa teachings.

It was during this period that four of the six major rNying ma pa monasteries were founded throughout Central and Eastern Tibet, some of them with the support of the Fifth Dalai Bla ma.¹²³ The first of these six monastic centres was Thub bstan rDo rje Brag in Upper Tibet. It is located close to Lha sa on the northern bank of the gTsang po river. Thub bstan rDo rje Brag was founded in 1610 by Rig ‘dzin Ngag gi dbang po (1580–1639).¹²⁴ Subsequently, rDo rje Brag became the principal centre of the *byang gter* or ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition of the rNying ma pa school.¹²⁵

¹²⁰ For these significant connections see E.G. Smith 2001, p.17. – On the Fifth Dalai Lama’s close relationship with the rNying ma school see R.A. Stein 1987, p. 128f.; D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, p.196 and Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 682f. and 821–824. In the latter work on p. 824 is written that “...directly and indirectly, the Fifth Dalai Lama was incomparably gracious to the teaching of the Ancient Translation School.”

¹²¹ E.G. Smith 2001, p. 18; P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, p. 28,p. 30.

¹²² This has been emphasized by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 823. He included a hagiography of the ‘Great Fifth’ in his work on the rNying ma pa School which mirrors the importance attributed by this tradition to the Fifth Dalai Lama (1991, pp. 821–824).

¹²³ According to E. G. Smith 2001, p. 17 the six major monasteries are Rdo rje brag (c.1610) and Grwa phyi O rgyan smin grol gling (1676) in Central Tibet; Ru dam rdzogs chen o rgyan bsam gtan chos gling (1685) and Zhe chen (c.1734) in the nomadic area between Khams and Central Tibet; and Kah thog Rdo rje gdan (1656) and dPal yul Rnam rgyal byang chub gling (1665) in Khams. – On the foundation and the history of the major monasteries of the ‘Old Translation School’ see op. cit., pp. 17–20. Refer also to D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, p.196 and P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, p. 28–32.

¹²⁴ Rig ‘dzin III Ngag gi dbang po was the third incarnation of Rig ‘dzin rGod kyi ldem ‘phru can. cf. M.J. Boord 1993, p.28. According to Dudjom Rinpoche the latter was invited on occasion of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s birth to perform a longevity ritual for him 1991, p. 821. S.G. Karmay notes that the rNying ma pa Order claims it was because of this special connection that the Fifth Dalai Lama later became a rNying ma pa adept 2002, p.32.

¹²⁵ A photo of Rdo rje Brag is contained in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, no. 75.

This achievement was mainly due to the initiative of Rigzin IV, Padma ‘Phrin las,¹²⁶ the Fourth Lineage Holder of the ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition and second head of rDo rje Brag Monastery. Thanks to the support of the Fifth Dalai Bla ma, Padma ‘Phrin las succeeded in establishing rDo rje Brag as both the major monastery transmitting the ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition and as one of the main institutions of the ‘Old Translation School.’¹²⁷ Much of his time Padma ‘Phrin las devoted to organizing the ritual texts of the *byang gter* which he revised and greatly extended, as has been pointed out by M.J. Boord.¹²⁸ The *byang gter* lineage represents a complete system of treasure-teachings which has been first revealed by the visionary Rig ‘dzin Rgod kyi ldem ‘phru can, (1357–1408).¹²⁹

Grwa phyi O rgyan Smin grol gling in Central Tibet is the main rNying ma pa monastery of the *lho gter* or ‘Southern Treasures’ teaching tradition unearthed in Tibet and Bhutan.¹³⁰ Originally, this monastery specialized in the *gter ma* teachings of the great treasure discoverer Ratna gling pa (1403–78).¹³¹ It is located not far from the home of the *byang gter* lineage of across the gTsang po river on a small tributary.¹³²

sMin grol gling Monastery was founded in 1676 by Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa and his younger brother, the great translator Lo chen Dharma śrī. (1654–1717), who was also his closest disciple.¹³³ Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa is the speech emanation of Bai ro tsa na, the famed great eighth-century translator. He revealed major *gter ma* or spiritual ‘treasures,’ compiled the canonical scriptures of the Nyingma tradition (*rNying ma bka’ ma*), inspired Lo chen Dharma śrī to write commentaries on many tantras, and is regarded as one of the most important masters and visionaries in the rNying ma pa tradition.¹³⁴

¹²⁶ A short hagiography of Rig ‘dzin IV Padma ‘Phrin las is given in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 719–20. All the data given above may be found on p. 720. A line drawing may be found on p. 719. – As to the close relationship between Rig ‘dzin Padma ‘Phrin las and the Fifth Dalai Bla ma see E.G. Smith 2001, p. 19.

¹²⁷ M. J. Boord 1993, p.29.

¹²⁸ M. J. Boord 1993, p.30.

¹²⁹ The life and achievements of Rig ‘dzin Rgod kyi ldem ‘phru can and the history of the ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition, its ritual cycles and practices is provided by Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 780–83. – The line of reincarnations of Rig ‘dzin Rgod kyi ldem ‘phru can is sketched by S.G. Karmay 2002, pp. 32–3. A detailed overview of the history of the ‘Northern Treasures’ tradition has been given by M.J. Boord 1993, pp. 21–3; see also J.P. Dalton 2002, pp. 165–89.

¹³⁰ See E.G. Smith 2001, p. 18. For some data on sMin grol gling Monastery and its history refer to E.G. Smith 2001, pp. 18–19, P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, pp. 28–30, and to D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson 1986, p. 196.

¹³¹ E.G. Smith 2001, p.18; P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, p. 29.

¹³² A photo of Smin grol gling is contained in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, no. 88.

¹³³ Actually, E.G. Smith (2001) presents two different founding dates : on p. 17 the year 1656 and on p. 18 the year 1676 which seems to be the correct date; for this see also P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, p. 28.

¹³⁴ For the life and works of Rig ‘dzin Gter bdag gling pa, the founder of the sMin grol ling tradition which

Significantly, Rig 'dzin gTer bdag gling pa and the Fifth Dalai Bla ma were mutually teacher and close disciple. Indeed, these eminent religious figures of different religious adherence shared certain political goals and offered practical help to realize them.¹³⁵ In the case of the relationship between the Fifth Dalai Bla ma and Rig 'dzin gTer bdag gling pa and his brother Lo chen Dharma śrī their mutual influence upon each other was clearly reciprocal.

According to the rNying ma pa tradition it existed the 'auspicious connection of priest and patron' between gTer bdag gling pa and Lo chen Dharma śrī on the one hand and the Fifth Dalai Lama on the other. The Fifth Dalai Bla ma took up both the sMin grol gling tradition and the 'Northern Treasures' tradition from rDo rje Brag. Dudjom Rinpoche comments the actual significance of the close political relationship in the following words: "In these ways, he planted the roots of continuity for the government of the Ganden Palace."¹³⁶

At sMin grol gling, Rig 'dzin gTer bdag gling pa and Lo chen Dharma śrī devoted the later part of their lives to the project of uniting and consolidating the rNying ma pa School through the construction of new, large-scale public rituals festivals which were to be performed before an unrestricted audience.¹³⁷ For this end both of them aimed at developing a new Sūtra empowerment since the new public ritual's primary purpose was no longer to initiate a disciple into the Sūtra's teachings. Instead, it was meant to serve as a 'community building event,' as J.P. Dalton has coined it, and thus the emphasis of the ritual celebration shifted from the participants to the observers.¹³⁸ It has to be borne in mind that the creation of this new kind of public grand ritual ceremonies was also due to the inspiration of the Fifth Dalai Lama.¹³⁹ While gTer bdag gling pa and Lo chen Dharma śrī created and established the new sMin grol gling rituals as a powerful means to unite the rNying ma pa School, the Fifth

spread to Khams and to Western Tibet, refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 825–34. A portrait is published in op. cit., p. 826, a painted scroll depicting him with his hand- and footprints in gold is reproduced in op. cit. under no. 89 opp. p. 852.

¹³⁵ Both rDo rje Brag and sMin grol gling monastery were given charge of performing certain rituals for the Tibetan government, a responsibility both of them hold to this day, see P. Yeshe and J. Russell 1991, p. 28, 30.

¹³⁶ Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 824.

¹³⁷ J.P. Dalton 2002, p. 8, 9, 206, 208, 221. According to Dalton the other means in their strategy to unite the rNying ma pa Order was 'rigorous historical investigation'. – Thanks to F.-K. Ehrhard this valuable PhD thesis was kindly made available to me.

¹³⁸ J.P. Dalton 2002, p. 224. As to the consequence of this kind of 'going public' Dalton comments: "How it was perceived as a public spectacle was now more crucial to its function within the Rnying-ma school." (ibid.).

¹³⁹ J.P. Dalton 2002, p. 208.

Dalai Bla ma employed a range of annual festivals and public rituals to bring the nation of Tibet together and build up and consolidate the new state.¹⁴⁰

gTer bdag gling pa and Lo chen Dharma śri created elaborately choreographed festivals which were enacted over a period of several days before large public audiences. It is since then that Mindröling enjoys a special reputation for its colourful sacred dances performed by large numbers of trained monks on an especially grand scale and for its grand public festivals requiring the resources that only a large and wealthy monastery is able to supply. Moreover, as J.P. Dalton notes, the creation and the performance of the new large-scale public festivals enjoyed great popularity which contributed that sMin grol gling with its teaching tradition and its sacred dances became the most influential monastic center of the rNying ma pa School.¹⁴¹ Significantly, the tradition of both kinds of sacred masked dance festivals held among the Sherpas, the *Mani Rimdu* performed in three monastic settings, and the *Dumji*, the major annual village temple festival, has its origin in the afore-mentioned large-scale public rituals festivals of the sMin grtol gling tradition.¹⁴²

4. Outline of the sacred life history of Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po (b. 1935), the present abbot of sTeng po che Monastery in the Khumbu region¹⁴³

Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po is the reincarnation of Bya stang chos dar, popularly called bLa ma dGu lo (1850–1934), mentioned in the preceding section. This renowned wealthy Sherpa became the disciple of the rDza Rong phu bla ma, received the Dharma name Ngag dbang nor bu bzang po and, following the latter's advice, became the main founder of sTeng po che Monastery, the first monastery among the Sherpas (consecrated 1919). Hence, the sTeng po che Rin po che's incarnation line is very short.

Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po was born in 1935 in Na' u che (or Nags po che) Bazaar. He is the son of a Khams pa trader whose great-grandfather had migrated from the Walungchung area near Mount Gangs chen mzod Inga, through Southern Tibet, to the Khumbu region where he had settled down in a small hamlet. His mother came from sThang smad in the western part of the Khumbu region. At the beginning of the 20th century Na' u

¹⁴⁰ J.P. Dalton 2002, p. 208.

¹⁴¹ J.P. Dalton 2002, p. 206.

¹⁴² For an account of these two different kinds of sacred masked dances see E. Berg (in press, Ch. Three, section 7a.

¹⁴³ The following short sketch is based on the few data which are given in his brief sacred autobiography which has been translated into English (Zangbu and Klatzel 2001, pp. 57–59); the same English text has been reproduced in T. Tsering 1999, 82–86.

che Bazaar had evolved into the main center on the old trans-Himalayan trade route leading through Solu-Khumbu to Tibet. Around the time of his birth his father was in Tibet on a trading venture. On his way his father had a dream about Gangs Ti se which was considered as auspicious. Some time later his mother also left for Lha sa with her small son. There she stayed with his father's aunt who was married to a Sherpa trader. This latter figure had acted as a sponsor of sTeng po che Monastery. It was here that the small boy called Pa sangs bsTan 'dzin was seen "...going to high seats and places and talking about Tengboche..." At the same time his aunt had a dream about the previous sTeng po che bla ma. In consequence, his parents and relatives "...thought I might be his reincarnation."¹⁴⁴

Following both the extraordinary behaviour of the small boy called Pa sangs bsTan 'dzin and the auspicious indications his aunt had received in a dream his parents traveled in 1939 from Lha sa to rDza Rong phu monastery to see the famous abbot Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin Nor bu (1864–1940). It was on this occasion that the rDza Rong phu Sangs rgyas recognized Pa sangs bsTan 'dzin as the reincarnation of Bya stang Chos dar, Ngag dbang Nor bu bzang po (1850–1934), the founder of sTeng po che Monastery, and bestowed on him the Dharma name Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po.

At the age of five (1940) the young boy came to sTeng po che monastery to receive religious education and to be raised as the reincarnate bla ma and abbot of the first Sherpa monastery in Solu-Khumbu. Four years later, at the age of nine (1944), Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po was again taken to Central Tibet. This time he came to rGyal rtse gLing bu, a small monastery renowned for its rigorous religious training. There he was introduced to and received the teachings of the sMin grol gling lineage of the rNying ma pa School from a certain Lha chen 'Jigs bral bsTan 'dzin dPa bo. This teacher belonged to the clan of the Chos rgyal or 'religious king' of Sikkim. It was from this bla ma that he took novice vows (*dge tshul*).

In rGyal rtse gLing bu Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po was to spend the subsequent three years for further religious studies and spiritual practices such as performing prostrations. Thereafter, he went to sTag lung, the seat of the sTag lung bKa' brgyud pa School.¹⁴⁵ Located northwest of Lha sa this monastery was founded in 1178. There, he met two eminent masters and teachers, H.H. the Karma pa XVI, Rang byung ye ses Rig pa'i rdo rje (1924–1981), and the XIth Ta'i Si-tu Padma dbang phyug rgyal po (1886–1952).¹⁴⁶ It was from these two

¹⁴⁴ Both quotations are from Zangbu and Klatzel 2001, p. 58.

¹⁴⁵ For information on the sTag lung bKa' brgyud pa as part of the 'Eight Small bKa' brgyud Branches' refer to E.G. Smith 2001, pp. 43–46, see p. 43f.

¹⁴⁶ Rang byung ye ses Rig pa'i rdo rje is the XVIth of the Zhwa nag or 'Black Hat Karma pa series of sTod lung mTsur phu. The XIth Ta'i Si-tu represents the line of the Si-tu of Lho Karma dgon and later dPal spungs. Both

hierarchs, each acting as head of a different section of the bKa' brgyud pa School of Tibetan Buddhism, that he received further teachings, instructions, and an important, but unfortunately not specified initiation (*dbang*).

Thereupon, he went to Lha sa, where he visited the Jo khang, the famous and most important pilgrimage site of entire Tibet located in the gTsug lag khang in the capital's centre that houses the Crowned Buddha known as Jo wo rin po che, the sacred statue of Buddha Śākyamuni.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, he paid a visit to the Potala Palace (*po ta la* or *pho brang chen po*), the winter residence of the Dalai Bla ma-s and seat of the Tibetan government.¹⁴⁸ Next, he traveled to Se ra, north of Lha sa founded in 1419, 'Bras spungs, the famous monastic university east of Lha sa founded in 1416, and dGa' ldan, north-east of Lha sa, founded in 1409. These three sites are the three major monasteries of the dGe lugs pa School of Tibetan Buddhism in Central Tibet.

For a short stay he went to rTse gdong Chos sde Monastery near gZhis ka rtse. There he studied the complete Lam 'Bras tradition ('Path with result') of the Sa skya pa School of Tibetan Buddhism under Ngor mKhan chen Ngag dbang bLo gros bSam 'phel sNying po.¹⁴⁹

After a few years' stay at sTeng po che monastery, Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po again traveled to Tibet where he studied for five more years.¹⁵⁰ At bSam yas Monastery he met bDud joms 'Jigs bral ye śes rDo rje (1904–87), one of 20th century's most accomplished masters of the rNying ma pa School who, appointed by H.H. Dalai Bla ma XIV, bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho, acted as the first head of his order until his passing away. At the age of twenty (1955) Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po received an initiation and a month's teachings from H.H. rDzong gsar 'Jam dbyangs mKhyen brtse chos kyi blo gros (1893–1959), one of Tibetan Buddhism's most eminent masters and teachers of the 20th century.¹⁵¹ In 1959, he studied for three months in Kalimpong with H.H. Dis mgo mKhyen brtse Rinpoche (1910–

incarnation series of the Karma pa sub-tradition have been provided by G.E. Smith 2000, p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ H. Richardson has published a detailed map of the Lha sa Jo khang and surrounding buildings (1993, p. 38).

¹⁴⁸ H. Richardson has reproduced a sketch of Lha sa and environs (1993 at the very end of the book).

¹⁴⁹ These vital teachings of the Sa skya pa School come from the Indian master Virūpa, 'Lord of Yogins'. They were originally transmitted to Virūpa by the tantric goddess Vajra Nairātmyā, the consort of Hevajra. Virūpa's Lam 'Bras became one of the major systems of tantric practice in Tibet. C. Stearns has devoted a detailed treatise to the early masters of the Lam 'Bras tradition in Tibet (2001, see Ch. One). – Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po 's teacher belongs to the influential sub-tradition of Ngor, a Sa skya teaching monastery near gZhis ka rtse which was founded by Ngor chen Kun dga' bzang po in 1434, see G.E. Smith 2001, p. 115

¹⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the sites of his learning in this period remain unspecified.

¹⁵¹ A sketch of the mKhyen brtse incarnations has been provided by both E. G. Smith 2001, p. 269 and M. Ricard et al. 1996, p. 150.

1991) who is regarded unanimously by the followers of all four schools as one of the foremost recent masters of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁵²

Today, Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po, the sTeng po che Rinpoche, is considered as one of the Sherpas' main present-day masters and teachers. Among the rNying ma pa clerics he is regarded as an outstanding Sherpa bla ma since he had received his profound religious education according to Tibetan Buddhist 'classical standards' at various monastic universities in the Land of Snows in the very last years before the Chinese occupation not only from the rNying ma pa but as well from the bKa' brgyud pa and Sa skya pa Schools of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁵³ Moreover, Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po had received valuable teachings, instructions, and initiations from some of the most eminent masters of his time of both the rNying ma pa and bKa' brgyud pa Schools before they had to take refuge in exile. His religious education clearly testifies that at his time the rNying ma pa School was open to other teaching traditions and philosophical systems which was certainly due, among others, to the great influence that the 19th century *ris med* or ecumenical movement had been exerting in Tibet which had served as an important means of revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism.

Among the Sherpas, Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po is also highly respected since he is the first reincarnation of Bya stang Chos dar, who, being the founder of sTeng po che, the first celibate Sherpa monastery, is held in particularly high esteem. Introduced by Bya stang Chos dar on the initiative of rDza sprul Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin nor bu (1864–1940), who is regarded as the very source of the sMin grol gling teaching lineage among the Sherpas, sTeng po che Monastery represents the first substation of the sMin grol gling tradition in the region of Solu-Khumbu. Hence, for more than half a century, sTeng po che Monastery was the Sherpas' main monastic center of learning.¹⁵⁴ It was here, that since its construction most

¹⁵² His vital role in the revitalization of Tibetan Buddhism in exile as well as in that of Sherpa Buddhism will be discussed in a separate section below.

¹⁵³ A photo of H.H. Dis mgo mKhyen brtse Rinpoche on a visit to sTeng po che dGon pa watching sacred dances being held in his honour with his host, the sTeng po che Rinpoche, is provided by M. Ricard 1996, p. 83.

¹⁵⁴ Since its construction, (1916–1919) sTeng po che monastery has undergone changing fortunes: it was destroyed once by a disastrous earthquake in the year 1934; a second time it burnt down to the ground on 19 January 1989 due to an overturned electric heater that had been left on in the office which was full of paper scrolls to print mantras for a new prayer-wheel. Its full reconstruction took ten years; it was achieved thanks to the combined efforts of local craftsmen, the monk community, and the local Sherpa community with the support of Sir E. Hillary and some other international donors. In September 1993, the consecration ceremony was performed by H.E. 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche in the presence of the Prime minister and few ministers of the then Nepal Government although its authorities had contributed but nothing to it. A brief story of sTeng po che's reconstruction has been written by American art historian T. Cahn 1993. The later development of the monastery and its immediate environs was supervised by German architect M. Schmitz (1994). Photos of the reconstructed sTeng po che Monastery are provided by T. Cahn 1993, p. 14 and Sherpa Thubten Lama 1991, p. 4.

of their leading religious figures have received religious education, important initiations, and the instructions as to the performance of the various sacred dances ('*chams*) of the sMin grol gling tradition. sTeng po che's importance was to last until the early Eighties when the reconstruction of the major rNying ma monasteries and their specific traditions in exile in Mysore and Dehradun in India and in the Kathmandu Valley placed the Sherpas' traditional monastic centers of learning in Tibet within their reach which are considered to be by far more attractive for their rigorous training.

The sTeng po che Rinpoche has always been strongly involved in the preservation of the Sherpas' cultural heritage. He has also been deeply committed to the well-being of the local population and the infra-structural development of the Khumbu area such as the building of bridges thus continuing the ancient tradition that had been opened up by the great saint, the famous Tibetan Buddhist siddha Thang ston rgyal po (1385–1464 or 1361–1485) who is said to have built the first metal bridges in Tibet.¹⁵⁵ He is considered as the great ancestor of the Mi nyag pa from eastern Khams, one of the four original Sherpa clans.¹⁵⁶ Moreover, for more than three decades, Ngag dbang bsTan 'dzin bzang po has been active in various Tibetan Buddhist committees and associations in Nepal, all of which are committed to the preservation and strengthening of Tibetan Buddhism's cultural heritage.

5. The sacred life-story of the Toloka sprul sku, Ngag dbang blo bzang ye śes rgya mtsho (b. 1937)¹⁵⁷

The present Toloka sprul sku, Ngag dbang blo bzang ye śes rgya mtsho, is the fourth reincarnation of a certain rDo dmar ba with whom the Toloka incarnation line has originated in the late second half of the Eighteenth Century. Ngag dbang blo bzang ye śes rgya mtsho was born in 1937 in the village of Patale on the southern margin of the Solu-Khumbu region as the eldest son of a village bla ma. At the usual tender age of three years (1940), the boy child was sent to Bya rog ri khrod hermitage in Upper Khumbu where he began to study

¹⁵⁵ This renowned eminent figure had traveled extensively in Tibet and China, built numerous temples which are said to have repelled invading armies from the kingdom, constructed monasteries in the kingdom of sDe dge in Khams province, founded the A lce lha mo theatrical tradition. For his hagiography turn to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 802–804; a line drawing is given on p. 803.

¹⁵⁶ This has been noted by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1991, p. 7. For the history of the Mi nyag pa as descendants of a kingdom bearing the same name in the region of present-day Kansu and Ch'ing Hai provinces of the PR of China and the subsequent settlement of their descendants in what is currently called Solu-Khumbu refer to M. Oppitz 1968, pp. 32–49; see also J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 319–320.

¹⁵⁷ The only available brief hagiography of this Sherpa bla ma is provided in English by T. Tsering 1999, pp. 101–102. The following outline is based upon the little information contained in that source. Unfortunately, the proper name of the incarnation lineage of the Toloka sPrul sku is not given.

under the guidance of a certain bla ma, Ngag dbang Sam gtan. After having passed the test, he was formally recognized in that year by sKu zhabs mang ldan, the younger brother of his predecessor, Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu, popularly called the sKu zhabs sprul sku. Then, bla ma Don grub, the older brother of his previous incarnation, invited him to Thang smad Monastery in the western part of the Khumbu region. On this occasion he was formally enthroned for the first time. Thereafter, he was invited to sPyi dbang Monastery, where the same ceremony was held. Finally, he ‘returned’ to Thar gling, also called Toloka, the monastery where he had taught in his former life. Here again, the enthronement ceremony was held for the third time, performed in the presence of the villagers and former students which lasted for several days. At the age of four (1941), sKu zhabs mang ldan who supervised his education began to teach him the Tibetan alphabet. At the age of nine (1946) he was invited to sTeng po che Monastery to continue his education. It was H.E. ‘Khrul zhig Rinpoche (b. 1924) who performed the hair-cutting ceremony and bestowed on him the Dharma name Ngag dbang blo bzang ye śes rgya mtsho.

From H.E. ‘Khrul zhig Rinpoche the present Toloka sprul sku received the empowerments and transmissions for several ritual cycles the most important being the *kLong chen snying thig* (‘The Heart-essence of Infinite Expanse’), the innermost meditation of rDzogs pa chen po, revealed by the great eighteenth-century scholar and meditation practitioner ‘Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798). From bla ma Don grub he received the empowerments in the ‘Ja’ tshon snying po tradition. In sKya brog Monastery, located only a short hour’s walk to the north of Thang smad Monastery, he completed the respective preliminary practices (*sngon ‘gro*) for two years. Thereafter, he went to Tibet, where he studied at the monastic college of a monastery for seven years.¹⁵⁸ He finally returned to Toloka Monastery, where he spent ‘many years’ practicing meditation in a hermitage.¹⁵⁹ It was there that he gave his students and the villagers a long-life empowerment (*tshe dbang*) and a transmission of the *dKon mchog spyi ‘dus* as well as teachings on the preliminary practice and the meditation of this major ritual cycle.

Currently, the present Toloka sprul sku, Ngag dbang blo bzang ye śes rgya mtsho, is residing in Bodhnāth.

¹⁵⁸ Unfortunately, neither the name nor the location of the monastery is mentioned. Instead, it is only noted that it is a certain ‘Nyakka Rinpoche’s monastery’ (Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, p. 102); unfortunately, I did not succeed to identify this religious personage.

¹⁵⁹ Sherpa Thubten Lama has provided a photo of Toloka or Thar gling dGon pa showing it in a deplorably dilapidated state (1999, p. 22). According to my information this monastery was renovated in the Nineties.

5.I. The incarnation line of the present Toloka sprul sku, Ngag dbang blo
bzang ye śes rgya mtsho (b. 1937)

The Toloka sPrul sku is the fourth reincarnation in an incarnation line that goes back to a religious figure who was active in the first half of the 19th century. The name of this man of religion was rDo dmar ba. The latter figure was the follower and disciple of the renowned Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug (1775–1837), who was the ‘placeholder’ (*gdan sa pa*) of Brag dkar rta so (‘White Rock Horse Tooth’) Monastery.¹⁶⁰ Brag dkar rta so is situated in the Mang yul region of Southwestern Tibet. With sKyid grong, its district town, it constitutes an area of southern and southwestern gTsang to which the upper valley of the Trisuli River north of the Kathmandu Valley belongs. This area has been an important geographical and ancient cultural link between Tibet and the South – India and Nepal – through which the introduction and spread of Buddhism in Tibet through traders, men of religion, and pilgrims took place.¹⁶¹

The great master Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug was born in sKyid grong in Southwestern Tibet just north of the Nepalese borderlands. Chos kyi dbang phyug was recognized as the reincarnation (*sprul sku*) of Brag dkar gDan sa pa Ye śes chos grags, 1705–1772)¹⁶² who had been associated with the hermitage of the ‘great sacred site White Rock Horse Tooth’ (*gnas chen brag dkar rta so*). This sacred place near sKyid grong is famous not only because Mi la ras pa (1040–1123), the most famous of all Tibetan ascetics and the most important disciple of Mar pa (1012–97), the father of the bKa’ brgyud lineage, had spent twelve years of spiritual practice at this retreat site. Owing to his spiritual retreat there, it has become an important sacred site in the cult of Tibet’s great yogin.

Later, gTsang smyon Heruka, 1452–1507, spent three years in meditation in the caves of Mang yul Gung thang.¹⁶³ It was also the place where the *Collected Songs of Mi la ras pa*, authored by gTsang smyon Heruka, the great ‘Madman of Gtsang,’ the famous yogin of the Ras chung bKa’ brgyud pa, one of the several branches of the bKa’ brgyud school, and author of several hagiographical works, as well as numerous other works composed by the latter’s disciples were subsequently printed.¹⁶⁴ In the sixteenth century the monastery of

¹⁶⁰ A stone relief of Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug can be found on pl. 7 and a most beautiful photo of Brag dkar rta so has been provided on pl. 8 by F.-K. Ehrhard 2004a.

¹⁶¹ As to this eminent historical importance of the Mang yul region as a cultural ‘corridor’ for the spread of Buddhism in Tibet see F.-K. Ehrhard 2004a, p. X and infra.

¹⁶² Cf. F.-K. Ehrhard 1997, p. 255, n.6.

¹⁶³ Cf. E.G. Smith 2001, p. 65.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. the introduction by K.R. Schaeffer to the edition of E.G. Smith’s anthology (2001, p. 5). On the life of Gtsang smyon Heruka see E.G. Smith 2001, p. 59–79. – In the course of the University of California expedition to Kutang and Nubri in 1973 M. Aris has paid a visit to that site. He describes it as “...belonging to the Bar-

Brag dkar rta so had been built on that site by lHa btsun Rin chen nam rgyal (1473–1557), the best known disciple of gTsang smyon Heruka.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, the Mang yul Gung thang area was particularly sanctified since it was here that, according to the biographical literature of Guru Padmasambhava the Indian tantric master and sage had entered Tibet and also left again after his mission in the land of snows had successfully been brought to its end.

Known to have reprinted many rNying ma pa texts and composed numerous texts himself,¹⁶⁶ Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug is a representative of both the rNying ma pa and the 'Brug pa bKa' brgyud pa Schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Chos kyi dbang phyug practiced the teaching tradition of sMin grol gling in dBus, where he had also studied.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, having been committed to an encompassing approach to the rNying ma pa School Chos kyi dbang phyug also practiced the ritual cycles of the 'Northern Treasures.' His main teachers were his grand-uncle Karma 'Phrin las bdud 'joms (1726–1789) and the renowned master Kah thog Rig 'zin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755), himself the teacher of Karma 'Phrin las bdud 'joms.¹⁶⁸

Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug became an influential figure in the spread of certain of the *gter ma* teachings of the rNying ma pa School throughout the Nepal-Tibet borderlands.¹⁶⁹ It is reported that among the increasing number of his disciples from this vast area were also some Sherpa tantric village bla ma-s (*sngags pa*) from the region of Solu-Khumbu.¹⁷⁰ Hence, for an adequate understanding of the cultural history of this vast region, in general, and for that of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, in particular, the activities of

'brug tradition (...). Not only was this monastery an important centre of the cult of Mi.la Ras.pa, but some scholars believe it to have been the place where the first edition of his writing was prepared.' (1975, p. 80).

¹⁶⁵ Cf. F.-K. Ehrhard 1993, p. 93, n.32.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. F.-K. Ehrhard 1993, p. 93, n.31 and 32.

¹⁶⁷ In his magnum opus on the Ārya Va ti bzang po or sKyid grong Jo bo, the famous miraculously arisen Avalokiteśvara statue made of sandalwood, and its temple, F.-K. Ehrhard makes use of the collected works of Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug upon which his investigation is based, see 2004a, pp. 108–124. Here is also contained a detailed biography of the Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku, see op. cit., pp. 89–107.

¹⁶⁸ For the activities of Karma 'Phrin las bdud 'joms see M. Boord 1993, p. 10.

¹⁶⁹ F.K. Ehrhard identified apart from Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug the masters Kah thog Rig 'zin Tshe dbang nor bu (1698–1755) and Karma 'Phrin las bdud 'joms (1726–1789) as the "...central figures in the codification and transmission of rNying-ma-pa teachings in the 18th and 19th centuries from South Tibet to Nepal." (1993, p. 81). In his *Shar pa'i chos 'byung* ('History of Sherpa Buddhism') mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin (1924–1990) has introduced Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug as the main bla ma who was instrumental for the transmission of the key ritual texts of Sherpa Buddhism which have been in use in the Sherpa area of Solu-Khumbu from that time up to the present (1971, fols. 50–54).

¹⁷⁰ See M. Kapstein 1983, p. 42. – F.-K. Ehrhard enumerates three figures (2004a, pp. 104f.). See also E. Berg (in press, Chapter Two).

this important rNying ma pa master in the first half of the 19th century is of crucial significance.

Chos kyi dbang phyug transmitted the teaching tradition sMin grol gling and the tradition of the ‘Northern Treasures’ (*byang gter*) to the Sherpa village priests who had traveled to him shortly before the middle of the 19th century. Of enduring great importance for the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu have been the treasure-cycles of Rig ‘dzin ‘Ja’ tshon snying po (1585–1656) and of Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa ‘gyur med rdo rje (1646–1714).¹⁷¹ Among the Sherpas, the famous revealer of *gter ma* cycles Rig ‘dzin ‘Ja’ tshon snying po is especially known for the *dKon mchog spyi ‘dus* which contains among other instructions, sādhanas focused upon the peaceful and wrathful aspects of Guru Padmasambhava (*gu ru zhi ba* and *drag po*) and upon the Lion-headed dākinī (*seng ge gdong ma*). According to tradition, Rig ‘dzin ‘Ja’ tshon snying po extracted the teaching cycle called *Yang zab dKon mchog spyi ‘dus* (‘Utterly Profound Gathering of All Precious Jewels’) from the iron gate of Hom ‘phrang Brag lung in Southeastern Tibet’s Kong po region in the year 1620.¹⁷²

Among the Sherpas of Khumbu Bya btang chos dbyings rang grol who had received the transmission of the main rNying ma lineages from Chos kyi dbang phyug was the main figure responsible for their transmission to his disciples in the Khumbu area.¹⁷³ Chos dbyings rang grol (d. ca. 1865) took over the leadership of Thang smad dgon pa in the Khumbu region after the death of his father.¹⁷⁴ He was a dedicated spiritual practitioner, built two hermitages, and taught many disciples.¹⁷⁵

Among the Sherpas of Solu who traveled in the early 19th century to Mang yul Gung thang to receive the transmission of these teachings Nyang rigs rDo rje ‘Jigs bral from dGon pa gZhung was the most influential figure.¹⁷⁶ In the *Shar pa’i chos ‘byung* composed by

¹⁷¹ On the spread of the treasure-cycles of these two *gter ston*-s among the Sherpas of Solu refer to F.-K. Ehrhard 1993, pp. 81–96. Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa’s most important text cycle in use among the Sherpas is the *rDor sems thugs kyi sgrub pa* (‘Realization of Vajrasattva’s Heart’). Ehrhard provided the translations of the two ‘accession lists’ (*thob yig*) of the afore-mentioned teachings of Rig ‘dzin gTer bdag gling pa and of Rig ‘dzin ‘Ja’ tshon snying po, see pp. 81–89 and 89–95 including the original texts appended following p. 100.

¹⁷² Cf. Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 810. For this master’s life and accomplishments see op. cit., pp. 809–812. A line drawing of ‘Ja’ tshon snying po is reproduced on p. 810.

¹⁷³ Cf. *Sharpa chos byung* (fol. 59). Chos dbyings rang grol was the head of Thang smad dgon pa in the Khumbu region.

¹⁷⁴ Cf. J. Wangmo 2005, p. 28. The sketch of the lineage of the Thang smad married bla ma-s is published in op. cit., p. 326 (= Appendix IV).

¹⁷⁵ For his accomplishments refer to J. Wangmo 2005, p. 28. A photo of his statue at Genupa hermitage has been provided by her (op. cit., photo no. 71)

¹⁷⁶ On this eminent member of the Nyang family (*Nyang rigs*) see *Sharpa chos byung* (fols. 48, 54, 56, 59). On fols. 52–54 the author gives an enumeration of all members of the Lamaserwa clan centered in dGon pa gZhung who had studied in Brag dkar rta so with sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug. For the names of the

mkhan po sangs rgyas bstand 'dzin Nyang rigs rDo rje 'Jigs bral is even noted as the teacher of a certain 'Dren mchog chos kyi dbang phyug which is just another name of Brag dkar rta so sprul sku chos kyi dbang phyug. According to this document it was rDo rje 'Jigs bral who brought the full *gter ma* tradition to Solu (fol. 48), founded the village temple bKra shis mthong smon popularly known as gZhung dgon pa (fol. 56),¹⁷⁷ and introduced the *tshes bcu* celebration according to the *byang gter* tradition held once every month in honour of Guru Padmasambhava (fol. 56). Moreover, it was this eminent village bla ma who established the *Dumji* as the main annual festival of the gSer ba lineage in dGonpa gZhung (fol.56) on the basis of the liturgical text *byang gter phur pa spu gri* in the middle of the 19th century. rDo rje 'Jigs bral transmitted the received teachings to his own disciples. It is of significance that these teachings have been passed on within the Nyang family in one uninterrupted family line of village bla mas from rDo rje 'Jigs bral down to the present village lama of dGon pa gZhung.¹⁷⁸

Bya btang chos dbyings rang grol and rDo rje 'Jigs bral, the two learned and accomplished Sherpa village bla mas, are outstanding figures in the history and development of 19th century Sherpa Buddhism. Each of these religious personages was responsible for the spread of those traditions as have been transmitted by Brag dkar rta so sprul sku chos kyi dbang phyug.

The traditions of both sMin grol gling and rDo rje Brag and the treasure-cycles of Rig 'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585–1656) transmitted in the early 19th century, among others, to the Sherpas have remained popular throughout the village-temples of Solu-Khumbu until the present day. The teachings, instructions, and transmissions as received from the highly venerated Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku including the tradition of the elaborated 'public festivals' served to revitalize and enrich Sherpa Buddhism. Thus it happened, as M. Kapstein has observed, that Sherpa Buddhism 'adopted its modern form.'¹⁷⁹

members of the Nyang family associated with Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug see also F.-K. Ehrhard 1993, p. 81,87, fn. 18, and 19.

¹⁷⁷ As to the difficulties of the exact dating of the village temple's foundation: the signboard above the temple door indicates the year 1636. This date seems to refer to the activities of bla ma rDo rje bzang po, the ancestor of the Lama Serwa clan in the Solu region who actually had only founded a retreat place for the performance of spiritual practices; S.B. Ortner gives these two dates as 1695/1720 (1989, p. 62); F.-K. Ehrhard dates the temple's foundation to the middle or the second half of the 18th century (1993, p.87, fn. 18). According to my information, however, the beautiful temple may have been founded only in the middle of the 19th century.

¹⁷⁸ For a detailed account of the activities of Brag dkar rta so sprul sku chos kyi dbang phyug and his spiritual influence on his Sherpa disciples as exemplified by Nyang rigs rDo rje 'Jigs bral see E. Berg (in press, chapter Two).

¹⁷⁹ Kapstein, M. 1983, p. 42.

5.II. The different figures belonging to the incarnation line of the Toloka sprul sku¹⁸⁰

1. rDo dmar ba¹⁸¹

This religious personage was a disciple of Brag dkar rta so sprul sku Chos kyi Dbang phyug (1775–1837), the renowned master and great teacher who was an influential figure in the spread of certain *gter ma* cycles of the rNying ma School of Tibetan Buddhism in the Nepal-Tibet borderlands in the first half of the 19th century. It is mentioned that rDo dmar ba acted as teacher who is said to have transmitted the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle of *gter ma* teachings from the famous revealer of *gter ma* Rig 'dzin 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585–1656) who was active in the first half of the Seventeenth Century.¹⁸²

2. Padma rGyal po

Hailing from the Yol mo area Padma rGyal po is rDo dmar ba's first reincarnation. He was endowed with the same religious knowledge as his predecessor. From this it can be concluded that he transmitted the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle to his disciples and followers in the Yol mo area to where also Sherpa village priests used go for religious studies.

3. Ratna Tshe dbang

According to the present hagiography Ratna Tshe dbang, rDo dmar ba's first reincarnation, was the bla ma who constructed 'Ja' sa Monastery in the early 19th century.¹⁸³ This

¹⁸⁰ The only available brief hagiography of this Sherpa bla ma is provided in English by T. Tsering 1999, pp. 101–102. Unfortunately, the name of the incarnation lineage of the Toloka sPrul sku is not given.

¹⁸¹ Unfortunately, I did not succeed in identifying either this man of religion nor where he was active. His name is not mentioned by mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin and A. W. Macdonald (1971). – According to J. Wangmo this figure was a certain rDo dmar zhabs drung mi 'gyur rdo rje (d. 1675) from Yol mo glang 'phrang (2005, p. 361, n. 171, an information I could not verify since that figure passed away in 1675, i.e. exactly one century before Chos kyi dbang phyug was born.

¹⁸² For the hagiography and achievements of this important treasure-revealer, especially known for the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle, refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 809–812; a line drawing of this eminent treasure-revealer from Kong po is provided on p. 810. For this master who had many names refer also to E.G. Smith 2001, p. 330, n. 818. He draws attention to the fact that the *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* "...spread rapidly through most of the other sects and throughout the Tibetan cultural world." (op. cit., p. 241)

¹⁸³ In contradistinction to this information as contained in the hagiography, according to the *Sherpa chos byung* compiled and written by mKhan po Sangs rgyas bstan 'dzin and edited by A. W. Macdonald (1971) 'Ja' sa dGon pa was founded by Padma gsang sngags bstan 'dzin and his son Ratna tshe dbang (fols. 81–3 until 81–6); see also his 'Sherpa pilgrimage guide' contained in K. Buffetrille 2000, p. 273. According to J. Wangmo I. 'Ja' sa Monastery was founded by Padma gsang sngags bstan 'dzin, and 2. it was his son Ratna Tshe dbang who was the reincarnation of Padma rGyal po from Yol mo (2005, p. 361, n. 171). – According to Sherpa Thubten Lama 'Ja' sa Monastery founded by Padma gsang sngags bstan 'dzin was destroyed by a fire at the beginning of the 20th century. His son Ratna Tshe dbang reconstructed it bigger than before but again it was destroyed in 1934 by the disastrous earthquake that also damaged sTeng po che monastery and numerous village temples, stūpas

important monastery in the history of Sherpa Buddhism is situated below a ridge and offers a great view over the entire Solu region with the massif of gShod rong Yul lha, both the incorporation and the seat of the regional protector deity, on the northern side. 'Ja' sa Monastery is located about an hour's walk to the southeast of Salleri, the present district capital of the Solu-Khumbu region.¹⁸⁴ Ratna Tshe dbang followed the sMin grol gling teaching lineage and transmitted the afore-mentioned *dKon mchog spyi 'dus* cycle to the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu.

4. Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu (d. 1936), the sKu zhabs sprul sku

Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu was born in Thang smad in the western part of the Khumbu region as the second son of Kun bzang bde chen rgyal po (d. 1915), who acted from 1895 to 1915 as the head of Thang smad dGon pa.¹⁸⁵ His teachers were the great rDza rong phu bla ma who also had confirmed him as the reincarnation of Ratna Tshe dbang, and a certain bla ma Don grub (d. 1957), the eldest son of Kun bzang bde chen rgyal po, who was a married bla ma and the heir of his father's lineage.¹⁸⁶ Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu became popularly known as the sKu zhabs sprul sku. Following his father's death in 1915, he assumed leadership of Thang smad Monastery. One of the most ancient and important monasteries among the Sherpas, Thang smad dGon pa was founded in the Twenties of the seventeenth century by Rol pa'i rdo rje, one of the two brothers of bla ma gSang ba rdo rje, the Sherpas' afore-mentioned mythical ancestor.¹⁸⁷

As Thang smad Monastery's monk community consisted mainly of married, but also of some celibate bla ma-s, the history of this famed monastery was continuously conflict-ridden. Later, Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu was approached by Sangs rgyas bstan pa (1857–1940), popularly called Sangs rgyas bla ma, a wealthy and powerful figure from the Lama gSer ba clan who residing in Pha plu in the Solu region wanted to build a celibate monastery and who asked him to become its head.¹⁸⁸ Happy to escape from Thang smad Monastery, Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu readily accepted this offer. The construction of sPyi dbang Monastery located on a high and steep cliff overlooking the major part of the Solu Valley began in 1925 under

and mañi walls in Solu-Khumbu as well as parts of Kathmandu.

¹⁸⁴ A recent photo of 'Ja' sa Monastery is contained in Sherpa Thubten Lama 1999, p. 5.

¹⁸⁵ Sherpa Thubten Lama has provided a recent photo of Thang smad Monastery (1999, p. 1).

¹⁸⁶ This data as to bla ma Don grub is provided by J. Wangmo 2005, p. 74. bla ma Don grub was living with his family in dGa' phug pa (Sherpa: 'Genupa') hermitage in Khumbu, see J. Wangmo, op. cit., p. 74, pp. 67–68.

¹⁸⁷ For this important chapter of Sherpa history refer to N.T. Zangbu and Fr. Klatzel 2000, p. 27

¹⁸⁸ A photo in colour of this influential figure has been reproduced in Sherpa Thubten Lama 1991, p. 6.

the supervision of the sKu zhabs sprul sku and his younger brother sKu zhabs mang ldan (1905–92). sPyi dbang's consecration ceremony was held in 1929.¹⁸⁹

However, following a quarrel with Sangs rgyas bla ma and some other influential members of the Lama gSer ba clan, Ngag dbang Yon tan nor bu after only a brief stay in the newly built sPyi dbang left in the company of his consort and his brother. During a short stay at the hermitage of Toloka located near Patale village close to Okhaldhunga, the capital of Nepal's present Sagarmatha zone, he gave a teaching and an empowerment. Thereafter, the sKu zhabs sprul sku and his retinue moved to the Kathmandu Valley, where they took residence in the vicinity of the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth.¹⁹⁰ The sKu zhabs sprul sku had been requested by the villagers to build a monastery at Toloka but he passed away in 1936 before its construction had been started. In his stead, his brother sKu zhabs mang ldan accepted the villagers' request and began its construction in 1937 at a site that had already been decided upon by the sKu zhabs sprul sku.¹⁹¹ sKu zhabs mang ldan was to remain in Tolokha for the next forty years. In his old age he finally moved back to his hermitage at Bya rog in Upper Khumbu where he lived together with his son and his daughter until he passed away in the year 1992.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ The most detailed account of the conditions that led to the founding of sPyid dbang Monastery was published by Sh. B. Ortner 1989, pp. 138–149. For the particular function of the sKu zhabs sprul sku in this context see op. cit., pp. 138–140. – A recent photo of sPyi dbang monastery has been given by Sherpa Thubten Lama 1991, p. 6.

¹⁹⁰ Most of the given details of the life history of the sKu zhabs sprul sku are contained in J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 73–75, 91–92, 95, 98–99, 368, n. 208. Later, in an ironic twist, the sKu zhabs sprul sku became the teacher of the Rana family.

¹⁹¹ For the circumstances that led to the building of Toloka Monastery see J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 98–99 and p. 367f. n. 207. The reincarnation of the sKu zhabs sprul sku (b. 1937) married and had one son and five daughters. Today he lives near the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth (cf. J. Wangmo 2005, p. 368 n. 208).

¹⁹² Concerning these details refer to J. Wangmo 2005, pp. 98–99 and p. 302.

Chapter Thirteen

The crucial importance of both Buddhist ethics and the ancient practice of patronage in the context of the current revitalization of Sherpa Buddhism and culture

1. The ethics of ‘giving’ as a key norm of conduct for Tibetan Buddhists and its continuing vitality as is expressed in the ongoing revitalization of Sherpa Buddhism and culture

So great is the Sherpas’ generosity for religious purposes that an impressive three-storied building with a large paved courtyard surrounded by galleries arose within two months on a site several hours’ walk from any permanent village. For all the villagers of Khumjung, Khunde, Phortse, Pangboche and Namche came to help with the work, giving their labour free of charge.”

In these words of unveiled admiration, Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf (1909–1995), the pioneer of the anthropological study of Sherpa culture and society, describes the crucial importance among the Sherpas of performing ‘positive acts’ in view of the personal acquisition of religious ‘merit’ (*bsod nams*).¹ Both the construction of the impressive sTeng po che dgon pa in the Khumbu region, the first celibate Sherpa monastery in Solu-Khumbu founded in 1916 by a group of four wealthy trader lay sponsors, and the labour that led to its completion in 1919, are regarded as acts of ‘merit-making’.²

As Ch. Ramble has recalled, traditionally, prosperity in the realm of Tibetan Buddhism has tended to be translated into patronage for Buddhist institutions.³ Sh. B. Ortner has shown

¹ Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. von 1964, p.131. Interestingly, he is the only anthropologist who ever has sought to find a convincing answer concerning the question as to the Sherpas’ readiness ‘to give to the Dharma.’ He elaborates at length on the importance of ‘positive acts’ and provides a wide range of examples, see pp. 273–275. More than a decade later he resumes this subject in a comparative treatise. Here, he highlights and examines the larger context in a separate chapter titled ‘Morality and the quest for merit’ (1967, pp. 180–206).

² For the particular circumstances that were to lead to the building of sTeng po che Monastery, refer to Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, pp. 129–138; see also the short passage in Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. von 1964, p. 131.

³ See Ramble, Ch. 1997a, p. 405.

that the emergence of celibate monasticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, which opened up a new chapter in the history of Buddhism among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, was the result of partly considerable wealth generated by new ways of trade in India at the turn of the 19th century.⁴ Despite the profound change highlighted by Sh. B. Ortner that had been brought about as the result of this significant pattern guiding Tibetan Buddhist behaviour, despite the fact that almost every Himalayan anthropologist has observed and somehow noted the Sherpas' 'great generosity for religious purposes' it has, in most cases, simply been taken for granted as representing the impetus for the accumulation of 'merit' in view of one's karma and a favourable rebirth. In other words, the historic origin of this Tibetan Buddhist key ideal has only rarely been discussed, since it is generally assumed it is common knowledge that the norms and values have been laid down in the discourses of Buddha Śākyamuni, the Buddha of our era, who lived in Northern India around the 6th century B.C.

The present investigation clearly demonstrates that the act of 'giving to the Dharma and the bla ma-s' is a *conditio sine qua non* for the current revitalization of Sherpa Buddhism and culture. Hence, attention will be turned briefly to the history of this key ideal.

In general, it is the un-regretted and generous giving that matters according to the code of Tibetan Buddhist ethics. The importance of giving is an integral norm of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Laid down in Buddhist canonical literature the precept of 'giving' is mentioned in the context of the Buddha Śākyamuni's stay at the root of the Enlightenment Tree (*byang chub kyi shing*). Following his attainment of perfect enlightenment some unspecified deities appeared recalling him as follows: "O Reverend One, alms were accepted in a bowl for the benefit of (all) sentient beings by former Buddhas." The text of the quoted *Sūtra on the Foundation of the Buddhist Order* continues: "The Lord, having considered this came to the insight: 'alms were accepted in a bowl for the benefit of (all) sentient beings by former Buddhas.' Then the need for a bowl arose in the Lord."⁵ Significantly, the Buddha Śākyamuni only resumes an established practice that had already been performed and thus sanctified by 'former Buddhas,' a fact that attributes an even greater legitimacy to this practice.

It is the first of the 'Six Transcendental Perfections' (*pha rol tu phyin pa drug*, Skt. *Ṣaḍ pāramita*) in which the moral ideal of the 'Perfection of Generosity' (*sbyin pa'i pha rol tu phyin pa*, Skt. *dāna pāramita*) is expressed. The other transcendental perfections concern those of discipline, patience, diligence, concentration and wisdom.⁶ This represents an integral part of the religious knowledge of the majority of the Sherpa laypeople.

⁴ See Ortner, Sh. B. 1989, p. 3, pp. 99–109; pp. 129–149.

⁵ This quote is from R. Kloppenborg's translation of the sūtra in 1973, chapter 2, nos. 12–13, see p. 9.

⁶ Concerning this group of 'Six Transcendent Perfections' refer to Patrul Rinpoche, 1999, p. 433; Dorje, G. and M. Kapstein 1991, p. 153.

Significantly, the fundamental Buddhist notion of generous giving is modeled according to the ideal of the bodhisattva (*byang chub sems dpa'*). It is this 'Idealtypus' in M. Weber's sense (1922) of the practitioner of the Mahāyāna path who strives for the realization of Buddhahood through the systematical practice of the 'Ten Transcendental Perfections' (*pha rol tu phyin pa bcu*, Skt. daśa pāramita) which include the 'Six Transcendental Perfections.'⁷ Instead of entering nirvāna, however, the bodhisattva chooses to remain in this world in order to benefit all living beings by compassionately helping them and by dedicating his accumulated karmic merit to all living beings. It has to be noted that the act of dedication of merit to all sentient beings forms an integral part of both any kind of ritual performance and of individual spiritual practice. Towards the end of his meditation the bodhisattva “

“...piles up the roots of good of all those, all that quantity of merit without exception or remainder, rolls it into one lump, weighs it and rejoices over it with the most excellent and sublime jubilation (...). Having thus rejoiced, he would utter the remark: “I turn over into full enlightenment the meritorious work founded on jubilation. May it feed the full enlightenment, (of myself and of all beings).⁸

In a discourse on 'The Six Perfections' the so-called 'worldly perfection of giving' is defined.⁹ Subhūti, who belongs to the group of 'Ten Great Disciples' of the Buddha Śākyamuni, explains:

“The worldly perfection of giving consists in this: The Bodhisattva gives liberally to all those who ask, all the while thinking in terms of real things. It occurs to him: “I give, that one receives, this is the gift. I renounce all my possessions without stint. I act as one who knows the Buddha. I practise the perfection of giving. I, having made this gift into the common property of all beings, dedicate

⁷ Concerning this group of 'Ten Perfections' refer to Dorje, G. and M. Kapstein 1991, pp. 167–68. To the aforementioned 'Six Transcendental Perfections' are added the following virtues which are to be perfected by the Bodhisattva through his resp. practice: 'skilful means' (*thabs*, Skt. upāya), 'prayer of aspiration' (*smon lam*, Skt. praṇidhāna), 'power' (*stobs*, Skt. bala) and pristine cognition (*ye śes*, Skt. jñāna).

⁸ This quotation is the last passage of the brief chapter on 'The Dedication of Merit' (pp. 132–35, see pp. 134–35) as translated by E. Conze in the second part of the collection titled *Buddhist Texts Through The Ages* which is on Mahāyāna (1990, pp. 119–217).

⁹ Conze, E. 1990, pp. 135ff., see pp. 136–37. In this context it is being differentiated between 'worldly' and 'supramundane perfection of giving.' The latter kind of perfection pertains solely to the realm of activities of an enlightened being.

it to supreme enlightenment, and that without apprehending anything. By means of this gift, and its fruit may all beings in this very life be at their ease, and may they one day enter Nirvana".¹⁰

It is in Subhūti's words that the moral ideal of giving is articulated that governs the actions of any ordinary believing Buddhist layperson. In a more differentiated way that enumerates particular acts of giving as are of importance in the Tibetan Buddhist world this basic notion has been explained by Patrul Rinpoche (rDza dpal sprul O rgyan 'jigs med chos kyi dbang po, 1808–87).¹¹ In his book *The Words of my Perfect Teacher* (Tib. *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung*) which has become one of the best-known introductions to the foundations of Tibetan Buddhism the great Nineteenth Century scholar and renunciate of the rNying ma pa School elaborates, a.o., on the training of the 'six transcendent perfections'.¹²

There are three forms of 'transcendent generosity': material giving, giving Dharma, and giving protection from fear.¹³ Whereas 'giving Dharma' means leading others to spiritual practice through various kinds of activities, a task which may solely be done by a bla ma, the third precept refers to certain mundane activities such as 'forbidding hunting,' which is observed in the larger space around all Sherpa monasteries and temples. Other actions concern 'saving the lives of (...), worms, flies, and other creatures.' While the act of saving of worms and flies may be observed among faithful people throughout their everyday life, it is at great places of pilgrimage such as the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth where different kinds of exotic birds may be bought on occasion of important festivals from Indian street vendors which are then set free by faithful Tibetan Buddhists.

¹⁰ Conze, E. 1990, pp. 136–37.

¹¹ Biographical data of this influential master from the eastern province of Kham can be found in Ricard, M. et al. 1994, p. XXV, n. 6; he is mentioned in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 on what he transmitted to the renowned master 'Jam mgom 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912), see p. 871; his picture, a print from a woodblock, is provided on p. 876. The tradition he inherited is briefly outlined in Patrul Rinpoche 1991, see 'Translators Introduction', pp. XXXI–V.

¹² Patrul Rinpoche 1999, pp. 234–255. – Patrul Rinpoche's perfect teacher, 'Jigs med rgyal ba'i myu gu, an important teacher and the most important disciple of Rig 'dzin 'Jigs med gling pa (1729–1798), is mentioned in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, p. 839; he is depicted in Patrul Rinpoche 1999, p. XXXIII. – The record of the latter's instructions were set down by his disciple Patrul Rinpoche, which became a very popular teaching manual of the rNying ma pa tradition. It is an explanation of the preliminary practices of the kLong chen snying thig, *The Heart-Essence of the Vast Expanse*, a spiritual treasure transmitted from the 'all-knowing' kLong chen rab 'byams pa (1308–1363) and received by Rig 'dzin 'Jigs med gling pa (1730–1798) in a series of visions, see pp. XXXII–V; for the latter's hagiography refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, pp. 835–840.

¹³ See Patrul Rinpoche 1999, pp. 234–238.

Of particular interest in this context is the activity of giving any kind of material gift since it can and is to be practiced by anyone, especially by the ordinary laypeople.¹⁴ Also of great importance is the rule that is associated with material giving. It is emphasized that, as with any activity of virtue, provided something material is given with a ‘perfectly pure intention,’ the amount is not important. Moreover, the influential moral precept concerning the handling of material wealth in general is expressed as follows:

“When people get hold of a few supplies or a little money, they hold tight to them with a dying man’s grip, and use them neither for this life nor for lives to come.. No matter how much they have, they still think they have nothing, and moan as if they were on the point of starvation.(...).

Avoid such attitudes and try to be generous, through such activities as making offerings to the Three Jewels and giving to beggars“.¹⁵

Throughout the Tibetan Buddhist world the act of ‘generous giving’ follows the key precept that, as has been mentioned before, has been formulated in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is this moral value that is also the *fons et origo* of the Sherpas’ readiness to give a considerable share of the profit derived from trading or other kinds of successful ventures to a monastery, its bla ma, for the upkeep or renovation of the local temple or the construction of a religious monument such as a stūpa or a maṇi wall, the commissioning of a painted scroll (*thang ka*), the purchase of sacred books for a monastery such as the full set of the bKa’ ‘gyur or bsTan ‘gyur or to sponsor the religious education of a young Sherpa monk, to name but the major activities of ‘merit’-making.

A particularly interesting case concerns the support of the staging of the communal temple festivals through donations in money or kind. It is through the sponsoring of their religious festivals, which serve both to bind the members of the local community in a common frame of action and to ensure its protection and well-being, that the benefactor contributes to the ‘turning of the Wheel of the Dharma’ and at the same time to the community’s well-being and prosperity. Significantly, in the local context, every male as representative of his household fulfills at least once in his life-time the role of a benefactor (*sbyin bdag*) owing to a rotation system according to which every year a fixed number of household heads has to provide the financial resources for the performance of the *Dumji*, the most important annual

¹⁴ Compare Patrul Rinpoche 1999, pp. 234–236.

¹⁵ Patrul Rinpoche 1999, see p. 234 for the first reference; for the quotation see p. 235.

festival as celebrated in the locality.¹⁶ Significantly, in the case of the performance of any kind of religious celebration, common thinking holds that the more lavish the ceremony the more effective it is, and it is considered to be an honour to contribute to it as much as possible. As a rule the wealthier the family the greater is usually its contribution.¹⁷

In fact, the act of contributing to the sponsoring of performance of their annual *Dumji* village-temple festival is an important act of personal ‘merit-making.’ However, in this particular context, the act of generosity is performed not solely out of the sponsor’s free choice. Instead, there is also implied a personal obligation to do so, since it is considered as a ‘civic duty’ of every man as head of one of the group of households the locality consists of to fulfill his role as benefactor (*sbyin bdag*) according to the distinct rotation system at least once in his life-time.¹⁸ As Chr. von Furer-Haimendorf has observed:

“Permanent exemption from the duties of the *lawa* [= the Sherpa term for the *Dumji* benefactors – E.B.], (...), is irreconcilable with full membership of the village community, and it is a matter of pride even for poor men to discharge their obligations of *lawa*, and to repay thereby free food and drink provided in past years by other villagers acting as *lawa*“.¹⁹

Of great importance is the fact that in the Sherpas’ new environment this significant cultural pattern to act as benefactor for the Dharma and its clerics is not broken due to the encroachment of modern norms and values that accompany the growth of individualism in their midst. Instead, as the diverse religious performances enacted in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and the latter’s prosperity clearly demonstrate the customary pattern continues to be a decisive impetus to fulfill the traditional role of a benefactor of the Dharma within the new existential framework. Currently, it represents a tradition-in-the-making: there is still no established rotation system as it prevails in the locality that would oblige all household representatives to perform it as a ‘civic duty’ for the large Sherpa community. Instead, until the present it is an honorific duty which is performed by all those who opt to fulfill this significant social role. It should not be forgotten, however, that this seemingly altruistic

¹⁶ Concerning this distinctive feature of the Sherpas’ entire festival economy see Berg, E. (in press).

¹⁷ Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. von emphasizes: “It would seem that among the Sherpas, as among Tibetan Buddhists, the religious impulse is so strong that any margin of resources left after essential needs have been met is largely devoted to religious purposes.” (1964, p. 174)

¹⁸ For this important socio-political aspect of the festival economy of the *Dumji* see Berg, E. (Chapter Four, Section 5 and Chapter Six, in press).

¹⁹ See Furer-Haimendorf, Chr. von 1964, p. 187.

impetus is invariably coupled with an 'egoistic' motive: to act as benefactor for the prosperity of the Law, its religious practitioners, and the celebrating community at large entails, at the same time, the personal collection of religious merit (*bsod nams*) in view of one's karma to ensure a favourable rebirth. The latter value is of utmost importance not only for the Sherpas but for any faithful Tibetan Buddhist throughout the Tibetan Buddhist cultural world.²⁰

2. The close relationship between the performance of the religious festivals and patronage: a complex 'system of reciprocity' between the deities worshiped, the clerics, and the celebrating Sherpa community

In what follows, attention shall be directed to the significant bond that is created and reaffirmed through the performance of each of the five festivals between the celebrating Sherpa community and the respective deity or deities to be venerated in its course. The religious festivals are briefly analyzed and discussed as 'systems of reciprocity' in the framework of which 'gifts' of offerings directed to the deities invoked and worshiped are exchanged with both the blessings and the protection to be received in return from the respective deities. However, the most significant kind of 'gift' in this context has been the different acts of patronage that made possible the building of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex in Bodhnāth including their own temple. It is this complex 'system of reciprocity' that secures the social cohesion and, at the same time, serves to create, maintain, and strengthen the novel all-inclusive Sherpa tradition.

Despite the fact that their effort is directed towards different deities, and their respective cults and their distinctive ritual differences notwithstanding, on the overall socio-cultural level the performance of all five kinds of religious celebrations serves to bind the individual members of the entire Sherpa community into one common frame of action and creates a novel kind of unity and harmony. Moreover, it is through these religious performances that a new 'de-territorialized' all-embracing Sherpa identity is forged and reaffirmed.²¹ Transcending the divisive local characteristics of traditional Sherpa culture and society, these religious festivals bring together the members of the different geographical segments and social units scattered across a vast territory, predominantly in the eastern part of Nepal's

²⁰ For these significant aspects as they are played out in the local context of the great annual *Dumji* performance refer to Berg, E. (in press).

²¹ In traditional Sherpa culture identity is largely based on the local group's association with its limited territory but, as Ch. Ramble notes, "...other markers of distinctiveness can always be found if required." (1997a, p. 410) This is the case in the novel framework where identity, as has been demonstrated, is constructed on other terms, a fact which is reflective of the Sherpas' pragmatism which has been a major source of their great adaptability to novel circumstances.

Himalayan region. Significantly, they bring the Sherpas together at one and the same – newly constructed – sacred site where they also celebrate a historically new all-inclusive “Sherpaness” at the same time. Not surprisingly, on occasion of each of these ceremonies there may always be noticed numerous participants in the audience who, as their behaviour in this large framework clearly reveals, doubtlessly experience this new kind of Sherpa unity and identity for the first time.

Moreover, it is of particular significance that all these festive events in the course of which the particular worshiped Buddhist deity is given certain offerings provide two different gains for the participants. On the one hand they constitute an important incentive for the individual Sherpa to actively participate in each of them if possible. In his valuable discussion of numerous kinds of offering (*mchod pa*) as prescribed in the various kinds of texts belonging to the genre of Tibetan ritual literature, J. Makransky has observed: “When the giver of offerings is a Tibetan Buddhist, and the recipients are powerful Buddhist deities ritually invoked, the giver receives an ‘immediate return’ of blessing or empowerment (*byin rlabs*).”²² Apart from this individual gain which is of greatest significance for any Tibetan Buddhist, the celebrating community as a whole receives kind help and powerful protection for its future well-being and prosperity in turn from the worshiped and involved deities.

It has to be emphasized that Tibetans regard practically all kinds of religious practices as offering (*mchod pa*).²³ The lighting of butter-lamps, the spinning of prayer-wheels, the daily juniper leaves fumigation, prostrations before sacred images or around sacred sites, recitations of a mantra, circumambulations of holy persons, books, monuments, and sites, the carving of Avalokiteśvara’s six-syllable mantra onto a boulder or rock face, the commissioning of sacred texts or images, the sponsorship of the education of a monk or nun, the construction of mañi-walls and –watermills, the building of sacred monuments such as stūpas, monasteries, hermitages, or the patronage of religious festivals, to name but the most common ones: all these different kinds of Tibetan Buddhist expressions of piety represent an offering directed either to a certain deity, among the adherents of the rNying ma pa School most usually to Guru Padmasambhava or to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the Lord of Compassion, or to the Dharma and its representatives.²⁴

²² See Makransky, J. 1996, p. 315f.

²³ R. B. Ekvall has mentioned the close association of sponsorship and the making of offerings as it prevails in the Tibetan Buddhist world (1964, p. 127). For a detailed account of the different forms of participation in Tibetan Buddhist observances see op. cit., pp. 114–149.

²⁴ It has to be emphasized that in the latter context to nuns has been traditionally ascribed a deplorably marginal role, Sherpa culture and society being no exception in this respect. Based on her long-term field research on nuns in Zangs dkar K. Gutschow has provided a vivid account of Buddhist female monasticism, the nuns’ struggle for survival, and their quest for enlightenment. Among others, K. Gutschow describes in detail the

The specific motivation behind any kind of Tibetan Buddhist offering is enshrined in the concept of karma and merit (Skt. *punya*, Tib. *bsod nams*) J. Makransky continues as follows: “Hence, giving and receiving (...) lie at the heart of religious practice. Formal rituals of offering generate tremendous karmic merit by providing the ritual structure.”²⁵ In fact, for Sherpas as well as for Tibetan Buddhists, in general, it is the key norms and values of the Buddhist code of ethics that constitute the major driving force in the present day despite their current encounter with modernity and the concomitant forces of secularization not only to participate in their religious festivals but also to support them generously through assuming the traditional role of either *sbyin bdag* or *lawa* in that particular context as well as to act as sponsor for the Dharma and its clergy in general. Most importantly, the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* including the community temple owes its existence solely to the donations from the members of the Sherpa community. To summarize, the key norm of giving to the Dharma and the clerics represents a *conditio sine qua non* for the success of the ongoing revitalization of Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society and the construction of a novel all-embracing tradition.

The exchange of ‘goods’ in this particular system of reciprocity, created by the officiating bla ma through the giving of worldly and the receiving of divine ‘gifts,’ closely connects the humans with both their deities and the Dharma. It is of theoretical significance that this exchange, profoundly symbolic and strongly utilitarian in character at the same time, clearly conforms to the famous Maussian notion of the ‘gift’ and the distinct character it assumes in the exchange of gifts. As analyzed in his influential ‘Essai sur le don,’ (1925) the renowned French sociologist M. Mauss (1872–1950) defined the ‘gift’ in that context as ‘fait social total’ (‘total social fact’) which has religious, moral, and economic implications. This holds true of the populations of the Tibetan Buddhist world such as the small Himalayan community of the Sherpas.²⁶

‘Buddhist economy of focused’ as opposed to that of ‘unfocused merit-making’. Based on the logic that devotees accumulate most merit through gifts to those perceived to be bodily impure and spiritually advanced it is, of course, the monks who receive the lion’s share of donations from the laity. Hence, she summarizes as follows: “Monks’ rituals capture good luck and consolidate wealth on a household and village level. In contrast, the nunnery serves as a vehicle for more general merit-making.” (1997, p. 46)

²⁵ J. Makransky 1996, p. 314.

²⁶ It needs to be added that M. Mauss analysed gift exchange also among neighbouring groups. In that context it serves as an important means to secure peace among them.

Conclusion

The central concern of this book is a detailed examination of both the strategy and the means employed through which the Sherpas have been successfully managing the creation of a novel tradition. In firm association, a new all-inclusive collectivity and a corresponding larger, i.e. pan-Sherpa, cultural identity is being forged that, at the same time, entails both a reinforced Buddhist and a wider culturally Tibetan identity. Significantly, the performance of certain major, i.e. not locality-bound, religious celebrations of the rNying ma pa tradition occupies a central place in their current ongoing great effort at preserving their cultural heritage in the context of their encounter with 'modernity' and the forces of 'globalisation'. Hence, it was sought to demonstrate in detail that it is mainly by means of the annual ritual performance of these major ceremonies that this novel tradition, in a far-away, culturally alien new place and space, is being forged successfully. It has to be noted that all have been established in the course of the last two decades, and more celebrations are intended to be introduced in this framework

Through making deliberate use of these rNying ma pa festivals as crucial devices in attempting to accomplish their particular goal, the actors thus clearly demonstrate both Tibetan Buddhism's as well as their own remarkable capacity to initiate and also to realise a veritable 'renaissance' of Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society in a wider, all-encompassing framework. Until not long ago Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society seemed to be seriously endangered, spoiled by its own tremendous material success and its inevitably concomitant deplorable cultural loss and alienation..At the same time, the detailed analysis and ethnographic description of the ritual performance of these major celebrations show their tremendously rich potential as to the creation of 'communitas', the influential notion that, as examined in a wide range of different settings, had been introduced by the great anthropologist and comparative symbolist V. Turner (1920–1983). In this case, a novel kind of 'communitas' is being crafted that for the first time in their history embraces the entire Sherpa community.

My special interest has been concerned with subjecting the contemporary 'modern' *conditio humana* characteristic of a peripheral social formation, as exemplified by the small culturally Tibetan Himalayan Buddhist community of the Sherpas, originally of northeastern Nepal, in one novel setting to ethnographic scrutiny. At the same time it is sought to shed some light on the cultural, social, and economic dimensions of 'globalisation'. This inevitable, and in many cases fatal, tidal wave has been strongly affecting the fate of all Himalayan

Buddhist communities belonging to the Tibetan cultural realm. Consequently, it was sought to provide cross-references as to other Tibetan local cultures in this realm whenever available to enhance our understanding of present day's complex ways characteristic of the formation and strengthening or of undermining and weakening of communal unity and identity in a Himalayan Buddhist local culture. As has been examined in detail, in the case of the Sherpas the latter way was ultimately deliberately changed through the successful revival of their religion, culture and society.

The detailed ethnographic description and close analysis of the performance of *lo gsar* under the ritual guidance of eminent Sherpa bla ma-s and of each of the other four major annual religious festivals offers ample proof of today's Sherpas' extraordinary ability to forge a novel all-inclusive tradition in a far-away, culturally alien new place and space.

Following a period of more than three decades of considerable individual gains coupled with grave cultural decay and alienation, the Sherpas seem to succeed to rearrange and strengthen their religion, culture and society. One may safely observe that, to adopt a metaphor coined by J.F. Fisher (1991), whereas during that preceding period material success had spoiled a lot of Sherpas to a more or less considerable degree, today the small Tibetan Buddhist Himalayan community seems to walk a finer line between business and Buddhism, in other words: between the modern way of making profit individually and the 'restored' care for their communal welfare in full accordance with Buddhist norms and values. Hence, as seen from today's perspective, the Sherpas' path towards 'modernity' that, as their rich Buddhist cultural heritage has been concerned, was to lead for decennia through a period of 'darkness', has ultimately not been at the expense of their religion, culture and society. Instead, after the duration of more than one generation of primarily having made their material gains and, at the same time, gotten more or less lost in its associated mundane enjoyments, history's pendulum has now done a full swing to the opposite side. The significant change was signaled first through the emergence of an awareness among the Sherpas as to the alarming state of both their religious and cultural heritage and their delicate high-altitude environment as well as of their profound alienation. In the course of my long-term field research I became witness of the awakening awareness, which revealed itself in countless conversations first only with certain bla ma-s, and very few leading figures of the Sherpa community. Truly outstanding among the latter has been bSod nams rgyal mtshan Shar pa, my extremely committed and knowledgeable, gentle and helpful main informant.

Not surprisingly, it was primarily this increasing awareness concerning their growing predicament that ultimately was to give rise to the Sherpas' current ongoing effort at a profound revival, reaffirmation and strengthening of their tradition. It is only since then that the path towards 'modernity' the Sherpas themselves deliberately began to chose was to lead

to the strengthening of their cultural heritage through the forging of a novel all-embracing tradition and a corresponding form of collective unity and cultural identity. As was closely analysed the center of the Sherpas' current fully self-made encompassing revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society as well as its main stage and its major driving force is represented by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* (Nep.) or Sherpa Service Center in Bodnāth, the communal building (Tib. *mi 'dzom sa*) of the entire Sherpa community including the *Shar pa dGon pa* ('Sherpa Temple'). It is this community institution, an institution combining both religious and mundane functions, in the context of Tibetan Buddhism and its tradition of sacred architecture a historically new form, that constitutes this book's focus.

It was sought to provide a close examination of those circumstances that were to lead to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex including the *Shar pa dGon pa*, the goals associated with its establishment, as well as its administration and maintenance. Of greatest importance, however, is the detailed description of the performance, of the history and of the symbolic meaning of each of the five major annual religious festivals that, being performed in this new setting, serve to create a novel all-inclusive tradition and a corresponding new collective unity and cultural identity that is beyond their traditional particularities such as that of clan, locality, and region. At the same time, attention has been directed to those ritual specialists under whose spiritual guidance the five religious festivals were established and who, through their ritual performances, have been responsible for the creation of the Sherpas' new tradition, which presently continues to be in the making. To gain an appropriate understanding of the book's main subject a full account has been provided as to the involved bla ma-s' life-histories and the diverse sacred sites where each one has been active, each one's incarnation lineage and the different personages each incarnation lineage consists of and the teaching tradition each one represents. These different aspects arranged into one text add to the completion of the writing of the history of Sherpa Buddhism, culture, society and economy.¹ At the same time these aspects combined serve to illuminate the Sherpas' present day's religious landscape. According to my collected information, among today's Sherpas it is unanimously agreed upon the fact that their traditional religious landscape has been greatly

¹ A detailed account of the history of anthropological research among the Sherpas and their major proponents has been given by E. Berg (2008, compare introduction and chapters one and two). Emphasis is put on the fact that this contribution builds upon and continues, to adopt a metaphor coined by the great sociologist of science R.K. Merton (b. 1910), the work of certain 'giants'. Recently, valuable glimpses from an auto-biographical perspective on his contribution to the beginning of the Tibetological and anthropological research concerning the Sherpas have been provided by A.W. Macdonald, a doyen of Tibetan and Nepalese studies, which forms a part of his long-awaited *rnam thar* (2004, see pp. 8f.). – A comprehensive retrospective 'On comparative ethnography in the Himalayas' which contextualizes his own contribution to the early anthropological research as to the Sherpas has been given by M. Oppitz (2007) in his Mahesh Chandra Regmi Lecture 2006.

expanded and enriched through the establishment of the *Shar pa dGon pa* in the Kathmandu Valley.

The investigation's findings as to the construction, maintenance and continuous expansion of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, the religious performances and to the larger revitalisation project provide clear evidence as to the entire Sherpa community's formidable capacity to organise themselves without succumbing to the seduction of accepting any support from outsiders. Thus, they manage to maintain their independence and freedom to choose and create their own path through future's ocean of uncertainties. One of the inquiry's main aims has been to describe in detail the afore-mentioned aspects generated through this admirable capacity that ultimately have been and continue to be of crucial importance for the success of the Sherpas' current and ongoing revitalisation project.

A key aspect of the inquiry concerns the analysis of the significant shift from the traditional, i.e. local, to a wholly new concept of community that is being created in this context. It has been discussed and demonstrated that in close association emerges an extended notion of identity inclusive of all Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu. As Ch. Ramble observes, it is in the context of these processes that people's primary allegiance is being shifted away from an identity shaped by locality through the performance of cults of place gods to one based on 'more abstract religious ideals' that conforms to the 'overarching concerns of high religion'.² This is being achieved through the performance of ritual celebrations that are not tied and thus restricted to a particular locality and its distinct tradition.

Belonging to the overarching rNying ma pa tradition within Tibetan Buddhism this significant transformation or extension of their tradition clearly transcends the traditional limits of Sherpa Buddhism which, until only recently, has existed solely in the diverse forms of local tradition as embodied in the diverse religious festival held annually in the local temple.³ In this new context old ties such as the attachment to their territory and the associated concept of identity as mediated through the cult of local deities have been replaced by new ties and conceptions, the most important one being a new unity and identity that, transcending their traditional local community and identity, embraces all Sherpas from Solu-Khumbu.⁴

² Ch. Ramble 1997a, p. 398; p. 404.

³ It needs to be emphasized that my observation is in full contradiction of J.F. Fisher who has noted: "Change occurs in the circumvention or shortcutting of tradition, not its elimination or transformation." (1990, p. 166; see also 1991, p. 44)

⁴ In recent years scholars such as A. Appadurai who focusing on the study of 'globalisation' have been examining the cultural dynamics of what is called 'de-territorialisation', a process of crucial importance which is commonly understood as an integral, i.e. inevitable, element of what is called 'globalisation' (1997, pp. 48-65, see particularly pp. 48-55).

As has been laid out in detail, the solemn performance of the five major religious festivals strongly contributes to the integration of all Sherpas regardless of both their clan and their local belonging thus generating among the Sherpas a new form of collective solidarity, of unity and of cultural identity. While the traditional particularities of locality, region and clan-belonging continue to persist as one frame of reference, the traditionally strong sentiments of affinity and cohesiveness are being transformed thus ensuring the relative coherence of today's entire Sherpa community, the maintenance of their Buddhist heritage and the reaffirmation and strengthening of their cultural identity as Buddhist and as belonging to the wider Tibetan cultural realm. Throughout numerous discussions a major recurring theme has always been the fact that the creation of these new ties as exemplified through both a new form of collective solidarity and unity and a shared all-embracing cultural identity fit well to the contemporary needs of the cosmopolitan Sherpas since these significant innovations are of great value in their dealings with others in both the Hindu nation-state of Nepal and the diasporic communities abroad.

Emphasis has to be placed on the fact that the current forging of a novel tradition is, indeed, an ongoing process; it is intended, for example, to introduce the *Dumji* festival in the Sherpa temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*, that happens to take place in the era of 'globalisation' and the Sherpas' global dispersal. Thus, today's Sherpas manage successfully to preserve their rich religious and cultural heritage and to maintain their distinct, although newly reshaped, unity and identity in novel circumstances. However, all these steps toward a revitalised and enlarged tradition have solely being made possible due to the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* and its temple, a task that had been shouldered and achieved solely by the Sherpas themselves.

It is important that, as Sh. B. Ortner has already emphasized two decades ago, the Sherpas certainly are not victim of 'world capitalist expansion' such as too many cultural formations have been throughout its history.⁵ On the contrary, the inquiry demonstrates in ethnographic detail that the Sherpas who have never been directly colonized do, indeed, represent the extraordinary example of a local people who, to borrow an elegant description coined by M. Sahlins, managed to successfully integrate the world system in their own 'system of the world';⁶ or, to use Ortner's words: the Sherpas have been able to control and thus mould their own fates until the present day.⁷ However, it has also to be recalled that, in addition to this, the Sherpas' great achievement has been and still is embedded in the wider framework

⁵ Cf. Sh. B. Ortner 1989, p. 99f.

⁶ M. Sahlins 1994, p. 384.

⁷ Sh. B. Ortner 1989, p. 100.

of the ongoing renaissance of the 'Old Translation School' of Tibetan Buddhism in exile. The collected findings clearly demonstrate firstly that also in the context of the ongoing revitalisation of Sherpa Buddhism and culture the spiritual potency of Tibetan Buddhism continues to serve as the major cultural force despite the powerful forces of globalisation that, as one might expect, oppose its unifying disposition. Secondly, the investigation reveals that it is despite the ongoing 'disenchantment of the world' as achieved through 'continuous rationalization and intellectualization of the holding sway over the world' (M. Weber 1919) that the Tibetan religious world is able even today to provide its vast 'pool' of religious knowledge, ritual practices and larger performances and thus to offer a common order in what is conceived of by Buddhists as the present 'degenerate era'.⁸ In consequence, as the investigation's results show, present day's Sherpa culture and history, society and economy that have been firmly rooted in it since their very beginning continue to be intimately tied to the Tibetan cultural world.

The profound changes thus ushered in answering the contemporary and urgent needs of Sherpa Buddhism, culture, and society at large opened up the important chapter of recent Sherpa history. These needs were successfully met by certain outstanding personages deeply committed to the service not of their respective households and the usual demands of their local civic society or their local temple or monastery thus 'imprisoned' in their local tradition. Instead, these personages have been greatly committed to the welfare of the entire Sherpa community. While the involved clerics have been contributing to the Sherpas' revitalisation project through advice, spiritual guidance and the performance of the five major religious festivals established in this framework the eminent laypersons have been and still are helping to fund and organize the religious celebrations, holding office and engaging in public labour to name but the most important aspects of their tremendously valuable contribution. To all these personages the Sherpas pay great respect and thanks. Moreover, certain leading dignitaries of the rNying ma pa School who have been acting as a great source of inspiration, offering invaluable spiritual guidance and contributing through a range of other kinds of support are being greatly venerated.

Contemporary Sherpas are fully aware of the fact that their entire community has been benefiting strongly from the well-intentioned and complex efforts of these outstanding personages, both clerics and laymen alike, including certain leading dignitaries of the 'Old Translation School' to preserve and strengthen Buddhism, culture and society among them. Hence, it comes as no surprise that their novel community center is a great source of ethnic

⁸ Interestingly, this important observation has also been made by M. Kapstein in view of present day's Tibet after its forced annexation by the People's Republic of China in the context of a discussion of the socio-cultural function of pilgrimage in the Tibetan religious world (2006, compare p. 243).

pride. And, to recall this significant achievement, the ritual celebrations held in this novel context have greatly contributed to reaffirm and strengthen the Sherpas' traditional pride to be a Sherpa and a Buddhist and to belong to the wider Tibetan cultural realm. To complete this brief sketch of the current state of Sherpa religion, culture and society: practically all contemporary Sherpas, old and also young, no matter how famous or wealthy they have become through adventure trekking or mountaineering business, or how educated or widely traveled they are, living either in their homeland Solu-Khumbu, the Kathmandu Valley or in diasporic communities abroad, are proud of being both Sherpas and Buddhists.⁹

What will probably remain a major problem in the future concerns the task of the successful integration of the Sherpa youth into the Sherpa community and the new Sherpa Buddhist tradition within an ever-increasing secular framework. After a serious decline that was to last, more or less, for the duration of the boom of the trekking business it is since almost a decade that contemporary young Sherpas, women and men, in increasing numbers have begun to pursue a religious career such as it was also common among their ancestors, at least at certain times.¹⁰ At the same time another section of Sherpa youth seems to have returned after more or less years of having simply drifted around. The majority of the younger generation of today's Sherpa community based in the Kathmandu Valley has received a secular higher education, since throughout the last decade it has been the goal of almost every well-to-do Sherpa besides buying a plot of land and building an own house to send the children to a well-renowned boarding school.¹¹ Albeit having been exposed to modern education, mundane life, secular values, money, tourism, etc., according to their own statements they nevertheless do not seem to suffer from an ambivalence very common today among the young generation anywhere that questions the validity and own logic of traditional rites in the performance of which they participate. While the young Sherpas pragmatically observe the major Hindu festivals as national holidays simply enjoying them as welcome additional leisure time most of them keep following the cultural practices and the religious precepts characteristic of their rich heritage. Usually, they are in no way compelled to partake

⁹ Interestingly, my observation, based on my long-term research among them, has already been noted by J. F. Fisher in his brief, but concise and valuable examination of the state of Sherpa culture and society in the Khumbu region in the late 1980s (1991, see p. 43).- It has also been confirmed recently through similar observations put on paper by J. Wangmo 2005, see p. 306, p. 307f.

¹⁰ As in the history of the 'Old School' at large, a distinctive feature of Sherpa Buddhism has always been the ups and downs a religious community, monastic or based in hermitages, has undergone in the course of time.

¹¹ Already in 1991, p. 44 J. F. Fisher has observed a growing awareness among both today's parents as well as among the young generation as to the great value of a sound education and that the latter increasingly make use of higher education since it is being realized that a better education opens up more successful career opportunities, or, as he put it briefly: "...the more educated are the more successful." For indications signalling this growing awareness see also J.F.Fisher 1990, p. 157.

in the 'non-modern' religious activities of the Sherpa community, but do so voluntarily since they are proud of both being Sherpas as well as Tibetan Buddhists. As such, they are always happy, as it is being emphasised in conversations, just as the older generations have always been, to join in religious ceremonies. As I have witnessed in so many instances in the context of practically all religious festivals young people are usually even being strongly encouraged from the side of both the bla ma-s and the lay people alike to take own initiative 'to improve' the performance of a religious festival thus deliberately binding them into the Sherpas' frame of reference.

On the occasions of the major religious festivals as celebrated in their local village temple or in that of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* in Bodhnāth and, according to my information, in those of the diasporic communities as well an increasing number of young Sherpas can be seen as participants clad in traditional festive dress who obviously enjoy the religious event. Whenever need arises, they assist their parents or friends in performing their traditional duties as benefactor or steward in view of the celebrating Sherpa community. In an increasing number of cases, they contribute something to the religious performances on their own initiative such as their 'motor rallye for peace' first 'in a war-torn country', then 'for world-peace' which is held in the context of the Tibetan New Year festival. This initiative leads a huge group of motorbikers adorned with Buddhist banners and shouting religious and political slogans in the late morning hours to Svayaṃbhūnāth Stūpa, around the Great Stūpa Bodhnāth and then back to the celebrating community in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*.

Another, more significant example concerns the showing of young Sherpas, both female and male, in numerous dance groups to perform the *shyabro* (Tib. *shabs bro*), the traditional Sherpa round dance usually performed in a temple's courtyard after the religious performance has come to its end. In the course of the last fifteen years young Sherpas throughout Solu-Khumbu, in their Valley community, and in recent years even in the diasporic community in New York have been getting together in festive dress to form dance groups in order to thoroughly re-learn their ancestors' favourite kind of secular enjoyment that, as a rule, follows a religious festival. The latter is a distinct sign of today's ongoing revitalisation as contributed especially by the young generation in contemporary Sherpa society. Moreover, in increasing numbers young Sherpas join their parents and grandparents in the participation in certain teachings given by certain eminent bla ma-s, which are meant to put on firm grounds or to re-establish the knowledge as to their own Buddhist tradition. This significant scenario may be witnessed particularly in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* where this sort of religious teachings constitute an elementary part of the ongoing efforts at revitalising Sherpa Buddhism, culture and society.

At the same time, there are numerous examples proving that most of today's Sherpas, in significant aspects, strive to follow their local tradition and its associated 'civic' obligations, which coexists with their novel all-inclusive tradition. Sherpas seek to buy a premise and build a house of their own in a Kathmandu suburb, preferably in the larger area around the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth. But at the same time they continue at the beginning of the new millennium to keep the house, including the land, cattle, etc. in their home locality that was inherited from their parents. Some even hold a position in the local village administration. Provided one can manage one returns to his locality to participate in the *Dumji* festival, the main local annual festival held in the village temple. When it is someone's turn to assume the 'civic duty' of the role of the benefactor of the *Dumji* festival he either returns to do so or he sends a brother, sister, father or mother as his representative. Throughout a period of almost two decennia I have neither personally encountered nor learnt of one single case yet that a Sherpa has ever sold his inherited house, land, and cattle or has ever flatly refused to assume the benefactor's role for the performance of the annual *Dumji* masked dance drama without having sent a representative in his stead and providing the due material resources associated with this significant social role. This prevailing attitude clearly mirrors the fact that also present day's Sherpas, no matter how far away from their homeland they live, seek to maintain the firm relationship with their home and land, and their home locality centered around the village temple, the stage of all local religious festivals.

In a famous section of his well-known essay 'Science as a Vocation' (1919) Max Weber has characterised 'modern secular society' as it emerged in occidental culture as follows:

"It is the fate of our times with its own intrinsic form of rationalization and intellectualization, in particular: disenchantment of the world, that precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystical life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal relations that persist among the individuals. (transl. E.B.)"¹²

Indeed, the afore-mentioned process of the 'disenchantment of the world' as achieved according to M. Weber through 'continuous rationalization and intellectualization of the holding sway over the world' is inevitably permeating and transforming all cultures of our globe. In the advanced industrialised countries the traditional gods have been either marginalized or forced into exile and their cults have been replaced by the most various kinds of secular idols and their respective cults. What has remained is, according to M.

¹² M. Weber (1919) 1988, p. 612.

Weber, a certain kind of technical rationalism. To complete this picture one has to add that the rule of the values and norms of capitalist consumerism has taken over.

In striking contrast, the case of the Sherpas as reflected by their construction of a temple cum community center and the performance of the five religious festivals offers a telling example which clearly testifies that a Tibetan Buddhist culture and society as represented by the small Himalayan community of the Sherpas is able to revitalise and strengthen its cultural heritage through the deliberate creation of a novel tradition and thus to adapt successfully to new circumstances. Such a profound regeneration of their culture has been made possible only through their unbroken readiness to assume the traditional patron's role not only in one's home locality but also in the temple of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* on behalf of the Sherpa-wide community that is being created in this novel context. Hence, the act of giving freely to the Dharma and the clerics as encouraged by the Buddhist code of ethics is still in no way outmoded among the Sherpas. The yet still unshattered belief in the necessity of continuous merit-making throughout a Tibetan Buddhist individual's life continues to represent the predominant impetus to make offerings to either the deities, the Dharma, or the representatives of the Buddhist clergy. It only remains to be hoped that their revitalised and enlarged novel tradition will also be actively strengthened through its deliberate use by the young generation of Sherpas who are being incomparably more exposed to the seductive forces of secularization than their parents have ever been.

In the Sherpa community building in the Kathmandu Valley the most important kinds of 'offerings' consist in the patronage and organisation of the religious festivals celebrated annually by the entire Sherpa community. Mention must also be made of the different acts of patronage that were to lead to the construction and the subsequent steps of expansion of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex in Bodhnāth centered around their own temple, popularly called the *Shar pa dgon pa*.

It is in this new geographical setting that the deities worshiped through the offering of various kinds of 'gifts' provide their benevolence and help in the Sherpas' collective endeavour to forge an all-inclusive Sherpa-wide community and to ensure its well-being, prosperity and protection. As has been demonstrated in detail this significant goal is being achieved through the performance of certain major religious festivals.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the extraordinary dedication of the Sherpa community to the Dharma and the revitalisation of Tibetan Buddhism and culture as symbolised by the construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* including the Sherpa temple and the funding and organizing of the performance of the five major annual festivals held in this framework. It has to be recalled that all these aspects embodying the current process of revitalisation owe their realisation solely to the individuals' free will – in contradistinction to the religious

events in the locality, which, as a major 'civic duty', have to be sponsored by all householders according to an annual rotation system.

It is of great significance that since its construction this new communal institution has also been serving as the main link between the Sherpas in Solu-Khumbu, in the Kathmandu Valley, and the diasporic communities at the time of their global dispersal. For all three sections it has assumed the significant role as the very center of the ongoing revitalisation project through the associated bla ma-s offering of spiritual advice and guidance in practically all communal affairs. Only the last fifteen years saw the emergence of the diverse diasporic communities in Japan and in the West, primarily in New York, California, and Oregon. The latter constitute the transnational network in which the cosmopolitan Sherpas are nowadays embedded.¹³ Owing to a strongly improved system of communication they 'dwell' together through e-mail and their webpages thus keeping close relationships with each other, with the local community where they have their 'roots' and with the Sherpa community in Bodhnāth as mediated through the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*. Thus, they combine the experiences of a multitude of places while firmly maintaining their cultural connections and fulfilling their social obligations in their local community. Interestingly, their circumstances abroad may also create a sense of being Nepali since Sherpas seek to live in neighbourhoods that, apart from preferably Tibetan Buddhists, usually consists of some of Nepal's mosaic of ethnic and caste groups. In consequence, their novel framework contributes strongly to the formation of a broader identity.

According to my recent information the total number of Sherpas presently residing in the US is about two thousand while between eight hundred and thousand Sherpas are living in New York City and State alone. Among them there are about two dozen Sherpas who, being trained as monks or bla ma-s but making their living in secular jobs just as all laypeople, officiate on occasion of both all major communal annual festivals and funerals being the most important of the life-cycle events. They have various temples located outside of New York City where they celebrate their major festivals such as *lo gsar* in association with the members of the Tibetan diasporic community.

A Sherpa bla ma and monk on visit is always invited to perform on occasion of any kind of religious ceremony. Usually, a Sherpa bla ma on visit is also asked by the Sherpa community to hold religious teachings on subjects which are of utmost importance for especially the members of the young generation. Representing the major 'victims' of the grave cultural loss the Sherpa community has been suffering from throughout the second half of the last century at the same time when numerous Sherpas made their considerable

¹³ For an analysis and a discussion of this subject compare the valuable contribution by A. Appadurai 1997.

monetary fortunes among the young Sherpas living in New York has been emerging in recent years an awareness as to their profound innocence as their own cultural tradition is concerned. Hence, their requests for certain religious teachings mainly concern explanations as to the history, complex symbolic meaning and performance of sacred dances ('*cham*), of the major religious festivals being performed such as *lo gsar*, and of the *Dumji*, the main religious festival held in the village temple, which will soon be introduced in their new community center.¹⁴ Recently, the Dalai Bla ma has been requested to perform a Kālacakra (*dus kyi 'khor lo*) ceremony in their institution, which mirrors the activity of the diasporic community.

In an email of 4/2/2007 I received from a young educated Sherpani who has been studying nursing, maternity and pediatrics in New York gives an interesting, concise account of the diasporic community of the Sherpas in New York, their characteristic living conditions and the ways they organise themselves. Her elaborations also include some remarks as to the religious festivals through the performance of which its members living in an entirely new setting are bound together into one common frame of both religious and secular action and communal unity and harmony:

“...Now I feel comfortable here in NYZ coz so many Nepali friends and relatives are nearby. I guess NYC has the largest population of Sherpas in this country. Most of them reside in Queens Borough. I think very few live in Brooklyn and Manhattan. In Queens most of them live in Jackson Heights, which is an Indian town. When I first went to Jackson Heights I felt like it is not the US. Am I in India Jackson Heights is the meeting point for all Sherpas living here in the wider area on weekends and whenever they have a day off. It is also good for grocery shopping coz we can find all the spices, rice, lentils, ghee, green chillies and many other items that give our food the same flavour like in Nepal. Here we find blue cheese which tastes similar to 'Shoshym' (the cheesy soup my mother makes to have with potato pancake). So we buy blue cheese and we enjoy it with potato pancake and *dildro*.¹⁵ (...)

(...) we have celebrations of New Year (Losar), Buddha Jayanti, weddings, birthday parties and other kinds of social gatherings. The special one is New

¹⁴ It is these significant questions that constitute permanent subjects of 'chatting' to be found on the website of the *Sherpa Association in NYC* (refer to [www. Sherpakyidug.org](http://www.Sherpakyidug.org)).

¹⁵ *Dildro* is a mix of semolina made of barley and water or milk that, only shortly boiled, is very nutritious but as such tasteless. Sherpas highly appreciate it in association with chillies and the kind of liquid cheese mentioned above.

Year festival. All the Sherpas go to a monastery in Upstate NY to have New Year puja (*lhapso* [Tib. *lha gsol* – E.B.]). The Buddhist lamas who are here perform cham and puja. Then a week later we have a New Year party in Manhattan in a hall which is provided by a church. The New Year celebration is organised by the Sherpa Association in NYC. They have a ticket system to collect money from all the Sherpa people. We do Buddha Jayanti puja also in the same hall. We have weddings and small birthday parties almost every week. There is a Tibetan restaurant called *Yak* at Jackson Heights where some people gather on weekend nights coz they have concert from Nepali singers who live here. Sometimes some singers come here to visit and they give small concerts, too. But I don't know much about the funerals. The average Sherpa men work at restaurants and small stores and the women are mostly babysitters. I think a lot of them got refugee status (can work legally and bring family from Nepal) from the US government because of the Maoist problem in Nepal.”

According to my most recent information the *Sherpa Association in NYC* has succeeded in finding a place in Jackson Heights suitable for the establishment of their own communal temple. It is a large hall in a church that the association is able to rent on a long-term basis where the Sherpa community in New York may gather to celebrate all their religious events.

To arrive at the end of this investigation: what is most important, after all, is that, according to both my collected information and my own observations, even the majority of contemporary young Sherpas seems to be either fully within the fold of Sherpa Buddhism and culture or has returned to its fold after a more or less adventurous and long journey through certain parts of modern day's secular world. This is not to deny that young Sherpas discovered that their hopes lie in material advancement, but, as seen from today, they do not seem to have forgotten their belief in the powers of prayers and religious performances. It is obvious that growing numbers of Sherpa youth are less spiritually inclined when compared to their parents since they identify themselves with a broadly Westernized way of life. It has to be maintained, however, that despite the above-mentioned forms of inevitable secularization that have been affecting Sherpa religion, culture and society the strong sentiments of affinity and cohesiveness persist even among the contemporary young generation.

Critics from the side of both bla ma-s and learned lay people emphasising that too few Sherpas of the young generation have undergone decent religious training point to the fact that the major contributions to the festivals in the Sherpa community are principally not religious, but remain more or less mundane, in most cases simply technical, in character. Nevertheless, the integration of the young generation into Sherpa Buddhism in its novel

form and into the Sherpa community with its religious festivals and associated social gatherings seems to have been successful until the present day. This holds even true as to the diasporic communities that continue to maintain their strong ties with the Sherpa community in Bodhnāth. At the same time, however, bla ma-s do not forget to draw attention to the fact that many young Sherpas' deeply internalised secular attitude has inevitably been contributing to some sort of 'dilution' of Sherpa Buddhism as manifested by their beliefs and practices on occasion of religious festivals and in everyday life. In consequence, both bla ma-s and laypeople alike are conscious of the task of re-integrating them into their tradition that they will have to face in the future, but they are optimistic. However, despite the considerable weight that they have to shoulder in this view their outlook remains wholly positive. As usual it is legitimated through reference to their complex history which is full of examples that clearly mirror the Sherpas' tremendous adaptability to novel circumstances.

As A. W. Macdonald has recently observed in a brief retrospective as part of his not yet published auto-biography to which my own experience fully conforms:

“Throughout my working life with Buddhists, I have always been impressed by the manner in which they helped one another.”¹⁶

It is hoped that, as has been discussed above, this deeply internalised Buddhist attitude that has been serving to keep the Sherpa community together until the present day, may persist throughout the Sherpas future journey through the troubled waters of post-modernity and the days to come.

¹⁶ Cf. A.W. Macdonald 2004, p. 10.

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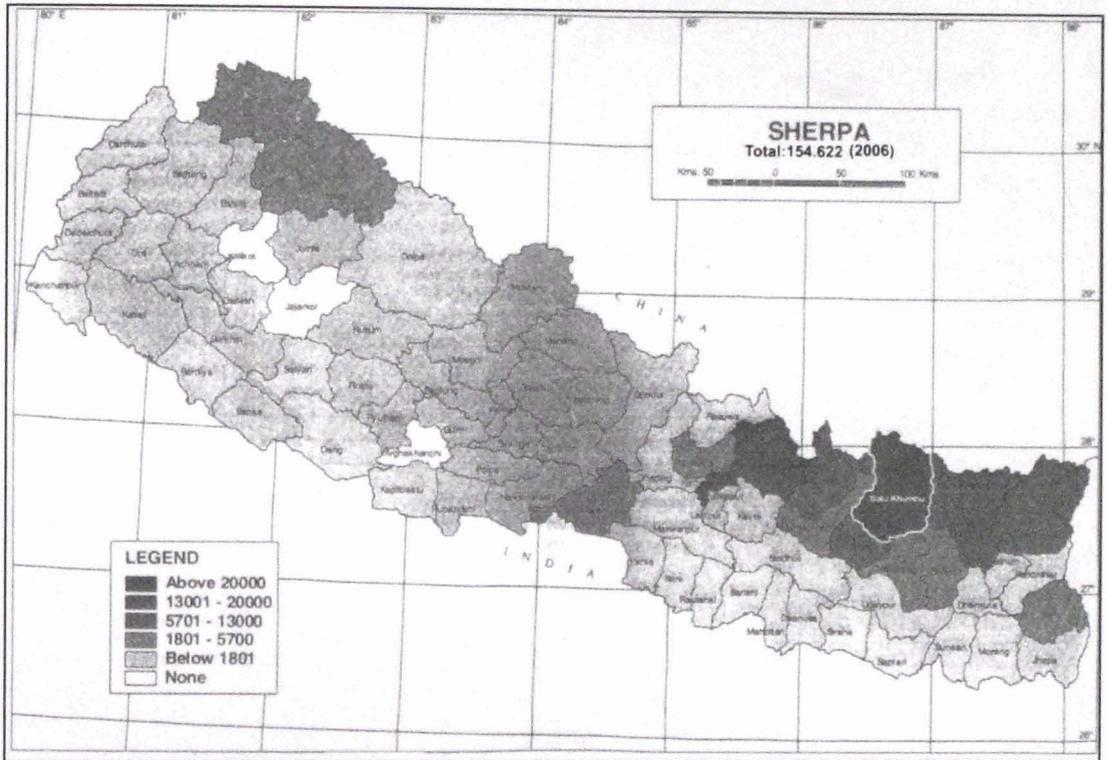
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Plates

Distribution of Sherpa Population in Nepal by Districts



Source: Gurung, H. et al. 2006. "Nepal Atlas of Ethnic and Caste Groups."
Kathmandu: National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities.

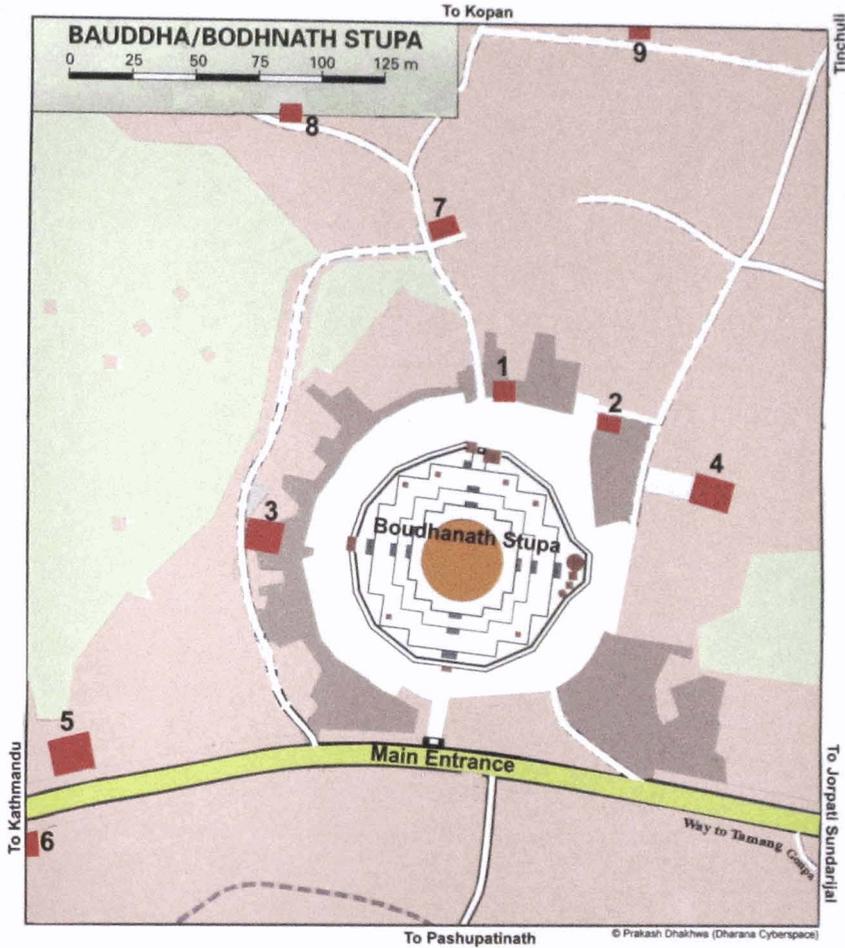
Map showing Solu-Khumbu, the Sherpas' homeland, within the Hindu nation-state of Nepal and the distribution of the Sherpa population by districts

The different sites of settlement of the present Sherpa Valley community



(Map design based upon Shangri-la Maps "Kathmandu Valley" 1: 50,000)

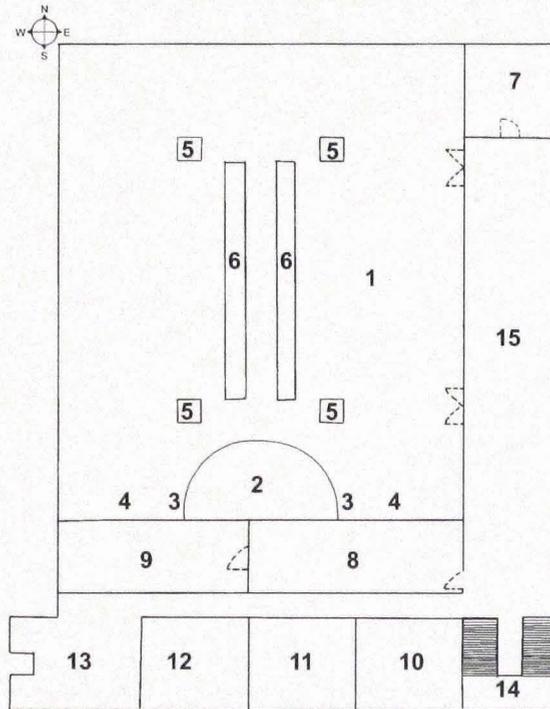
Map showing the different sites of settlement of the present Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley displayed in a green frame (based on the membership data kindly provided by the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*)



1. Guru Lhakhang (Temple of the Chini Lama, Nyingma)
2. Temple of Thousand Buddhas (Dabsang Rinpoche, Kagyu)
3. Jamchen Lhakhang (Chogye Trichen Rinpoche, Sakya)
4. Samten Ling Monastery (Gelug)
5. Sherpa Gonpa in the Sherpa Sewa Kendra (Nyingma)
6. Dudjom Gonpa (Dudjom Rinpoche, Nyingma)
7. Thrangu Tashi Monastery (Thrangu Rinpoche, Kagyu)
8. Shechen Monastery (Rabjam Rinpoche, Nyingma)
9. Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling Gonpa (chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Kagyu & Nyingma)

Map showing the Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth and the inner part of its surrounding sacred space in which currently six Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and three temples including the Sherpa Gonpa in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* exist

Sketch of the Sherpa Gonpa (23, x 27 m) located on the first floor of the Sherpa Sewa Kendra Building in Boudhanath



1. Temple (Tib. lhakhang or 'dus khang)
2. Statue of Padmasambhava
3. Alter
4. Kangyur & Tengyur
5. Four pillars supported the ceiling of the temple
6. Two large low tables for the religious officiants who are seated in hierarchical order in two parallel rows facing each other
7. Room of the sacristan
8. Office of the Sherpa Sewa Kendra
9. Room of the protector deity
10. – 12. Store rooms
13. Additional kitchen to be used on occasion of big religious festivals
14. Stairs leading from / to the ground floor
15. Porch open towards the east

Sketch of the Sherpa Gonpa located on the first floor of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building in Bodhnāth

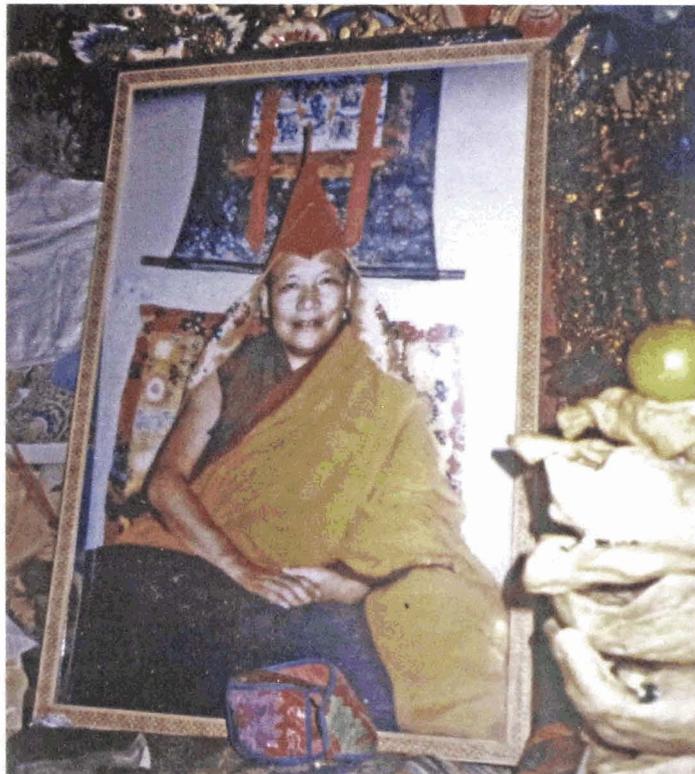
The Sacred Landscape of Solu-Khumbu
(as seen by a contemporary Sherpa thanka painter)



- | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Mt. Chomolungma (Everest) | 15. Khumjung & Khunde | 28. Balthanga |
| 2. Mt. Nangpi La | 16. Phaplu | 29. Lhasa Girpu |
| 3. Mt. Numbur | 17. Tengboche Monastery | 30. Lukla |
| 4. Mera Peak | 18. Syangboche Monastery | 31. Sallari |
| 5. Mt. Cho Oyu | 19. Nauche (Namche) Bazar | 32. Ledingma |
| 6. Mt. Pumori | 20. Kyilkhordingma Monastery | 33. Chuwarma |
| 7. Mt. Lhotse | 21. Thame Monastery | 34. Katutenga |
| 8. Mt. Nuptse | 22. Tolokha Monastery | 35. Gonpa Zhung (Junbesi) |
| 9. Shorong Yulha | 23. Pangboche Temple | 36. Kusungang |
| 10. Mt. Thamserku | 24. Chiwong Monastery | 37. Phortse |
| 11. Kalapathar | 25. Phungmoche Monastery | 38. Golela Temple |
| 12. Mt. Pikyé | 26. Sengephuk | 39. Phagdingma |
| 13. Mt. Ama Dablam | 27. Uomi Tsho (Nep. Dudh Kunda) | 40. Thubten Cholling Monastery |
| 14. Takshindo Monastery | | |

Source: Sherpa Thupten Lama: The Sheras And Sharkhumbu 1999

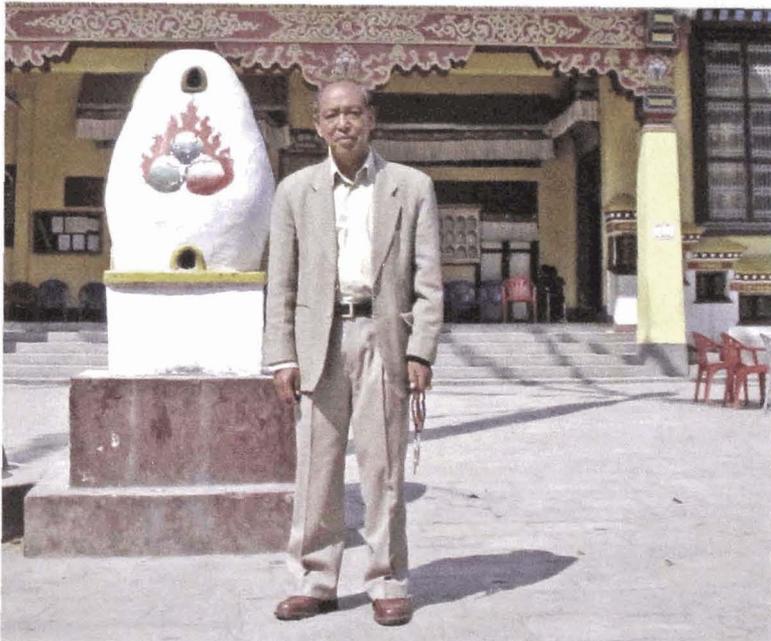
Painted scroll from the hand of Thubten Lama, the renowned Sherpa historian and thangka painter (orig. Phungmoche/Solu, today living in Bodhnāth) showing the Sherpas' traditional sacred landscape of Solu-Khumbu



The statue of Padmasambhava is graced by big-sized photos of leading dignitaries of the rNying ma pa School; this photo shows H.h. 'Khrul zhig Rin po che (b. 1924) who is highly venerated among the Sherpas; he is abbot of a big monastery in the Solu region which is the home of the exiled community of rDza rong phu Monastery just north of Mt. Everest in the Ding ri region



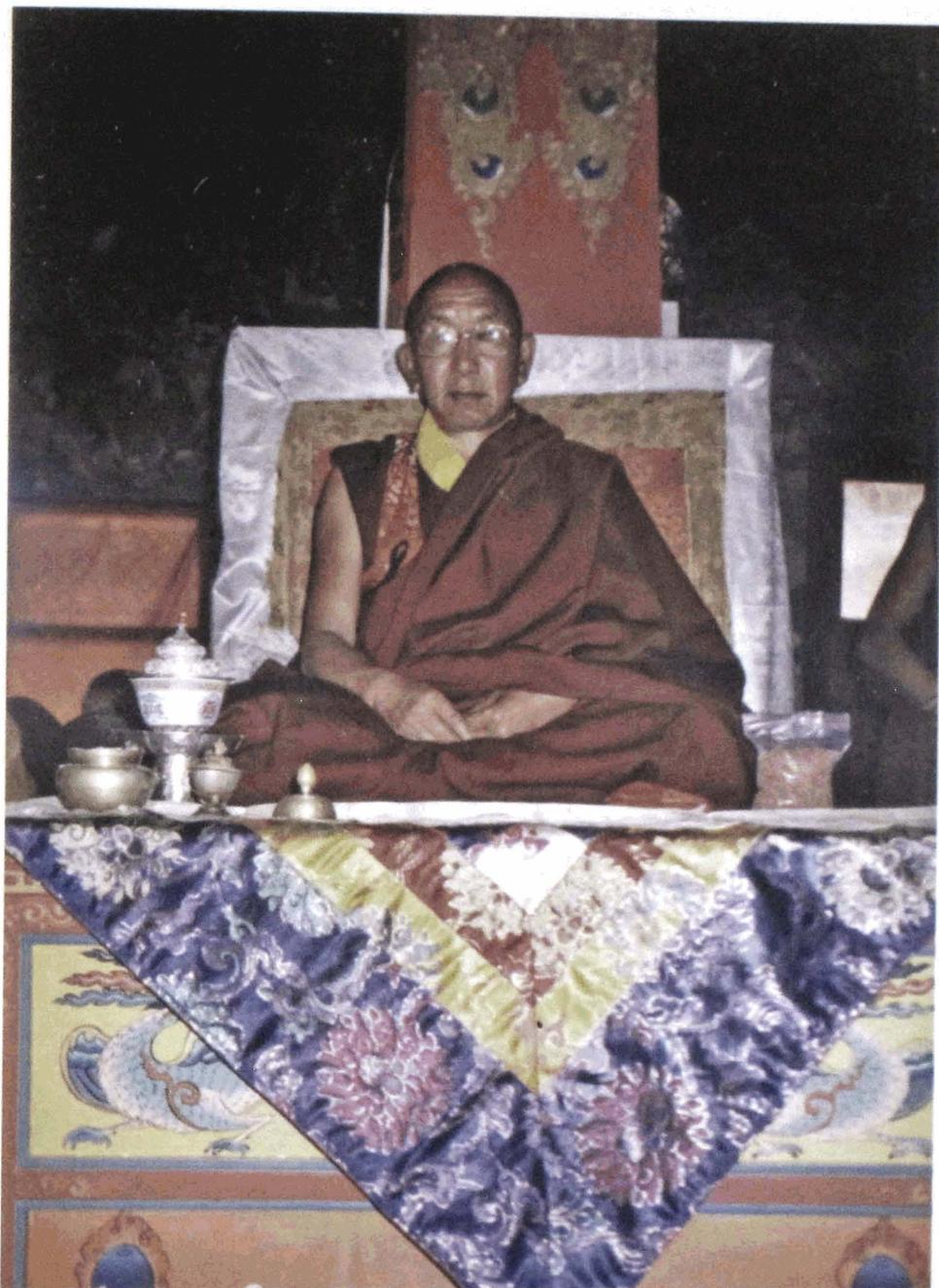
Metal plate adorned with a *vajra*, symbol of Vajrayāna, below the bust of Ang Dorje Lama, the major among the three Sherpa ‘big men’ who had been responsible for the planning, design, and construction of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* complex in Bodhnath.



Sonam Gyaltzen Sherpa in the courtyard in front of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* building complex; the Sherpa temple is located on its first floor; until 2006 chairman of the *Sherpa Seva Kendra* management committee, he has been one of the major driving forces that were to lead to the construction of the communal institution; moreover, he has been the invaluable source of oral history concerning the formation of the Sherpa community in the Kathmandu Valley who was the main informant of this investigation



The present XIIth rDza sprul, Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin jigs bral dbang phyug chos kyi rgyal mtshan (b. 1959) who usually presides over the performance of *lo gsar*, the major annual festival, as celebrated in the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*



“Ngag dbang bstan ‘dzin bzang po, b. 1935, abbot of well-known Tengboche monastery located in the Khumbu region”



Sherpa lady, the representative of the *lo gsar* patrons, performing the formal ceremony of welcome of all participants on occasion of the celebration of *lo gsar* at the entrance gate of the Sherpa Seva Kendra



Two groups of leading Sherpa ‘big men’ dressed in their ceremonial garment on occasion of the *lo gsar* festivities (a and b)



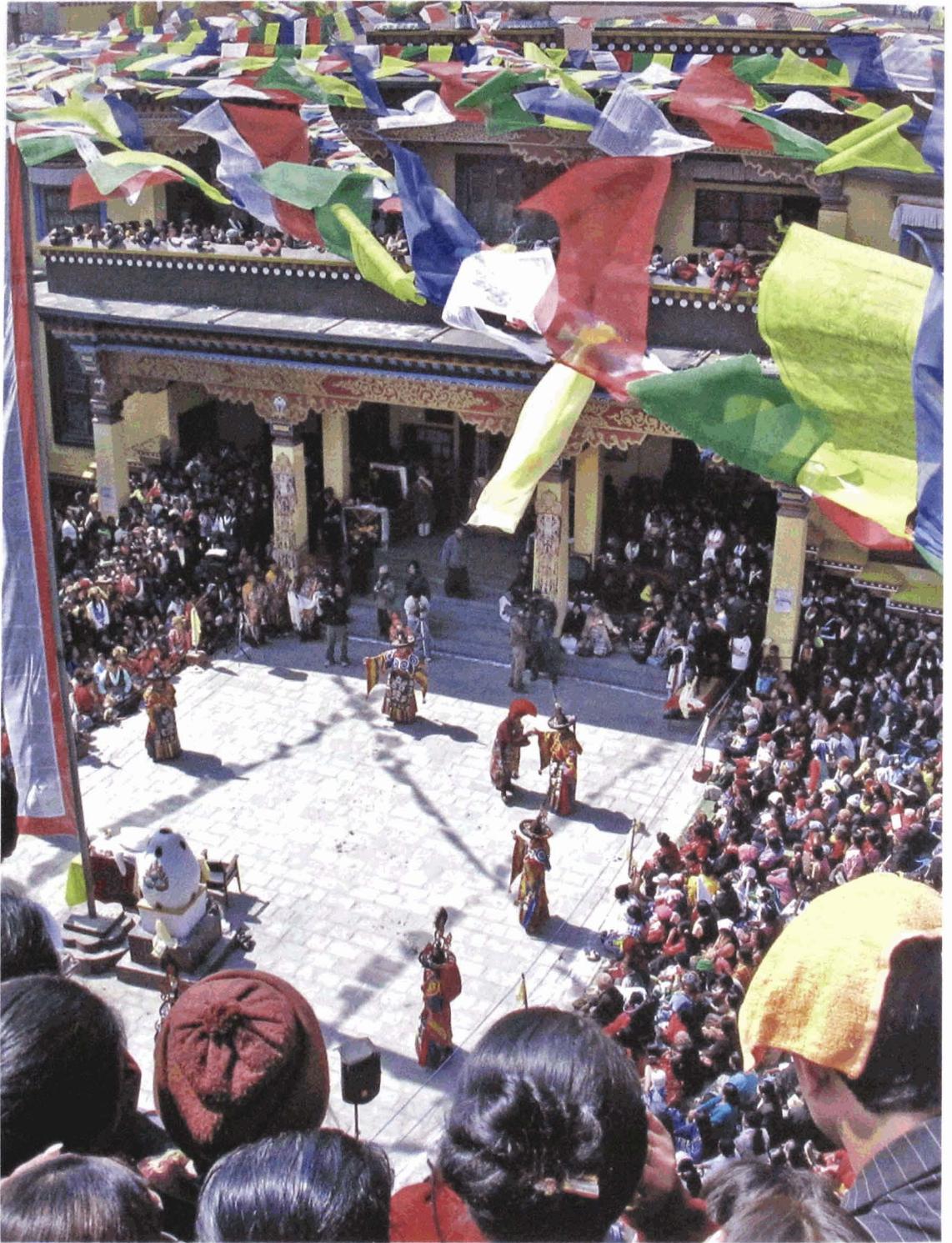
Painted scroll of Guru Padmasambhava adorned with numerous white silken ceremonial scarves (*kha btags*) in the center of the altar placed in the courtyard of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra*



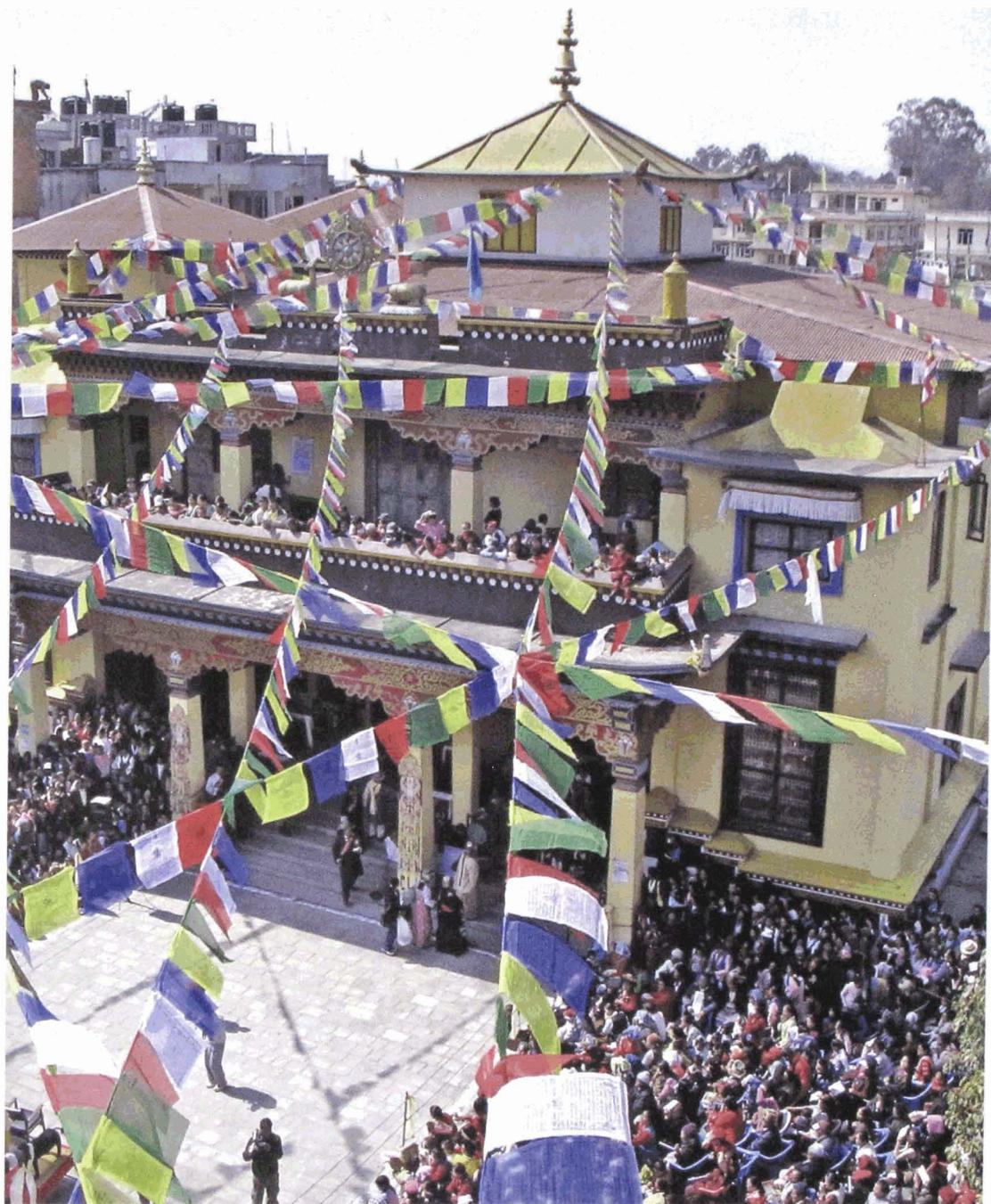
Courtyard as seen from above which is densely packed with spectators during the brief sacred masked dance ('chams) performance on occasion of *lo gsar*



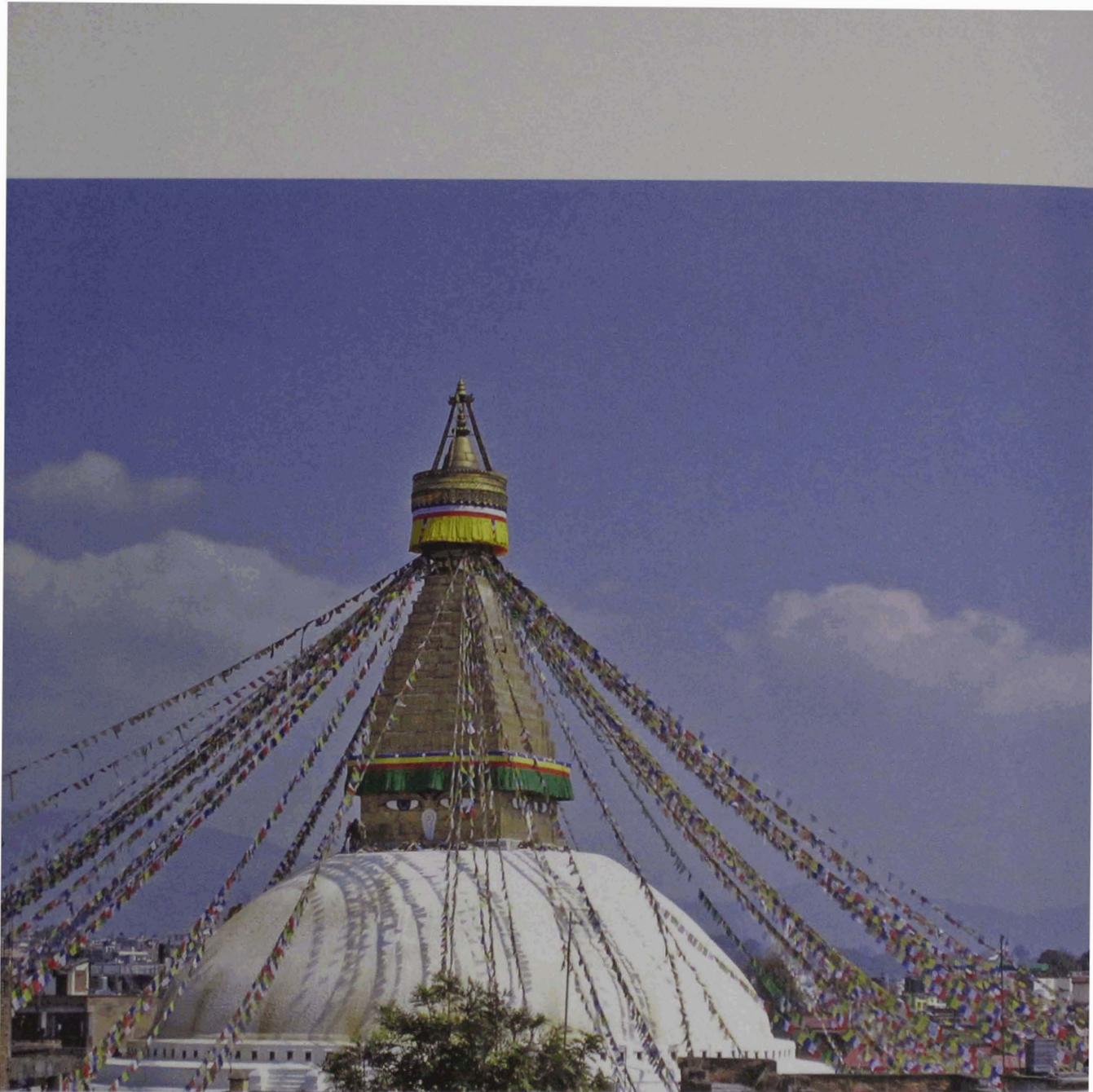
Young Sherpas on the roof of the communal kitchen building watching the sacred masked dance performance



The sacred masked dance performance as seen from the roof of the communal kitchen building



Full view of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* from the roof of the communal kitchen building adorned with numerous strings of prayer flags on occasion of *lo gsar*; the temple is situated on the first floor while the large hall on the groundfloor is used for mundane purposes



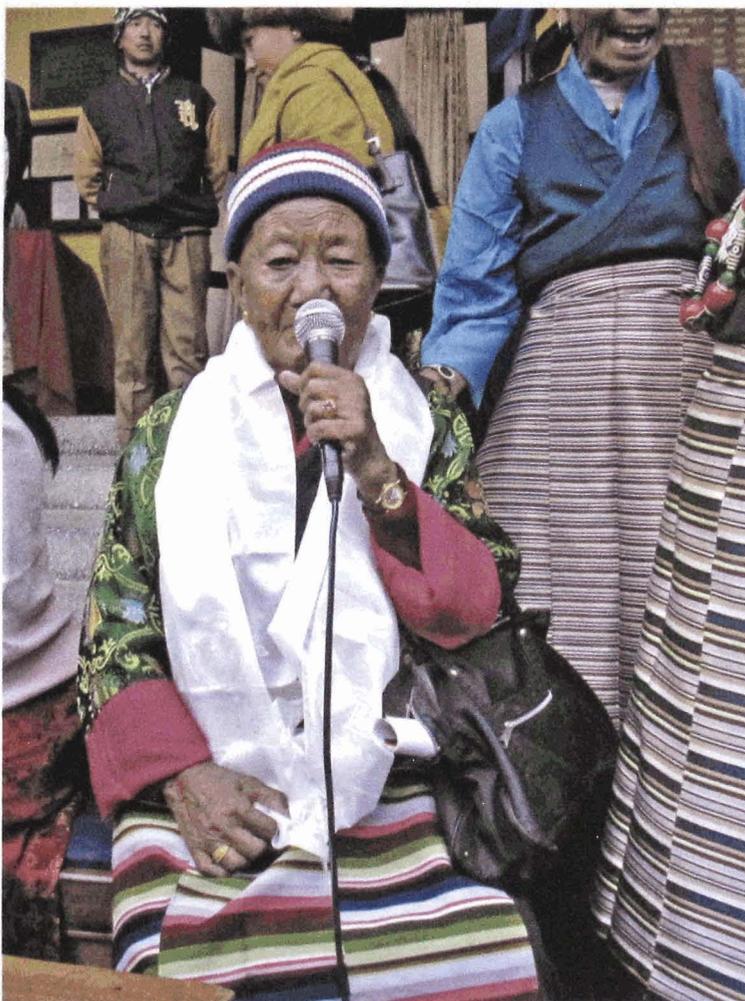
The Great Stūpa of Bodhnāth adorned with numerous strings of prayer flags on occasion of *lo gsar* as seen from the roof of the communal kitchen building



Sherpa ladies old and young dressed in their finest festive clothes performing the *zhabs bro*, the Sherpa round dance, in the courtyard of the *Sherpa Sevā Kendra* after the religious celebration of the Tibetan New Year has come to its end



Sherpa lady dressed in her finest festive clothes wearing different kinds of traditional jewellery



Renowned old Sherpa chanteuse singing traditional songs on occasion of the performance of the *zhabs bro*, the Sherpa round dance, in the courtyard building

