

Labtse Construction and Differentiation in Rural Amdo

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The ritual cosmos in the Tibetan landscape is marked through sacred constructions and ritual practices which “constantly recreate[d] the structure of Tibetan religious meanings.”¹ One such type of ritual practice focuses on Labtse² (*lab tse, lab rtse, lab btsas, la btsas, la rdzas*), arrow-spear structures prominent in Amdo.

Labtse are understood as consecrated abodes and places of veneration for specific local territorial gods (*yul lha, gzhi bdag, sa bdag*). These structures form the centre of communal Labtse rituals that reinforce the exclusive relationship between a mountain deity, “his”³ local community and the community’s territory. The ritual and the veneration of the deity are dedicated to “mundane” benefits, concerning personal and communal matters, such as health, wealth or other forms of good “fortune” (*g.yang*). This paper describes previously unclear construction components of Labtse, including their subsurface altars. It also compares Labtse with other, similar types of structures in the Tibetan landscape. The paper is based on fieldwork conducted during 2012 and 2014 in the Amdo region, mainly in the village of Fudi (*phug sde*)⁴ near the renowned Labrang monastery (*bla brang bkra shis 'khyil*), situated in Gansu Province of the People’s Republic of China. I was able to attend the reconstruction of the Labtse of Amnye Dragmar (*a myes brag dmar*) during a three week stay there in 2012.

¹ Samuel 1993: 159.

² Synonyms for Labtse or the altar inside the foundation of it used in Tibetan texts include : *gser mkhar* (golden palace), *gsas mkhar* (divine palace), *dpa' mkhar* (hero’s palace), *lha rten* (deity’s receptacle), *lab btsas pho brang* (Labtse palace), *btsan mkhar* (palace of a tsen demon) and *lha tho*.

³ I use the masculine personal pronoun in this paper, to stress the general concept of *gzhi bdag* as masculine human-like actors, through there are rare accounts of female territorial deities for example from the Rebgong area.

⁴ The Tibetan name probably means place/village inside (the mountains) as the Fudi territory extends over a mountain range and an important mountain pass. The villagers commonly pronounce *phug sde* closely to the Chinese equivalent 夫地 (*fúdi*).

1. Historical Background

It is widely purported by Tibetan and Western⁵ sources that mountain deity cults and Labtse trace back long before the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. Tibetan texts⁶ on Labtse often begin with vague discussions of its origins, linking the Labtse cult to the Bon tradition, the Manjushri cult at Mount Wutai, the Shiva cult in India or the Chinese Princess Wencheng ('On shing kong jo). Also military undertakings or the placing of stones on mountaintops or borders as markers or guideposts for soldiers and herders are discussed.

Other clues might be found through archaeological remains, but very little scholarly attention has been paid to this possibility. Bellezza documents archaic shrines and rock art in Upper Tibet which he identifies as *rten mkhar*, *gsas mkhar*, *lha rten* and *lha gtsug* "(...) cubic or stepped tabernacles used to enshrine and worship indigenous deities."⁷ Bellezza stresses that one feature that distinguishes these shrines from the remains of early Chorten (*mchod rten*) constructions is the frequent presence of subterranean structures.⁸ He attests that these shrines are of "substantial age,"⁹ but the exact period of their origin has not been determined.

Although the custom of erecting Labtse in Tibetan cultural areas is assumed to be very old, available information on Labtse constructions in Amdo generally indicate quite recent origins.¹⁰ Almost all Labtse structures in Amdo were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when "[t]he *yul lha* cult was singled out as *rmong dad*, 'inane faith.'"¹¹ After the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, Labtse were restored or rebuilt in many places. However, the financial resources and construction knowledge were initially deficient. Once exposed to the harsh weather conditions in Amdo, a weak construction thus often led to a sidewise bending of the Labtse's arrow-spears. This phenomenon is understood as an indication of problematic relations between the village and "his deity," and can damage the reputation of the village. Therefore, the proper construction of the often widely visible Labtse is very important for the villagers. Karmay translated further reasons for proper construction originally given by an Alag:¹² "If the *dpa'*

⁵ E.g. Pallas 1801: 215.

⁶ Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006: 4–5.

⁷ Bellezza 2008: 141.

⁸ Bellezza 2010.

⁹ Bellezza 2008: 142.

¹⁰ E.g. in Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006.

¹¹ Karmay 2005: 65.

¹² Honorific title for a reincarnate lama in Amdo.

mkhar is correctly built, men will live long, women will be glorious, the merits of men and woman will be abundant, their power and prosperity will expand, they will have fewer enemies and thieves, less risk from wolves and there will be benefit to their posterity."¹³ Since the beginning of the 1980s Labtse construction manuals have been republished, reincarnate lamas (*sprul sku*) have once again become involved in their construction, and financial resources in Amdo have increased. Today Labtse rituals and constructions are booming. In many places older structures have been replaced by new ones that are larger and of better quality.

In 2012 I was fortunate to be present when one such old Labtse was rebuilt in Fudi village, a Lhade (*lha sde*)¹⁴ village of Labrang monastery. The original Labtse had been destroyed in 1958. For a short period in 1960–1961 Labtse rituals were briefly resumed before again being disrupted until the end of the 1970s. The Labtse construction in Fudi was then provisionally repaired, and subsequently rebuilt sometime around 1989. The quality of the construction remained unsatisfying in the eyes of the villagers, though, and they planned a major reconstruction in 2012. Before 1958 every Tsowa (*tsho ba*)¹⁵ of the village had its own Labtse. However, after resuming the ritual, only one Labtse has been erected for every Zhidak (*gzhi bdag*)¹⁶ in Fudi. Among these, the Labtse of Amnye Dragmar, considered the "natal deity" (*skyes lha*) of every villager, is the most important.¹⁷

2. Construction

Preparation

Usually the Labtse ritual in Fudi is an annual one-day event in which one or two young or middle-aged men of every family participate. However, in this special case of the reconstruction in 2012, it was a five-day event, involving the whole village, including the women. The main construction activities took place on the third day under the instructions of an Alag. For the reconstruction of the Labtse in Fudi, a circular camp of tents was set up about 2 km away from the village at the foot of the hill, where the Labtse of Amnye Dragmar is situated. The women stayed in the camp, while the men moved

¹³ Karmay 2005: 67.

¹⁴ Lit. "divine village," villages with tax, labor and ritual duties and commitments to the monastery.

¹⁵ Social unit.

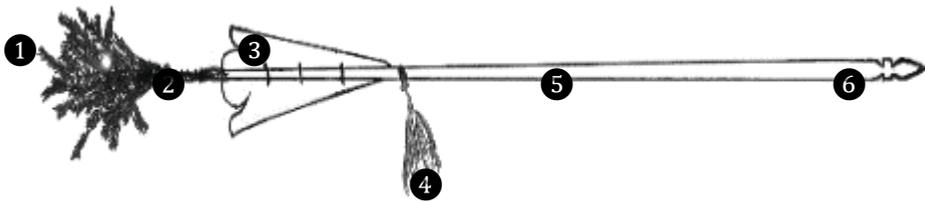
¹⁶ Territorial deity, lit. "master of the ground."

¹⁷ Sa mtsho kyid 2011: 250.

between camp and construction site.

When I arrived with my guest family at the festival site on the first day, the old Labtse had already been removed and the old spears were carried down the hill by village men. The old arrow-spears were used to make fire for cooking or for incense offerings (*bsang*).¹⁸ A special beautifully ornamented tent was set up in preparation of the visit of the village's main lama, Alag Hortsang.

The first two days were spent in construction preparations. As for the annual Labtse ritual every family has to provide an arrow-spear. In Fudi the arrows-spears are usually called wooden arrows (*mda' shing*), or sometimes just arrows (*mda'*). Written sources often use the term arrow-spears (*mda' mdung*). These arrows-spears are understood to be weapons of the deity.¹⁹ In the Labrang area the shaft is made of local wood as fir (*som shing*) or pine (*thang shing*). In other areas the shaft is taken from Xining lumber yards²⁰ or, as I saw in the Rebgong area, made out of bamboo. At the front end of the arrow shaft an arrowhead (*mda' rtse*) was carved in the wood. Toward the rear end of the shaft, the fletching (*mda' sgro, shing sgro*) was made out of three painted wooden panels that were fastened to the shaft with a cord. The ornaments of the panels were chosen according to the family's preference, and represent tiger stripes and leopard spots.²¹ In Labrang, these panels were sold in the shops of the town. Most villagers just bought them, but some prepared and painted their own.



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| ① juniper bush twig (<i>shug lo</i>) | ④ woollen tassel (<i>tshar lo</i>) |
| ② woollen cord (<i>bal thag</i>) | ⑤ shaft (<i>mda' rkang</i>) |
| ③ fletching (<i>mda' sgro, shing sgro</i>) | ⑥ arrowhead (<i>mda' rtse</i>) |

Figure 1: The Arrow Spear (*mda' shing, mda' mdung*).

¹⁸ Fumigation or (incense) smoke offering.

¹⁹ sTobs stag lha 2013: 60.

²⁰ Tsemdo 2009: 351.

²¹ sNying bo rgyal, Rino 2009: 102.

Another preparation activity, which included the women, was the spinning of sheep wool into several cords. One of these ropes was used to affix a twig from a juniper bush as a kind of nock on the rear end of the arrow, below the fletching. Just above the fletching a woollen tassel was tied to the shaft, as a symbol of fortune and prosperity (*g.yang*). The arrows with this woollen tassel are thus also called fortune arrows (*g.yang mda'*). Other woollen cords were prepared for later use in installing the arrow-spears and fastening them to each other. Some women prepared small tsampa²² balls. These were later burned during various smoke offerings (*bsang*) as food for the deity. Villagers explained that the Zhidag values the numbers of offerings, so many small food offerings are more pleasant to the deity than a big one. Whereas the woman stayed in the camp, the men were busy carrying all kind of materials to the construction site up the hill. Some tents were also pitched on the hillside. Beside the preparation for the Labtse construction itself, the first two days were used to prepare for the festive celebration. Two sheep were slaughtered by the men and blood sausages and other foods prepared by the women.

Beyond the preparation bustle there was still enough time for villagers to sit together, chat and play games. Several families shared each of the tents, kitchen equipment and a temporary clay stove. As there was not enough space in the tents for all people to eat at the same time, the men usually ate first and the women took their turn later. The villagers of Fudi only rarely smoked or drank alcohol, especially since Labrang monastery discouraged this for both health and safety reasons. Every evening after dinner most villagers returned home for the night, and only some of the men stayed at the campsite.

Arranging the Altar

On the third day at 7:45 am the men of the village met at the village square, dressed in their best clothes and riding their motorbikes. They departed as group to the monastery to escort Alag Hortsang to the Labtse construction site. Meanwhile the women walked to the campsite and waited for the Alag's arrival. About forty-five minutes later the convoy, consisting of the lama and his attendant in their cars together with the village's men on their motorbikes, reached the campsite. The women greeted the guests also wearing their best dresses (*ras lwa*). They formed an honour guard along the way to the entrance of the campsite, on either side of which juniper bushes were ritually burning on small altars. The lama was welcomed in the tent

²² Roasted barley (*rtsam pa*).

that had been specially prepared for him, where he was offered food and drink. The men also ate some food and climbed up the hill to the constructions site. The Alag rode up the hill on a beautifully decorated horse. The men spent the following hours on the hill performing the rites, that are required by the Labtse manuals under the guidance of Alag Hortsang and arranging the subsurface altar in the foundation. Meanwhile the women sat in the tents drinking milk tea and watching what was happening on the hill from a distance.

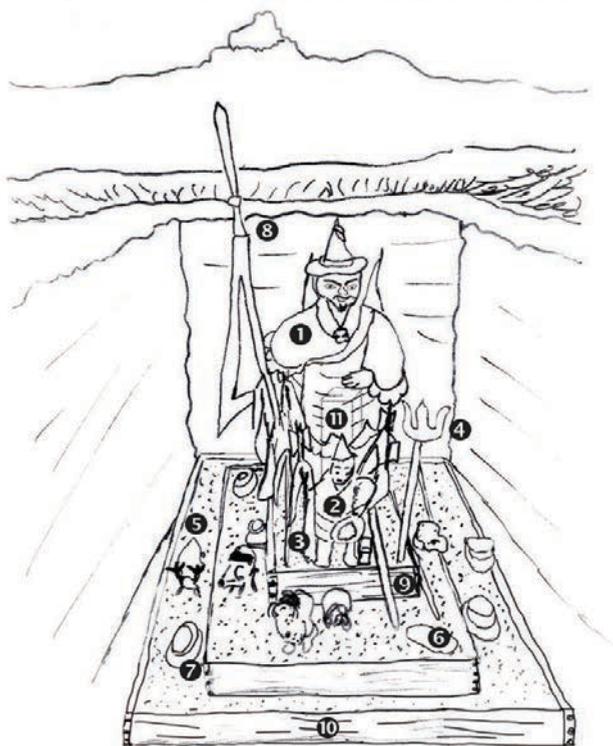
From the women's perspective, which I too adopted, as I was not allowed to climb the mountain, the men were standing quietly in a circle around the construction site. An offering altar (*bsang khri*) was situated only a few metres from to the Labtse structure. At 10:45 am an offering of roasted barley, bread, fruits, silk and juniper and birch branches topped by a big tsampa cake (*gtor ma*) was set on fire on that altar. In the *bsang*-ritual text of the village the *gtor ma* is identified as 'brang rgyas.²³ Fire crackers were burned and paper lungta²⁴ thrown into the air. There was the sound of the conch shell trumpet (*dung dkar*) and the shouting and cheering of the men. After it became quiet again, the construction of the Labtse soon resumed. At 11:40 am fire crackers were again set off, the conch shell sounded, lungta papers were thrown, and the men shouted and yelled "*kye kye so so lha rgyal lo*"—"victory to the deities." Again it became quiet and the construction continued until about 12:30 pm, when once more fire crackers were set off, the conch shell blown, and paper lungta were thrown into the air.

During those three and a half hours on the hill, the Labtse was rebuilt under the instructions and ritual service of the Alag. From my position with the women in the camp, I was not able to observe the rites closely. However, these ritual practices are described at great length in several Tibetan sources and Labtse manuals, as well as in the research of Davaa-Ochir.²⁵ Here I will focus on the architectural aspects and material offerings of the ritual.

²³ Hortsang 2012: 8.

²⁴ Small papers with wind horse (*rlung rta*) prints.

²⁵ Davaa-Ochir 2008: 65–103.



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| ❶ Effigy of Amnye Dragmar | ❷ Effigy of Tselo Khachog |
| ❸ Ritual arrows adorned with silk in the five cosmological colours (<i>dar tshon sna lnga</i>) | ❹ Trident (<i>sba lcags dkar po tshigs gsum</i>) |
| ❺ Animal representations (<i>spyan gzigs</i>) | ❻ Chunk of butter (<i>mar</i>) |
| ❼ Treasure vase (<i>gter bum</i>) | ❸ Big spear |
| ❾ Offerings of weapons (<i>mtshon 'bul</i>) | ❿ Grain filled altar (<i>gter sgam, zlum po gru bzhi</i>) |
| ⓫ Central pillar (<i>srog shing</i>) | |

Figure 3: The Foundation of the Labtse Structure in Fudi.

The excavation for the foundation of the Labtse already had been prepared earlier. It measured about two and a half cubic metres. Under the instructions of the Alag the central pillar (*srog shing* ⑩) was planted into the ground and wrapped with yellow silk.²⁶ The Tibetan Labtse manuals put great emphasis to this central pillar. Tulku Lobsang Tsondi's text *Lha rten brtsigs tshul gyi cho ga dge legs dpal ster*²⁷ describes the decoration of a *srog shing* with inscriptions of dharanis and mantras,²⁸ as well as representations of the sun, moon, stars and garudas.²⁹ The central pillar, as a representation of the *axis mundi*, also plays quite a prominent role in several other types of architecture in Tibetan culture (e.g. Chorten).

A large effigy of the mountain deity, Amnye Dragmar, was fastened to the central pillar. In front of this was set up a smaller effigy of the deity's newly installed helper and minister (*blon po*), Tselo Khachog (Tshe blo kha chog), a former "hero" of Fudi village with the official title of Btsangi Huawo Dorje (bTsan gi dpa' bo rdo rje).

Very little is known about the foundations of Labtse constructions and the deity effigies inside. However, the rebuilding of a Labtse is an infrequent event at which usually only local participants are present. A rare representation of the foundation of a Labtse with its deity effigies appears in an article by Hildegard Diemberger.³⁰

Tulku Lobsang Tsondi refers to the space surrounding the central *srog shing* as *gter 'khor*,³¹ that is, a mandalic environment of the receptacle. In Fudi, this space was horizontally and vertically ordered by three frames (*gter sgam* ⑩),³² each filled with grain (*'bru sna*) and thus creating elevated platforms on which the deity's offerings and gifts were arranged. Ritual arrows adorned with silk in the five cosmological colours (*dar tshon sna lnga*) were planted into the grain. Additional offerings were hunting weapons (*mtshon 'bul* ⑨), animal representations (*spyang gzig* ⑤),³³ food offerings, tea, money and tools. All of these were carefully arranged on the grain platforms.

The Tibetan text *Lab rtse'i srog shing 'bri tshul*³⁴ lists the following as religious gifts (*chos sbyin*) that have to be arranged in the

²⁶ See also Tsemdo 2009: 353, figure 5.

²⁷ Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006: 5–6.

²⁸ Skt. *dhāraṇī* and skt. *mantra*: magic texts.

²⁹ Skt. *garuḍa*, tib. *khyung*, a mythical humanoid bird.

³⁰ Bulag, Diemberger 2007: 124.

³¹ Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006: 8.

³² Information by informants, translated as "receptacle box."

³³ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975: 387.

³⁴ *Lab rtse'i srog shing 'bri tshul*. Place and publisher unspecified.

excavation hole (*shong*): (representations³⁵ of) a tiger (*stag*), a lion (*seng*), a garuda (*khyung*), a dragon (*'brug*), a horse (*rta*), cattle (*nor*), a sheep (*lug*), a peacock (*rma bya*), a crane (*khrung khrung*), a parrot (*ne tso*), a *shang shang* (mythological bird), a cuckoo (*khu byug*), thirteen white stones (*rdo dkar bcu gsum*), swords (*ral gri*), armour (*go khrab*) and a vajra. In order to protect the four directions, the tiger has to be arranged in the east, the dragon south, the bird (*bya*) west and the tortoise (*rus sbal*) north. Another term for some of the offerings are treasure items *gter rdzas*.³⁶ This term can refer to either minerals or terma objects³⁷, and possibly also treasure vases (*gter bum* ㉗). Treasure vases are offered in many circumstances. Tulku Lobsang Tsondi describes *gter bum* as new clay pots that are filled with twenty-five substances (*bum rdzas nyer lnga*) and subsequently closed and sealed during Tantric rites (*bya rgyud*).³⁸

The big spear (㉘) next to Amnye Dragmar with a flag in the colours white and red is quite often found in representations of mountain deities. These are the colours associated with Buddhist lay practitioners (*dge bsnyen*), and thus probably indicate the submission of the Zhidak to the Buddhist teaching. Another item included is a trident (*sba lcags dkar po tshigs gsum* ㉙) that is mentioned in the *bsang* ritual text of Amnye Dragmar as well.

After planting the central pillar, fixing the effigy, building the altar and arranging the offerings, yellow silk was wrapped around the altar as a final decoration.

Raising the Arrow-Spears

At 12:45 pm the foundation was completed by adding the arrow-spears. According to my informants, the biggest arrow-spear was planted directly into the grain filled altar (*gter sgam* ㉚) of the foundation. Bands in the five cosmological colours were fastened to the top of the longest arrow-spear and the villagers raised it by hoisting on the bands. The length of the spears represented social position in the village. The longest central spear, according to my informants, was thus attributed to the former *dpon po* (lord, "king") of Fudi village.

³⁵ That also can be visual representations.

³⁶ Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006: 59.

³⁷ THL Tibetan to English Translation Tool.

³⁸ Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring 2006: 9.



Figure 4: Details of the Foundation.



Figure 5: Raising the Arrow-Spears.

The next step in raising the Labtse was to add the other arrow-spears, prayer flags and unicolor flags to the “king’s spear” in order of their size. The longest ones were added first and the smaller ones last. However, before they could be fastened, the arrow-spears and prayer flags had to be purified. As they circumambulated the nearby *bsang* altar in a clockwise direction, the villagers soaked the spears in the smoke of the *bsang* offering. The middle-aged men of every family, whose duty it is to engage in deity cults and Labtse rituals, then added the spears to the Labtse. Sometimes younger boys from the participating families would also bring their own smaller spears. To fasten the whole construction together, sheep’s wool cords (*dmu thag*) and silk bands in the five cosmological colours were wrapped around the arrow-spears. Finally, some juniper bushes were added in the spaces between the spears and the cords. Quite often Labtse structures are linked by *dmu thag* cords to neighbouring prayer flag structures.³⁹ In Fudi, about one hundred metres east of the Labtse a Victory Banner prayer flag structure (*rgyal mtshan tse mo*) was set up. However, in Fudi this structure was not linked by a *dmu thag* to the main Labtse construction. Wooden frames were built later around both the Labtse and the *rgyal mtshan tse mo* structures to support the

³⁹ For further details on the mythical relevance of the *dmu thag* robe, see Karmay 1998: 282, Karmay 2005: 57–58 and Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1972: 552.

poles of the prayer flags and the arrow-spears. In other places I saw these supporting structures being made using masonry or just piles of stones (see Figure 6, 7 and 8).

At about 2 pm the construction was finished. The Alag and the villagers returned back to the tent camp. The women served them the lunch which they had prepared in the meantime. After lunch, another *bsang* offering was lighted at the altar next to the tent camp with shouting and cheering “*kye kye so so lha rgyal lo*” (victory to the gods). Offerings included grain, fruits, bolt of silk fabric, juniper branches, etc. After two hours the Alag took his seat in front of his tent and received the villagers according their rank, starting with the oldest down to the youngest males, followed by the oldest to the youngest females. Each villager presented a Katag (*kha btags*) to the Alag, and the Alag in return blessed them. His accompanying monks distributed blessed green ribbons to each villager that they were supposed to wear around their necks.

After these exchanges, the Alag’s car drove up to the tent and he took his seat inside it. Escorted by the village men on their motorbikes, he returned to the monastery in Labrang. After some time, the men came back and started to play games and eat snacks. Besides the simple tents of the families, there was a specially decorated tent, equipped with soft cushions and tables stacked with food. Groups of villagers took turns sitting and eating in the special tent. At 6 pm a noodle soup was served for dinner, and afterwards most villagers returned to the village. The festival continued for two more days. Because of the sacredness of the place that was created through the Alag’s visit, an immediate disassembling of the camp would not have been considered appropriate.

3. Differentiation

Demarcating Between Similar Structures

When discussing the meaning and definition of the term Labtse with various Tibetans, it became obvious that in informal conversations it was sometimes used in a general way to denote all kinds of similar “flag/pole” structures (e.g. Labtse structures, prayer flag structures). However, when going into more depth and discussing the ritual purposes of the particular structure, Tibetans in my research area assigned the term Labtse only to ritual structures designed to venerate the local deity, Zhidak, which they clearly distinguished from other structures. In Tibetan textual sources the term Labtse always refers to the structure that is linked to the local Zhidak-cult. In Western language sources, the differentiation between the Labtse

structure and apparently similar prayer flag structures is often unclear. Therefore, it is important to demarcate these two kinds of structures.

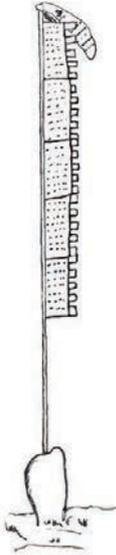
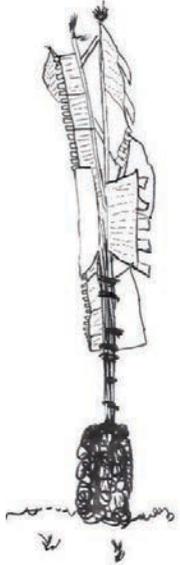
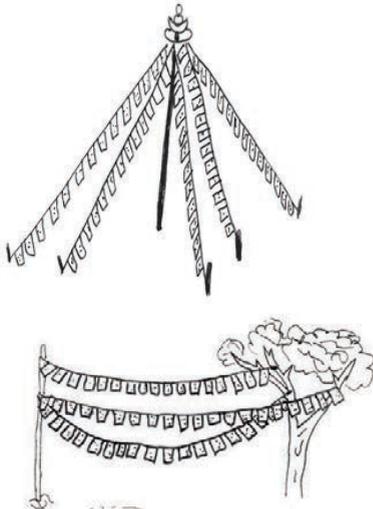
		
<p>Flagpole-style (<i>dar lcog</i>)</p>	<p>Victory Banner-style (<i>rgyal mtshan rtse mo</i>)</p>	<p>Windhorse-style (<i>rlung rta</i>)</p>

Table 1: Different Prayer Flag Structures.

Prayer flags are frequently raised in Amdo in connection with architectural structures or prominent landscape features. Often they are positioned at the top of mountains, passes, or at specific landmarks such as gorges, bridges and the confluences of rivers. There are different designs of prayer flags. Sometimes the flags are fixed directly to a flagpole. Other designs fix the prayer flags to ropes and suspend them between two points, possibly also poles. These prayer flag structures are usually not understood as abodes of a specific deity. Instead, they are prayers for well-being and luck, and for a general honouring of all kinds of deities by both the people who hung the flag and those who pass by the landmark or architectural structure. In Amdo the prayer flags that are fixed to ropes and suspended between elevated points often display wind horse prints

and are therefore usually called Lungta (*rlung rta*).⁴⁰ Another design that is found in front or next to many houses is the Flagpole-style (*dar lcog*). This is a single big flagpole on which a long multi-coloured prayer flag is fastened.

In addition, there is a quite popular structure in Amdo, called Victory Banner (*rgyal mtshan rtse mo*).⁴¹ It has prayer flags that are fixed to poles. Their prints often contain a long text, the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit text *Āryadhvajagrakeyūranāmadhāraṇa*, in Tibetan 'Phags pa rgyal mtshan rtse mo'i dpung rgyan.⁴² In contrast to the Flagpole-style of prayer flags, the Victory Banner-style consists of many flagpoles. Beside the flags with the specific text, other unprinted or windhorse flags can also be added. The flags and poles are then fixed together by ropes and are often supported by a wooden frame similar to those of the Labtse structure. Victory Banners are often built next to a Labtse and are sometimes connected with them through a sheep wool rope (*dmu thag*). Sometimes a structure for veneration of a minor Zhidak, which is not considered as the natal deity (*skyes lha*) of a community, might not have an elaborated Labtse with arrow-spears, but rather a smaller Victory Banner structure.

The following points are highlighted in order to show the differences:

	Labtse Structure	Prayer Flag Structures
Pole	Arrow-spears as weapon for the deity.	Flagpoles to which prayer flags are fastened or poles to which ropes with prayer flags are fastened
Flag	No flags necessary, sometimes prayer flags or unicoloured flags are added.	Prayer flags with prints. Different designs.
Fletching	Wooden and coloured fletching.	No fletching.
Targeted Group	Exclusive for the community. Usually the village males.	Inclusive to all who pass by.

⁴⁰ For more on *rlung rta*, see Karmay 1998: 413–22.

⁴¹ Not to be confused with the victory banner (*rgyal mtshan*) that is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols. The fabric version of that victory banner can also be found in connection with prayer flags, such as those in the Flagpole-style.

⁴² Berounský 2009: 28.

Location	Usually at a prominent, elevated places, highly visible but not easy accessible.	At landmarks (passes, gorges, bridges etc.), next to roads, easy accessible.
Ritual	Annual Labtse ritual, private offerings when required.	Every time when passing by.
Purpose of ritual	Maintaining a long-lasting relationship with the local deity to secure its goodwill for the family and community.	Winning the goodwill of all kind of deities for the short travel period. To "air" continuous prayers.
Basement	Often elaborate basement with an altar and offerings for the deity.	No elaborate basement. Basement only to fix the pole.

Table 2: General Differences between Labtse and Prayer Flag Structures.

Different Labtse Structures

In the Labrang area, every village has one or several local mountain deities that are exclusively worshipped by the local community. Additionally, there are also regional and supra-regional deities with Labtse structures that are venerated by their respective communities. There are, for example, several Labtse of the extended Labrang community (*lha sde shog pa bzhi*). One is situated on the hill northwest of the Labrang monastery. Another example of a supra-regional Labtse was described by Li An-che in the 1930's: "Then each tribe has its annual offerings of arrows to the local mountain god. The time differs in accordance with mythological associations about individual deities. Several tribes in one general region have a common mountain god of a higher rank. The offering of arrows for Grandfather Niangchen in Kan-su, for example, took place on July 31, 1939, when all the tribes around Bla-bran participated in the ceremony."⁴³

Beyond the veneration of a mountain deity and its shrine by entire territorial communities, there are also several special forms of Labtse for specific groups within a community. For example, there is a very small Labtse structure accessibly located within the village of Sayinang, called *zha yas lab tse* (Children Labtse in Amdo dialect). I was told that the village's main Labtse structures are very far away and high in the mountains, where only adult men will go. The children thus have their own Labtse ritual at the Children's Labtse.

⁴³ Li 1994: 14.

Labtse can also be differentiated according to their arrangement. In some areas, such as Rebong, there are Labtse that comprise a main Labtse Structure and thirteen smaller ones. According Davaa-Ochir this formation is called “Labtse of a mother with 13 sons” (*la btsas ma bu bcu gsum*). Similar *ovoo* seem to be quite common in Mongolia.⁴⁴ More research is needed concerning the material culture and the different types of Labtse mountain deity cults.



Figure 6: Children Labtse in a Village Close to Labrang.



Figure 7: “Mother and Sons” Labtse in the Rebong Area.



Figure 8: Labtse of the lHa sde shog pa bzhi Community with a Conjoined Prayer Flag Structure.

⁴⁴ See Davaa-Ochir 2008: 58–63.

4. Conclusion

Labtse structures are landmarks, displaying spiritual, social, cultural, as well as political bonds and power claims. The purpose of this paper has been to shed more light on the construction process and the involved rituals. Though that is not an exhaustive description it suggests avenues for further comparative research in other areas of Amdo and Tibet.

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Except for the photographs of Figure 4 and Figure 5, which were taken by villagers of Fudi, the drawings and photographs are the author's.

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