

KHAR PHUD: A NON-BUDDHIST LHA SOL FESTIVAL OF EASTERN
BHUTAN^{*}

UGYEN PELGEN^{**}

INTRODUCTION

Not much research has been done in the field of non-Buddhist festivals and rituals in Bhutan. Any non-Buddhist festival or ritual is called Bon, a term which has to be understood in this case as opposed to Buddhist, and needs further research. On subjects close to mine today, the bibliography on Bhutan is poor. I can only think of Chime Wangmo, who spoke about the phallic symbols in house building at the IATS in New York in 1982, Francoise Pommaret, who dealt with a non-Buddhist festival in south-central Bhutan (Proceedings of the IATS in Bloomington, IN Press), Tandin Dorji's contribution to the Vienna conference 1999, and finally my own contribution to New Horizons on Bon studies, Bon Studies 2, National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2000.

While in most communities worship of the local deities is simply conducted by food offerings (*tshogs*) and fumigation (*bsang*), it is performed in a slightly different manner in

* I am grateful to the people of rTsa mang village for sharing their experiences and providing me with the information on the *mKhar phud* festival. I also would like to thank Principal, Mr. Tshewang Tandin and Vice-Principal Mr. T.S. Powdyel for their support and encouragement and my colleagues at Sherubtse College. Many thanks to Professor Karmay Samten, Dr. Francoise Pommaret and Dr. Katia Buffetrille for sparing time to proofread the paper and for making necessary corrections.

** Lecturer, Sherubtse College, Kanglung.

villages under rTsa mang *rged 'og* in the Mongar district in eastern Bhutan. Situated on the west bank of the Kuri chu, it is inhabited, like most villages in Bhutan, by a farming population. Dry land (*sKam zhing*), and wet land (*chu zhing*) dominate the agricultural activities. The annual crops of maize and rice occupy the largest area. Livestock rearing also supplements the rural living. The major sources of cash income are potatoes and citrus fruits. Dairy products provide another source of cash income. The *rged 'og* has a primary school, a basic health unit, an agriculture center and a veterinary center.

The language, a branch of the Bum thang pa language, in its literal sense is known as 'you and me' *khyod chang nga chang*. Curiously, it is a closely related language to rDzong kha, the national language of Bhutan, and to a certain extent to *Chos skad*. I have tried my best wherever possible to comply with the standard rDzong kha and *Chos skad* spellings while transliterating, but words that do not conform either to rDzong kha or *Chos skad* have been written retaining the pronunciation of the spoken dialect.

If we break the word *mKhar phud* into two-- *mKhar*-house, *phud*-first offering--it literally means a festival of first offering¹. This offering is done in honor of a deity, known as *zhes gsungs Guru bzhes*. The *mKhar phud* festival is celebrated in the villages of rTsa mang, Ban jar, 'Dra ma gling, sGong la spong, and Khengs Gongs du under Mong sgar rDzong khag in eastern Bhutan². Though it is celebrated in all these villages,

¹ The languages of eastern Bhutan called tshangla or shar chog pa do not have scripts; therefore, some of the names/terms are rendered phonetically.

² These villages together form the rTsa mang administrative unit, *rged 'og*, administered by the rTsa mang village headman *rged po*. *rged 'og* is made

one might find slight variations in their actual practice, in the names attributed to the practitioners, and in the number of days the lHa gsol festival is performed. While the *mKhar phud* festival is celebrated for the entire seven days in the villages of rTsa mang, Ban jar and 'Dra ma gling, it is celebrated for only three days in Gong la pong and Khengs Gongs du. The priests are also known by different names. In Khengs Gongs du the priest of the ritual is addressed as *sTon pa gshen rab-* the name attributed to the Bon founder, whereas in the villages under rTsa mang rged 'og the priests are addressed by different names. The Bonpo or *phra min*³ who does the *gsol kha* and the *boro dpon* and the *boro gyog* who performs the main rituals.

In this paper I would simply like to discuss the *mKhar phud* festival of rTsa mang village starting with the historical background, the preparations involved and the actual performance of the festival⁴.

up of three to four villages and forms the smallest administrative unit supervised by the village headman. The village of Khengs Gong du forms a separate rged 'og and is administered by the Gong du rged po. While the villages under rTsa mang rged 'og are on the right side of river Ku ri chu on the lateral highway to Thim phu, the village of Khengs Gong du is two days walk from Mong sgar district.

³ *Phra min* is a word used in Tsangla (= Sharchopkha), and has therefore no written form. However one may ask whether it does not refer to the Tibetan word *phra men*. This word is found, for example, in Mi la ras pa's *Hundred Thousand Songs* by gTsang smyon, when Mi la ras pa questions beautiful young women on who they are in reality "Are you magic dakini? (*phra men*). Cf. Chang 1977:vol. 1:314; and by the 5th Dalai Lama in his '*chams yig* and translated by Nebesky as "witch". Cf. Nebesky 1976:91, 169-173. Also *The S.C.Das dictionary*, 1977:842, gives the meaning of "magical forecasts". Extrait de l'article de vienne de F. Pommaret.

⁴ The last *mKhar phud* festival was celebrated in 1999 and the next will be celebrated in 2001. The Village headman of rTsa mang rged 'og provided me with substantial information. He is also at present the priest of 'Dra ma

BACKGROUND

At the time of my visit to rTsa mang village, the festival had already been celebrated the year before, which meant I had to wait for another year to take part in its celebration. For this research I relied on Padma rDo rje, a seventy-year-old resident of the village, who in his younger days had taken part in the festival. With my limited understanding of the dialect *khyod chang nga chang*, I had to depend at most times on an interpreter. As I talked to Padma rDor rje he narrated his perception of the history of this festival and describe how it is performed today by the residents. In the actual festival performance the priest would begin by narrating in verses its history to the people before coming to the performance, and that the recitation of the prayers by heart is also done in verse. The would begin the festival with these verses:

In the beginning there was no earth,
Without earth there was no sky.
In the beginning there was no Man,
Without Man there was no God.
The one to come before Man was,
Mi thos gny' khri btsad po.
The one before bird was,
sTon pa sgom chen.
The first among the Rich was,
The rich sGam chi stong ldan⁵.

gling village and has been actively involved in the festival for more than ten years. The other most useful informant was 70-year-old Padma rDo rje of rTsa mang village, who was the priest from his youth till retirement. On the eve of his retirement, he has chosen two village men to take up his position. They are being trained by him in the art of performing this festival.

⁵ *Dang po dus ni sa yang med*
Sa med na ni gnam yang med
Dang po dus ni me yang med
Me med na ni lha yang med

With these verses begins the history of the *mKhar phud* festival, which first took place so long ago that it is almost lost in antiquity⁶. The above verses claim that central to all beings in this universe is a god, without whose presence the existence of sentient beings in this universe is meaningless. So the three, *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po*, *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* and *Phyugs chen gam chi stong ldan*, met together and agreed that what they needed was a God whom all earthly beings could look up to as their guardian and protector in their daily chores. They decided among themselves to ask for one from the gods in heaven. *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po* agreed to render labour services, while *Phyugs chen gam chi stong ldan* agreed to bear the expenses. *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* decided to go to the gods' realm and ask for a god but thought that *Mi thos gnya' khri tsoed po* had the least work. So he came up with an idea to give him an equal share of the burden. When the actual day came for *Bya rtsi ston pa sgom chen* to proceed to the god's realm, he disappeared from the scene. *Phyugs chen gam chi stong ldan* and *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po* met and decided that because *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po* had the least work, he should look for *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen*. *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po* went in search of *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* in all the four directions.

Dang po med las nga ba ni
Mi thos gnya' khri tsod po
Dang po sa la nga ba ni
Bya rtsi ston pa sgom chen
Dang po chu las nga ba ni
Phyugs chen sgam chi stong ldan

⁶ Padma rDo rje was himself lost in time and space as he narrated the verses by heart. He remembers the festival being conducted when he was still a child and no one remembers when and who first conducted it. All he could say was that it happened long, long ago.

Wayo, Wayo - Voices from the Past

Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po went to the east,
He met rDo rje sems pa the eastern Lord,
He could not meet sTon pa sgom chen,
And Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po had to return⁷.

Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po could not find Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen. In the East, Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po met the God of East rDor rje sems pa. In the West, he met the God of West Rin chen byung gnas. In the North he met the God of North Snang wa mtha' yos and in the South he met the God of South Don yon grub pa. At last he went to a rocky cave known as A su ra'i brag phug⁸ situated in the south of Tibet and inquired after Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen.

In the south of the country of Tibet,
In the rocky caves of A su ra'i,
Where three mountains meet,
Where three rivers join,
The water droplets fall on the rocky caves,
The clear water reflects the rocky caves,
The rosary of precious gems,
The medicinal cleansing water,
In the rocky caves of A su ra'i
Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen are you there⁹?

⁷ *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po shar du 'gro*
Shar rDo rje sems pa'i sku mjl song
sTon pa sgom chen zhal ma mjl
Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po zhi du log.

⁸ The rocky caves of A su ra'i is in Nepal and is a Buddhist place of pilgrimage.

⁹ *rGya nag yul gyi pha rol na*
bod pa'i yul gyi tshur rol na
gang chen gsum yang 'zoms sa lu
chu chen gsum yang babs sa lu

Padma rDo rje said that *Mi thos gnya' khri btsad po* finally found *bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* hiding in the rocky caves of *A su ra'i*. But *Bya rtsi sToen pa sgom chen* refused to go to Heaven insisting that he would have to be in proper attire for such an arduous journey.

I won't go to the upper realm of the gods;
If I am to go to the upper realm of the gods;
I need a white band on my head;
I need a mirror on my forehead;
My mouth should be a cleft mouth;
I need an amulet on my back;
I need clothes on my body;
I need necklaces on my neck;
I need shoes on my feet;
I need wings on my sides¹⁰.

As desired, *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* was dressed with all the items he demanded and prepared for the journey. Riding astride the clouds like they were horses, he finally entered the gods' realm. Before entering the palace, he remained clinging

*chu yi zir pa brag la phog
brag gi zir pa chu la phog
mu tig shel gyi 'phrena ma khro lo lo
sTon pa sgom chen bzhugs la bsam.*

¹⁰ *sTeng lha yi yul du nga mi 'gro
sTeng lha yi yul du nga 'gro na
mGo la thod dkar yug chig dgos
dpri ba thig la me long dgos
kha mchu 'di ni shor ba dgos
rgyabs la di ni rgyab ga dgos
gzugs la di ni skyi rung dgos
rkang pa di ni zhabs lham dgos
shogs pa di ni gdong mar dgos.*

to a water pipe till a water carrier came along. He sent word through the water carrier to *Wa ldan gungs ldan*, the God King¹¹ who called for him. *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* flew inside the palace and attached himself to a pillar. *Wa ldan gungs ldan* fainted at the ugly sight of *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* and on gaining consciousness inquired after the purpose of his visit. *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* told the king that the earthly beings had no one to protect and guide them and that he had come there personally on their behalf to ask for a god. *Wa ldan gungs ldan* told him that he could not send any of his sons but that *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* could choose any of his four daughters. *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* replied.

It is the son who looks after the family and his relatives;
It is the son who destroys enemies;
I want a son for the earthly beings and not a daughter.¹²

Wa ldan gungs ldan, outwitted by *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen*, consented to his request and ordered his youngest son *zhel gsung Guru zhel* to go down to earth. *zhel gsung Guru zhel* did not want to leave his godly realm and replied:

I will not enter the realm of the sentient beings.
I will not enter the polluted land of sickness and filth.
I will not enter the land of eternal birth and death.¹³

¹¹ The God King referred to here is Lha tshang pa or Lord Brahma. He is also called as *wa ldan gungs ldan* by the village folks of rTsa mang.

¹² *gnyen 'khor skyong rung bu gis skyong*
dgra 'khor 'dul rung bu gis 'dul
'jig rten mi yul gyi bu zhu ba.

¹³ *'jig rten mi yi yul du nga mi 'gro*
nad grib btsogs grib yul du nga mi 'gro

Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen replied:

Sickness and pollution of filth can be cured by fumigation;
One should be cautious of filth from birth and death.¹⁴

But *zhel gsung Guru zhel* would not listen. Finally, *Wa ldan gungs ldan* decided that whoever rolled the least number would leave for earth, while the rest could choose destinations of their own. They all agreed. The eldest son, *gTsang gtsang rdo rje*, rolled three sixes and chose to go to Tibet. The second eldest, *rGya nag brong nag*, rolled three fives and chose India. The third eldest, *sPyi la dkar mo*, rolled three fours and chose *Kheng sPyi la dkar mo*¹⁵. The youngest, *Zhel gsung Guru zhel*, rolled three threes and had no choice but to come down to earth. A day was fixed for his descent. The King sent his three sons and a retinue of gods to accompany his youngest son to earth. On the way the demi gods and devils heard of the descent. They were so surprised to see that a small creature like *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* was able to persuade God to send his son to earth. The demi gods and the devils watched the whole retinue with surprise and laughed at them. *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* felt annoyed and wanted the lesser gods and devils to go away. He hit upon a plan and removed his undergarments. The demi gods and the devils, seeing him naked with his penis dangling, cursed him and went away in utter shame and disgrace leaving the entourage in peace. The entourage at last reached earth safely.

shi grib skyes grib yul du nga mi 'gro

¹⁴ *nad grib shi grib bsangs thabs yod*
skyes grib shi grib zen thabs yod.

¹⁵ The place is probably referred to the present Kheng district in Bhutan.

As told in the oral history of the *mKhar phud*, from that day the earthly beings started worshipping deities and making offerings. *mKhar phud* celebrates the day of descent of the deity *zhel gsung Guru zhel* from the gods' realm to earth. The tradition of hanging phalluses and uttering obscene remarks echoes the removal of undergarment to drive away the lesser gods and the devils. Unlike other villages where a mountain or a hill is designated as the abode of the deity, *rTsa mang* village does not have any mountain abode for its deity *zhel gsung Guru zhel*.

CONTRIBUTIONS

The *mKhar phud* festival does not involve much preparation except in cutting and decorating of an oak tree, the deity's tree (*lha gshing*), preparing fermented wine (*sing chang*)¹⁶ and assembling a makeshift altar (*mchod gsham*). It also does not involve any sacrifices, unlike many other festivals which would demand a bull, a pig, a sheep or a chicken. The contributions are also minimal. At the collective level, the contribution is only wheat grain used for preparing fermented wine. The contribution of wheat grains varies from the wealthy to the poor. The rich would contribute ten to 15 *bre*¹⁷ while the poor would contribute about 1 to 2 *bre*. At the individual level, every household stores enough rice, meat, butter, cheese, milk, fermented wine and other necessary items to entertain guests as they visit each house as part of the festival. They make a long slender cakes of long life from wheat (*tshe 'khrungs*) and of prosperity and wealth (*gyang 'khrungs*). They also prepare wooden phalluses called *lha'i bu*

¹⁶ The liquid extracted out from the fermented grains and served before distillation is known as *singchang*.

¹⁷ a unit of measurement used by the Bhutanese; one *bre* of wheat is approximately one and half kilograms.

*tshe rings*¹⁸ (= *khyod chang nga chang*), which are normally kept with the grains in the storehouse or in the attic to guarantee a good harvest.

PREPARATION

The first step towards conducting of the festival is the preparation of fermented wine. On the 20th day of the fourth month, the villagers with their contributions of wheat grain gather at the house of the deity's host (*lha'i gnas po's*), a house nominated in the village where an altar is made for offerings. Usually a wealthy house is nominated for this purpose. A stone oven (*thabs bor*) (= *khyod chang nga chang*) is also made by planting three big stones on the ground on which is placed a pot for cooking the collected grain. It is opened on the 26th day of the lunar calendar at the start of the festival. While fermented wine is being prepared, the grain that floats to the top of the container is collected and put in a separate container and kept in the attic of the house of the deity's host. On the concluding day of the festival, the container with the grain is brought out in public to see if it has germinated. If the seeds have germinated, it signals a good harvest.

On the morning of the 26th day, the villagers gather in front of deity's host house and decide on a person to prepare the deity's tree. Unlike other traditions and festivals, they do not have any beliefs about choosing particular persons with regard to age, etc., except that females are not allowed to cut the deity's tree. The person chosen could be any one enthusiastic and eager to carry out the task of cutting the

¹⁸ It is an honorific term, generally applied to such a thing. It would stress the fact for the people, it gives blessing of long life and becomes sacred. It is also considered as a talisman to drive away evils, misfortunes and protect families from curses and other disasters.

deity's tree and preparing the phalluses. This chosen person is acknowledged as a clean person (*gtsang mi*). On entering the forest at dusk the person chooses a *sog skyes shing*, one of the many species of oak trees grown in Bhutan and the one that is used for making a deity's tree. The tree chosen to be cut as a representation of the deity *zhel gsung Guru zhel* who came down to earth is one that is vertically straight with lots of branches. The branches are cut off leaving only those at the tip so that the tree is not completely barren. The tree bark is also peeled off. The tip of the tree signifies fumigation plants (*bsang shing*) of the deities, the root represents the life tree (*srog shing*) of the nagas (*klu*), while the branches represent the resting site of the Nightingale (*lhab bya*), and the white part of the peeled off bark of the tree represents purity of heart. Then the clean person shapes about nine to ten phalluses the size of an arm's length. These phalluses represent *Bya rtsi Tton pa sgom chen's* penis and symbolize fertility. Though *Bya rtsi sTon pa sgom chen* had just one hanging below his waist, they prepare as many phalluses as possible so that each household is at least blessed with one. These phalluses are painted red at the tip with the red juice extracted from a creeper plant known as (*rtsod*) which is similar to madder. The phalluses are then tied on to the branch of the deity's tree, heads downwards using creeper plant as the rope. Before dusk the deity's tree with all the decorations is brought from the forest and kept at a small field near the deity's host house to be taken to the ritual site (*lha vaung*)¹⁹ (= *khyod chang nga chang*) the next day.

¹⁹ The designated ritual place where the festival is conducted. It is a flat ground where they do not farm.

From the day of the preparation of fermented wine till the festival is over, women who have recently delivered babies are kept out of participation and the dead are not burnt but buried with the belief that impurities (*sgrib*) affect gods. The dead ones are burnt later when the festival is over. The participants also refrain from consuming pork during the festival. Besides the preparations involved, a few villagers are designated to take an active role during the festival. They have the main priest of the rituals (*boro dpon*)²⁰ and the assistant priest (*boro gyog*)²¹. The main priest and the assistant priests are trained and know all the verses by heart. The Bonpo who performs the *gsol kha*. The caretaker (*mdo dam pa*) who looks after the guests. The wine incharge (*chang gnyer*) and the general participants known as *las bi las cham* (= *khyod chang nga chang*).

²⁰ The word in a literal sense when broken into two could mean a dance leader. However in the mKhar phud festival he is the designated person playing a major role and involved right from the start till the festival is over. He is one of those persons selected and trained to lead the festival. He serves as an assistant till he takes over the charge as boro dpon.

²¹ gyog means work. boro gyog in a literal sense would mean an assistant. He is also chosen and a trained person and assists the boro dpon in the festival and in the absence of the boro dpon conducts the festival.



People on their way to the house in the village with phallus sticks, in a similar festival, Dueza celebrated in Kengkhar, Mongar. Photograph by Francoise Pommaret

THE DESCENT OF THE DEITY AND STRIPPING OFF THE PHALLUSES

The 26th day of the fourth month marks the beginning of the *mKhar phud* festival. It is the day of the deity's descent (*babs dus*) from the Godly realm to earth. As daylight breaks, the Bonpo visits the deity's host house and makes wine offerings (*chang phud*) and prayers in honour of the deity. He does this every morning before the start of the actual celebration. After the wine offerings and prayers, he joins the villagers at the ritual site and helps in the preparation of the ground and the altar. While the elderly folk wait for nightfall, small children in ones and twos crowd near the ritual site and entertain

themselves throwing obscene remarks at each other known as (*ba dab stu*)²² (= *khyod chang nga chang*).

No fire tongs pulled at it, yet red fiery tongue stood jutting out,
No driller entered it, yet depthless the cavity,
No flames singed it, yet dark and black it is,
Longing for more and never satiated.²³

As night falls, the main priest and the assistant priest accompanied by men and women folk from every household dressed in their best attire gather at the ritual site. Unbothered by the obscene remarks of the children, the gathering is offered welcome wine (*bzhes chang*) by the host lady (*Nang gi aam*). It should be noted here that shyness and feeling of shame are brushed aside during the entire festival. As night falls people light up torches and amidst dances and songs the menfolk carry the deity's tree to the ritual site, with children following close behind shouting obscene remarks at the top of their voices. On reaching the ritual place the deity's tree is placed inside a hole by the main priest dug earlier in the day, while the rest of the villagefolk sit in rows in front of it. Offerings of fermented wine are made to the gathering before the main priest and the assistant priest take their seats in front of the deity's tree to mark the beginning of the festival. A volunteer, usually a middle-aged man who has participated in the festival earlier, is invited from amongst the crowd to partake in a duel of words with the main priest. This duel of

²² The obscene remarks used by the children are known as *ba dab stu* and do not have any specific reason.

²³ sTu zhong zhong rgyal mo zen za do
da ta 'byon na da ta nyams
kem pa ma snem lcae bur mo
me gyi ma nem kha nag mo.

words between the two marks the beginning of the *mKhar phud* festival, reenacting in words the whole history of the *mKhar phud* festival from the descent of the deity to the description of the deity's tree from its tip down to its trunk. The onlookers listen in silence. Once the duel of words is over, the gathering is served with another round of fermented wine. It should be noted here that the only drink served in the entire festival is fermented wine and retaining tradition, cups and plates of bamboo leaves are used in the entire festival. The main priest then takes the lead and dances around the stone oven. Unlike dances on other occasions where the whole group sings, here the dancers repeat every stanza after the main priest. This dance goes on till daybreak. As the first day comes to an end, the crowd rush towards the deity's tree and strip off the phalluses and make it barren except for the few branches at the top. The phalluses are taken home to save the family from misfortunes and bring good luck.

BLESSINGS AND WINE OFFERINGS

The second day of the *mKhar phud* festival is a day of wine offering and receiving blessings (*dKon mchog pho rab*). Every household takes with them, milk, butter, cheese, fish and fermented wine in bamboo containers *palangs* (= *khyod chang nga chang and shar chog pa kha*). In two small baskets (*ama*) (= *khyod chang nga chang*) they take slender boiled wheat flour cakes of long life and cakes of prosperity. The crowds gather and walk to a place not far from the ritual site. The menfolk wear scarves (*bkab ney*), and lining up facing north offer wine from the small bamboo cups filled with fermented wine to *btsan gog 'phel* and *klu dga' dbang 'jog po*²⁴.

²⁴ They are also local deities worshipped by the people.

Offerings to *gsung chog sGrdol ma*, the mother,
Offerings to *dpal li rgyal mtshen*, the son,
Offerings to *gyu sGron*, the daughter.
Offerings to *klu dga' dbang 'jog po*,
Offerings to *mtsho sman rgyal mo*, the mother,
Offerings to numinous forces of the right,
Offerings to numinous forces of the left.²⁵

In the meantime, women watch their men folk offer wine to the deities. After the offerings are made, both men and women leave for the ritual site. There, the offerings of milk, butter, cheese, meat, fish, cakes of wheat flour and fermented wine are spread on the makeshift altar. The Bonpo²⁶ then takes his place. So far the Bonpo was a mere spectator. But now his participation in the *mKhar phud* starts with the offerings of prayers. He offers fumigation (*bsang rab*) and water (*chu rab*). Reading from a text, he invites all male and female gods and prays for peace and prosperity in the village. The main priest then takes his seat and performs prayers for long life (*tshe zhu*). Here is the first stanza:

In the holy abode of Zangs mdog dpal ri,

²⁵ Gog 'phel lhab sey dkar po cho dor
yum ni gsung chog sgröl ma cho dor
sras ni dpal li rgyal mtshen cho dor
sras mo gyu sgron bzang mo cho dor
klu chen dga' dbang 'jog po cho dor
yum ni mtsho sman rgyal mo cho dor
phar gyas la gnas pa cho dor
tshur gyon la gnas pa cho dor.

²⁶ *mKhar phud* is considered a Bon celebration in the sense of the Bhutanese term with the Bonpo minimally involved. His only designated task in the festival is to perform *gsol kha* every morning before the actual start of the festival. A particular text is read while performing *gsol kha* in honour of the local deity.

Wayo, Wayo - Voices from the Past

Resides slob dpon o rgyn gu ru with his vase of long life,
Came to receive blessings,
As the vase reaches the upper sky,
Let man live life that reaches the sky²⁷.

After this, the people begin their rounds to the houses visiting the nearest house from the ritual place to perform prayers of good wishes (*smon lam*) led by the main preist. Before reaching the house both men and women wear bands on their heads made from twigs and branches with leaves sticking out from the sides. Prayers of good wishes are performed at every house of the village for the welfare and prosperity of the household members and to protect them from any misfortunes and mishaps for the year. The prayers last for the next two to three days until they complete visits to every household in the village. Before entering the house, they wait at the entrance and describe the entire house from the doorstep to the walls and the pillars. Then they request the landlady to open the door²⁸. Before she opens the door she inquires,

Are you all friends or foes?
If you are foes, then my door is closed.
If you are friends, then my door is open²⁹.

²⁷ *Gnas zangs mdog dpal gyi dgon pa lu*
slob dpon o rgyan gu ru tshe bum
tshe bum pa mi shig tshe zhu ba
bum pa'i mtha ni dgung la thug
mi tshe dgung la mtho ba tshe zhu ba.

²⁸ *Phel lo phel lo sgo phel lo.*
²⁹ *Khyod gnyen yin nam dgra yin nam*
dgra yin na bsdam sgo yin
gnyen yin na phel sgo yin.

The *Bro-dpon* and his company of men and women reply,

I am a friend and not a foe,
Let me in, open the door³⁰.

The landlady opens the door and welcomes them. Everyone is offered seats and served locally brewed alcohol (*ara*) and fermented wine. The main priest then starts with a verse conveying to the family members that he brought with him prayers for long life.

I brought long life for father,
I brought prosperity for mother,
I brought strength for your sons,
I brought authority for your daughters,
I brought growth for your children,
I brought medicine for the young ladies³¹.

As the main priest chants prayers for long life and prosperity, the landlady brings a small woven basket filled with a variety of crops. In the middle of the crops she places a wooden phallus covered in a small scarf. This is known as the birth of long life (*tshe ring*), the phallus symbolizing long life. After the prayers are over, the guests are served with fermented wine.

³⁰ *Nga ni dgra ni men no gnyen yin no
phel lo phel lo sgo phel lo.*

³¹ *Pha a pa dga' ba' tshe 'ong pi
yum a ma dga' ba' gyang 'ong pi
stag shar dga' ba'rste 'ong pi
smen chung dga ba' bang 'ong pi
wo lo dga' ba'l skyis 'ong pi
smen shar dga ba' bya 'ong pi.*

The initiation of prayers of good wishes and prosperity for the entire family is followed by the driving away of evil spirits (*phyi la*) (= *khyod chang nga chang*). Two women who have brought two phalluses with them take the floor and start dancing. As they dance they touch the head of every person present with the phallus, signifying that the phallic power will drive evils and misfortunes out of the house. When the dance is over, the landlady serves the guests with food and more drinks. As the group leaves for the ritual site, the landlady thanks them for visiting her house and blessing her family with good luck and prosperity. At the ritual site the main priest and the assistant priest then divide the people into two groups. Each of them leads a group and visits every house in the village to bless the household members with good luck and prosperity. The blessing of the family members and driving away of evil continue for the next three days until the evening of the sixth day when all gather once again at the ritual site. In the mean time, the deity's tree is kept at the ritual site.

THE CONCLUDING DAY

On the last day of the *mKhar phud* festival, known as *wag pa'i zor*, (= *khyod chang nga chang*), the village folks once again gather at the ritual site. Led by the main priest, the villagers sit around the deity's tree and join the main priest in saying the concluding prayers. The last verse, which is sung by the main priest with the village folk repeating every syllable after him, goes as follows:

The sun has set beyond the skies;
Its warmth has been left in my hands.
The moon has crossed the sky;
The dates have been left in my hands.

The stars have crossed the sky;
The moon has been left in my hands.
The lion has crossed the mountain;
Its roar has been left in my hands.
The stag has crossed the forest;
The horns have been left in my hands.
The deer has crossed the meadows;
Its footprints have been left in my hands.
The bird Tong tong has crossed the birches;
Its soothing voice has been left in my hands.³²

Bidding goodbye to *zhel gsung Guru zhel* and thanking him for blessing the village with prosperity, long life and good health, the weeklong *mKhar phud* festival finally comes to an end. Before dispersing for their respective homes, the villagers sit in a circle and drink the leftover locally brewed alcohol. Leaving for their homes in one's and two's with marks of contentment and accomplishment on their faces, they already begin talking of the next occasion when they can partake of the celebration and pray for long life, good health and prosperity.

³² *Aa hoi, khri gdung o'gal tey dgung o'gal tey
drod nyams mi nga'i lag na lus
zalad wa 'gal tey dgung 'gal tey
tshe grang mi nga'i lag na lus
sKar ma 'gal tey dgung 'gal tey
zalda dkar mi nga'i lag na lus
seng ge 'gal tey gangs 'gal tey
gsung skad mi nga'i lag na lus
sha wa 'gal tey nags 'gal tey
rab chu mi nga'i lag na lus
ka sha 'gal tey spang 'gal tey
rKang rjis mi nga'i lag na lus
tong tong 'gal tey mdang rgyal tey
gsung skad mi nga'i lag na lus.*

CONCLUSION

The *mKhar phud* festival, observed by the people of rTsa mang rged 'og since time immemorial, still continues to play a considerable role in the daily life of the villagers. Of the many differences found throughout Bhutan in the practice of worshipping deities from trees, rocks, streams and lakes to designating mountains as abodes of deities, this practice finds in itself a place unique to the people of rTsa mang rged 'og. I haven't heard or come across lHa gsol practices that involves the participation of children and shouting obscene remarks at each other nor of people rushing for phalluses and taking them home as talismans. Every household hangs them from the sides of their roofs and in front of the entrances. Nor are lHa gsol's carried out for days as this that lasts for a week. The Buddhist practitioners in Bhutan certainly attribute such worship to Bon. Yet the Buddhist practitioners have never questioned the conduct of these festivals and it is correct to claim that the two existed harmoniously. Nor I do intend to oppose or question this view.

The rapid economic development and changes taking place in Bhutan pose no less threat to this ancient tradition than they do to the very identity of the villagers themselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chime Wangmo. "Rituals of Bhutanese House Construction in Bhutan" in *Soundings in Tibetan Civilization*, B. Aziz and M. Kapstein (eds), Manohar, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 107-114.
- Francoise Pommaret, "Rituals non-bouddhiques de Kheng 'Bu li (Bhoutan)," *Proceedings of the 8th IATS Bloomington 1998*, in print.
- George Van driem. "Languages of the Greater Himalayan Region, Vol. I., Dzongkha", Research School CNWS, School of Asian,

Khar Phud: A Non-Buddhist Lha Sol Festival of Eastern Bhutan

African and Amerindian Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands,
1998.