

Celebrating festivals, negotiating memories – a study of the Drugpa Tseshi festival tradition in contemporary Lhasa¹

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1.0 Introduction

Ritual practice related to the sacred landscape of Lhasa is performed daily by its residents and visiting pilgrims, but the activity is particularly extensive during the celebration of religious festivals. This essay seeks to describe and analyse the celebration of one such festival in contemporary Lhasa: the Drugpa Tseshi (Drug pa tshes bzhi) festival which commemorates the Buddha's first sermon. In Lhasa the festival is celebrated by pilgrimage to hermitages in the mountains north of the city. The participants visit a range of monasteries, hermitages, caves, springs, self-emanated images and other sacred objects and features in the landscape. These places embody long and intriguing stories, illustrating how the memory of the religious history of Lhasa is weaved into the landscape.

The Drugpa Tseshi festival constitutes a long tradition of communal events celebrated annually in the public space of Lhasa, only interrupted by the Cultural Revolution, which imposed a prohibition on all religious expressions. The Tibetans were gradually able to resume their traditions after the ban was lifted in 1978.² But in the years since then, Tibetan society has undergone radical transformations and the conditions for religious practice have changed correspondingly.

Despite of a vast body of literature on Tibetan religion, the festivals of Lhasa have received relatively little scholarly attention.³ References to the Drugpa Tseshi tradition can be found only in a few publications in western and Tibetan languages. A description of the celebration will therefore have documentary value in itself and will constitute the first part of the essay. Then, I will explore the Drugpa Tseshi festival and look at how Tibetan ritual practices related to sacred space are maintained and negotiated in the modern secularised context of contemporary Lhasa.

1.1 Religious traditions as part of a collective memory

The maintenance of this religious festival tradition will be discussed in terms of transmission of collective memories. Maurice Halbwachs claimed that although it will always be the individual who remembers, we share a significant part of our memories with the social groups to which we belong.⁴ A certain convergence of memories is a prerequisite for the social identity of a community.⁵ Knowledge about the religious festival traditions in Lhasa is

¹ The material for this essay was collected through fieldwork in Lhasa in 2002 and 2003, supplemented by readings of relevant literature. During this period I did participant observation of several festivals, and conducted in-depth interviews with informants, who belonged to different age groups and social backgrounds. The names of all informants occurring in the text are pseudonyms.

² The prohibition against religious practice was repealed at the Eleventh Party Plenum in Beijing in 1978. See Goldstein and Kapstein 1998: 10.

³ Most notably Richardson 1993 and Rigzin 1993, in English; and Bod ljongs sman rtsis khang 2001, Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las 2002, *Grong khyer lha sa'i lo rgyus rig gnas* 1998, Kun dga' 1985, Nor bu bsam grub 1998, Shan kha ba 1984 and Thub bstan sangs rgyas 1974 in Tibetan. For a more complete list see Hovden 2006: 3-5.

⁴ The term collective memory was first coined by the French second-generation Durkheimian, Maurice Halbwachs (1992).

⁵ Prager 2001.

acquired as part of the process of learning to remember in a socially appropriate manner. The way such *mnemonic socialization*, as Eviatar Zerubavel would call it, occurs is characteristic of the various social communities to which we belong.⁶ Tibetan pilgrimage festival traditions consist of discursive, spatial, temporal as well as practical forms of knowledge which can be transmitted in a multitude of ways, ranging from the most explicit normative prescriptions to implicitly encoded messages.⁷

1.2 Localisations of memory

In this study of the Drugpa Tseshi festival I will keep my main focus on how memory is grounded in place. Margaret C. Rodman notes that places tends to be taken for granted as the settings where things happen and that the meaning of place too often seems to go without saying.⁸ She reminds us that places far from being only inert containers are “politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions.”⁹ The contemporary disputed practice of pilgrimage in the mountains of Lhasa during Drugpa Tseshi, which is specifically designed to bring the Tibetan religious community into ‘contact’ with sacred places from their collective past, is a prime example.

Paul Connerton writes that we situate what we recollect within the mental and material spaces provided by the social group to which we belong.¹⁰ However, the qualities that emerge in sacred places are not all contained implicitly in the place, but are brought to it by performance. Carrying on the theoretical work by Merleau-Ponty and the fine literary descriptions by Proust, the theory of incorporated or bodily memory is Connerton’s main contribution to the study of social memory.¹¹ Connerton argues that one of the most important ways the past can be represented and recalled to us is through various kinds of social practices. The human body has a fundamental role in the definition and creation of space, and in the development of spatial experience and consciousness.¹² Rodman underlines the importance of acknowledging that narratives of places are not just told with words; they can be told and heard with senses other than speech and hearing.¹³ The following account of Drugpa Tseshi will try to be attentive to these processes.

1.3 Tibetan perceptions of place

Tibetan religion encompasses a complex set of practices and understandings related to its landscape. The rich Tibetan cosmology consists of several layers, with roots stretching far beyond Buddhism: to Bön, the pre-Buddhist religion, Indian tantric religion and Chinese geomancy. A popular theme in Tibetan religious history is how Buddhism had to convert and tame the indigenous deities and forces to be properly established. However, the notion that the indigenous forces were converted and tamed rather than extinguished also meant that the beliefs and practices connected with them became incorporated into the new Buddhist tradition.¹⁴ The celebration of Drugpa Tseshi shows several examples of how the older traditions got incorporated into the corpus of Tibetan religious practice and belief.

⁶ Zerubavel 2003: 5.

⁷ Previously I have discussed the interplay between discursively, temporal, spatial and practical modes of collective memory. Hovden 2006.

⁸ Rodman 2003: 204.

⁹ Rodman 2003: 205.

¹⁰ Connerton 1989: 37.

¹¹ Although the mnemonic capacity of various cultural and religious practices like commemorations has been studied frequently in recent research on collective memory, Connerton’s work stands out for his stress on the importance of often taken for granted bodily practices.

¹² Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 185.

¹³ Rodman 2003: 214.

¹⁴ The point has been made by several scholars. See for instance Samuel 1993: 157-175 and Kapstein 2000.

As a result, there exists a broad range of categories of spaces, places, people and objects considered by Tibetans to possess sacred power.¹⁵ In general one can say that the landscape and objects tend to be empowered either by a previous event (the activity of a religious saint or deity), or also through its function as an abode or physical representation of a deity.¹⁶ The term most commonly employed to denote the sacred or powerful places of Tibet is *gnas*, meaning ‘abode’ or ‘seat’.¹⁷ Places that are categorised as *gnas* are believed to possess a special kind of power.¹⁸ This power can be conceived of in different ways, but the most common Tibetan term employed is *byin rlabs*.¹⁹ *Byin rlabs* designates a power that can be inherent in sacred places or can be possessed by sacred people or objects. *Byin rlabs*, lit. ‘wave of *byin*’ is commonly conceived of in a substantial sense as a “field of power” believed to saturate the object and the space around it.²⁰ A significant proportion of Tibetan religious practices are directed at acquiring or manipulating religious power emanating from these sacred places or objects. The belief that it is possible to acquire the power of these places and objects through physical contact informs people’s behaviour at the various sacred sites visited during Drugpa Tseshi. Such perceptions of the qualities of the landscape constitute an important part of religious collective memory in Lhasa. Yet this collective memory, which is variously distributed among the inhabitants, is sometimes strongly disputed.

2.0 Presentation of Drugpa Tseshi

Drugpa Tseshi (Drug pa tshes bzhi) commemorates the first teaching of Buddha Śākyamuni in the Deer park in Sārnāth outside Vārāṅasī.²¹ The name simply means fourth day of the sixth month, and refers to the date for the celebration according to the Tibetan lunar calendar. Another name for the festival, Chökor Düchen (Chos ’khor dus chen) ‘festival of the Dharma wheel’, points to the event commemorated. This name, however, is not frequently used in Lhasa.

Buddha’s first sermon is recorded in several biographies of Buddha’s life.²² The fourteenth century Tibetan Buddhist scholar, Buston, recounts the *Lalitavistarasūtra*’s²³ narrative of Buddha’s actions.²⁴ After the Buddha reached enlightenment, Brahma and Indra, together with innumerable gods and goddesses requested the Buddha to share his profound wisdom. But the Buddha refused on the grounds that no one would be capable of

¹⁵ For a more thorough discussion of the various classes of sacred or powerful places see for instance Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993, Stein 1972, Karmay 1998 or Huber 1999: 77-104 and 1998.

¹⁶ There are several ways in which a place can be seen to have sacred qualities in Tibet. One is by being affiliated with deities, either as their abode, physical manifestation, site of their activity, or locus of their life power, *bla*. The other is by being empowered by religious saints. A place can also be empowered by sacred objects, often themselves empowered by religious saints or deities. Finally, a natural phenomenon may have been given mythical explanation.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of the concept *gnas* and its related practice in pilgrimages see Huber 1999 and 1998.

¹⁸ This ‘power’ can be of different kinds or be employed for purposes of purification, merit, luck, or more vaguely appropriated.

¹⁹ *Byin rlabs* has often been translated as ‘blessing’. Huber argues that this is an unsatisfactory translation because outside the technical tantric terminology it has a much broader range of denotations. See Huber 1998: 90-93.

²⁰ Huber 1998: 15.

²¹ It is the Tibetan equivalent to the Āsālha pūjā celebrated in the countries of southern Buddhism.

²² Jacobsen 2000: 37. Buston (1931: 3) cites the event from the *Lalitavistarasūtra* (*Rgya cher rol pa’i mdo*), Powers (1995) do in addition quote the *Mahāvastu*, and the *Buddhacarita* by Aśvagoṣa. The other Tibetan texts I have consulted do not specify their sources, but the form and content of their representations are largely similar to those cited above.

²³ The *Lalitavistarasūtra* stems, according to Keown (2003: 153), probably from the first century CE. The text is mainly concerned with the life of the Buddha until the start of his teaching and is probably based on Sarvāstivādin material, to which Mahāyāna elements have subsequently been added.

²⁴ Buston 1931: 39-56.

understanding his teaching. After repeated requests to pass on the teaching by Brahmakūṅka (Tsangs pa gtsug phud can) along with a retinue of sixty eight thousand Brahmas, the Buddha finally consented. And so the Buddha gave the first teaching about the four noble truths (*bden ba bzhi*) to his five disciples (*'khor lnga de sangs bo*), and the wheel of Dharma was set in motion.

2.1 History of the festival

Whereas the tradition of remembering the deeds from Buddha's life goes back to the origin of Buddhism, it is unknown when people started to commemorate through the celebration of festivals. Neither my informants nor any of the written sources I have consulted so far give many clues about the reason for the specific forms the celebration has taken in Lhasa.²⁵

The celebration of the festival before 1959 is recorded by Richardson, Shankhaba and Sangye.²⁶ Their accounts describe how the upper stratum of the society celebrated the festival by various offerings in the temples in Lhasa. Sangye elaborates on the extensive offerings performed in Tsuglakhang and the other surrounding temples organised by the government. Officials would first visit the main temples of Lhasa and then go to the Potala and Norbulingka for a reception with the Dalai Lama.²⁷

But in addition to such general descriptions of offerings and religious visits, elderly Tibetans told me about a curious tradition connected with King Songtsen Gampo.²⁸ In the past celebrations of Drugpa Tsheshi, Tibetan barley beer (*chang*) would be offered to a silver jug (*'khrungs ban*) placed in Songtsen Gampo's chamber in Tsuglakhang. The jug, which is still exhibited in the temple, is made of silver, the bowl is decorated with three gilded images and the long neck is crowned by a horse-head finial. According to oral tradition Songtsen Gampo threw the jug from the roof of the Potala in a drunken frolic. The jug is believed to have miraculously landed without any damage at the stone pillar in Zhol below the palace.²⁹ The jug was later concealed as treasure on the Garpa mountain (sGar pa ri) and re-discovered as religious treasure (*gter ma*) by Tsongkhapa (Tsong kha pa) (1357-1419). Elderly informants told me that the silver jug has left a clear trace on the surface of the rock which still remains.³⁰ In order to commemorate King Songtsen Gampo, a ritual used to take place in his chamber in Tsuglakhang. Shankhaba records that a group of people consisting of the temple keeper, a government clerk and housekeepers (high ranked servants) from the families of the nobility and the clergy would convene in the Tsuglakhang.³¹ After the session in the chapel the group of celebrants would go to the Potala palace and to Norbulingka for an audience with the Dalai Lama. The reception would be followed by a meal where each would get poured beer from the silver jug. Shankhaba recounts that the beer from the jug was endowed with *byin rlabs* and the celebrants would perform an offering of the first part of the beer (*phud*) before drinking.³²

²⁵ Pasang Wangchug suggested that the origin of the celebration in Lhasa may be accounted in the *nam thar* of the Fifth Dalai Lama or in the writings by Tsongkhapa.

²⁶ Richardson 1993, Shankhaba 1997 and Sangye 1999.

²⁷ Sangye (1999) and Richardson (1993: 96).

²⁸ There are several uncertainties about the traditions connected with the beer jug. It is for instance quite possible that the traditions refer to two different jugs, which both have belonged to Songtsen Gampo. The accounts given by my informants, Shankhaba (1997), Richardson (1993) and Heller (2002) are unclear on this issue.

²⁹ It should be noted that neither the present Potala palace nor the stone pillar was built at that time. However, it is believed that the Potala palace is built over the ruins of an earlier palace built by Songtsen Gampo. The stone pillar was erected about a century later to commemorate the victory of King Trisong Detsen (755-97) over the Chinese Emperor in 763.

³⁰ This is also confirmed by Shankhaba (1997) and Richardson (1993).

³¹ The title *lha gnyer las drung nang gzan* is a general title. Shankhaba does not specify whether he is referring to government clerks or householder servants of noble families. Kelsang Döndup (B3) told me that this ritual would be performed by ordinary people.

³² A study of "the silver jug" has been published by art historian Amy Heller (2002).

Shankhaba aims to clarify the connection between the commemoration of the Buddha's first sermon and the focus on Songtsen Gampo in the local celebrations. He writes that since the festival is celebrated to commemorate the Buddha's teaching, Tibetans will therefore also remember King Songtsen Gampo who is revered as the first king to introduce Buddhism to the country.³³

The celebration of the beer jug of Songtsen Gampo appears to have been an important part of the official celebration in the past. But from the perspective of common lay people, it was a relatively marginal phenomenon. According to my elderly informants as well as the accounts in the Tibetan literature the main way of celebrating the festival in the past, at least by young people, was by pilgrimage to the hermitages in the mountains north of Lhasa.³⁴ The accounts do not record any specific religious activity, but list some of the hermitages visited and describe the festive atmosphere of the celebrations. The participants would dress up in their best clothes, the women wore garlands from the twigs of the dog rose bush, and they would sing religious songs (*rnam thar*)³⁵ as they walked along the pilgrim path. The celebrations would be ended by picnic in Drapchilingka (Gra bzhi gling ga) where the pilgrims would meet up with family and friends.

2.2 Contemporary celebration

The past tradition of celebrating the festival by pilgrimage in the mountains is still maintained. Nowadays, a tradition of three alternative ways of celebrating the festival is established. The most common way of celebrating the festival is to walk the Rikor (Ri bskor) a half circuit in the mountain side of Sera Utse (Se ra dbu rtse),³⁶ the mountain above Sera monastery. The second alternative is to make a circuit around the Damra, a wetland area at the foot of the mountains between the monasteries of Drepung and Sera.³⁷ Although reportedly popular in the past, the area is less visited nowadays, presumably because of all the military structures, and the Communist Party School which lies in the area. The third practice common during this day is to climb the mountain behind Drepung monastery, the Gephel Utse.³⁸ It is this last option that will receive the main focus here.

2.3 Religious practice during pilgrimage

Drugpa Tseshi is one of four Tibetan festivals commemorating the deeds of Buddha Sakyamuni. These festivals share a common perception that the karmic effect of people's actions is multiplied. Yet, even though Drugpa Tseshi is one of the Buddha-festivals, people seem less concerned with issues of morality than during the other festivals, and appear to give a slightly different set of explanations for their religious activities.³⁹

³³ Shankhaba 1997: 59.

³⁴ Sangye (1999), Dungkar Rinpoche (2002), Kunga (1985), *Grong khyer lha sa* (1998) and *Yul skor sne shan* (1998) list a range of monasteries and hermitages that would be visited. The lists are varying in length and detail.

³⁵ *rnam thar* can be translated either as 'biography' or 'song from Tibetan operas' (Goldstein 2001: 630). In the Tibetan accounts of the celebration of Drugpa Tseshi, *rnam thar* is used in combination with the verb 'to sing.'

³⁶ Also called Phur bu ldog ri and gDugs ri.

³⁷ 'Dam bu can gyi mtsho (Lake of reeds) Wylie 1962: 80.

³⁸ Wishing to observe as much as possible of the celebration my ambitious plan was to combine two of these routes, starting with the Gephel Utse and continuing with Rikor. Completely exhausted after I had descended Gephel Utse, I had to resign this plan. Accordingly, the observation of the Rikor and the Damkor had to take place on later occasions.

³⁹ The other three Buddha-festivals, Saga Dawa, Lhabab Düchen and Chötrül Düchen all take place within the cityscape of Lhasa. If comparing Drugpa Tseshi to the other three festivals an interesting difference emerges. Although much of the ritualised activity is similar, for instance the offering of *bsang*, the explanations given were more concerned with morality, whereas during Drugpa Tseshi the activities tended to be performed to enhance people's luck and wellbeing.

The most basic ritual activity with which the festival is celebrated consists simply of walking: circumambulation or climbing mountains, which is believed to yield purification and acquisition of merit. The pilgrims offer juniper incense and silk scarves, and raise prayer flags, in addition to the essential performance of prayers and mantras. Other important practices are related to the concept of *byin rlabs* and are directed towards acquiring sacred power from physical contact with sacred images like statues, self-emanated images and thrones, as well as the mountain itself.

2.4 Start from Drepung

Reaching an altitude of about 5400 meters, Gephel Utse (dGe 'phel dbu rtse, also known as Ri bo dge 'phel or rMa ri rab 'byams⁴⁰) is one of the highest mountains in the Lhasa valley.⁴¹ The climb takes approximately seven hours from the monastery and it is customary to spend two days on the climb. Most people start from Drepung, in the early afternoon the day before the festival. The path soon reaches the first of two ceremonial thrones (*bzhugs khri*) for the Dalai Lamas, which constitutes a main focus for ritual activity during the climb up to the hermitage. The thrones are situated on a small plateau with a view over the Lhasa valley. During Drugpa Tseshi, a large fire for fumigation offerings is burning, and long strings of prayer flags are hung between the rocks. The high thrones are built of stones and get covered by white silk scarves (*kha btags*). When the pilgrims arrive at the plateau, they first offer juniper incense, and then perform circumambulations around the thrones, recite prayers and adorn the empty thrones with ceremonial scarves. Several people also throw piles of prayer cards (also called *rlung rta*), up in the air while shouting 'may the gods be victorious' (*lha rgyal lo ki ki so so so so so so*, or *ki ki so so lha so*) as an invocation to the gods for good luck.

2.4.1 The Gephel Ritrö hermitage

Soon after the last throne, the path flattens and curves eastwards towards the Gephel Ritrö (dGe 'phel ri khrod) hermitage. The hermitage is built on a little plateau in an otherwise steep hillside and was founded by Tsepa Drungchen Kunga Dorje (Tshal pa drung chen kun dga' rdo rje) in the fourteenth century.⁴² The Gephel Ritrö is also the main shrine of the Tenma (bsTan ma) goddess and there is a throne in the hermitage reserved for her oracle.⁴³

During Drugpa Tseshi all buildings in the area are housing pilgrims who make camp to get a little rest for the first part of the night. Provisional kitchens are set up to cater for the visitors, and monks helped by laypeople boil large cauldrons of tea and water for the crowd. In 2002, the hermitage and the herders' quarters were filled to the brim, and the people who could not get in, raised tents, made other provisional shelters or simply camped in the open air. A certain number cannot be given, but a rough estimate would count at least three thousand pilgrims.

In the assembly room of the monastery were a few people worshipping and making offerings in front of the altars. But later, when the monks gathered for a prayer session, none of the pilgrims were attending the ceremony. As a general impression, the main function of the hermitage during the festival seemed to be to provide lodging, rather than to serve as focus of religious devotion. The hours from late afternoon till late night/early morning, while people rested at the hermitage, were spent on various leisurely activities like singing and playing cards and some had even brought cassette players playing mostly Indian and some Tibetan

⁴⁰ Wylie 1962: 79, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 190.

⁴¹ With the possible exception of Mindrug Tsari (sMin drug rtsa ri?) behind Bumpari (Bum pa ri) at the other side of the Kyi river.

⁴² Drung chen Kun dga' rdo rje of the Tshal pa family, a contemporary of Buston. See Wylie (1962: 102f n. 88) and Dowman (1988).

⁴³ The last incarnation in this line of female state oracles is Lobsang Tsedron (Blob sang tshes sgron). See Havnevik 2002: 263-264.

music non-stop. Soon it got dark, but hundreds of small bonfires lit up the night. The pilgrims were talking and laughing loudly and the atmosphere was high.

2.4.2 Ritual activity at the top of the mountain

The first groups took off for the final climb as early as one o'clock in the night, but most waited till around three o'clock. The stream of pilgrims carried torches forming a glowing 'snake' wriggling up the mountain side, until finally reaching the saddle shaped plateau that constitutes the top of the mountain. Many pilgrims went first to Lhasa Utse, a peak at the eastern side of the plateau, before they headed towards the main summit at Gephel Utse. The atmosphere at the summit was somewhat chaotic as the whole top was covered with strings of prayer flags going in all directions.

Most of the pilgrims were performing fumigation offering. First the celebrants offered ground twigs of juniper or other fragrant herbs, then they add barley flour (*rtsam pa*) and barley seeds⁴⁴, and finally barley beer (*chang*) is sprinkled on the fire. My informants told me that the fumigation offering during Drugpa Tseshi is performed for worship of the mountain deities, people's birth deity and home deities.⁴⁵ Most people reported that they performed the ritual for the enhancement of luck or well-being. Three groups of students that I spoke to told me for instance that they had come with the purpose of praying for good results at coming exams.

Many of the pilgrims also hung prayer flags between rocks and cairns at the summit.⁴⁶ The flags, (*dar lcog*) or (*rlung rta*), signify the idea of well-being or good fortune.⁴⁷ The colours of the flags correspond to the five elements in Tibetan astrology, and when hanging prayer flags many Tibetans choose prayer flags with a colour corresponding to the birth-year of family members, friends or high lamas. To direct the effect of the prayer flags to certain people, many devotees wrote names on the prayer flags with the colour of their birth year. The wind activates the prayers or the scriptures on the flags and, carries with it the power to the birds, animals and human beings which it meets on its way.⁴⁸

2.4.3 Abode of the Tenma

Mount Gephel Utse is also revered as the abode of Dorje Dragmo Gyal, one of the twelve Tenma goddesses.⁴⁹ The Tenma goddess is said to have been converted to become protectress of the Buddhist Doctrine (*srung ma / chos skyong, dharmapāla*) by Phadmasambhava.⁵⁰ The mountain is simultaneously perceived as the abode of the goddess and as a representation of

⁴⁴ The content of these 'white substances' may vary slightly among the celebrants.

⁴⁵ For instance the interview with Kelsang Döndup.

⁴⁶ For more details on the history and ritual significance of the raising of prayer flags, see Karmay 1998: 413-422. See also Lopez 1997: 548-550.

⁴⁷ Karmay 1998: 415.

⁴⁸ Phuntsok explained that the effect of raising prayer flags can be understood in several different ways. Some Tibetans believe that the effect of the prayer flags is only dependent on the intentions of the person hanging them. Just as with the fumigation offering, the practice of raising prayer flags can take on a range of meanings varying with the context. But whereas fumigation offering is often practiced for purification of defilements, which are causes of misfortune, the raising of prayer flags is more generally performed for the enhancement of luck.

⁴⁹ The lama recounted that the bsTan ma bcu gnyis were converted by Padmasambhava to become protector deities of Buddhism. See also Nebesky-Wojkowitz 177-198. Little is known about the religious function of the mountain prior to the foundation of the monastery, but the present Tenma cult is probably a Buddhist version of a much older cult. It is likely that the Tenma either was the original deity of the mountain, converted to become a protector of Buddhism as tradition has it, or she may have replaced, been identified with, or mixed together with an older deity.

⁵⁰ Das 1998: 561.

her physical form.⁵¹ One of my informants, a lama from Drepung, described how the physical features of the mountain represent the body of the Tenma.

He said that the top of the mountain is the head of the Tenma. Two small elevations in the landscape just above the hermitage represent the deity's breasts. To the south-west of the hermitage is a double rock formation, which is said to be the palace of the Tenma (bsTan ma'i pho brang).⁵² And at her feet lies the monastery Drepung. The Tenma has been taken as protector deity of the monastery, and the mountain is therefore held in particular reverence by its monks.

2.5 Participation in the celebration of Drugpa Tseshi

In the paragraphs above, Drugpa Tseshi has been described as a popular festival celebrated by great numbers of people. Monks both in the Gephel hermitage and the Pabongka monastery, which is the starting point for the Rikor circuit, reported that the number of people participating in the celebration of Drugpa Tseshi had been increasing in the recent years.⁵³ Since the festival takes place in such a variety of locations, it is difficult to get an overview of the participation, but some general features emerge. My informants estimated a high proportion of unemployed people and workers from the private sector participating in the celebration. Only few of the participants were employees in the public sector.⁵⁴ A significant proportion of the participants also appeared to come from the rural districts of Lhasa, but the large number of participants who were originally from other parts of the country, was a striking feature which is worth dwelling on.

Lhasa has always attracted pilgrims from other parts of Tibet, but after decades of massive immigration, Lhasa has experienced more than a tenfold increase in the population. This change in the demographic composition of Lhasa and the resulting high number of migrants participating in the festival has important implications for the maintenance of the traditions as part of people's collective memory. The pattern of participation in Drugpa Tseshi seemed to conform largely to the general picture of religious practice in the public space of Lhasa, with one important exception. Drugpa Tseshi is distinguished from other festivals by the large proportion of young people taking part in the festival.⁵⁵

One important reason for this divergence is that participation in Drugpa Tseshi was reportedly subject to fewer and less strictly enforced restrictions than participation in many other festivals. A related factor mentioned by my informants was that, as Drugpa Tseshi was celebrated in the mountainsides, rather than in the streets of Lhasa, it was given less public attention. This would enable more people who were normally hindered from displaying their religious activities publicly to take part in the celebrations. Furthermore, Drugpa Tseshi is celebrated in the summertime when more people, particularly young people, have free time to participate. Many of my informants reported that the form of the festival itself was a motivating factor. The fact that it was celebrated in the mountains together with only Tibetan people gave many a strong feeling of Tibetan identity. Several of my informants reported that this was an important reason for their participation. Moreover, for the young people, the gay and relaxed atmosphere during the festival was also reported as important.

⁵¹ Réne De Nebesky Wojkowitz writes that the mountain is regarded by some as the life power mountain (*bla ri*) of the Tibetan people. Nebesky Wojkowitz 1996: 483.

⁵² Interview with the lama.

⁵³ Interview with the hermit in Lhalung Draphug, and a monk at Pabongka.

⁵⁴ The enforcement of religious restrictions appeared to be considerably stronger in the public than in the private sector, with increasing restrictions at the higher end of the social hierarchy.

⁵⁵ Most children and youth in school age are hindered or discouraged from participating in a number of festivals. Some schools have very strict rules prohibiting their students from participating in any religious activity in public and put emphasis on giving political education to the students, whereas other schools operate with less pronounced regulations.

Participation in the festivals may serve as an important indicator for the sustenance of the religious collective memory of the Tibetans. However, the maintenance of traditions is of course also dependent on the content of the celebrations. Another crucial question is therefore, to which degree the Tibetan participants have the capacity to give meaning to their religious activities; to 'read' or 'hear' the stories that are told through the visits to the sacred places during the circumambulation and the pilgrimage.

3.0 Transmission of tradition

Lhakpa Tsering, an elderly man with whom I had a discussion about sustenance of the Tibetan festival traditions was concerned about the conditions for the transmission of the rich tradition of cultural and religious knowledge, which had informed the celebrations in the past.⁵⁶ He commented that

Nowadays, people do not know the real meanings of the festivals. Drugpa Tseshi, for instance, is a festival which they associate only with mountains. The parents do not tell their children about the real reasons for the celebrations. So young people go to celebrate the festival in the peaceful places outside the city, but they do not know why.⁵⁷

Like many others of the elder generation, he was recognising that the times have changed and that the present day celebrations are taking place in an environment significantly different from the one in which he had grown up. He expressed fear that the level of knowledge among the younger generation would diminish and eventually lead to a distortion of the traditions and loss of meaning. The sustenance of the religious traditions in Tibet is essentially dependent on the preservation of various kinds of knowledge as part of the Tibetan collective memory. In contemporary Lhasa these modes of religious and cultural knowledge have to compete with alternative explanatory models.

3.1 Contested memories

The collective memories of Lhasa have never constituted a stable entity; a quick glance at Tibetan history suffices to reveal that clearly. However, the physical outline of Lhasa has changed tremendously during the last fifteen to twenty years. This development bears signs of different understandings and ideas about the functions and meaning of the cityscape. Different perceptions of the spatial environment of Lhasa are also clearly reflected in patterns of movement. The religious practice performed during the festivals reaffirms the celebrants' belonging to the same mnemonic community. This gathering around their cultural and religious identity has strong symbolic significance for the participants.

The discourses about festivals in contemporary Lhasa are constrained by being largely cut off from the public channels of discourse: by the impact of competing discourses as experienced by children and youth in school, through instructions at people's work places, and through the structural alterations of society which influence the flow of narratives and stories traditionally exchanged within the families. This is a central feature of the setting in which the festival is celebrated, and it has important implications for the distribution of collective memory among Tibetans.

Nevertheless, the distribution of knowledge about the narratives of the festival did not seem to correspond with the degree and nature of participation in the celebration. The stories about the turning of the wheel of dharma constitute a basis for the empowerment of the Drugpa Tseshi festival. Yet, as an overall impression, the commemoration of this foundational

⁵⁶ Interview with Lhakpa Tsering.

⁵⁷ Interview with Lhakpa Tsering.

event did not seem to be of central importance to my informants. Only a few of the people I spoke with connected the festival with the first sermon of the Buddha.⁵⁸ Instead my informants taught me that a meaningful celebration of the festival did not depend on the knowledge about its foundation.

3.2 Ritualised construction of place

Rather, when telling me why they celebrated the festival the majority of celebrants focused on the pilgrimage to the sacred sites. These places visited during Drugpa Tseshi are loci of a great number of stories. When these stories are told and retold they contribute to make the places meaningful and sacred to the devotees. However, Jonathan Smith argues, places do not possess sacred qualities in themselves.⁵⁹ This raises the question of which mechanisms connect the sacred qualities to the place. Smith asserts that the sacred qualities are apprehended to the places through ritual.⁶⁰ To which degree ritual is a necessary precondition for apprehending the sacred quality of places can perhaps be discussed; whether or not that is the case will largely depend on definitions on ritual and sacredness. However, for the present purpose suffice to suggest that the appropriation of the power inherent in places and objects depends first and foremost on culturally specific sensitivities of the qualities of the places. A simple categorisation of the place as sacred (embedded with *byin rlabs*) is often sufficient for the devotees to incite practice. The effect of *byin rlabs* functions largely on the basis of contiguity and identification, and physical presence at a place is therefore a necessary condition for the celebrants to extract its power.

When I asked my informants to explain the meanings and effects of their ritualised practices at the various sacred places, their responses were of several different kinds. Some informants chose to emphasise stories they had heard about the places, whereas others recounted more personal experiences. Some referred to religious doctrine, whereas others went silent and, embarrassedly, told me they did not know. Still, judging by their reactions, it was quite obvious that the pilgrimage was meaningful for them. Humphrey and Laidlaw remind us that there exists no single hidden ‘meaning’ in a ritual for the researcher to discover. Rather, they advise us to approach meaning as something that the individual agents *attribute* to their ritualised actions.⁶¹ The extent, to which a group of people will report uniform answers about the meaning of their actions, may rather be a question of authority. Successful transmission of an orthodox interpretation by religious authorities provides the devotees with a model explanation.⁶² In contemporary Lhasa, the availability and enforcement of such model explanations are limited.

4.0 Negotiating memories

⁵⁸ One should, however, be careful in drawing the conclusion that this is a new development. Already in 1895 Waddell (1934: 503) noted: “It is not easy to give a categorical list of the great popular festivals of the Lāmas, for the Tibetans unlike the Chinese and Japanese, do not seem to possess printed lists of their feast-days, *and the particular event which certain of the days devoted to Buddha is intended to commemorate is not generally known.*” (Italics mine.)

⁵⁹ Smith 1998.

⁶⁰ Smith 1998.

⁶¹ “Our account of ritualisation suggests why actors should feel impelled to look for symbolic meanings, as one way of apprehending the ritual acts they perform. But it suggests too why symbolism, where it occurs in ritual, is highly unlikely to consist of the sort of all-explanatory hidden code which many anthropologists have seen it as their task to try to uncover. It is extremely unlikely to be much like a language. Actors’ attribution of symbolic or propositional meanings to ritual acts (...) much more resembles Sperber’s conception of symbolism as a cognitive mechanism involving creative improvisation, and the search for interpretations in a store of background and tacit knowledge (Sperber 1975, 1982, 1985).” (Humphrey & Laidlaw 1994: 192)

⁶² See for instance Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994: 200. The changing pattern of religious authority is one of the most important changes in the religious life in Lhasa today.

The societal changes Lhasa has gone through during the last decades pose important challenges to which the festival will have to adapt. Commemorating the Buddha's first sermon, one of the foundational events in the history of Buddhism, the Drugpa Tseshi festival is not under threat as such. What is at stake is rather the form and content of the festival. What the celebrants perceive and experience during the pilgrimage to Gephel Utse depends on the cultural knowledge they possess. The religious appreciation of many of the places visited during Drugpa Tseshi depends on the celebrant's abilities to read the "natural" landscape. To be able to see Gephel Utse as a Tenma goddess, or to know which of the juniper trees are inhabited by serpent deities (*klu*) and which rocks are inhabited by *btsan* spirits, requires a specific set of localised knowledge which is variously distributed in contemporary Lhasa. Noticing a lack of such knowledge particularly elderly people that I spoke with worried that the tradition was in a state of decline.

However, the increasing number of participants in the Drugpa Tseshi festival, and particularly the high number of young celebrants, suggests that there is a substantial amount of motivation and incentive to maintain the tradition. The festival is celebrated by pilgrimage, which is among the most widespread of Tibetan religious practices. These practices can therefore easily be transmitted, and newcomers told me that they learned about the tradition by imitating the other practitioners. More specific knowledge about the stories grounded in the landscape of Lhasa may variously be acquired, adapted and attributed to the practices at other occasions.

Having been a centre of religious and worldly power, Lhasa has for a long time attracted people from other parts of the Tibetan cultural area, providing the traditions of Lhasa with a certain dynamic. Contemporary Lhasa has inhabitants from all over Tibet, bringing new ingredients to the celebration of the festival and thus making the festival traditions of Lhasa more diverse. However, the opposite development may be just as prevalent. Many newcomers in Lhasa follow the crowd during the pilgrimage and eventually incorporate the traditions of Lhasa into their repertoire. Hence, the celebration of the Drugpa Tseshi festival does also contribute to more uniformity of the traditions. All in all, the religious collective memories of the Tibetan citizens in Lhasa today constitute a multifarious picture.

The period I have dealt with here constitutes a short period in the long history of the Drugpa Tseshi festival. The development of the festival traditions will only be possible to assess properly from a temporal distance. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that despite the challenges posed to the sustenance of the festival traditions from the socio-political circumstances, the celebrants are not passive subjects to the flows of change, but active agents negotiating their traditions. The celebration of the festival should be viewed as an example of just that.

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