

## **On Local Festival Performance: The Sherpa *Dumji* in a world of dramatically increasing uncertainties<sup>1</sup>**

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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.

E.G. Smith (2001:240)

The Sherpas are a small, ethnically Tibetan people who live at high altitudes in the environs of Mt. Everest in Solu-Khumbu, a relatively remote area in the north eastern part of the “Hindu Kingdom of Nepal”. Traditionally, their economy has combined agriculture with herding and local as well as long-distance trade. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century they have been successfully engaged in the trekking and mountaineering boom. Organised in patrilineal clans, they live in nuclear family households in small villages, hamlets, and isolated homesteads. Property in the form of herds, houses and land is owned by nuclear families.

Among the Sherpas, *Dumji*, the famous masked dance festival, is held annually in the village temple of only eight local communities in Solu-Khumbu. According to lamas and laypeople alike *Dumji* represents the most important village celebration in the Sherpas’ annual cycle of ceremonies. The celebration of the *Dumji* festival is reflective of both Tibetan Buddhism and its supremacy over autochthonous belief systems, and the way a local community constructs, reaffirms and represents its own distinct local

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tradition by way of the worship of local deities. Its elaborate performance follows a ritual pattern that is rooted in and governed by Tibetan Buddhism. In each place, however, the ritual performance of the masked dance celebration is staged in public according to a particular local tradition. As will be shown, it is the general ritual pattern of the Mindroeling tradition of “public festivals” and its sacred dances, an influential sub-school of the Nyingma order, that has been made use of as an overall ritual structure into which the distinct local tradition of the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung has been inserted.

In his preface to a collection of articles on Himalayan rituals A. W. Macdonald has reminded us that an isolated ritual, taken out of its local cultural context, is deprived of its significance.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I intend to assess the relevance of the *Dumji* celebration in the formation of a particular local tradition and in its relation to Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>3</sup> I examine the main issues that have been brought into play in the construction and elaboration of a distinct local tradition and the complex enactment of the *Dumji* festival in the village temple of Gompa Zhung (Nep. Junbesi). Gompa Zhung is the spiritual center of Sherpa Buddhism in Solu. It has to be noted, however, that this local tradition is exceptional among the Sherpas as it is equivalent to the particular tradition of the Lamaserwa clan being the only kinship group rooted in this locality.

First, a brief overview over the history of the Sherpas, their migration to Solu-Khumbu, the settlement of the Lamaserwa clan in the upper Solu valley and the origin of the *Dumji* in Gompa Zhung will be given. Then, to gain an appropriate understanding, two rather different traditions of sacred masked dance ceremonies, the *Dumji* and the *Mani Rimdu* festival which are staged annually among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, will be discussed. Having traced the distinct local tradition of the *Dumji* festival as performed in Gompa Zhung back to its historic origin, the meaning, general ritual structure and complex ritual performance of the *Dumji* ceremony in Gompa Zhung will be highlighted. Then follows a short description of the *Dumji* festival patronage in its relation with Sherpa identity.

It will be shown that the *Dumji* festival as held in the local community constitutes a key social institution in Sherpa society that binds the individual members of the local community into one common frame of action, thus continuously creating and reaffirming both their unity and identity. The performance of the *Dumji* festival offers a striking example of a cultural force that serves as a crucial guarantee of the maintenance and continuation of Sherpa Buddhist culture and tradition, especially at a time of serious conflict and crisis when the preservation of their cultural heritage is threatened. Thus, instead of presenting the static picture of a timeless ritual

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. 1987a: 9.

<sup>3</sup> This issue has been explored in an inspiring article by Ramble (1990).

in a never changing socio-cultural context, I want to shed some light upon the important question as to how a local tradition responds to the sudden emergence of dramatically altered circumstances.<sup>4</sup> This will be dealt with in the last part of this paper.

### **1. Sherpa migration, their settlement in Solu-Khumbu, and the origin of the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung**

According to their own written tradition the ancestors of the Sherpas left from Salmo Gang, a region in the eastern province of Kham in Tibet, in the period between the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. M. Oppitz mentions that the widespread and long standing fear of the Mongols was the reason they left Salmo Gang around 1500 for the area of Tinkye in Central Tibet.<sup>5</sup> Again they had to leave because of a Muslim invasion of Tibet from Kashgar which managed to advance almost to Lhasa in Central Tibet. After a long journey the Sherpas entered Khumbu around 1533<sup>6</sup>. They took possession of this area in the second half of that century and later of Solu in the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

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...”<sup>7</sup> Already before their exodus from Kham the Sherpas seem to have been devout followers of the Nyingma school, the ‘Adherents of the Old’. This is the order of the original Buddhist tantric tradition whose followers practise those tantras that were translated during the Royal Dynastic Period (eighth and ninth centuries). The *rNying ma pa* are ‘the Old’ in contrast to the Sarmapa (*Gsar ma pa*) or ‘Adherents of the New’ which include all of the other Tibetan Buddhist schools. The latter emerged as “reform movements” when about two centuries later a new set of Sanskrit texts was translated into Tibetan.<sup>8</sup> M. Kapstein draws attention to the fact that the Nyingmapa share a common history and much doctrine but that this school is also characterised by a considerable degree of heterogeneity. In consequence each regional tradition adheres to rites revealed by a Nyingmapa visionary.<sup>9</sup> This appears to be equally true for the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu. It was the great treasure-discoverer Ratna Lingpa (Ratna gling pa, 1403-79) who transmitted the Nyingma tradition to the ancestors of the Sherpas. Subsequently, each locality has constructed its own distinct tradition. The core of this local

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<sup>4</sup> E.R. Wolf has recently proposed to see culture “... not as a fixed stock of materials and symbolic forms but as repertoires deployed in action.” (1999: 132).

<sup>5</sup> Oppitz (1968: 75).

<sup>6</sup> Oppitz (1968: 78).

<sup>7</sup> (1987b: 69).

<sup>8</sup> E.G. Smith (2002: 14f.).

<sup>9</sup> This has been emphasized by Kapstein (1983:42).

tradition is represented through the performance of the *Dumji*. It must be noted, however, that the *Dumji* festival among the Sherpas has not been instituted in the interest of a political or stately power such as in Tibet, in Sikkim or in Bhutan but solely by the people of the local community themselves, owing to the initiative of a charismatic village lama of their own.<sup>10</sup>

The process of appropriation by the Sherpas of their new cis-Himalayan territory through 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. A.W. Macdonald has called the "great ideological drama [that] was played out in the local landscape" a process of "Buddha-isation" that is typical for the Buddhist conversion of formerly non-Buddhist people and areas.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly the Sherpas' settlement in the Khumbu region was possible only after their religious and political leader, lama Zangwa Dorje (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. He also founded the first Sherpa village temple in Pangboche (sPang po che) where he, among others, instituted the *Dumji* festival. Later another charismatic figure, lama Dorje Zangbu (rDo rje bzang po), the mythical ancestor and culture hero of the Lamaserwa clan, led the members of his clan to the southern region of Solu. There they settled down in the upper Solu valley after their lama had performed some significant miracles and founded the first temple at what since then has been called Gompa Zhung, 'meditation place where one bows down repeatedly' (Nep. Junbesi, lit. 'moon valley'). According to my informants, however, this first religious monument in Gompa Zhung was only a *mtshams khang*, i.e. a retreat place for meditation.

Originally the Sherpas of the Lamaserwa clan lived in Serta in Kham. In their written history they claim direct descent from the "treasure discoverer" Nyangrel Nyima Özer (Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, 1136-1204) who is regarded as one of the main masters in the early history of the Old Translation School of Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> All the descendants call themselves Serwa (*Gser ba*), i. e. people from Ser in Kham, who settled in a wide area in the upper Solu valley. In fact, they are members of the Lamaserwa patrilineage (*rus*) of the Nyang clan (*rig*), an important line of hereditary householder lamas (*sngags*

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<sup>10</sup> As to Bhutan in this context cf. Aris (1976:612-3); Pommaret (2002:17). As to the various ceremonies of the Lhasa year cf. Richardson (1993: 7ff.).

<sup>11</sup> Macdonald (1990:203).

<sup>12</sup> In the clan document II of the Minyagpa – one of the four Sherpa proto-clans– as translated in Oppitz (1968:57-58, see p. 57). – On Nyangrel Nyima Özer, the first of the "five kingly treasure finders" and the reincarnation of king Trisong Detsen see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 (Vol. I: 755-759); Dargyay (1977: 97-103). J. Gyatso 1996 calls Nyangrel "one of the principal architects" (p. 162, fn. 9) of the "full-blown Treasure tradition" (p. 151).

*pa*) in Tibet.<sup>13</sup> Among the Solu Sherpas there was no regular *Dumji* for about six generations after their settlement in Solu in the course of the 17th century. It was the learned village lama Nyangrig Dorje Jigdral (Nyang rigs rDo rje 'Jigs bral) who introduced the *Dumji* in Gompa Zhung on the basis of the text *byang gter phur pa* around the year 1850.

## **2. *Dumji* and *Mani Rimdu* – two traditions of sacred masked dance festivals among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu**

The tradition of Tibetan sacred dance is old and represents an important genre of both Bon and Tibetan Buddhist tantric practice. The Tibetan Buddhist *'cham* tradition is said to have its prototype in the first recorded *vajra* dance performed by the great Indian sage and tantric master Guru Padmasambhava in the context of the construction of Samye, the famous first Tibetan Buddhist temple complex built in the year 779 on the initiative of King Trisong Detsen (742-797) who reigned from 755/56-797. According to Tibetan Buddhist historiography Padmasambhava performed this dance in order to subdue and tame local spirits hostile to the introduction of the Buddhist *dharma*, to bind them by oath and transform them into protectors of the Buddhist faith (*chos skyong*), thus creating a purified realm necessary for the construction of the temple. Another specific sacred dance that is of particular importance in this context is called *zvha nag* after the characteristic black hats (*zvha nag*) that are used in particular tantric ceremonies. This dance with its distinct costume – the traditional dress of a tantric practitioner – is associated according to Tibetan Buddhist narrative with the Buddhist monk Palkyi Dorje from Lhalung. Palkyi Dorje is said to have committed an ethically necessary and heroic murder by killing the anti-Buddhist king Lang Darma (reigned from 838-842), the last of the Yarlung kings, in the year 842 in public.<sup>14</sup> In this act of ritual killing he made use of a bow and an arrow which he had concealed in the long sleeves of his flowing costume while performing this particular dance.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Childs 1997 has reconstructed the origin of the “Sherpa Serwa lineage”.

<sup>14</sup> For this ritual assassination refer to Stein (1987: 37); Shakabpa (1967: 52).

<sup>15</sup> This mythical episode is of crucial importance especially in later Tibetan Buddhist historiography in which the emperor Lang Darma has been alleged to have persecuted Buddhism which justified the murderous act. As to its historical “truth”, this Buddhist narrative has been strongly criticized by Tibetologists. Against this version Karmay argues that the Buddhist clergy “...became too thirsty for political power so that the emperor was obliged to take action against the growing power of the Buddhist establishments, but did not persecute Buddhism as a religion...” (1998c: 532). According to Karmay, in reality no contemporary evidence of any persecution can be produced. Instead, Lang Darma seems to have dismantled Buddhist monastic institutions, as then they had frequently been involved in state affairs, and thus he had caused the wrath of Buddhists (1988:2). This view has recently been supported by Kapstein who sees the much debated “persecution of Buddhism” by Lang Darma as a mere withdrawal of royal patronage (2001: XVIII, pp. 11-12). He refers to a manuscript from Dunhuang, dating probably to the end of the tenth

Central features of these sacred dances performed by trained dancers who represent various divinities are the colorful costumes and, in many cases, the wearing of awe-inspiring masks symbolizing the oathbound protectors of the Buddhist doctrine. An important function of the 'cham is the physical manifestation of the great protecting divinities who have been invoked and worshiped in the course of the rituals during the preceding days. The ritual dances of the manifested divinities aim at the exorcism of evil for the benefit of the community that sponsors the festive event. Moreover, they are a powerful means for the purification of all obscurations and thus help to ease the path leading toward enlightenment (*byang chub*). Since Padmasamhava performed the first *vajra* dance, sacred dances are enacted also in the case of a *stūpa* to be built, a *maṇḍala* to be created or in the context of important ritual ceremonies. On all these occasions sacred dances are staged in monastic establishments as well as in village temples; however these are entirely different settings, and the ritual performances differ accordingly.

Sacred masked dances in a monastic context are performed by the monks of both the Bon religion and of the Nyingma, Kagyü, Shakya and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism in the course of the most important rituals of the liturgical calendar.<sup>16</sup> Each of the different schools as well as particular major monasteries have developed their own tradition of performing the sacred dances at different times of the year and on special days of the month. Specific manuals called 'cham-yig written by high dignitaries describe and prescribe minutely the ritual activities to be performed, the masques and the costumes to be used, and the dance

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century, that strikingly does not mention Lang Darma in an enumeration of Tibet's royal patrons of Buddhism, while at the same time it contains no indication of a persecution. – It is an established historical fact, however, that this event in the year 842 had some disastrous consequences, as it led to the collapse of the Central Tibetan royal dynasty and the dissolution of the ancient empire. An ensuing civil war resulted in a protracted period of political division, as Tibet broke up into a number of small principalities competing for hegemony, and thus in the loss of its military power and political unity; for this see Beckwith (1987: 168ff.). The central authority was restored in 1247 when Sakya Pandita was invested with the right to rule over the Thirteen Myriarchies of Tibet by Prince Godan, a grandson of Gengis Khan, cf. Shakabpa (1967: 54).

<sup>16</sup> The most comprehensive general work on the subject of Tibetan Bon and Buddhist sacred dances is still by de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1976. On 'cham cf. Snellgrove & Richardson 1986: 246f.; Stein 1987: 126-9; Schrempf 1990 and 1994, Kohn 2001: 55-63. See also Aris 1976 and Pommaret 2002 on sacred dances in Bhutan; Karmay 1998a, Schrempf 2000 and 2001 on sacred Bon Dances; Richardson 1993 on annual ceremonies, processions, sacred dances in Lhasa; Schrempf 1997 on the transformation of Tibetan ritual dances in the context of Tibetan diaspora and the "global performance marketplace". Other useful treatises on this subject are by Hoetzlein 1991, Marko 1994, E. Pearlman 2002.

movements and hand gestures to be practiced, to the accompaniment of long horns, oboes, drums and cymbals, etc.<sup>17</sup>

In his path-breaking treatise R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz has drawn attention to the fact that the tradition of Tibetan sacred dance has given rise to two different categories of dances. *Gar* are the dances performed by monks in the absence of uninitiated spectators as part of the worship of certain deities. The other kind is called '*cham*'. This term designates the public religious dances with which this paper deals.<sup>18</sup> As M. Schrempf has emphasized, '*cham*' is commonly understood as a public form of Tibetan ritual dance which is performed for a lay audience by monks dressed in colourful costumes and wearing masks mainly representing the protectors of religion (*chos skyong/ bon skyong*), and their assistants.<sup>19</sup> Among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu, however, two different kinds of sacred masked dance festivals, *Dumji* and *Mani Rimdu*, are staged annually at different times at different places.

*Mani Rimdu* centers on the cult of a little-known form of Avalokiteshvara, the patron-deity of Tibet, known as 'Lord of the Dance' (*gar dbang*).<sup>20</sup> The *Dumji* festival focuses on various emanations of Guru Padmasambhava depending on each of the eight distinct local tradition where it is held. *Dumji* is staged in the temple of the locality for the benefit of the local community and is performed solely by a lay tantric lama (Tib. *sngags pa*), who is hereditary village head lama, and assistants; these religious practitioners also perform the sacred dances. Usually, the latter have received from the tantric lama both an initiation into the ritual cycle of the celebration and training in the steps and movements of the sacred dances involved. All the ritual practitioners in the context of a *Dumji* celebration are married householders who are referred to as "lama" in the local community. In contrast to the most important annual ritual ceremony of the local community the *Mani Rimdu* festival is enacted in a monastic

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<sup>17</sup> R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz has edited and translated the important dance manual for the *Vajrakīla 'cham* (1976: 111-245) the major part of which had been written by Lama Ngawang Lobzang Gyatsho, the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-82), while several other clerics had completed it after his death (cf. p. 85).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Schrempf (1997: 91).

<sup>20</sup> *Mani Rimdu* belongs to a species of Tibetan rituals known as *ril sgrub* which means 'pill practices'. The name *Mani Rimdu* is a corruption of the Tibetan term *maṇi* as it is pronounced in Sherpa language which R.J. Kohn renders as 'the practice of the mani pills'. This category of mani pill-rituals is dedicated to Avalokiteshvara, the spiritual patron-deity of Tibet (2001: 4). – The only major works on the Sherpa *Mani Rimdu* are by Jerstad 1969 as enacted in Thame Gompa in the region of Khumbu and the invaluable and meticulous research by the late Tibetologist Kohn (1985 and 2001) on its celebration in Chiwong Gompa in Solu. Moreover, the *Mani Rimdu* as it was then performed in the monasteries of Thame and Tengboche has been described by von Fürer-Haimendorf (1964: 210-224; 1984: 100-101).

framework before a mixed audience of clerics and laypeople. The acting performers in this large-scale monastic celebration are highly educated celibate monks and well-trained monk dancers.

Both the *Dumji* and the *Mani Rimdu* festival as they are held among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu until the present day belong to a genus of Tibetan rituals known as *sgrub mchod* ('propitiations and offerings'). According to G. Tucci the goal of the cult act (*mchod pa*) composed of scriptural recitation and liturgical performances is either to pacify or to give pleasure to a deity or to promote the deity's actualization.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, both kinds of religious ceremonies are embedded in an overall ritual complex comprising liturgy and dance performance that is called *sgrub chen* which Tucci has rendered as 'great liturgical performance'.<sup>22</sup> In Sherpa language the two ritual categories *sgrub mchod* and *sgrub chen* are blended with each other. This mix of terms results in the word *Dumji* which is the name of the festival.

Moreover, both the *Dumji* and the *Mani Rimdu* festival have their origin in the grand public festivals with their elaborate dances that have become a hallmark of the Mindroeling tradition. This important Nyingma teaching tradition was founded by the famous teacher and treasure discoverer Rigzin Terdag Lingpa Gyurme Dorje (Rig 'dzin Gter bdag gling pa 'Gyur med rdo rje, 1674-1714), the great abbot of Mindroeling monastery in Central Tibet, which he had established in 1676, and his younger brother Lochen Dharmashri (Lo chen Dharma shri, 1654-1717).<sup>23</sup> Enacted before large audiences of both clergy and laypeople over a period of several days, these spectacular public ritual ceremonies necessitated resources that only a large and wealthy monastery could provide. The ritual dances that figured prominently in many of Terdag Lingpa's newly introduced public festivals were performed by highly educated monks, often in large numbers, who had received a solid training in monastic dances.<sup>24</sup> These elaborate ritual ceremonies were created by Terdag Lingpa (1646-1714) and his younger brother Lochen Dharmashri (1654-1717) as an efficacious device in their effort to reunite the warring factions of the Nyingma order and thus to consolidate the "Old School" through new large-scale public festivals.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Tucci (1988: 115).

<sup>22</sup> Tucci (1988: 150).

<sup>23</sup> For the teaching tradition of Mindroeling refer to Kohn (1997: 368; 2001: XXX, 3f., 10, 15f., 35, 49-52). For the life and spiritual achievements of Terdag Lingpa, who is revered as the second-most important master of the "Old School", and the translator Lochen Dharmashri refer to Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, Vol. I: 825-834 and 728-732.

<sup>24</sup> For brief descriptions of this kind of elaborate sacred dance as created by Terdag Lingpa and performed in Mindroeling since the end of the 17th century until 1959, thereafter restarted in exile in 1991, refer to Dalton (2002: 34, 204, 206). – This valuable treatise was kindly made available to me by Ehrhard.

<sup>25</sup> See Dalton (2002:8).

It is of particular significance that the creation of these new grand public ceremonies at Mindroeling for political reasons was also inspired by the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatsho (1617-1682), who at the same time similarly instituted a range of new public festivals in his mission to build and consolidate the new Tibetan state that he had founded in 1642 with the help of Gushri Khan (1582-1655), the chief of the Qosot Mongols.<sup>26</sup> As R.J. Kohn observes, Terdag Lingpa occupies a special position in the history of Tibetan sacred dances, as he was instrumental in making *'cham* a national phenomenon in Tibet.<sup>27</sup> According to Kohn it is also said that the sacred dances that form an essential part of many of Terdag Lingpa's newly created Nyingma public festivals inspired his older contemporary and spiritual friend, the Fifth Dalai Lama, to introduce similar dances to the Gelug school.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, both traditions of sacred masked dance celebrations as staged in Solu-Khumbu have their source of origin in the teaching tradition of Mindroeling, the most important monastery of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism in Central Tibet. It was Zatul Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (rDza sprul Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin nor bu, 1866-1940), the abbot of Dzarongphu monastery in the Dingri area on the northern side of the Everest range who brought the *Mani Rimdu* traditions to his monastery.<sup>29</sup> Having adapted them into their present form he used this particular Mindroeling tradition as the basis for the liturgy for the creation of the *Mani Rimdu* festival that is celebrated in present-day Solu-Khumbu. As to the sacred dances, he took the majority of the *'cham* from a monastery in Tsang province in Central Tibet to which he added some of the dances from Mindroeling.<sup>30</sup> According to R.J. Kohn the performance of the *Mani Rimdu* at Dzarongphuk began between 1907 and 1910, and from there it was transmitted to Solu-Khumbu, about 1940.<sup>31</sup> It is enacted in public rituals annually at different times at only the three monasteries of Tengboche (October) and Thame (May) in Khumbu and of Chiwong (November) in Solu.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Dalton (2002: 8, 206-209).

<sup>27</sup> Kohn (2001:56).

<sup>28</sup> Kohn (2001:49).

<sup>29</sup> For the history of Dzarongphu monastery and the life, achievements, and the spiritual influence of the charismatic *Dzatul* Ngawang Tenzin Norbu 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 Aziz (1978: 209-211); Diemberger (1992: 2-5, 3-4 and 3-5; pagination acc. to chapters!). For Ngawang Tenzin Norbu's creation of the *Mani Rimdu* festival refer to R.J. Kohn (2001: 4, 51-3.).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51f.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52f.

<sup>32</sup>As R.J. Kohn observes, although the liturgical text and the complex of rituals are the same, the ritual performance of the *Mani Rimdu* differs slightly at each monastery (2001:4).

The *Dumji* festival has been held traditionally in the five village communities of Pangboche, Thame, Khumjung, Nauche and Rimishung in Khumbu and in Gompa Zhung, Sagar-Bhakanje, and Goli in the southern region of Solu.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the clear-cut history of the *Mani Rimdu* based on just one liturgical text as it is performed in Solu-Khumbu, the history of the *Dumji* among the Sherpas is more complex and thus more difficult to trace, since each village community where it is held has a distinct tradition of its own which also includes as its key element the basic text or collection of texts used as liturgy.<sup>34</sup>

### 3. The tradition of the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung

Inspired by an influential lama in south-western Tibet the tradition of the *Dumji* came to Gompa Zhung some time after 1850. Shortly before the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a number of charismatic Sherpa village priests travelled to the region of Mang yul in Tibet to study with the Trakar Taso Tulku Mipham Choki Wangchuk (Brag dkar rta so sPrul sku Chos kyi dbang phyug, 1775-1837).<sup>35</sup> This famous master gave them instructions and empowerments of a number of ritual and meditational cycles which have been practiced in the context of communal ceremonies throughout the villages of Solu-Khumbu up to the present day. Choki Wangchuk practiced the teaching tradition of Mindroeling in central Tibet. Moreover, being committed to an encompassing approach to the teachings of the Nyingma school, Choki Wangchuk also transmitted the ritual cycles of the “Northern Treasures” of revealed literature (*byang gter*).

*Terma* (Tib. *gter ma*) or treasures are religious texts and diverse sacred objects concealed by Padmasambhava, his consort Yeshe Tsogyal, Vimalamitra and other masters. Later, “...when the time was ripe for disciples to be trained...”, they have been discovered by the reincarnations of those disciples of Padmasambhava who were prophesized as *terton* (Tib.

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<sup>33</sup> *Dumji* traditions have disappeared in some places whereas in others the same or a slightly different tradition has been invented. In at least five instances, the tradition of performing the *Dumji* festival among the Sherpas has become extinct in the last three decades. On the other hand, in at least four localities the *Dumji* celebration has been instituted in the same time span. Moreover, in 1993 the married lama of Chialsa Gompa in Solu started the sacred masked dances called *Guru Tsengyed* (Tib. *Gu ru mtshan brgyad*, ‘the eight different aspects of Padmasambhava’). This tradition, among others also linked with Mindroeling, was wholly unconnected with Sherpa Buddhism. It was Dilgo Khentse Rinpoche (1910-91) who had advised the Chialsa lama to establish this new tradition of sacred dances at his gompa. Through the help of the former head of the Nyingma school (from 1987 until 1991) the monks of Chialsa gompa received a sound training in the practice of *cham* at Shechen gompa in Bodhnath.

<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, space forbids going into the different local traditions in this paper.

<sup>35</sup> This eminent Nyingma teacher was instrumental in the transmission and spread of the *terma* teachings of his school in the Tibetan-Nepalese borderlands. On the achievements and the spiritual career of this master refer to Ehrhard (1993: 93, n.31 and 32; 1997: 255).

*gter ston*) or treasure revealers, explains Dudjom Rinpoche.<sup>36</sup> The *terma* tradition represents the interrupted as opposed to the orderly oral transmission of the continuous (*bka' ma*) instruction, both of which represent the two important traditions of instruction among the Old School.<sup>37</sup>

The *byang gter* lineage represents a complete system of treasure-teachings within the Nyingma school which were first revealed by the visionary Rigzin Godem (Rig 'dzin Rgod kyi ldem 'phru ca, 1357-1408) in the year 1366.<sup>38</sup> It was this great master, who being one of its main revealers, established the tradition of the “Northern Treasure Texts” in Tibet. After a difficult beginning at another place the lineage of the “Northern Treasures” of ritual and meditational cycles found its centre at Dorje Drag, the second major monastic institution of the “Ancient Translation School” in central Tibet since its foundation in 1610. From then until 1959 the “Northern Treasures” have been a major religious system that controlled over fifty monasteries. It is of significance that Dudjom Rinpoche puts strong emphasis on the eminently political nature of the Northern Treasure tradition of revealed literature.<sup>39</sup> Certain of its rituals concerned with the “expulsion of armed forces” (*dmag bzlog*) were used, against invading Mongol armies, and this sometimes led to the persecution of this sub-school of the Nyingma order.

According to the *byang gter* chronicles, cultic texts and ritual practices concerning the fierce deity *Vajrakīla* were among the many teachings transmitted to Tibetan devotees by the Indian tantric master and sage Padmasambhava in the eighth century. The *terma* texts of the “Northern Treasures” center on the cult of the deity *Vajrakīla*, a wrathful emanation of

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. 1991 (vol. I: 782).

<sup>37</sup> For this refer to Smith (2001: 15). The third stream of transmission of the Nyingma tradition is that of the “profound pure visions” (*zab mo dag snang*) in which Padmasambhava in person appears to the treasure-revealer and transmits a treasure to him.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Boord (1993: 2). The life and spiritual achievements of Rigzin Godemcen and the history of the Northern Treasure tradition, its ritual cycles and practices is described in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 (Vol. I: 780-83). – The line of reincarnations of Rigzin Godemcen as the lineage-holders of the Northern Treasure tradition is sketched by Karmay (2002: 32-3). Whereas recently M.T. Kapstein has recalled that the system of the Northern Treasures “remains so far unstudied” (2001: 209, fn. 66), a detailed overview of the history of the Northern Treasure tradition has already been given by Boord (1993:21-35). See also Dalton (2002: 165-89).

<sup>39</sup> According to him the *byang gter* tradition “...contains, without omission, everything that anyone might require for increasing the teaching, turning back invading armies, terminating infestuous disease, the pacification of civil war, exorcism of Gongpo spirits, restauration of governmental authority, and the control of epidemics and plagues. It contains various ways to promote the happiness of Tibet, (...), and also the notices and keys for many sacred places and lands, this single treasure is universally known to resemble a minister who beneficially serves all Tibet and Kham.” Cf. 1991 (Vol. I: 782).

Padmasambhava. The Sanskrit term *Vajrakīla* is rendered in Tibetan as Dorje Phurpa, the deity of the *phur bu*, the ritual dagger, which is another name for the fierce aspect of Padmasambhava called Dorje Zhonnu.<sup>40</sup> Within the *kīla* cult in which the deity *Vajrakīla* is worshiped, *kīla* is a weapon of ritual magic. It is the foremost ritual emblem of the *byang gter* tradition; and *vajra* is originally the thunderbolt of the Indian god Indra. Since one of the stated aims of the *kīla* doctrines is to provide a method for the subjugation of “all enemies and obstructors”, the cult was readily able to assimilate troublesome local gods and demons wherever it spread.<sup>41</sup>

One of the Sherpa village lamas who travelled to Mang yul to study with the Trakar Taso Tulku was the learned Nyangrig Dorje Jigdral of the Lamaserwa clan in Gompa Zhung. Choki Wangchuk inspired the introduction of the *Dumji* in Gompa Zhung that represents a combination of Dorje Drak rituals of the Northern Treasures tradition and the tradition of Mindroeling *sgrub chen* practices and its sacred dances. Moreover, Choki Wangchuk compiled the basic liturgical text *byang gter phur pa* that is used for the performance of the festival in Gompa Zhung. It consists of four different treasure-texts unearthed by two different treasure-revealers of the *byang gter* tradition. It was this treasure-text that Choki Wangchuk transmitted to Dorje Jigdral after having received the instructions and the initiation for its ritual use. Dorje Jigdral passed on the received teachings to his own disciples. These teachings have been transmitted within the Nyang family of Gompa Zhung in one line of village lamas from Dorje Jigdral down to the present village lama, Lama Tenzing (bLa-ma bstan 'dzin, b. 1939). According to Lama Tenzing's information he has presided over the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung since the death of his father and predecessor eighteen years ago.

#### **4. Meaning and general structure of the *Dumji* festival and its ritual performance according to the distinct local tradition of Gompa Zhung**

The *Dumji* festival focuses on offerings and requests to the gods and on offerings and threats to the demons. After a distribution of ritual foods to all those present, it closes with a “long life blessing” ceremony (*tshe dbang*). In other words *Dumji* represents a ritual ceremony performed to propitiate the deities by prayer (*gsol 'debs*) and to worship them by meditation and offerings in order to secure their benevolence, protection and help while, on the other hand, exorcising the evil forces from the local community. To

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<sup>40</sup> Dorje Zhonnu is depicted in Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 (Vol. I: 482).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Boord 1993, p. 8; Boord also highlights the history, iconography, and religious chronicles of the *kīla* and the Northern Treasures *kīla*, see pp. 39-251. On the cult of *Vajrakīla* in Tibetan Buddhism see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991 (Vol. I: 710-716); Mayer 1996; Khenpo Namdrol 1999; Smith (2001: 238-9).

accomplish all this, the elaborate religious celebration that is based on a complex set of several different ritual categories extends over a period of five days.

The main ritual acts include the purification of the ritual space (*bsang*), the calling or invocation of both the transcendental and the local deities<sup>42</sup> (*'spyan drang*), the offering of place (*bshugs pa*), the offering (*mchod pa*) consisting of seven substances<sup>43</sup>, praise (*bstod pa*), supplication (*'phrin las bcol ba*), and recitation of mantra (*bzlas pa*) in the course of meditation. In this context music, chanted *mantra* (the sound-form which represents and is the deity), *sādhana* (the ritual prescription for the visualization and proper worship of the central deity including a description of the deity's form and attributes), dance movements with masks and costumes, ritual objects, especially the ritual dagger called *phur bu*, and *mudrā* (symbolic hand gestures) come together and create a carefully prepared and well organized performance of gods and goddesses dancing on the local ground of the celebrating community. According to my lama informants the medium of tantric dance is regarded as the necessary guarantee for the power of certain important ritual activities. Musical instruments such as bell, cymbal, long horn, oboe, big drum and small hand drum are used for invocation and veneration of the deities. Their use enriches the ritual performance with power and blessings.

Usually the masked dance ceremony builds on three different acts: (a) a preparatory phase of meditation by all performers within the temple on the *yi dam* or patron deity concerned, as well as an empowerment of the *gtor zor* or 'defensive weapon' represented by a ritual cake (*gtor ma*) later to be cast against the evil forces; (b) the public performance in the courtyard which reaches its climax in the exorcism of evil forces (*gtor zlog*); and (c) the dissolution phase within the temple where the performers' visualisations of the deities involved are dissolved into emptiness.

A *'cham* performance such as the *Dumji* festival just as any other important ritual celebration generally provides the possibility for the "two pursuits of life" (Tib. *tshogs gnyi*)<sup>44</sup>: the accumulation of both religious merit (Tib. *bsod nams*) for a favourable rebirth and of mundane wealth. For the clergy, however, the main reason to perform the masked dance consists in the symbolic expulsion of the accumulated evils of the past year that harm the Buddha's teachings and all sentient beings.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the dancers

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<sup>42</sup> Transcendental deities can lead to enlightenment and can offer any kind of help in this world and the world beyond. Local deities can offer help and protection in this world only.

<sup>43</sup> These seven substances are: 1. drink, 2. purified water including *nyer spyod*, i.e. "the five kinds of offerings to be made to the gods in worshipping them": 1. flowers, 2. incense, 3. lamps, 4. odours, 5. eatables (Das 1989: 488).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Das (1989: 1033).

<sup>45</sup> Owing to this important function Richardson (1993: 123) has called these dances "protracted rites of catharsis."

believed to procure blessings (*byin rlabs*) for all participants, to generate faith in the Buddhist Dharma in both the lay people and the lamas, and to ease the way to enlightenment (*byang chub*). At the same time the lamas use the *'cham* performance as an impressive means of instruction of the lay population by depicting the supremacy of the Buddhist *dharma* while at the same time entertaining them.<sup>46</sup>

For the people of the local community, however, the *Dumji* festival also serves their mundane existential needs as it marks with the transition to spring time the beginning of the agricultural cycle.<sup>47</sup> The local deities to be worshiped can offer help and protection in this-worldly affairs only. They reside in specific locations and grant their help if they have been properly worshiped. The Sherpas turn to these deities to make them grant general well-being and prosperity. The requests directed to the local deities concern health and well-being = the prosperity of agriculture, cattle and trade as the three pillars of the Sherpas' economy; protection from natural disasters such as hail, landslides and earthquakes, and progeny. The *Dumji* festival represents the major cult of the local divinities that is performed within the framework of the worship of the central deity on which the *Dumji* celebration focuses. The local divinities and their worship is contained in the sacred book that serves as liturgy and is recited by the practitioners on the first three days of the festival.

The general ritual structure of the *Dumji* celebration among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu is as follows. Beginning one week before the festival, the village lama performs a daily reading of a *kangso* text in worship of the local and regional protective deities as well as their clan deities.<sup>48</sup> It is this act practiced in solitary retreat in the village gompa that necessarily precedes the celebration of the *Dumji* festival.

On the first day a juniper-burning offering ritual (*bsang*) usually performed in the morning ensures the purification of the relationship to the gods and of the site.<sup>49</sup> Another important ritual act is the circumambulation (*skor*) of the village temple complex by all sixteen performing lamas. On the second day at night there is a long dance rehearsal without masks, while on

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<sup>46</sup> This paedagogical aspect is noted by Stein (1987: 126); and in the context of the *Mani Rimdu* by Jerstad (1969: 3,74). In personal conversation with lamas the complaint as to the lack of knowledge among the laypeople concerning both the history of Tibetan Buddhism and of Sherpa Buddhism is a recurrent theme.

<sup>47</sup> In the southern region of Solu the *Dumji* festival is held in the months of March or April, whereas in the northern Khumbu region where spring is later it is enacted in April or May.

<sup>48</sup> Das (1989: 121) renders Tib. *Bskang gso* as 'to make copious religious services to the tutelar deities, angels, and the guardian spirits of the ten quarters'. S.G. Karmay renders the term as 'atonement ritual' (1988: 238). On the *kangso* celebration as performed in Solu cf. Berg (1998: 24-5).

<sup>49</sup> On the ritual of purification (Tib. *bsang*) cf. Karmay 1998b. In fact there are two different categories of *bsang* rituals: *klu bsang* as to the worship of the aquatic serpent deity, and the *lha bsang* concerning the worship of the transcendent deities.

the third day the *'cham*, the full set of masked dances consisting of a total of eleven dances, is enacted. The public performance in the courtyard begins in the late afternoon and lasts until around nine o'clock at night. The clerics regard this particular act as the most solemn part of the *Dumji* ceremony. It reaches its climax in the exorcism of evil forces (*gtor zlog*). On the first three days the ritual activities were devoted exclusively to warding off evil spirits harmful to the Buddhist dharma and to all sentient beings, on the fourth day starting in the late afternoon a "long life empowerment" ceremony (Sherpa *whong*; Tib. *tshe dbang*) is conducted. The latter seems to be of utmost importance to the lay audience because of the complex "long life blessing" which is bestowed at its end on all people lined up in a queue. Its major components are: (a) long life pill (*tshe ril*), (b) long life beer (*tshe chang*), (c) long life torma (*tshe gtor*), (d) long life water (*tshe chu*) and (e) ritual arrow made out of bamboo (*mda' dar*). The blessing by the sacred book used as liturgy is executed by the presiding tantric village lama, the blessing by the ritual arrow by his assistant. Then follows the distribution of the aforementioned components of this blessing from the hands of other village lamas. The diverse variations of this structure according to the distinct local traditions notwithstanding, meditation, offering and dance with costumes and masks constitute the key elements of the *Dumji* ceremony.

The enactment of the *Dumji* masked dance drama in Gompa Zhung extends over a period of five days. On each of these days a part of the liturgical text is read by the lamas in the village temple. The beginning of the ritual celebration is marked by a *pūjā* in commemoration and worship of Dorje Zangbu, the village's founding lama who is regarded as the mythical ancestor and culture hero of the Lamaserwa patrilineage in Solu, at the small *stūpa* which contains his relics. In the early afternoon the juniper-burning ritual ensures the purification of the site. This ritual act is followed by the circumambulation (*skor*) of the village temple (*gompa*; Tib. *dgon pa*) and an offering to the guardian kings of the four quarters (*phyogs skyong rgyal po*). After night has fallen the tantric village lama performs the Black Hat Dance. Following the ritual of "taming" the evil forces by summoning them into a small cloth doll effigy of entirely featureless human shape called *ling ga*, this tantric dance reaches its climax when the *ling ga* is pushed by the lama's foot into a triangular pit in the courtyard. It is immediately covered with one of the flagstones that pave the courtyard.

On the second day at night there is a long dance rehearsal with almost no audience apart from small children and few old people. On the third day the full masked dance performance consisting of a total of eleven different dances is enacted at night. The clerics regard the performance of the sacred dances as the most solemn part of the *Dumji* festival. The dance performances include, among others, one dance each of Gonpo (Tib. *Nag po chen po*, Skt. *Mahākāla*), of the lion-faced goddess Senge Dongma (Tib. *Seng ge gdong ma*, Skt. *Simhavaktra*) and of Palden Lhamo (*dPal ldan lha*

*mo*, Skt. *Śrī Devī*), the chief-guardian goddess of the Tibetan Buddhist Pantheon. The *'cham* performance culminates in the exorcism of evil forces (*gtor zlog*) which are represented by an effigy made of a sacrificial dough cake (*gtor ma*). The exorcism is effected by the tantric village lama who in the course of meditation, first in retreat, then in public, invokes and subsequently becomes the central deity. Someone has to carry the effigy along the path marked by two parallel white lines made of *tshampa* dough that leads down to the place of the village area below the main *stūpa* where it is cast away. The person on whom the burden falls to cast it away has to be a social outsider, usually a person of low status like a *Kāmī*, or someone from another ethnic group, thereby acting like a scapegoat.

On the fourth day starting in the late afternoon, after the “long life empowerment” ceremony (*whong*; Tib. *tshē dbang*), the more than one-and-a-half hour long colourful public “long life blessing” seems to be the most important aspect of this festival for the assembled laity. Its typical feature is the ordered chaos of a crushing crowd in an almost trance-like state while the uninterrupted blowing of the oboes, signifying the presence of the deities, keep the festival’s atmosphere at its climax, lasting for about one and a half hours. On the fifth day the *Dumji* celebration concludes with the *kutshab ternga* ceremony in the village temple.

An important part of the festival is constituted by the ritual activities of invocation, offering, and worship of the high deities as well as the local gods. The latter are represented by two different effigies each of which are made of sacrificial dough cakes (*gtor ma*). One of each is placed on the altar in the temple, whereas the other one is put on the second altar in the center of the courtyard. Most prominent among the local protective deities are the male god (*lha*) of the inhabited land (*yul*) of the Solu region (*Shorong Yullha*, Tib. *Gshong rong yul lha*) named Tashi Palpoche (Tib. *bKra shis dpal po che*, Nep. Numbur) and the aquatic divinity Lumo Karmo (Tib. *Klu mo dkar mo*, i.e. white female *nāginī* or serpent deity). Both of these local deities are particularly venerated for their care and protection of the mundane well-being of the whole region.<sup>50</sup> According to the acting lamas the most important marker of local distinctiveness is the *kutshab ternga pūjā*, held on the fifth and concluding day, and the blessing by that sacred statue.

The *kutshab ternga* are the “five treasure representations” of Guru Padmasambhava, the Indian tantric master and sage who according to the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism was instrumental in the introduction and establishment of the Buddhist doctrine in Tibet.<sup>51</sup> Padmasambhava is

<sup>50</sup> On the worship of the local and regional protector deities in Gompa Zhung cf. Berg 1998.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Das (1989: 90): *sku tshab*: – ‘a representative’ (i.e. a statue or sacred text representing a deity, in this context: a statue of Guru Rinpoche – E.B.); *gter*, ‘treasure’, i.e. Buddhist scriptures and sacred objects hidden by Guru Padmasambhava and other tantric masters; – *nga*, ‘five’.

said to have created these five statues himself and to have hidden them, one of them in Tsibri, at the time of his departure from the Land of Snows for the protection and well-being of the Tibetan people. Hence these *kutshab ternga* statues are endowed with a very special power (*byin rlabs*) for the adherents of the Nyingma school, and consequently they bestow tremendous merit on those who receive their blessing.

Of these five sacred statues the Lamaserwa clan owns one. No other village gumpa in the whole Sherpa area of Solu-Khumbu owns an extremely sacred and powerful statue of Guru Padmasambhava of comparable religious importance. According to their written tradition its owner Sungden Dorje gave the sacred statue to Dorje Zangbo, their mythical hero, while he had been studying for three years in Tibet.<sup>52</sup> The *kutshab ternga* statue in Gumpa Zhung represents a lama with a typical hat sitting in meditation posture on a lotus throne. Its size is only about ten centimeters and it is made of clay that is covered with a layer of gold. It is kept in a finely crafted silver box that is decorated with jewels and stored in a separate room on the upper floor of the village temple. Laypeople have access to it only for a short while on the fifth and last day of the *Dumji* festival when it is taken out to be displayed in public for the blessing. The village lama blesses people by touching the crown of their heads with the statue.

As already mentioned, the *Dumji* festival staged in the temple of a village community is enacted by tantric lay practitioners, i.e. married householder lamas. The sacred dances on occasion of the *Dumji* ceremony are performed according to the same patterns such as those of the monastic counterpart, the *Mani Rimdu*, but in a markedly less elaborate mode. In their village community the ritual performers are all indiscriminately referred to as “lamas”. As a rule, monks neither officiate at nor attend village ceremonies with the exception of funerals.<sup>53</sup> But, as happens in Gumpa Zhung, a monk may officiate at the *Dumji* performance in his capacity as member of the celebrating clan. He acts as the head lama’s assistant and as such he is regarded as the second village lama of the Lamaserwa clan community.

The majority of Sherpa men have had some instruction in reading, writing and the fundamentals of religion either in a monastery or from a lama whether as novice, lay student or ordained monk who may have later on broken the vows and chosen the secular life of a married householder. Thus, most Sherpa men are able to at least read and chant some of the basic religious texts, play some of the musical instruments and officiate in support of the village lama in the context of the performance of village ceremonies.

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Macdonald (1987b: 71f.).

<sup>53</sup> On the existing deep cleavage between these two kinds of religious practitioners in Sherpa Buddhism – the celibate lamas, monks, and nuns on the one side and the married householder lamas on the other – which is due to still rising pressure from the religious establishments that has been felt since their emergence in the early twenties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the effected changes cf. Ortner (1995: 359; 377; 1999: 171-75, 262-72).

Owing to this fairly high standard of religious education among men – absent among women – the local Sherpa community is almost self-sufficient in its religious affairs.

In most cases a local community among the Sherpas consists of scattered hamlets and isolated homesteads that are centered around the *gompa* of a village. Composed either of a single clan as in the exceptional case of Gompa Zhung or of several clans as in all other seven localities where *Dumji* is celebrated, it consists of a group of families linked by one or more relationships which favours concerted action in the general organization of both secular and religious activities. Daily life revolves around the village *gompa*. Buddhist precepts and practices govern, at least ideally, the conduct of the Sherpas' spiritual and worldly affairs such as farming, herding, and trading.

The householder lamas form a body which conducts the annual liturgical ceremonies in the village temple as well as the domestic rituals, both of which are based in the Sherpa Buddhist scriptural tradition. Apart from that they are in charge of the maintenance of the temple and of the administration of the temple funds. Moreover, they have to perform various tasks before, during and after the religious ceremonies.

As far as the *Dumji* festival is concerned, the current hereditary village lama presiding over the celebration had received the initiation and empowerment (*dbang*) for the ritual enactment of the ceremony in direct transmission from his father, his predecessor, and two other village lamas from the Lamaserwa clan. From his father he had also learnt the movements of the different dances, the way of chanting, the words that are chanted and their order in a lineage from teacher to student that is regarded as the only way to impart the tradition from one generation to the other. It is significant that the village lama's father had not only received the usual transmission, initiation and empowerment necessary for the proper enactment of the *Dumji* ritual cycle within the paternal lineage. The latter had also received the instructions and empowerments directly from the abbot and the monastic community at the newly established Tengboche monastery (1916). As has been already mentioned above, its wealthy founder, Ngawang Norbu Zangbu (Ngag dbang nor bu bzang po, 1848-1934), popularly known as Lama Gulu, had brought the Mindroeling tradition including the sacred masked dances at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to Solu-Khumbu from the aforementioned Ngawang Tenzin Norbu (1867-1940), the lama of Dzarongphu Gompa situated in the Dingri area just on the northern side of Mt. Everest.

As is customary among Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, the present village lama's father was eager to regenerate his ritual knowledge and power by way of the most direct link with the teaching tradition to which the ritual cycle of the *Dumji* celebration belongs. At this time the tradition was represented in person among the Sherpas by Ngawang Norbu Zangbu to

whom not only many monks, but also many of his contemporaries among the village lamas travelled to receive their religious education. It is from this Sherpa lama that the latter received, among other things, the direct explanations and instructions as to the Mindroeling teaching tradition to which the ritual cycle of the *Dumji* celebration belongs, including the sacred dances. According to my information it was this particular regeneration of their ritual knowledge through this eminent Sherpa lama of Solu-Khumbu in the early 20th century that enabled the village lamas to correctly perform the same *Dumji* festival but enacted each on the basis of a distinct local tradition.

All the masks and costumes used for the celebration of the festival were crafted by religiously trained artisans of the Lamaserwa clan. In fact, in Gompa Zhung all masks and costumes are of considerable age and none of the religious artisans who had created them is still alive. But none of my lama informants seemed to worry particularly about the fact that today there are no young Sherpa artisans to continue with these traditions of religious craftsmanship. The usual pragmatic answer is that in case the community has to celebrate an important festival but lacks officiating lamas, masks, costumes, musical instruments or other ritual paraphernalia, all kinds of help is granted by the two monasteries in the valley, which were founded and organized by clerics of the Lamaserwa clan, and also by nearby Serlo Gompa founded and managed by abbots of the Thaktho (*Gragstho*) clan. Moreover, it is added, it has become common practice today among the Sherpas to purchase most of their religious items in the shops around the great *stūpa* at Bodnath, northeast of Kathmandu, where they are cheaper.

### **5. Local *Dumji* performance, festival patronage, and Sherpa identity**

It has to be noted that among the Sherpas the *Dumji* festival with its colourful masked dances was not instituted in the interest of a political or stately power such as happened with public festivals in Tibet or Bhutan, but solely by the Sherpa people of the eight localities where it is held.<sup>54</sup> In each case the *Dumji* was introduced thanks to the initiative of a charismatic village lama. The celebration of the *Dumji* festival is the major festive occasion on which the two categories of “place” and “territory” come together and thus have a direct bearing on Sherpa identity and its different layers.

The *Dumji* celebration in Gompa Zhung is embedded in the history of the Lamaserwa clan that is rooted in its geographical territory as symbolized

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<sup>54</sup> For the political purpose of the establishment of new public festivals in Tibet and Bhutan in which sacred dances figured prominently see Macdonald (1987: 10f.). For the sacred dances as performed in Bhutan refer to Aris (1976: 612f.); Pommaret (2002: 175). As to the staging of sacred dances in various public ceremonies of the Lhasa year until 1959 cf. Richardson (1993: 7ff.)

by the heroic deeds of the mythical ancestor, which he had performed at certain places, and the local protective deities. Both the former and the latter are being worshiped in its course. Hence the ritual ceremony gives a collective identity to the celebrating Lamaserwa clan community. As such it can be regarded as an elaborate ritual self-enactment of the Lamaserwa clan and its history which is clearly mirrored by the fact that Sherpas of other origin may take part solely as simple marginal spectators. At the same time the *Dumji* festival represents the traditional link between the Lamaserwa community as part of the Sherpa ethnic group and Tibetan Buddhism. The *Dumji* festival builds upon crucial episodes and several matters such as the liturgical text belonging to the *terma* tradition and the *kutshab ternga* statue which are at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism and its history in the Land of Snows. Consequently, in the course of their *Dumji* festival the members of the Lamaserwa clan celebrate their clan community as a whole thereby also reaffirming their individual clan membership. Moreover, this is the ritual in which they celebrate themselves as both Sherpas and Tibetan Buddhists, clearly belonging to the Tibetan cultural realm.

In fact, the Sherpas are not only proud of being Sherpas, but they consider themselves as both Sherpas and Tibetan Buddhists. Religion is the distinctive idiom – as it is to Tibetans in general – in which the Sherpas present themselves in their dealings with Hindus or people of other ethnic origin, whereas the reference to locality is employed in their interaction with both Sherpas of other regions and Tibetans and also with other Nepali people.<sup>55</sup>

It is predominantly in the context of the major local religious celebration of the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung that the individual as well as the communal identity of the members of the Lamaserwa clan is moulded and given its particular character. Moreover, the worship of the regional protective deities such as the male god of the inhabited land of the Solu region – *Shorong Yullha* – in its course constitutes the regional identity of the Solu Sherpas as opposed to that of the Khumbu Sherpas who during the corresponding ritual events venerate the *Khumbu Yullha*. It is only on this festive occasion that all the people of the Lamaserwa clan unite once a year with both the high gods and their local deities to protect their people and territory against evil forces and to secure the benevolence and help of the deities, thus reaffirming the future well-being of their community. Here it may suffice to quote the view of a Sherpa business man who has been living with his wife and children permanently in Kathmandu for more than a decade and who had come to Gompa Zhung for the *Dumji* in 2002 to fulfill his duty to act as one of the four annual sponsors of the festival. His view,

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<sup>55</sup> These two markers of Sherpa identity are shared by all other of Nepal's Tibetan speaking groups. Ramble (1997: 379) has pointed out in a comprehensive treatment that the identity of the Bhotiyas, the indigenous Tibetan-speaking people of Nepal, is based on religion and "...very largely on their association with a limited territory."

articulated with great pride of Sherpa culture and religion, is illustrative of the eminent double function that the *Dumji* celebration fulfills in the local Sherpa community and that the average Sherpa is fully aware of:

Today, many Sherpas have left their local community in Solu-Khumbu and many others follow them for a variety of reasons. They live in Kathmandu, but a steadily growing number of Sherpas have established themselves abroad. But nevertheless, we keep our houses and fields, and often a part of the family remains. We Lamaserwa people try to return, at least, for the annual *Dumji* festival. If one's term has come to assume the role of the *zhindak* on that occasion we do our best to arrange our business schedule accordingly, even if one lives in Europe, Japan, or in the United States. The celebration of the *Dumji* is necessary as only this guarantees the help and blessings of our deities without which we cannot exist. Moreover, it ensures the well-being and cooperation of our Lamaserwa community here in Gompa Zhung just as it does in the case of all other communities in Solu-Khumbu where the *Dumji* is celebrated.. As you have seen, the celebration of our *Dumji* brings us all together. And since it forces us to act as *zhindak* in this context at least once in our life-time we all contribute to be brought together at least on occasion of this annual festive event. Indeed, without the proper annual celebration of *Dumji* the continuity of our religion and culture will be broken and as Sherpas we will be lost.

Accordingly, I suggest that for the celebrating Lamaserwa clan community the *Dumji* festival can be understood as a “ritual of unity and identity”.<sup>56</sup>

In Sherpa culture practically all communal celebrations are based upon the social institution called *zhindak*<sup>57</sup> (Tib. *sbyin bdag* – Skt. *dānapati*). 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”.<sup>58</sup> Sponsorship of the annual local celebrations is considered to be one of the main communal duties of each head of a nuclear family household. However, sponsorship in the case of *Dumji*, being the Sherpas' most

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<sup>56</sup> Pommaret (2002) has analyzed the annual sacred dances in the Paro Valley in Bhutan, a territory which is represented by its local divinity. According to her these dances reveal the identity of the people of the central valley of Paro (p. 175). Other valuable contributions to the question of identity-building in the context of the worship of the local protector deities cf. Diemberger (1994: 144); Kind (2002: 271, 285f.).

<sup>57</sup> In a comprehensive treatise Ruegg (1995) has highlighted the ancient Tibetan relation between a lama, the religious officiant/counsellor/spiritual preceptor as donee (*mchod gnas*) and the royal lay donor (*yon bdag*). On the the institution of the *zhindak* in Sherpa society in general cf. Ortner (1998: 23-29); in the particular context of the *Dumji* festival in Gompa Zhung cf. E. Berg 2003; in the context of the *Dumji* festival as held in Khumbu where the sponsor is called *lawa* cf. Fürer-Haimendorf (1964: 185-208).

<sup>58</sup> Das 1989: 939.

important annual celebration in village ceremonial life extending over five days, involves considerable resources so that many householders have to save money for quite a few years in advance to meet the expenses involved.

Each local community where *Dumji* is celebrated has a traditionally fixed set of special patron organizers – mostly four or eight – called either *zhindak* or, more specifically, *chiwa* (Tib. *spyi pa*) who are in charge of the full preparation and organization of the festival. S.Ch. Das renders this term as ‘head, chief, leader, superintendent’.<sup>59</sup> In this context the *Dumji chiwa* acts predominantly both as ‘superintendent’ and as ‘steward’ translated by C. Ramble.<sup>60</sup> This office rotates annually according to differing schemes among the number of households which constitute the local community. It is the temple-committee (Tib. *tshogs pa*) that usually selects the *chiwas* for the following year’s festival. This 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 *chiwas*.<sup>61</sup> This register is kept in the *gompa*.

The *chiwa*’s duties are manifold, the most important one being organisational such as fund raising, collecting of grain, providing of all food, and the execution of the festival. Together with their wives and daughters the *chiwas* are responsible for catering, either for all the people present or for the officiating performers only. Their wives have also to brew a considerable quantity of *chang*, the Tibetan beer made of buckwheat, millet, corn or rice, to be consumed in the festival’s course.

Among the Sherpas, to act as *chiwa* for the celebration of the *Dumji* constitutes the most important communal duty of the married householders which has to be performed at least once, sometimes even twice in his life-time. If a Sherpa for some reason is incapable to meet these obligations in one year the order of rotation may be changed even for a certain time. But permanent exemption from this communal duty is impossible as it results in the loss of full membership in the local community.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 806.

<sup>60</sup> Ramble (1987: 228). In his Ph.D. thesis (1984: 283-335) on the local community of Bonpo householder priests of Lubra in Western Nepal Ramble has presented one of the most detailed description of the economics of ritual and festival patronage in the Tibetan cultural realm. It seems that the system of festival patronage as practiced among the Sherpas of Gompa Zhung is very different and far less complex when compared to the economic organisation of village rituals and the patronage system of the Lubragpas. Their *sbyar tshogs* (‘combined accumulation’) system of patronage (p. 297, 331) operates through accumulating donations and using them as capital which is invested in trade. For a recent contribution on festival patronage see the paper on lay sponsors of communal rituals and their involvement in the revival of Bon monasticism in Amdo Shar khog by Schrempf 2000.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 588.

In the course of the *Dumji* celebration, membership in the local Sherpa community is celebrated and reaffirmed by the social institution of festival patronage. As far as the process of identity building in Sherpa culture is concerned (which is primarily constituted within the local community), the *Dumji* patron, organizer, and steward assumes a key role. According to the norms of Sherpa society it constitutes an important civic duty of the married householder to act as patron or *chiwa* of the *Dumji* festival at least once, sometimes even twice in his life-time. Mostly people know beforehand when their turn as patron is likely to come. This knowledge is important as many householders have to save for quite a long time to be able to cover the expenses involved. If someone is not able to meet these obligations the order of rotation may be changed for some years. But permanent exemption from the duty to act as a patron in this context is impossible as it implies the loss of full membership in the local community. However, according to my informants, this has never occurred.

As already mentioned, the office of the *Dumji* patron entails fairly high expenses as well as a range of time consuming duties to be performed before, during and after the festival. But apart from the obvious burden of those expenses and duties there are also definite advantages, privileges and pleasures associated with the patron's job which from the Sherpas' traditional point of view by far outweigh the disadvantages. Most important seems to be the following fact: at least once, in some cases even twice in their life time, it provides all men as representatives of the households, be they rich or poor, including their wives and children with the opportunity to act in the leading role among the assembled laypeople on the communal stage. This happens in the context of their main ritual celebration that mirrors the distinct history of the local Sherpa community within the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Moreover, a short separate public ceremony devoted to the *Dumji* patrons is conducted on the first day just after the juniper-burning ritual. After that only the *chiwas* together with their wives and their mostly young children receive a special blessing. Due to this and the special merit that accrues to the *Dumji* patrons and their wives in organizing the *Dumji* festival the office of the patron was not only held in high esteem in the past, but also in the present.

The patron's leading role involves caring for the religious space of the village temple complex which is necessary for the undisturbed performance of the festival. He has to assume a role which resembles that of an otherwise non-existent policeman whose word has to be followed unquestioningly without delay by the lay audience. His main duties in this respect consist in keeping the children – in this context usually more or less out of bounds – at bay; in avoiding and, if necessary, in settling the outbreak of a verbal or physical conflict among Sherpa adults which usually has been latent and of long standing; in providing help to all those, mostly people of old age, who have lost their self-control normally from drinking too much *chang*; and in

constantly keeping an eye on the correctly dressed dancers so that their masks and costumes fit properly during the long performance of the sacred dances.

Actually, the ritual enactment of the *Dumji* celebration and the patron's activities in its course offer a telling example of how the distinct tightly-knit social web typical of Sherpa Buddhist society is continuously created and renewed. It is a world in which people are closely interconnected and have ongoing mutual obligations. Since their early childhood Sherpa girls and boys become familiar with their communal festival and its performance, its origin and meaning, the different rituals and sacred masked dances, the complex procedure of the "long life blessing" and the religious merit accruing from the participation in the festival and also with the range of mundane enjoyments that go with it. A least once they have experienced the whole festival from the privileged perspective of the patron's family.

In two long dances the young boys of the local community are even given their own role on stage in the context of the solemn *Dumji* celebration. Inserted into the sequence of the eleven masked dances are those two interludes which are not considered sacred dances ('*cham*'). These so-called "comical acts" which usually end in obscene gestures and sexual allusions seemingly endlessly repeated are performed with much enthusiasm and considerable noise but with no stage training and only very little creativity by young boys who are dressed up in fantastic costumes. They are called *tek-tek*, i.e. 'small demons' which is also the name of this kind of dances. According to the clerics these two interludes are said to have been introduced only in order to catch the attention of the laypeople whose usual capacity of concentration is rather limited in the course of such a long ritual performance and who otherwise would either fall asleep, start conversation or simply leave and get drunk. Sherpas seem to enjoy especially these two interludes whereas the clerics most often look bored as they consider them an intrusion into the solemn ritual celebration of the *Dumji* festival.

Unmarried young adults, both girls and boys, help their relatives when it is their turn to act as patron or they are married to one of the patrons. Moreover, for them the festival represents a major opportunity for meeting partners of the opposite sex and for merry-making. After marriage they have to save for years to provide the means necessary for the patron's duty. For those Sherpas of the middle and the old generation who are simply off duty, the festival provides a favourite time to meet others, to engage in long conversations, to drink *chang*, to sing and dance while performing late at night the *shyabru*, the Sherpa round dance, around the pole which is the center of the courtyard of the village temple. And as grandparents they give explanations to their grandchildren while watching over the correct performance of the sacred dances until in quite a few cases their liberal consumption of *chang* brings their concentration to an end. Often this leads to an interesting role reversal later at night when the small grandchild has to

lead the drunk grandmother or grandfather along the trail back home through the darkness.

## **6. The *Dumji* celebration in 2002 in Gompa Zhung in the context of growing political instability**

Around noon about fifty Sherpas of the Lamaserwa clan of all generations had assembled in the village temple of Gompa Zhung where the *kutshab ternga* ceremony was being conducted by the tantric village lama, i.e. the village head lama, and his sixteen ritual assistants. It was the day of the Kalachakra New Year, the first of the third month of the Tibetan Water Horse Year 2129 (i.e. April 13<sup>th</sup> 2002) and the last day of the *Dumji* masked dance drama. In this locality the celebration extends over a period of five days. The *Dumji* festival is the most important annual religious celebration of the Sherpas as enacted in village ceremonial life. Its main purpose consists in an annual exorcism of evil forces which are believed to have gathered since its last performance, thus providing good fortune for the future well-being of both the Lamaserwa clan and its individual members. Its general ritual structure as described below consists of a juniper-burning offering ritual on the first day, a dance rehearsal on the second, the full set of eleven dances on the third, a “long life empowerment” ceremony on the fourth and the *kutshab ternga* ceremony on the fifth and last day.

On the two preceding days only about two hundred Lamaserwa Sherpas – that is far less than half of the usual number of participants – had enjoyed the spectacular mask dances and received the blessing after the “long life empowerment” ceremony (*whong*; Tib. *tshe dbang*). Moreover, the participants all dressed up in their finest garments, had spent the long cold and humid nights until the early morning hours merrily drinking, singing and performing the *shyabru* (Tib. *zhabs bro*), the Sherpa round dance, in the temple courtyard. Most of the unmarried young women and men, however, had disappeared sooner or later into the “disco” which was erected by them in a deserted house on the same occasion about five years previously.

Normally the *Dumji* celebration is the festive occasion of the Lamaserwa clan for which up to four hundred and fifty people from a total of eighty four households gather in the village of Gompa Zhung. Most of the households are located in remote hamlets and isolated homesteads which are scattered over a considerable territory in the upper Solu valley. The members of the Lamaserwa clan come to the *gompa* of their spiritual center to watch the colourful masked dances, to generate merit, to receive the blessing of long life and to indulge in a range of mundane entertainments.

The *kutshab ternga* celebration is not only the second-most auspicious religious ceremony of the *Dumji* festival; actually it is also one of the most pleasant parts of the whole festival. All those assembled are in high spirits

while at the same time being fully relaxed if not just simply tired. Present are all the sixteen performing village lamas, the four sponsors of the *Dumji* celebration, their wives and children. Moreover, all families and individuals from Gompa Zhung proper and from diverse hamlets in the vicinity participate. Even after some days of intensive feasting the latter still can manage to take part in the final ceremony and receive the *kutshab ternga* blessing at its end.

After the ceremony the village lama introduced a wholly new element into the traditional ritual procedure. He gave an hour-long carefully prepared speech in front of his Lamaserwa audience. As the prominent keyholder of the *kutshab ternga* statue from distant Phaplu could not take part any more due to Parkinson-disease, the village lama was free to modify the celebration according to newly arisen circumstances. For the first time the framework of the major annual ceremony was deliberately used by Lama Tenzing to articulate urgent problems of communal interest. However, he still related the local history of the religious celebration and of the sacred statue to make his people aware and proud of their cultural heritage as epitomized by the *Dumji* festival.

What was new to all those present was the lama's deliberate reference to the growing predicament that the Sherpas presently face. Unlike a contemporary Nepali politician's speech, however, he neither presented some easy political analysis of the current situation nor any proposals as to which path to choose for a better future. Nonetheless he made his message very clear as he alluded to the increasingly dramatic political turmoil of the Maoist insurgency, and how it affected everyday lives and livelihoods.

On this day the atmosphere in the village temple was markedly different. On all the preceding days the ritual celebrations had been performed in a religious space which was shared by many children who, as is the norm on festive events such as this, had been playing and chasing around noisily in the courtyard and in the temple; at the same time many of the adults had been engaged in long and loud private conversation and quite a few of the old ones, male and female, had already been enjoying *chang* for some days brewed only on occasion of special religious celebrations such as the *Dumji* festival. Today, however, the attention of most of those present was fully concentrated on their highly respected lama's elaborations; the children were exhorted successfully to remain quiet in order to listen carefully to the lama's words which they actually did, and all those who tended to fall asleep were quietly kept awake.

In fact, the lama's speech represented a carefully prepared teaching to his audience hitherto unheard of among them. In its course, Lama Tenzing first gave an extensive overview on Tibetan Buddhism, its history and its central tenets starting with the achievements of Guru Padmasambhava in taming the malevolent spirits, binding them by oath and thus building Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet in the year 779. Its second part

focused on the historic origin of the Sherpas in Kham and their *Dumji* festival, its complex meaning, and on their long migration across the Himalayan divide to Solu-Khumbu. In the largest part, however, he elaborated at great length on the history of the Lamaserwa clan and on their famous ancestors. This was followed by a detailed account of when and how the *Dumji* came to Solu-Khumbu and to Gompa Zhung. Of particular importance for the listeners seemed to be both, the purpose – the expulsion of evil forces from the community - and the distinct benefits accruing from the annual correct performance of the *Dumji* for the local community of the Lamaserwa clan as a whole as well as for the sponsors and their wives and families.

In a noteworthy concluding statement the lama summarized his exposition which amounted to a pointed local history of Sherpa religion, culture and society as an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism. Only then the village lama made use of a Tibetan term which describes the state of particular worldly circumstances or of a whole era from a religious perspective. According to him the present era in which the Sherpas and all other sentient beings have to live in and suffer from, is a time of grave *dip* (Tib. *grib*), which clearly signals *kali yuga*, i.e. the dark era in which the evil triumphs over the good. *Dip* is translated by S.Ch. Das as ‘shade; defilement; filth; contamination, mostly in a religious sense’.<sup>62</sup> Ch. Schicklgruber, however, has highlighted its use in the particular socio-religious context of the ethnic Tibetan Khumbu in northeastern Nepal. He has rendered it in its extended sense, which is of interest here, by ‘chaos’ as opposed to a “religiously and socially ordered world”.<sup>63</sup>

Consequently the end of the village lama’s speech was marked by the statement that especially in these difficult times of chaos it is and will be of vital importance for the Sherpas to stick firmly to the Buddhist dharma, to be proud of the Sherpas and, in particular, of the Lamaserwa clan’s glorious past and present, to continue the celebration of their religious festivals and to devote all their available resources to the preservation of their cultural heritage. Lama Tenzing’s speech, which left the majority of his listeners in deep thought, clearly marks a turning point in the Lamaserwa clan’s recent history.

By way of this short reference to their endangered culture and religious tradition the village lama only subtly alluded to the presently increasing predicament of the Sherpas’ daily lives and livelihoods. He thus articulated and reflected upon what everyone present had become clearly conscious of in the course of what had happened to them in Solu in at least the last eighteen months.

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<sup>62</sup> Das 1989: 244.

<sup>63</sup> Schicklgruber 1992: 724.

Just opposite to the stairs leading into the courtyard of the village temple had been one of the rare police posts in Solu-Khumbu which had been established only seven years ago. Since it had been blown up by the Maoists in November 2000 it was given up by the state authorities. Its ruins are regarded as a mirror that reflects the Sherpas' current life conditions more clearly than anything else. Telecommunications with Solukhumbu which had reached the area just less than a decade ago were totally destroyed in March 2002; the highly successful major hydro power station in the region completed in 1993 was devastated in January 2002; most of the small and simple local stations are also out of function but will not be repaired as long as the present political instability prevails. These two achievements truly had meant "progress" to the population as they had highly improved the circumstances in Solu-Khumbu. Now, however, life conditions resemble the negative side of the old days when nights used to be black and Kathmandu far away.

From time to time Maoists in smaller or larger groups – most of them being of Hindu caste origin – move into Gompa Zhung at night, put up a camp in the center of the village for some days and establish their own "rule". Up to now there have been almost no Sherpas involved in the Maoist movement. Currently the latter seems to follow more or less the unpredictable, arbitrary rule of mere warlords better known from some Third World countries other than Nepal. Here they extort food and money from the population, especially from the owners of the seven local lodges, paint their symbols and political slogans on sacred monuments thereby causing growing hopelessness among the local population. Among others, the young enthusiastic followers of the Maoist underground movement have resorted to corporal punishment – what they called "disciplinary measures" – directed against three of the lodge owners and the widely respected headmaster of Solu's only Hillary Secondary School: they were publicly beaten within the schoolyard in the village's center as they were declared as "class enemies". Since then all of them and many more whose local lives have been shattered have escaped to the Kathmandu valley.

Since the royal massacre of June 1<sup>st</sup> 2001 the insurgency has become more and more threatening and the situation increasingly hopeless. This has caused, among other things, the almost total breakdown of the formerly flourishing trekking tourism on which the majority of the local Sherpas have been more or less dependent as the village of Gompa Zhung has been a major rest stop on the Everest Basecamp trail. This sad state of the trekking business has prevailed until the year 2003 and yet there is no hope that it will recover in the near future. Since the authorities – police and army – have given up state control over wide areas of Eastern Nepal many of those who can afford have already moved or have been planning to move to the Kathmandu valley in search of a better future as they cannot bear the growing uncertainties any longer. Less than fifty percent of the usual

population has remained, most of them being the poor and the old people. The middle-aged generation and their children have almost fully disappeared but they still continue to show up for the duration of the *Dumji* festival. Of the total of twenty-four houses in Gompa Zhung proper seven have been deserted. The two well-established lodges have been closed down by the Maoists, the other five lodges have been empty as there have been almost no tourists at all in that high season. For the first time during the *Dumji* festival the hammer and sickle banner was fluttering on top of the main *stūpa* since the local Sherpas were too afraid to remove this unloved emblem. But fortunately the insurgents neither showed up in the village nor disturbed the religious celebration, as had been predicted by rumours. Such was the rather depressing context in which the *Dumji* festival was held in the year 2002.

After completion of the *kutshab ternga* ceremony in the early afternoon the religious practitioners remained seated, to be served with food and drink by the sponsor and his wife. The audience, however, dissolved slowly and people started to leave for their homes in smaller and bigger groups. The usual calm of everyday life returned to the temple courtyard again while the merry singing of the groups of disappearing Sherpas could still be heard from afar for quite a while. Only some young men remained whose duty was to remove the tent and the central pole in the courtyard which are put up only for the performance of the *Dumji* festival. The highly concentrated mix of smells of sweet herbal incense, oily butter lamps and of sour *chang* filled the air.

## 7. Conclusion

To summarize, the ritual performance of the *Dumji* masked dance festival constitutes a key socio-religious institution which integrates the individual members of the local community into a common frame of action. Moreover, it establishes an alliance between the local people, high gods and the local and territorial divinities which has to be purified and reaffirmed annually, thereby renewing the forces of fertility and prosperity. The celebration allows the local community to define itself as an autonomous social unit as well as an integral part of Tibetan Buddhism. In consequence, the annual staging of the sacred mask dances continuously creates and renews unity, thus giving an identity to the celebrating community that is based on its own history and is rooted in its territory.

Accordingly, the *Dumji* festival as the major ritual performance among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu that unites the local people and gives them a complex identity serves an important social function especially today, in the current situation of a more and more deeply-felt crisis, for the preservation of Sherpa religion, culture, and society. At present, the Sherpas have to wrestle with at least two kinds of radical changes within the larger political

framework of the Hindu nation-state which are due to two entirely different processes. One has been of their own making. It is articulated by a rapid rise from being traditional high-altitude agro-pastoralists and traders to their successful engagement in Nepal's globalized trekking and mountaineering industry.<sup>64</sup>

The recent dispersion of a growing number of Sherpas to far-away places such as Kathmandu, London or New York and the concomitant shift in values and ideals are mirrored, among other things, by the currently increasing withdrawal of those Sherpas, who had made a fortune, from their customary moral obligation to act as donor on behalf of the monasteries and their respective monk communities. It has to be recalled that since their emergence from the beginning of the 20th century onwards, monastic establishments and the celibate lamas, monks, and nuns have always been strongly dependent upon lay sponsorship from the side of wealthy "big men".<sup>65</sup> Today, however, the monasteries are almost all more or less fully supported by Western and Japanese individuals and/or organisations.<sup>66</sup>

In contrast to the currently decreasing patronage of monastic institutions among the Sherpas which depends on free decision, it represents a social obligation towards one's own clan community to act as donor on behalf of their communal religious festivals such as the *Dumji* celebration at least once in a life-time. But the village temple committee has also to cope with increasing problems which are felt when it has to designate the group of four donors for the enactment of the following year's festival. The main reason for these difficulties consists in the fact that at present more and more Sherpas have their centre of life in places far away from their local community in Solu-Khumbu. Owing to these new circumstances those Sherpas are often not able to fulfil their customary obligations at a fixed date that has not been of their own choice. More and more often, Sherpas cannot meet their obligation to act as donor in this context, and they resort to a customary device and send a representative in their stead, usually a sister or brother. In this way they make sure that although they cannot participate personally the proper celebration of the *Dumji* is guaranteed and thus the

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<sup>64</sup> The tourist, trekking and mountaineering business kept flourishing until 2000/01 when Western media began to report more steadily on the Maoist insurgency, and it reached almost a complete breakdown in 2001 after the events of the 11th of September without having had the chance yet to recover from that state.

<sup>65</sup> For this important chapter of recent Sherpa history see Ortner (1989: 99-149). See also part II of this paper.

<sup>66</sup> According to my recent information at present only the two Sherpa *gompas* each at Rimishung in Pharak and at Goli in Solu are supported solely by Sherpas themselves. In the case of Rimishung the bulk of the material support is being provided by the village lama who for fifteen years successfully runs a meditation centre in Taiwan whereas in Goli, formerly a village of rich traders, the village community itself still takes care of their religious establishments.

preservation of both the core element of their local tradition and of Sherpa Buddhism and society.<sup>67</sup>

The second process, however, has been invading Sherpa Buddhist society in less than the last three years from the outside through the growing violence in the course of the expansion of the Maoist insurgency. Currently, the latter shatters the order of Sherpa village life and confronts the Sherpas with a world of growing uncertainties hitherto unknown to them, while the pursuit of the Hindu state policy as far as the Buddhist high-altitude areas are concerned, has still remained one of more or less blatant neglect.

According to my information there is at the moment a rising awareness among the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu concerning the growing realm of problems which currently affect their culture, religion and society. But most probably it will take them some time to find appropriate solutions at a time when they have to cope with several waves of serious changes. When asked about this, both Sherpa monastic clerics and village lamas generally are fully aware of their currently strongly growing predicament which they understand as a clear indication of the “degenerate times” that are typical of our present era. Nevertheless, they are very optimistic as to the future of Sherpa Buddhist culture and society. Their optimism seems to be justified by the fact that hitherto their rotation system of the patrons of the *Dumji* ceremony has kept working. In fact, until now not one case has been reported of a Sherpa who flatly refused to act as donator or simply didn't show up for the performance of this duty.

Moreover, the village lamas keep referring to the Sherpas' long history of migration which was possible only because of their capacity to adapt successfully to novel conditions, even in our era when Sherpas in growing numbers migrate to Western countries and to Japan. According to my informants, their past has clearly shown that the annual and correct celebration of the *Dumji* festival has been the appropriate powerful ritual means in Sherpa history thanks to which all evil was successfully averted from the local community up to the present day. Indeed, its performance will be of utmost importance, especially at times of growing political conflict and economic crisis such as in our present era. Hence, in their view the Sherpas will also be able to master the profoundly changed conditions of today provided they continue firmly to stick to their traditions which are rooted in Tibetan Buddhism.

It is this view that has been expressed to me by both the village lamas of Gompa Zhung and of four other localities where the *Dumji* is held, and a great number of laypeople whom I had the opportunity to interview. Moreover, their optimistic view is shared, among others, by the Sherpas'

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<sup>67</sup> All interviewed Sherpas expressed this concern emphasizing that without the celebration of the *Dumji* festival the future of Sherpa society as is lived in the locality as well as of Sherpa Buddhism in general will be seriously in danger.

spiritual authority, Trulzhig Rinpoche XI, the highly venerated abbot of Thubten Choeling monastery situated just an hour's walk away. He is representative of the Dzarongphu tradition and leading dignitary of the Nyingma school, who has been active in strengthening Sherpa Buddhism, for instance by recruiting a young generation of Sherpas and initiating them into the meditative and ritual cycles such as those of the *Dumji* which a lay tantric lama has to perform on behalf of his local community since the old village lama of Gompa Zhung represents one of the last of lay tantric practitioners of his profession.

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