

A Ritual of Political Unity in an Old Nepalese Kingdom

Some preliminary observations

-Charles Ramble

1. Introduction

The impetus for the present article was provided by a document photographed in Dzar (Jharkot) in 1989 by Prof. D. Schuh. The text, consisting of eight folios in Tibetan cursive script, is essentially a memorandum of the material infrastructure of a major ceremony, involving over a dozen settlements in the region. The only date given appears on folio 3: the Fire Bull Year, which in this case may be 1877, or 1817, or possibly earlier. In any event, it is likely that the ceremony itself is considerably older.

The text (henceforth the Memorandum) is concerned primarily with the various provisions of the participant communities and the gifts to which certain protagonists were entitled. There is only incidental reference to the organisation and character of the celebrations. Surprised that an

event of such scale and importance should have disappeared practically without trace from the region, I made enquiries about the ceremony in the local village, using the text itself as a point of departure. The following pages are a reconstruction of the ceremony, based on these enquiries and an analysis of the Memorandum.

A proper study of this ceremony would require a clearer knowledge of the archaic political organisation of the region, as well as a more thorough analysis of relevant liturgical texts and more extensive enquiries as to the unwritten procedures of the celebrations. While it is hoped that further research will make such an undertaking possible, the present account is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment of the subject; it is rather an attempt to isolate the main features of this ceremony, and to discuss the evolution of its political significance down to the present day.

2. The place and the people

The geographical area in question is the political entity known in Nepali as Baragaon, a group of eighteen settlements that once constituted a kingdom. The history of political relations between Baragaon and neighbouring principalities, such as Jumla, Lo and the Gorkha state, is only peripherally relevant to the present discussion. The important point is that the local rulers continued to exercise a significant degree of autonomy in the internal administration of the kingdom, and a number of political and ritual forms appear to have remained largely intact until the implementation of the Panchayat system. It was the introduction of elected local authorities that finally displaced the traditional rulers as the effective local leaders. The details concerning the relationship between the Baragaon dukes and the state of Nepal, and the erosion of their power during the Panchayat administration, await further documentary research. However, for the sake of simplicity, since the present paper is concerned with Baragaon as a royal principality, it will be referred to as a kingdom.

The people of Baragaon are grouped into five strata as follows: Nobles, Priests, Commoners, "Sub-commoners" and Artisans. (In addition to these, there are a number of Indo-Aryan occupational castes, esp. Kami and Damai.)

There is no good reason for not referring to these strata as castes, but certain points must be clarified. Castes in the Indian context are defined in terms of endogamy (not, as is often claimed, in terms of occupation: not all potters make pots, for example, and relatively few Brahmans are priests). In Baragaon there are two criteria for caste membership: endogamy and residence.

Caste status is *said* in Baragaon to be patrilineally inherited, but in fact this is not entirely true. If a man of a priestly village moves

to a commoner village to marry the daughter of a sonless household, his children will be born with commoner, not priestly, status. Conversely, the offspring of a commoner man who marries into a priestly village will be priests.

It should be emphasised here that priests are not the same as monks. Monks are celibate, and are recruited from any of the higher ranks. It is usually the second son in each family who becomes a monk. Priests marry, and the eldest son in each household of a priestly community who receives religious training.

There are two priestly communities within Baragaon: Lubra and Chongkhor. Lubra is a Bonpo community, while Chongkhor is a settlement of priests belonging to the Nyingmapa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The other main religious force in Baragaon is the Sakyapa sect of celibate monks which has three main monastic centres: in Kag, Dzar and Dzung. More will be said about these monks presently.

The nobles of Baragaon live in five mixed-caste settlements: Dzar, Kag, Dzung, Dangkar-dzung and Samar. These sites are referred to as the "capitals" (rgyal-sa) of Baragaon. There are several villages of "Sub-commoners", but only one of them, Khyinga, will be relevant here.

The way in which the stratification of the various castes is objectified, for example in differential bridewealth prestations and a range of socio-economic disparities, is a complex subject that unfortunately cannot be developed here.

3. The annual ritual for the purification of the kingdom

The ritual which formed the focus of the annual ceremony belongs to the category of rites known as *mdos* (pronounced dö). *mdos* rituals have been studied by a number of scholars, including

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Giuseppe Tucci (1980), and, more recently, A.-M. Blondeau (1990). The importance of *mdos* rites in Tibetanised communities of the Himalaya have also been described by certain anthropologists, such as B. Steinmann (1992) for the Tamangs. *mDos* rites are of several sorts, and seem to have reached their greatest degree of elaboration in Bonpo literature, although a systematic study remains to be done. They may be used for a range of purposes, such as the subjugation of demons, exorcisms or, as Steinmann has found, for the worship of ancestors. The ceremonies may be truly indigenous to Tibet, since nothing corresponding to them has yet been located in Indian sources.

Here I shall concentrate narrowly on the version that was performed in Baragaon. The name of the *mdos* in this case is Charka Nakpo (Tib. *Char-ka nag-po*), and it is said to belong to the ritual cycle of the tutelary divinity g \ddot{S} in-rje (Sanskrit Yama). The passage in the text which describes the construction of the effigy states that it should have a "frightening face" like Yama, but that the whole figure should be conceived as Mañjuśrī.¹ The *mdos*'s body, says the text, is Mt. Meru; he is surrounded by the four continents and his feet are under the ocean; he is crowned with the sun and moon and adorned with the eight planets, the twelve animal symbols of the calendar and other items of astrological significance, and surrounded by an assortment of divinities, birds and animals.

Without engaging in too detailed an analysis of the features, it can be seen that this description accords with informants' assertion that the *mdos* is a representation of the kingdom conceived as the whole cosmos.

All the communities in Baragaon (with certain exceptions that we shall come to presently) seem to have had a role to play in the festivities surrounding the ritual. In fact, the Memorandum opens (fols. 1-2) by listing the

basic obligations of the following participant villages: Te, Taye, Tiri, Kag, Phelag, Dangkardzong, Pagling, Khyinga, Dzar, Purang, Dzong and Putra. The required contributions consist for the most part of quantities of rice, barley, butter, salt, cash and meat. The little (and relatively recent) settlement of Pagling had only to pay 50 paise, and a section of Purang was required to provide firewood for making tea.

Samar, Gemi, Gyaga, Sangdak and Tshuk - the northern villages of Baragaon - are not included. The reason for their omission is not clear, since enquiries indicate that Samar, at least, did have a role to play in the ceremony. It is possible that the obligations of these outlying villages are dealt with in a separate document, perhaps kept in Samar as the "northern" capital, that has not yet come to light.

There are two other significant omissions. One is Lubra. There are two likely reasons why this settlement should be excluded. First, as a community of Bonpo priests, Lubra would have no sacerdotal role to play in an essentially Buddhist ceremony. Secondly, Lubra lies south of the Panda Khola, which is referred to in certain local documents as marking the political boundary between the territory of Thini and the domain of the rulers of the Muktinath Valley. The fact that, to my knowledge, Lubra is regarded as a part of Baragaon in all other political and social situations, may attest to the antiquity of this *mdos* ritual, if not necessarily that of the Memorandum itself.

The other community that is conspicuous by its absence is Chongkhor. In this case, the absence is precisely because of the importance of the settlement to the ceremony, since the priests of Chongkhor were charged with performing the ritual itself. They provided religious services, and received gifts in return. The reverence accorded to these priests is clear at several points in the memorandum. Thus during a dance performance

in Dzong:

The lama (the senior priest of Chongkhor) shall be given the use of a fine carpet to sit on and a folding table, a long-stemmed cup with a saucer, a teapot of tea and a bowl of tsampa. The dbu-mdzad, the cha-dpon and the senior gyin-pa² shall each have one pot of tea and a box of tsampa, an individual seating carpet and a small folding table. The rest (of the priests) shall have one teapot and one box of tsampa (between them). As for beer, the lama shall receive a brass bowl with butter ornamentation. The three (i.e., the dbu-mdzad, the cha-dpon and the senior gyin-pa) shall receive a bowl of beer, and the rest shall have a large flask of beer (between them) (fol. 4).

The services of the ordinary priests of Chongkhor were also rewarded:

For the part they play at the beginning and end of the ceremony, the priests (*dbon-po*) shall be paid: 18 measures (*zo-ba*) of tsampa; 13 measures of barley; the upper part of the carcass of a goat or a sheep; 1 (or 2? text unclear) measures of butter, and 1 measure of salt (fol. 3).

In addition to the central figure of the *mdos*, a number of other effigies were made, representing the illnesses and sins that had accumulated over the course of the year, and these were deposited in the wicker enclosure surrounding the *mdos*. (The liturgical text also specifies the effigy of a Bonpo, an indication of the undercurrent of perennial hostility between Buddhist and Bonpos in the area.) The Memorandum specifies precisely how much material should be used in the construction of certain images. The specification of bitter

buckwheat flour "for the construction of the male and female figures" (fol. 3) suggests that these figures may be exorcistic effigies (*glud*).

At the end of the ceremony, on the 29th day of the twelfth month, the *mdos* would be taken outside the village in a direction determined by astrological computation and destroyed at a crossroads. The computation, and perhaps calculations of other auspicious dates connected with ritual, were also performed by the lama of Chongkhor. The Memorandum suggests that the protocol of requesting the lama for his services followed the normal procedure of accompanying the formal request with a flask of alcohol.

When requesting the divination, one ceremonial vessel (of beer) should be presented. After that (the vessel) should be brought back (to Dzong) (fol. 4).

The same passage further informs us that the lama and the other hierarchs were paid for this service with lengths of cloth. Later in the text we are told that the lama should be given an additional payment, although it is not clear whether the divination in question is the same as the one referred to above:

The lama shall receive, as a token of thanks for having performed the divination, the front part of the carcass of a goat or sheep, and the right half of the head (of a goat or sheep) (fol. 5).

Now the *mdos* was regarded as a very dangerous object, charged as it was with the concentrated afflictions of a whole year, and precautions had to be taken in order to prevent the harmful power turning back on the village. It is normal practice, even in minor exorcisms, for one person to follow the carrier of the effigy out of the village brandishing a knife or a khukhuri

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and admonishing the malign spirits not to return to the house. Clearly, something more than a single khukhuri is required in the case of the *mdos*.

Each of the five capitals was required to send a number of soldiers to Chongkhor to perform this function. There are a number of details here which remain to be clarified. First, the etymology of the term for soldier given in the Memorandum is obscure, not least because of the irregularity in the orthography: *rgya-dmag-pa* and *brgya-dmag-pa*, as well as variations on these spellings. The former might, among other things mean "Chinese soldier" (*rGya-nag-gi dmag-mi*), while the latter could signify a centurion (*brgya*: one hundred), but this is entirely conjectural. Secondly, the number of soldiers is not certain. Kag and Dzar are said to have provided four each, but the other capitals may have furnished a smaller number. The text does not enlighten us on this score, and inquiries yielded inconsistent responses.

Whatever the case, these soldiers would accompany a representative of the ruler to Dzong, where they would be received with honours. Apart from their role as bodyguards, the main function of the soldiers was to follow the *mdos* out of the village, in a line, with drawn swords, to prevent its return. In a ritual sense, then, the nobility - the representatives of the five capitals - had the task of protecting the kingdom from harmful agencies.

As we might imagine, the soldiers, and more particularly the nobility whom they accompanied, were treated with considerable hospitality during the ceremony. The titles of the rulers given in the Memorandum are the *sku-tshab* and the *dpon-tshab*, terms which imply respectively representatives of the *sku-zabs* and the *dpon-po*. I shall not speculate on who precisely these figures were, or which power they represented. The matter is discussed in a forthcoming work by Prof. D. Schuh. For the purposes of the present

study, the important point is that they stand for the regional political authority.

When the *sku-tshab* comes to Dzong, the constables (*rol-bu* for *rol-po*) should contribute beer for the lord and his retinue. The monks should contribute two flasks of beer for the lord and his retinue. ...Purang should contribute beer made from six measures of barley for the *dpon-tshab* and his military escort (*brgya-dmag*). ...When the *sku-tshab* departs the man from Purang who leads the horse shall provide: fodder for the journey and beer, one flask for the lord and one for his retinue. When the lord arrives in Purang, he should be provided with an individual seat, while the representative of the chaplain (? *bla-tshab*) and the armed escort should be provided with a single row of seats. Moreover, one-and-a-half measures of beer for the lord and his retinue should be supplied (fol. 3).

In Dzong itself,

The *sku-tshab* and his retinue shall (have the use of) one house, which should contain: 1 folding table, one individual seat, 1 seat for a row of people, and a votive lamp capable of burning through the night. The leader should have one measure of rice for his evening meal, and his armed escort shall have 3 measures of rice: they shall have an unlimited supply of beer (lit. "a vessel of 'water' from which their mouths shall never be empty"); at bedtime, the armed escort and the *sku-tshab* shall have one flask of beer each. On the 30th day, in the morning, the *sku-tshab* shall have one bowl of tsampa with a daub of butter and a flask of beer for his breakfast (fol. 5).

Apart from the various material contributions

detailed in the documents, the Commoners also had an important role to perform during this ceremony. They did not come to Dzong, but within their own villages would perform special dances and sing songs. The Commoner women would sing three long songs, a cycle called "The songs for the king and the nobility" (*rgyal-glu dpon-glu*). Regrettably, it seems that the words have now been lost, but it is clear at least that they formed a kind of panegyric to the rulers of the kingdom. In Dzong itself the young men and women who danced in front of the guests of honour were rewarded with a length of cloth each (fol. 4). They were also given tea at public expense (fol. 7), and in the concluding stages, small gifts of money and ceremonial white scarves (fol. 7).

The priests performed the ritual and read the liturgy; but they did not carry the effigy out of the village for disposal. The removal of the *mdos* and its noxious contents was the responsibility of Khyinga, the "Sub-commoner" village mentioned above. This is one of the few performative aspects of the ceremony to which the Memorandum refers: "the people who carry the great *mdos* shall indeed be the people of Khyinga" (fol. 3). Later on we are informed that the two individuals who carried the effigy out should receive a length of cloth each (fol. 5). By avoiding the performance of this demeaning part of the ceremony the priests were able to offset any ambivalence inherent in the duty of purifying the kingdom. Their status was not threatened by their occupation.

4. The appropriation of the *mdos* and other rituals

4.1. Domestic rites

In addition to the *mdos* ritual which they perform as a corporate community, the Chongkhor priests

used to have traditional relationship with patrons in neighbouring communities of the kingdom. They would visit these households annually to perform propitiatory rites for the domestic gods of the owners. The Sakyapa monks have gradually managed to persuade these householders to transfer their patronage from the Chongkhor priests to the monks themselves. Thus the capital Kag no longer receives the services of any Chongkhor priests. Among other things, the transfer has entailed a change in the divinities being propitiated. The tutelary god *gSin-rje* has been replaced, in all these households, by the goddess *dPal-ldan Lha-mo*, who is favoured by the Sakyapas.

4.2. Animal sacrifice and community solidarity

In addition to the presence of Bon and Buddhism, Baragaon bears traces of what we might think of as the indigenous religion of the area. Animal sacrifice - widespread in pre-Buddhist Tibet - appears to have been practised in all villages of the kingdom (with the exception of Chongkhor, which was established specifically as a Buddhist community). The missionary activities of a range of Buddhist and Bonpo lamas has put an end to the sacrifice of animals in all the Baragaon communities (with a single exception which will not concern us here). A brief examination of the decline of blood sacrifice in Kag reveals that the Buddhist suppression of the practice is motivated by factors other than simple compassion for living beings.

Until approximately fifty years ago, annual blood sacrifices were performed in Kag. Three times a year a sacrificer known as the *aya* (Tib. *a-ya*)³ would visit the capital to offer sheep, goats and a yak to the local divinities (*pho-lha* and *jo-bo*). The most important of these was the yak sacrifice, which was referred to as the *Loyak*.⁴

After an examination of the liver and entrails the *aya* would make predictions concerning the type of maladies that might afflict the community's people, crops and livestock in the coming year. Each of Kag's households would then receive a piece of the meat, known as a "divine token" (*lha'i-rtags*, corresponding roughly to the Nepali *prasād*). The reception of this token was the criterion for each household's inclusion in the social life of the community. Thus if a house were somehow overlooked during the distribution, its members were not obliged to perform any community services, such as labour on village trails and irrigation systems, and they would be exempted from occupying onerous offices such as headmanship, stewardship and the like.

All the annual sacrifices were stopped by a missionary lama from Goyag Monastery in Tibet. But the propitiation of the village gods was not abandoned altogether. The Sakyapa monks of Kag took over the performance of the Loyak, but imposed certain changes. A real yak is not killed, but instead a dough effigy of the animal is cut up at the old sacrificial site and, as with the yak meat in the past, pieces of the dough are distributed to all the households. The portions are also called "divine tokens", and, as in the past, failure to be given a piece entitles a household to stand down from all community obligations for the year.

The conclusion to be drawn from this change is that the monks have taken over the ritual articulation of the communal unity of Kag. It is certainly no accident that of the three sacrificial rituals that were held in the capital, it is the one which carries the greatest significance for the cohesion of the community that has been perpetuated by the monks.

4.3. The *mdos* ritual

As stated above, the royalty of Baragaon retained a considerable measure of autonomy in the

administration of the kingdom until the early sixties, when the implementation of the panchayat system provided both an alternative local administration and a more direct link with the central government of Nepal. It is only after this time that the annual *mdos* ceremony appears to have gone into decline. The political redundancy of the ritual, exacerbated by a critical dispute between Chongkhor and Dzong, undermined the unifying effect of the events. The rite is still performed annually, but in Chongkhor, without the presence of other villages. Most important, the soldiers and royal emissaries have ceased to attend. The local celebrations by the Commoners have been abandoned in all but two of the villages.

But a soldier is required to follow the effigy out of the village for disposal, and in the absence of soldiers from the capitals one of the Chongkhor priests must himself play this role. Dressed as a soldier, he enters the temple where the priests are assembled and is greeted with a parody of the respectful welcome accorded to the real soldiers in the past. "You have come all the way from Samar," they might say. "You must be tired. Sit down and have some beer."

The political relevance of the ceremony for the kingdom has vanished. Nevertheless, the rite retains considerable importance for the Chongkhor priests. The ascription of status, as stated above, is based primarily on residence, and only to a lesser extent on descent. Occupation is not a criterion. However, in order to justify the ascription of priestly status to individuals born in a community, there is a feeling that the village in question must have some kind of corporate priestly function. I have discussed this problem elsewhere as it relates to the settlement of Lubra, and shall not undertake a detailed examination of the problem here (Ramble 1990).

The abandonment of the *mdos* ritual would deprive the Chongkhor priests of the single most

important expression of their corporate priestly status in the caste configuration of the kingdom. But their position has been weakened by the fragmentation of the ceremony, and the redundancy of the priests is now being precipitated by a shrewd bid for power on the part of the Sakyapa monks.

The Sakyapa community in Baragaon is focussed on three of the capitals, Dzar, Kag and Dzung, which contain monastic centres (*chos-sde*). Since the collapse of the ritual unity of the kingdom, the clergy is the only entity which exercises any kind of unifying ceremonial influence over a large section of Baragaon. The three capitals form the nuclei of "parishes" which comprise the remain villages as follows:

1. DZAR, Purang, Khyinga
2. KAG, Tiri, Phelak, Pagling, Dangkardzong
3. DZONG, Putra, Chongkhor

Monks in the subsidiary villages are attached to their respective parish capitals, and patronage from the laity is also organised within the respective subgroups.

In 1989, the Sakyapas implemented a new ceremony, to be held annually, at which the monks of all three parishes were to be present. The ceremony was a *mdos* rite for the purification of the settlements grouped under Dzar, Kag and Dzung - in other words, the entire Tibetan-speaking portion of the kingdom of Baragaon. The intention was to rotate the venue annually in a three-year cycle around the three capitals.

The first ceremony was held in Dzar. The monks of all three capitals were present, but only the laypeople of Dzar parish were required to provide material support and to perform the various duties required in the performance.

The second ceremony was held in Kag in 1990. In 1991 the venue was Dzung, which

includes Putra and Chongkhor in its parish. It was remarked to me that the decision to hold the first and second gatherings in Dzar and Kag respectively was especially shrewd: by the time Dzung's turn came the ceremony was already fairly well-established as an annual event, and the Chongkhor priests would have more difficulty in protesting against something that had already acquired a certain momentum.

The *mdos* in question is not the same as that performed in Chongkhor. It belongs to the ritual cycle of the tutelary god Phurba (Phur-pa), over which the Chongkhor Nyingmapas have no ritual authority to officiate. As a purificatory rite for the old kingdom, then, the Sakyapa *mdos* is in direct competition with that of Chongkhor, with the difference that the former is more societally relevant since it involves the participation of a large section of the old kingdom.

An important difference between the two ceremonies is the composition of the lay officiants. Whereas the old "royal" *mdos* was based on the ritual division of labour among different castes, the Sakyapas designate responsibility without attention to such considerations. When the *mdos* was held in Dzung in 1991, the monks declared that the carriers of the effigy - a role reserved for the lowest participant caste in the royal version - should be priests of Chongkhor. The demand was clearly an attempt to demean the Chongkhor priests and thereby further to dismantle the caste structure of the old kingdom, which is perceived as an impediment to the religious monopoly of the monastic community and hence, among other things, their access to patronage.

In the event, the Chongkhor priests adamantly refused and the monks conceded to the refusal: they were probably expecting such a response. But they warned the priests that, when the ceremony came around to Dzung again three years thence, the priests would have to carry the

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effigy, or else the monks would withdraw the religious services that they currently provide for Chongkhor: they will not perform *kurim* (*sku-rim*) ceremonies to which they are invited, they will refuse to officiate at funerals, and so on.

The Chongkhor priests have effectively been threatened with excommunication from the Sakyapa religious hegemony over the kingdom. It will be interesting to see how Chongkhor responds to this ultimatum in 1994.

5. Conclusions

A few brief conclusions may be drawn from the ethnographic case described above. First, the political organisation of the kingdom of Baragaon conforms very closely to the structure of caste society as defined by Hocart, and to this extent it bears numerous similarities to kingdoms such as the Kathmandu Valley under the Mallas, or pre-colonial India. How far Baragaon is typical of other Tibetan-speaking areas will have to be judged on the basis of further research. Secondly, caste society so defined is by no means intrinsically Brahmanical. The important feature is the close association between the ruler - usually a king - and the priesthood, whether Hindu or Buddhist. The priests legitimate the ruler's force, but their exercise of ritual power (and therefore the access to material resource granted by this role) is made possible only by the authority of the ruler: the political influence of the religious forms derives from the ruler himself. Finally, the social persuasiveness of symbolic activities can be transposed with relative ease onto a changed political setting. As in the case of Nepal as a whole, it is not an ideology or religion that affects the material circumstances of its adherents, but the intentions of the people who manipulate it.

Notes

1. It may be mentioned that the wrathful form of Manjuśrī is Yamāntaka, the "Slayer of Yama", who also has a bull's head.
2. These three terms designate various figures in the priestly hierarchy of Chongkhor.
3. This term appears in certain Bonpo texts, such as the *gZi-brjid* and *gZer-myig*, to denote a category of priests in the old kingdom of Zhangzhung.
4. The etymology of this term is not entirely certain. One possible meaning is "the harvest-time yak" (*lo[-thog-gi] g.yag*). However, in normal Tibetan usage, as Christoph Cüppers has pointed out to me, the expression means literally "good harvest" (*lo[-thog] yag[-po]*). The term *yag-po* for "good" is not used in the Baragaon dialect (*dga'* is the normal word), but this does not obviate the possibility of it having been introduced in the region as part of the stock compound expression *lo-yag*. I have seen this ceremony referred to in only one local document, an old tax register from Kag. The orthography given here is *lo-dbyag*, an incorrect spelling that does not help to solve the problem.

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