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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## The remaking of a Tibetan mountain cult festival: the worship of landscape deities in the Rebong Valley, Amdo

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### ABSTRACT

Festivals in honor of mountain deities were revived across the Tibetan plateau in the 1980s, some years after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) in the People's Republic of China. This article, primarily analyzes the development of one mountain festival in Amdo, Qinghai, focusing on the decades from its revival until today. During mountain deity festivals, primarily men from multiple villages, a range of religious specialists, and representatives of local authorities gather at a stone cairn on a mountain top, where a variety of rites, ceremonies, and games takes place. In the 'old society' the chieftain of a congregation of villages had an important role as patron, mediating between the deity, the deity's medium, religious specialists and villagers, while his function has diminished in the revived festival. Faced with major social-economic-political changes, while retaining and recreating many elements of tradition, striking transformations in the festival's structures of patronage, piety, and play have transformed its human network, its format, and its significance.

### KEYWORDS

Tibetan mountain deities; festivals; patronage; worship and play in Tibetan mountain cults Rebong valley; Amdo sacred landscape in Tibet and the Himalayas

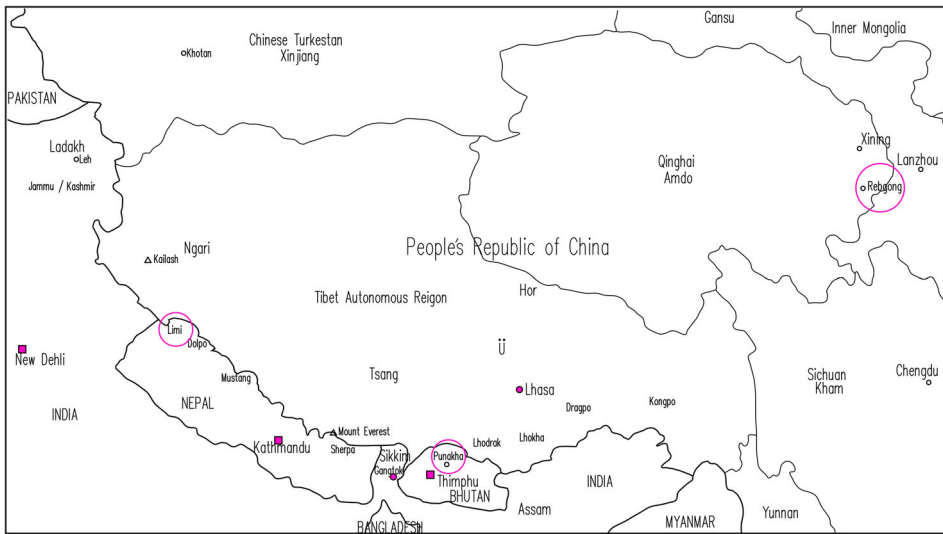
The worship of mountain deities in the landscape is part of a living religious tradition in contemporary Amdo (A mdo) Qinghai Province in the People's Republic of China, as well as in many other Tibetan Buddhist and Bonpo communities across the Tibetan plateau and the high Himalayas. It has been described as 'one of the most enduring constants, not only in Tibetan societies, but also among Tibeto-Burmese populations' (Blondeau 1996, vii). Following social and economic liberalization in China after the Cultural Revolution, pilgrimage and the worship of mountain deities were among the first religious practices to be revived in the early 1980s, since these activities did not depend on large physical structures and institutions and people could still remember recitations and bodily rituals (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998; see also Connerton 1989; Figure 1).

Festivals involving ritual invocations of and sacrifices to mountain deities (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*) take place yearly in local communities in Tibetan areas on the plateau in the high Himalayas (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998).<sup>1</sup> The most conspicuous marks of

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<sup>1</sup>We have chosen the category 'mountain deity' and 'mountain deity cults' since these are widely accepted in Tibetan studies. 'Cult' is used as a neutral category like in Tibetan studies (see, e.g., Blondeau 1998).

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**Figure 1.** Adapted from © Nicolas Tournadre and Snow Lion 2002, see Tournadre and Dorje (2003).

the cult are stone cairns *laptse* (*la btsas*) in the landscape, in which long wooden arrow-poles are inserted and where rituals to mountain deities take place.<sup>2</sup> The cult is reported to be particularly vivid in the multicultural Sino-Tibetan borderland, where, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, old mountain deity shrines and cairns have been rebuilt and new ones have been established by local Tibetans who invest substantial time and resources in the worship (Huber 1999, 24; Karmay 1994, 119, 2005, 53–57).<sup>3</sup>

In the pre-1950s, local chieftains had a combined religio-political-social role and were seen as representatives of the deities. The Amnye Taklung (A myes sTag lung) in Rebgong (Tib. Reb gong, Ch. Tongren) in Amdo (A mdo, Qinghai Province, the People's Republic of China) – both the mountain and the eponymous deity inhabiting it – are seen as one entity by local people. In a similar way that the deity protects the villagers and their animals, the chieftains would in the past act as patrons and protect their fellow villagers, their territory, and the agropastoral lifestyle. There is a strong belief among the villagers that one of the former chieftains was the son of Amnye Taklung. In many contemporary mountain deity festivals in Amdo, Communist cadres are involved in patronage. This is a paradox since party members are officially atheist, but some of them, too, have fond memories of a time when the festivals were major cultural

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*Yul lha gzhi bdag* is a term used across Tibetan areas for local landscape deities; more specifically, *gzhi bdag* is used colloquially, while *yul lha* more often appears in textual sources. Discussions on these categories continue in the field and remain unresolved. See, e.g., Blondeau (1996). See Connerton (1989) for a discussion of how performative memory is bodily. There are several unspecific references to time in this chapter because information given by interlocutors is an amalgamation of collected memories, and therefore the ideal of time specificity is hard to reach. 1958 is a breaking point for all the informants' memories because this was the year when all religious practices were suddenly prohibited – a prohibition that lasted for about two decades.

<sup>2</sup>There is great variation in cults to landscape deities on the Tibetan plateau and in the high Himalayas. The Mongolia *ovoos* resemble the Tibetan *laptse*, and in both traditions autochthonous pantheons were superimposed by Buddhist deities, although significant differences exist, see Davaa-Ochir (2008). See also the volume edited by Charleaux and Smith (2021) on *ovoos* in Inner Asia.

<sup>3</sup>For reflections on contemporary mountain deity cults, local identity, and environmental protection in Kardzé Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, see Tsomu (2022, 43–62).

events. Not only were the landscape and its deities worshiped by men, this was also a time when villagers dressed in their finest clothing and engaged in horse-racing, courting, and playful games (see, e.g., Kværne [2006] 2015). In the current setting the patrons interpret their mission as a predominantly secular one, while at the same time they take part in domains that have magical and supernatural elements (see, e.g., Kuyakanon and Gyeltshen 2022 on the repurposing of ritual in Bhutan).

Mountain deity festivals have in history, at least on the northeastern Tibetan plateau, been mainly a male undertaking, reflecting patriarchal spiritual norms and practices (for the worship by women, see below).<sup>4</sup> As a rule, only men in the Rebgong valley take part in the pious veneration of the mountain deities. In the past, women were part of the festivities only after the ritual veneration was completed, when the events turned into playful courting, singing, horse racing, and other secular competitions. Women, dressed in their most beautiful attire, made and served the communal meals and had an important role in the exchange of courtship songs, in the ring dances and when playing. In a joyful atmosphere the festivals changed from serene worship by men into a playful, mix-gender event.

Being totally forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, mountain festivals have been revived all over the Tibetan plateau after the mid-1980s; many of the main elements of the old ceremonies continue to be celebrated, but we see a repurposing of rituals in that they now serve to strengthen male Tibetan identity and to support predominantly male economic and educational ambitions in a society where the majority is Han Chinese (e.g., Kværne [2006] 2015; Makley 2007, 2013a, 2013b; see also below). In the current remaking of the mountain cult rituals in Rebgong society, new elements of the modern society are celebrated, but at the same time the profound worship of the landscape continues, similar to what we see in Bhutan and Mongolia.<sup>5</sup> In line with contemporary ideals of gender equality, women in the Rebgong valley are gradually taking part in the actual veneration of some mountain deities, to the dismay of ritual specialists and elderly villagers, as this is a major clash with a patriarchal worldview and ritualization (see below).

The focus of mountain deity rituals is to maintain a system of reciprocity between deities inhabiting the landscape and villagers in order to avoid natural calamities and to obtain bountiful harvest, increased herds, prosperity, good health, and luck. The Tibetan mountain deity cult is a multilayered and complex system of beliefs and practices in which the most spectacular ceremony is the *lurol* (*klu rol*) summer festival,

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<sup>4</sup>We are treading carefully when using ‘patriarchy’ and ‘patriarchal,’ as such hegemonic categories conceal the fact that women, as well as men, may be powerful in some domains of society, but marginalized in others – something that becomes evident when we study gender relations cross-culturally (see, e.g., Havnevik 1989 and Moore 1988, 1994). Nevertheless, in Amdo, the political scene was dominated by men, and religious lineages and religious figures (lamas, monks, lay tantric ritual specialists) were predominantly male. The main rituals at the Amnye Taklung *laptse*, as well as at many other mountain cairns, were the prerogative of men, whether they were ordinary village men, lay tantric specialists, or monks. There were (and are) powerful female religious masters in Amdo (such as Gung ri mkha’ ‘gro ma dKon mchog Rig ‘dzin sGrol ma, 1814–1891; see, e.g., Havnevik 1989, 70). A mountain deity could be female, and women could participate in the cult and even serve as the deity’s medium (see below and Havnevik 2002). In Nyemo (sNye mo) in Tsang (gTsang), Tibet Autonomous Region, women as well as men propitiated the *yulha* (see Karmay 2000). Since the late 1980s several books have been published on Tibetan and Himalayan female religious specialists and ordinary laywomen (e.g., Fjeld 2022; Gayley 2017; Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Havnevik 1989; Jacoby 2014).

<sup>5</sup>In Bhutan, likewise, serene worship and playful festivals go hand in hand. For the repurposing of Bhutanese rituals, see Kuyakanon and Gyeltshen (2022). For a discussion of the significance of place-making as a cultural activity, see Basso (1996).

celebrated in around seventeen villages in the central valley of Rebgong.<sup>6</sup> The festival has changed significantly over the years but contains elements such as mediums (*lha pa*) entering into a trance during which they pierce the cheeks of male villagers with metal skewers. Some mediums have their forehead cut with a knife, or get a knife stabbed into their mouth or abdomen. Up until the mid-2000s, animal sacrifices, involving the removal of the still-beating heart of a living animal, were part of the ritual offerings to mountain deities (sNying bo rgyal and Rino 2008 and Buffetrille 2019; Figures 2 and 3).

More widely practiced are annual festivals of offerings to mountain deities at *laptse*, an event related in some villages to the spectacular and more widely studied *lurol* festival. *Laptse* is both the name of the cairn and of the annual festival to a mountain deity. This article discusses the yearly *laptse* festival in honor of the non-Buddhist deity Amnye Taklung at Mount Amnye Taklung (3984 m) in Amdo. This festival has been revived, reinvented and repurposed since the late 1970s, after it had been suppressed for more than two decades, most harshly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976; Figure 4).

## Background

The belief in mountain deities goes most likely back to pre-Buddhist times in Tibet and is related to a tripartite division of the cosmos into the sky, a middle zone, and a subterranean zone inhabited by different classes of deities and spirits (*lha*, *gnyan* and *klu*).<sup>7</sup> About Tibetan mountain deities, Rolf A. Stein wrote:

These gods relate man to his group in space and time: in space, because identical with those controlling the physical environment, house or country; in time, because they preside over the fortunes of the line, from ancestors to descendants. For man himself, in whom these relationships intersect, his gods guarantee – if all goes well – life-force, power, longevity and success. (Stein [1962] 1972, 222)

The origin of the Tibetan mountain deity cult (and to landscape deities in general) at stone cairns is obscure, and there is no scholarly consensus. Samten Karmay, based on the thirteenth century text *lDe'u chos 'byung*, suggests that cairns marked a secular and fiscal institution where travelers had to pay to cross a pass or a river during the Imperial Period of the seventh to ninth centuries CE and that a *laptse* was a landmark on a mountain before it became a ritual term.<sup>8</sup> The religious worship of mountain deities is connected with ancient myths of kingship. The first legendary Tibetan king Nyatri Tsenpo (gNya' khri btsan po) descended from heaven on a rope *mutak* (*dmu thag*) to the mountain Lhari Gyangto (Lha ri Gyang to) in Kongpo (Kong po, in what is now central-eastern Tibet Autonomous Region), while the ancestral deity of the historical kings of the Yarlung dynasty is believed to have landed on Mount Yarlha Shampo (Yar lha Sham po) in central Tibet (Snellgrove [1967] 1980, 58–59; Stein

<sup>6</sup>For the variation and complexities of the mountain deity cults, see Blondeau and Steinkellner (1996) and Blondeau (1998). In this short chapter, we cannot dwell in detail on *lurol* mountain deity cult practiced in the Rebgong valley, but refer the reader to, e.g., Makley (2013b, 2014), and Nyingbo-Gyal (2011).

<sup>7</sup>For an encyclopaedic work on Tibetan spirits, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz ([1956] 1975). See also the chapters of Diemberger, Yudru Tsomu, Hovden and Havnevik, and Kuyakanon and Gyeltshen in Kuyakanon, Diemberger, and Sneath 2022.

<sup>8</sup>He finds that in Dunhuang documents, *btsas* is an honorific form of *yon* ('fee'); Karmay (2000, 391).



**Figure 2.** A medium (*Iha pa*) being pierced during *luol* in the Rebgong valley © 2008 Niangwujia.

[1962] 1972, 202–203). The Potala Palace, the residence of the Dalai Lamas, has a *laptse* in its cellar that is said to have originally been built on the Red Mountain, where the palace was later constructed (Nebesky-Wojkowitz [1956] 1975, 205–206; Stein [1962] 1972, 206).



**Figure 3.** Pierced young men performing rituals during *luol*. © 2008 Niangwujia.



**Figure 4.** The *laptse* at Mount Amnye Taklung. © 2017 Niangwujia.

In Rebgong, mountain deities are said to have moved to the region during imperial times from central Tibet, or even from India, while others are believed to be of Chinese origin.<sup>9</sup> A common narrative connects the mountain cult, especially *lurol*, to the signing of a Sino-Tibetan treaty in the ninth century. Similar events, known as *lhatse* (*lha rtsed*), are performed in neighboring villages as well,<sup>10</sup> reflecting the cultural fluidity in this multiethnic frontier zone (Epstein and Peng 1998, 123; Roche 2014). Charlene Makley (2014, 231) maintains that the *lurol* festival in Amdo originated with Buddhism's expansion eastward from central Tibet, and she shows that the *lurol* in the village of Jima started in the nineteenth century as an extension of the *laptse* cult (2014, 253n20) as a celebration of victory in an intervillage land dispute. But in villages located at some distance from the main river valley of Rebgong, such as Gyalbo (rGyal bo), the local deity cult is linked to Bonpo (Bon po) and Buddhist origin myths (Niangwujia 2021, 77–78).

Patronage and the exertion of authority, and sometimes also of power, were prevalent features in mountain deity cults. The local king or chieftain was seen as the son of the deity, and this mythic relationship was replicated throughout Tibetan areas in genealogical links imagined to exist between territorial deities and local chieftains (Karmay 1994, 1998, 432, 434).<sup>11</sup> Often a male mountain had a female lake or mountain nearby as his spouse, while smaller mountains were seen as brothers or children. In many places the mountain god was titled 'grandfather' (*a myes*) or 'father' (*a pha*), and his wife was

<sup>9</sup>For a long passage, with references to texts, about the obscure origin of Rebgong's mountain deities, see Niangwujia (2021, 62–65).

<sup>10</sup>Known as *lhatse* (*lha rtsed*), rituals that are performed in neighboring Shongha (Zhong hwa), Jantsa (gCan tsha), and Trika (Khri ka) counties, while a parallel ritual practice named *nadun* is also practiced among the Monguor people in Minhe in the Haidong area (Ch. *haidongshi minhexian*). See also Roche (2011).

<sup>11</sup>A connection that is also made in authoritative manuals for *laptse*-building on Taklung mountain, see Niangwujia (2021, 232).

called ‘mother’ (*a ma*). In some territories the main mountain deity was female, and here women were not only allowed to participate in the cult but could also serve as the deity’s medium. A woman in Lhasa, Lobsang Tsedron (Blo bzang Tshe sgron, b. ca. 1924), was until 1959 a medium possessed daily at Drepung (‘Bras spungs) monastery by an ancient female mountain deity residing at Mount Genpe Utse (dGe ‘phel dbu rtse).<sup>12</sup>

A mountain deity’s domain marks the boundaries of the land inhabited by his worshippers, and all natural resources in the territory belong to the god (Hovden and Havnevik 2022). Mountain deities can be benevolent but also malevolent, as is the case for Amnye Taklung, and in the past local chieftains led communal sacrificial rituals in exchange for resource extraction, protection, luck, fertility, and prosperity. The imagery connected with mountain deity cults abounds with symbolism related to height and fertility (Gutschow and Ramble 2003, 137–177; Mills 2003; Ramble 1996, 147–152). Worship is closely connected with the mountain as a source of water and is performed during harvesting time and the seasonal movement of herds (Blondeau 1996, xi; Hovden 2016, forthcoming; Pommaret 2004, 55; Samuel 1993, 184). In the Rebgong region, tantric rituals are commonly carried out by male Nyingmapa and Bonpo lamas (*bla ma*) and lay tantric specialists (*sngags pa* or *dbon*) with the aim of urging the mountain deities to control meteorological events such as hailstorms and precipitation (Figure 5).<sup>13</sup>

Mountain deities are generally portrayed as warriors, carrying weapons and seated on mounts, often horses (Figure 6).

In the cult related to Amnye Taklung, a ritual manual describes the deity in this way:

The king of local deities possessing wrathful power,  
 sTag lung, the powerful and mighty deity,  
 With radiant smile and heroic garments;  
 Wears adamantine armor,  
 Brandishes the flag-spear of the btsan spirits,  
 [Wears] the three weapons including the arrow and bow at the waist,  
 Mounts the white, speedy and clairvoyant horse,  
 Sometimes in the wrathful form of klu and btsan,  
 Chases enemies, riding a red horse.  
 (sNgags-btsun Padma, n.d. (a), fs. 1–2; in Niangwujia 2021, 222)

Painted and sculpted martial images of the deity are found in shrines, temples, and households, and effigies are buried in the foundation of the deity’s stone cairn in the mountains (Diemberger 2007, 133, see Figure 9 below).

Mountain gods can simultaneously be ‘natal deities’ (*skyes lha*), protectors of the lineage (‘gods of the males’, *pho lha*; ‘gods of the females’, *mo lha*), ‘warrior deities’ (*dgra lha*), and ‘territorial deities’ (*yul lha* / *gzhi bdag*), reflecting their shifting and

<sup>12</sup>She was possessed by Dorje Dragmo Gyal (rDo rje Drag mo rgyal), one of the twelve *tenma* (*bstan ma*) goddesses, a subgroup of the Five Sisters of Long Life (Tshe ring mched lnga), see Havnevik (2002, 259–288). For local Tibetan female mediums of landscape deities, see Diemberger (2005, 133–167).

<sup>13</sup>Niangwujia (2021, 315–368). For the role of the mountain deity worshipped by villagers in Lhagang (Lha sgang), Sichuan, see Sonam Wangmo (2019, 198–205).





**Figure 5.** Nyingma lay tantric specialists performing rituals in the vicinity of Mount Amnye Taklung. © 2017 Niangwujia.

multivalent character, and worship may overlap or differ according to these categories (Blondeau 1996, ix; Pommaret 2004, 57). The martial characteristics of mountain deities are related to ritual mobilization of the deity's power and support during times of political conflict and war (Diemberger 1994, 149). The masculine character of the cult is highlighted by the insertion of arrow-poles (*mda' shing*) in the cairns by male worshippers, as symbols of masculinity,<sup>14</sup> and in their battle cry *kyi kyi so so, lha rgyal lo* ('may the gods be victorious') called out at the annual festival. The arrows are believed to be weapons that the mountain deity uses to protect the villagers, and men sought strength and courage from martial deities (see, e.g., Diemberger 1994; Epstein and Peng 1998).

Mountain deities not only legitimized political authority but were also related to social hierarchy. In some areas on the Tibetan plateau and in Mongolia we find cairns for royalty, for nobles and lamas, for common people, and for the rich (*phyug po'i la btsas*; Berounský and Slobodník 2003, 270; Niangwujia 2021, 198; Sneath 2007, 141, 146). Local ritual manuals also delineate different typologies according to function and location: there were cairns worshiped by associations of villages, by single villages, and by household groups *tshoba* (*tsho ba*).<sup>15</sup> Cairns could be located at mountain tops, on mountain shoulders, and at the base of mountains (Davaa-Ochir 2008, 55; Niangwujia 2021, 194, 196).<sup>16</sup> In some areas there were cairns worshiped by children (*byis pa'i la btsas*), and in Mongolia there were cairns, *ovoos*, for women (Birtalan 1998, 206).

<sup>14</sup>An arrow is symbol of the male while a spindle is symbol of the female in Tibetan tradition, see, e.g., Karmay (1994).

<sup>15</sup>For the ritual manuals, see Niangwujia (2021, 42–46). The function of mountain deities reminds us of Durkheim's classical but outdated functionalist study of 1912.

<sup>16</sup>In Mongolia *ovoos* could be arranged in groups of thirteen, with a central *ovoo* surrounded by a group of four in the cardinal directions. In some areas, thirteen *ovoos* were arranged in a row, see Davaa-Ochir (2008, 58–63).

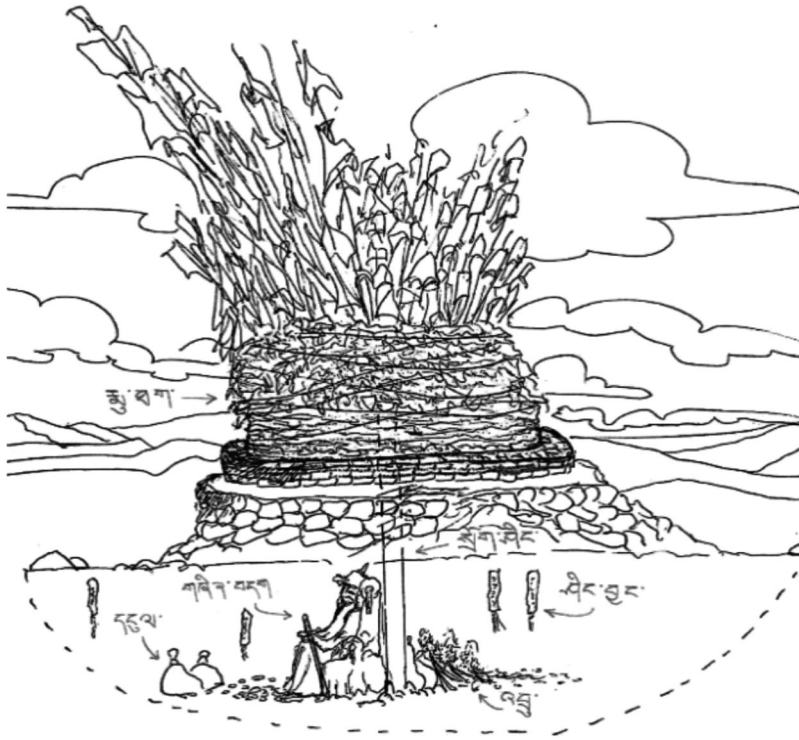


**Figure 6.** An old painting of Amnye Taklung owned by a family. © 2017 Niangwujia.

Since the 1990s, with the revival of *ovoo* worship in Mongolia, where the worship of cairns was widespread, a number of mountains have been established as ‘state-worshiped mountains’ (*töriin tahilgat*),<sup>17</sup> marking the association between state power and the landscape. This connection has frequently been referred to by Mongolian presidents after parliamentarism was established in 1990. We need, however, to be careful when comparing *laptse* and *ovoo* worship since ancient local worldviews and religious practices differed on the Tibetan plateau, in the high Himalayas, and in Mongolia, but in many cases old and local perceptions and rituals were overlaid with Buddhist ones or existed side by side (see Blondeau 1998; Blondeau and Steinkellner 1996; Ramble 1990).

It is common for Tibetan and high Himalayan religious specialists and common people alike to explain the benefits of worshipping mountain deities at mountain cairns by merging elements from different worldviews. Jigche kyab (’Jigs byed skyabs), a Nying-mapa practitioner from Gyalbo maintained that the main benefit of building *laptse* is that

<sup>17</sup>There were three such state mountains in 2004 and eight in 2007; see Davaa-Ochir (2008, 15).



**Figure 9.** © Drawing of a *laptse* in Sogpo (Ch. Henang) County by Jana and Yancen Diemberger. See also Hildegard Diemberger 2007, 133.

it is a way of restoring the fertility of the soil (*sa bcud*) and prevents epidemics, disputes, and wars. When the soil's fertility is restored, sentient beings can acquire more benefits. In contrast, if the soil's fertility deteriorates, the welfare of sentient beings automatically declines. The fortune of sentient beings on this earth is related with the rise and decay of earthly fertility. Although mountain deities are hungry spirits (*yi dags*), they wander in space (*mkha' la rgyu ba*), so they have a tiny foreknowledge (*mngon shes*). They can be beneficial if they want and will therefore repay the offerings we make to them. We have to value their importance, otherwise the welfare of sentient beings will decline (Niangwujia 2021, 200–201).

Here, the interlocutor blends communal religion and Buddhist understandings by connecting fertility with the welfare of sentient beings (*sems can*) and by classifying mountain deities as the Buddhist hungry spirits (Skt. *preta*, Tib. *yi dags*). A prevalent feature of the mountain cult to Amnye Taklung is a complex fluidity between non-Buddhist, Buddhist, and Bon traditions marked by religious collaboration, pluralism, and syncretism.<sup>18</sup>

Worship of Tibetan mountain deities is generally performed daily or seasonally, mostly by men in Tibetan and high Himalayan regions. Purification offerings (*bsangs*, *bsang ba* 'to purify'), an essential ingredient in the cult, are performed to remove

<sup>18</sup>For a discussion of themes in comparative studies of Buddhist traditions, see Sihlé and Ladwig (2017, 116). We use 'syncretism' in line with Shaw and Stewart's definition (Shaw and Stewart 1994).

defilement (*'grib, dme, mnol, phog pa, 'bags pa*) caused by birth and death, conflicts, consumption of forbidden food, contacts with outcasts and strangers, and moral sin (Diemberger 2007, 148). In Rebgong, menstruation and birth blood are seen as particularly polluting (Epstein and Peng 1998, 133–135; see also Diemberger 1994), and women are as a rule excluded from the majority of the cults as well as from shrines where images of mountain deities are kept (Niangwujia 2021). The most common annual worship of mountain deities in Amdo takes place at the deity's residence in the mountain cairn, but in Ladakh the protector (*yul lha*) of a village is never connected with a mountain (Dollfus 1996).<sup>19</sup> There is thus great variation in such cults according to a community's geographical location, history, and livelihood.

### The reorganizing of the Taklung *laptse* in the 1950s

The communal worship of the deity Amnye Taklung at his cairn on Mount Amnye Taklung is carried out by inhabitants in Gyalbo (rGyal bo), a multi-religious association of nine villages (Figure 7).

These villages constitute one of the nine townships of Tongren county, located to the east of Rongbo (Rong bo), the political, economic, and cultural center of Rebgong.<sup>20</sup> The villagers are agropastoralists, but a larger diversity of income is currently available, primarily for men.<sup>21</sup> Amnye Taklung is propitiated both on a large *laptse* where the deity is seen to reside, and rituals are done to appease the deity to prevent hailstorms, thus making him a protector of the villagers' agropastoralist life style. In 2016 and 2017 Niangwujia collected data from one of these villages, Chyetri (Phye khri), which has 144 households and a population of 700 (Figure 8).<sup>22</sup>

The Taklung *laptse* is associated with the local ruler and with power (*btsan po'i la btsas*; Niangwujia 2021, 197), as well as with fertility and welfare. Prior to 1958, inhabitants in all the associated villages of Gyalbo worshiped Amnye Taklung on the mountain in a large annual communal festival that usually lasted for three days. This festival, led and sponsored by the hereditary Gyalbo chieftain, in the role as patron, included animal sacrifice, fumigation rituals, mediums' possessions, the planting of arrow-poles at the deity's 'palace' (*pho brang*), communal meals, horse-races, competitions, singing, dancing, and playful activities.<sup>23</sup> Only men could participate in the worship at

<sup>19</sup>In Bhutan *yulha* can live in mountains, rocks, or groves (see Pommaret 2004, 41, 49). For information about landscape deities in Limi, the authors refer to Hovden (2016), Hovden and Havnevik (2022) and Hovden (forthcoming).

<sup>20</sup>The name Rebgong is ancient and has a complicated history. Tongren is a Chinese term that was created during the Chinese Republic (1912–1949), and recently Tongren transformed into the city of Tongren, and its official name in Tibetan is Thunrun (Thun run).

<sup>21</sup>We do not have space in a short chapter to critically discuss the categories we use, such as 'traditional,' 'pre-Buddhist,' 'ancient,' and 'communal religion.' Stein uses the term 'the nameless religion' for communal or 'folk religion'. We refer the readers to classics, such as, e.g., Stein ([1962] 1972).

<sup>22</sup>Here, nine clusters of households were in the past responsible for arranging the *laptse* festival. In addition to a common worship at the summit of Mount Amnye Taklung, each of the villages has its own cairn where the village deity is venerated, and there are also cairns for clusters of households. For more information on the *chikdak* and the changes it underwent, see Niangwujia (2021).

<sup>23</sup>In the three villages in the Limi valley, many different rituals are performed to territorial deities; many of these have been buddhified and more research is needed. On the tenth of the second month, villagers worship Apchi (A phyi), their *yulha*, who is also the protector deity of the Drigung Kagyu school. In this worship all the villagers participate; first all the men proceed on nicely dressed riding horses. The riders would make one circumambulation of Rinchen Ling monastery and then go down to the horse racing fields. A white horse leads the procession, then horses follow according to color. Thereafter they all go to the Apchi's palace (*pho brang*). Apchi might be a merger



**Figure 7.** The Amnye Taklung ('Grandfather Taklung', the highest peak) and Ama Gyomo ('Mother Gyomo', to the left of Amnye Taklung) mountains viewed from the hilltop where the hail effigy of the village of Chyetri is located (see below [Figure 8](#)). © 2016 Niangwujia.

the cairn, while all villagers took part in the post-ritual celebrations. Under the chieftain's patronage and authority, fifty representatives from the different villages were responsible for organizing the festival.<sup>24</sup>

Until the mid-nineteenth century, a group of villagers called *chikdak* ('*khyig bdag*'), formed by representatives of all household clusters, assisted the chieftain in administrative matters. This group was primarily responsible for regulating agropastoral activities, including the organizing of communal events such as the *laptse*. In 1958, when the Great Leap Forward campaign was initiated, political, social, and economic reforms were carried out across China. As part of this extensive campaign, the Democratic Reforms program (Ch. *minzhu gaige*) was carried out throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). As a result, the old political system of Amdo was radically transformed and the chieftain lost his position. Yet the role of the *chikdak* remained in most of the communities as one of the few remnants of the old system (see also Goldstein 1998; 1–14 and Huber 2002a, xi – xxiii). However, from 1958 onwards representatives of the 'production teams' (Ch. *shengchandu*) organized under the commune system (Ch. *gongshезhi*) and headed by the secular party secretary (Ch. *zhibu shuji*) and village leader (Ch. *cunzhang*) became actively involved in community events.<sup>25</sup> This is also the case in Gyalbo, where by the late 1970s a reformed *chikdak* took over the organization of the *laptse* festival.<sup>26</sup> However, the new *chikdak's* influence is limited as the village is officially administered by the party secretary and village leader representing the Chinese hierarchical government levels of township (Ch. *xiang*) and county (Ch.

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between an older *yulha* and the Drigung Kagyu protectress Apchi Chokyi Drolma (A phyi Chos kyi sGrol ma), e-mail communication with Hovden, December 8, 2022; see also Hovden (2016, *forthcoming*). Information also from Rinchen Loden, December 7 and 8, 2022.

<sup>24</sup>One man for each cluster of households was sent, and formerly twelve villages belonged to this association, a group known as the 'the generals of the Rlang family' (*rlang tshang spyi dpon*), see Niangwujia (2021, 244).

<sup>25</sup>Even though the commune system was abolished in the 1980s, the residual function of the production teams prevails and primarily supervises the agro-nomadic sectors in all communities (Niangwujia 2021, chapters 4 and 5).

<sup>26</sup>In the village of Chyetri, for example, nine members of the former *chikdak* were replaced by the four representatives of the four production teams, and this group is responsible for arranging all religious ceremonies in the village (Niangwujia 2021).



**Figure 8.** The hill with the hail effigy of the village of Chyetri. Here rituals are performed to prevent hailstorms that may ruin the fields and harm the animals. © 2016 Niangwujia.

*xian*). In this way the old religio-political authoritative structure has been replaced by a secular, Communist one.

### The reconstruction of Taklung *laptse* in 1985

Following Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policies, which began in December 1978 just after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Amnye Taklung's *laptse* was rebuilt. It was provisionally reconstructed in 1979 and rebuilt more thoroughly in 1985. All the nine villages of Gyalbo worship at this *laptse*, but Chyetri initiated its reconstruction, since this village had been the seat of the last chieftains (Niangwujia 2021, 237–241).<sup>27</sup> Although the chieftain had lost his power, his old role was still symbolically recognized, but now the new *chikdak* was responsible for the rebuilding, paradoxically with the party secretary and village leader playing significant roles.<sup>28</sup>

The preparatory tasks involved making a large wooden treasure box for consecrated offerings that was carried to the mountain, along with a several-meter-tall 'life tree' (*srog shing*). Both were inserted in a rectangular hole about two meters deep dug out at the mountain summit. Lay tantric specialists inserted statues of Buddhist deities such as Padmasambhava, the 'Three Protecting Lords' (Rigs gsum mgon po),<sup>29</sup> the 'Three Deities of Longevity' (Tshe lha rnam gsum),<sup>30</sup> and blessed offerings such as parts of wild animals, weapons, precious stones, and metals into the box. The hole was

<sup>27</sup>Local genealogical records mention earlier chieftains from other Gyalbo villages, e.g., the genealogy written by rGya bza'i dge bshes 'Jam dbyangs grags pa (b. 1486) (2010).

<sup>28</sup>For example, in Chyetri the village leader was in charge of collecting the offering substances (*rdzas*) and organized the purchase of wild animal skins from Gachu (Ch. Lingxia), the nearest Chinese city (Niangwujia 2021, 209).

<sup>29</sup>The bodhisattvas Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, and Vajrapani.

<sup>30</sup>Amitayus, White Tara, and Namgyalma (Nam rgyal ma).

covered with earth and stones and a square frame of wood was placed on the top.<sup>31</sup> During the festival, arrow-poles were to be placed in this frame and bound together by a woolen cord, the *mutak* (Niangwujia 2021, 288; Diemberger 2007, 124, 133; Tsering 2011, 2016).<sup>32</sup> Both the life pillar and the *mutak* signify the connecting point between heaven and earth, between deities and humans (Stein [1962] 1972, 202–206), and in the Tibetan civilization the preoccupation with heights, as mentioned above, can frequently be observed (Figure 9).

In 1985, young men, including members of the *chikdak* and the *tshoba*, a group of households that currently functions as a social unit for organizing events such as weddings and funerals, cut arrow-poles in the nearby forest and carried them to the summit to renew the cairn. Villagers customarily competed to have the longest poles, to be the first to sacrifice their animal and other offerings, and to plant their arrow-pole; the winner was believed to get more blessings from Amnye Taklung than the others. Usually, a deity medium would supervise the strict hierarchical order according to which the local monastery Tshagya (Tsha rgya) would insert its pole first, followed by the representative of the Gyalbo chieftain from Chyetri and then the other villagers.<sup>33</sup> In 1985, however, conflicts nearly broke out at the cairn over the order of planting the arrow-poles, due to historical rivalries between the villages and connected with the Gyalbo chieftain's patronage and leadership. A monk from the monastery acted as intermediary and stopped the skirmishes, acting on the Buddhist clergy's authority in the ritual (Niangwujia 2021, 289).<sup>34</sup>

### Annual celebration at Mount Amnye Taklung in 2000s

Since 1985 the festival to Amnye Taklung has been celebrated yearly. The following is based on data collected in the village of Chyetri during the festival in 2017 (Niangwujia 2021). While in the past all men from the village were expected to participate, this year only about 50 of the 144 households sent a young male representative, and approximately over one hundred men from all the nine villages attended the festival.<sup>35</sup> They were mostly casually dressed students who rode motorbikes to the base of the mountain on the seventeenth day of the sixth lunar month; the custom of arriving the day before with the sacrificial animals had been discontinued. In the past, villagers would bring arrow-poles between three to five meters long, but since the authorities banned the cutting of forest wood, shorter poles were now bought in the market, something that was convenient because

<sup>31</sup>Prior to a translation of a Tibetan text, written by a Mongol religious master, giving a detailed list of offering substances used in *ovoo* rituals, see Davaa-Ochir (2008, 71–74).

<sup>32</sup>About Tibetan mythology and the first Tibetan kings descending to earth by a rope (the *mutak*) and returning to heaven by the same rope, see, e.g., Stein ([1962] 1972). The construction of the deity's shrine, 'throne,' or 'palace' in the mountains has been described by several scholars. In the Limi valley deities in the landscape are said to dwell in 'palaces' (*pho brag*) (Rinchen Loden, e-mail correspondence, December 2022). For the Nyingmapa texts recited during the consecration rites when Taklung *laptse* was rebuilt in 1985 and 1991, see figures 13 and 14 above and Niangwujia (2021, 185–189).

<sup>33</sup>Prior to 1958 several mediums inspected the arrow-poles and the order of planting them into the *laptse*. The role of the deity medium in the past is largely unknown. Villagers say that the medium regulated the ritual procedures, including making offering and planting the arrows. Besides being possessed by Amnye Taklung, the medium gathered Gyalbo villagers and gave advice on communal affairs. He appears to have had a mediating role in conflicts over grassland and in disputes between neighboring villages (information gathered in 2017 by Niangwujia).

<sup>34</sup>For monastic control of the *laptse* worship, see also Tsering (2017).

<sup>35</sup>Karmay (1994, 1998) writes that around 200 men participated in the Sharkhog *laptse* festival south-east of Amdo in 1985.

they could be transported on motorcycles. From the base of the mountain, the young men hiked to the summit carrying the poles and other ritual offerings.

In 2017 there were no possessed mediums, lay tantric specialists or senior villagers on the summit. The young men from the nine different villages in Gyalbo arrived in groups, and after the initial offerings had been performed, the planting of the arrows in the *laptse* started. After they had burned juniper as fumigation offerings (*sang* [*bsangs*]), they inserted arrows. This most significant part of the *laptse* was followed by minor sequences such as tying woolen cords (*mutak*) around the arrow-poles, tossing paper with *lungta* (*lung rta*, ‘wind horse’) into the air, calling out battle cries, setting off firecrackers, and burying treasure bags (*terkhug* [*ter khug*]) below the cairn (Figure 10).<sup>36</sup>

In 2017, only some worshipers tied woolen cords around the arrow-poles, while others instead hung prayer flags (*rgyal mtshan rtse mo, dar lcog*) on the cairn, a new practice later condemned by lay tantric specialists because prayer flags with printed Buddhist or Bon deities and their mantras are connected with orthodox religion in which the mountain deity cult has a marginal role. Buddhist and Bon monks and nuns in the Rebgong valley, as well as in many other parts of the Tibetan plateau, distance themselves from the mountain cult because it has up until recently involved elements incompatible with normative Buddhism and Bon, such as animal sacrifice and deity possession. In practice, however, several categories of religious specialists in the Rebgong valley participate in segments of the cult.<sup>37</sup> During the Cultural Revolution much religious knowledge was lost, and in the revival starting in the 1980s, partly due to lack of knowledge, traditions that were previously kept apart have now become fused in new combinations and repurposed.

The hierarchical order of the arrow-pole planting, which customarily recognized the status of Rongbo monastery and its last chieftain, broke down as villagers rushed forward to plant their arrow first. The custom of planting one arrow for each of the household clusters had been abandoned a few years earlier, but some villages continued the tradition of planting a communal pole by the *chikdak* committee. A stone cairn at the site venerated by Bonpo villagers had earlier been removed by Buddhist worshipers, but in anticipation of conflicts, the Bonpos refrained from rebuilding it (see below). The customary gift exchange between the representative of the chieftain, the Bonpo chanter, and one of the villages did not happen either (Niangwujia 2021).

In 2017 there was no sacrificial killing on the mountain, although some villagers brought animal parts from the market as offerings (see also Buffetrille 2019). New at the 2017 festival was the participation of a few women in the pole planting, a liberalization that was strongly criticized by some village elders (Figure 11).<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>*Lungta* are paper slips with printed mantras, for a thorough discussion of *lungta*, see Karmay (1993, 1998), and for *terkhug*, see Niangwujia (2021).

<sup>37</sup>Several monasteries in Amdo have their own cairn (*lha tho*). It also has arrows stuck into a frame, and this is an offering to the protective deities of the monasteries, the *dharmapalas* (e.g., in Kirti monastery in Ngaba). The *lhatho* is, however, different from *laptse* in many ways, and the ritual itself is not as large as the *laptse*, and it is exclusively for the monks. There are no spirit mediums, lay tantric specialists, or animal sacrifices. The *laptse* festival studied in this chapter played a significant role in the social and political life of the villagers in the past. While lay Bonpo and Nyingma tantric specialists had the main roles, the monastics were peripheral (see Niangwujia 2021). Also in Rinchen Ling monastery in Limi, monks have their own veneration of protective deities of the monastery by a pole in the courtyard of the monastery (*lha srung*), e-mail exchange with Rinchen Loden and Hovden, December 7 and 8, 2022; see also Hovden (2016, forthcoming).

<sup>38</sup>Karmay writes that women participated during mountain cult rituals (*lha gsol*) in bZang ri village in the sNye mo valley in gTsang, Central Tibet in 1999 (Karmay 2000). For a photo of women taking part in the *laptse* ritual in Tawa (mTha' ba)/Labrang (Bla brang) in 2013; see Tsering (2017, 120).





**Figure 10.** Young men on the summit of Amnye Taklung making offering of fumigation. *Lungta*, having been tossed into the air, cover the ground. © 2017 Niangwujia.

After the ritual procedures were completed, only the young men gathered at a nearby spot to enjoy a simple snack, playing popular songs from their mobiles on Bluetooth speakers.

Earlier, all villagers participated in these informal gatherings and playful activities. On the meadow that in the past was full of tents, there was only one in which a common meal was held. Eight horses had been brought for a horse-riding show, but there were no competitions, singing, communal meal or playful activities. In 2017 only a brief horse race took place (Figure 12).



**Figure 11.** Young men and a few women participating in the making of fumigation offering and the tossing of *lungta* at the summit of Amnye Taklung. © 2017 Niangwujia.

## Interreligious cooperation

Religious diversity has been a significant feature of the worship of Amnye Taklung, even though the inhabitants of Gyalbo are mainly Nyingmapa adherents. The cairn that existed before 1958 is said to have been built by Bonpos according to Bonpo directives, but the reconstruction in 1958 followed instructions found in two Nyingmapa texts,<sup>39</sup> under the guidance of a Gelukpa lama, Alak Mentshong (A lags sMan tshong), from Rongbo monastery.

The various offering substances inserted into the wooden treasure box were blessed by Nyingmapa tantric specialists. During the ceremony at the summit in 1985, a Gelukpa lama with assistant monks and Nyingmapa tantrists consecrated (*rab gnas*) the rebuilt cairn. A medium of Amnye Taklung became possessed and performed during the fumigation offerings, and a hereditary Bonpo ritualist with servants, who previously used to play exclusive roles in the sacrificial rituals and gift exchanges, chanted during the fumigation offerings on behalf of all the villagers. While possessed deity mediums play an important role in the *lurol* festival (see above) in the central Rebgong valley, since the 1980s lay tantric ritualists and monks feature more prominently in the worship of Amnye Taklung (see Niangwujia 2021).

## The mountain deities and religious texts

Historically, and described in Tibetan texts, we find both opposition and collaboration between non-Buddhists and Buddhists, but in general Buddhist ritual specialists were seen to gain the power to control autochthonous spirits and turn them into protectors of Buddhism. Tibetan religious biographies (*rnam thar*) and religious histories (*chos 'byung*) abound with narratives of meetings between lamas and mountain deities, and while the encounters may be confrontational, often the deities assist the clergy in their endeavors.<sup>40</sup> For instance, once, when the female lama Shugseb Ani Lochen (Shugseb A ne Lo chen, 1865–1951) experienced revelations, said by a Buddhist religious authority to be in Sanskrit, a local deity (*yul lha / gzhi bdag*) miraculously supplied her with birch bark on which she could write her visions. The relationship with her own teacher, a male lama, was not as collaborative. He kicked Ani Lochen's head so that the visions stopped, told her that she was not suited for that kind of writing, and burned her birch bark texts.<sup>41</sup> Patriarchal norms and practices existed across the

<sup>39</sup>Villagers claim that the cairn is Bonpo, but it has no special function today, and the Taklung *laptse* has been shared by Bonpo and Buddhist followers up to the present time. The Bonpo text is owned by the current Bon ritual master. The two Nyingmapa texts were composed by Khams Bla gNam mkha' rgya mtsho (1788–1859), *dPal mkhar la brtse gang du stod, lha rten gzhi brtsig gi cho ga'i ngag 'don rab gsal bsam 'grub nor bu'i gter mdzod bzhugs* and *Sa bdag klu gnyen mnyes byed lha rten brtsigs 'bul gyi lag len nyi zla'i nor bu bzhugs so* (for the second text, see figures 13 and 14; see also Niangwujia 2011, 42–43 and 185–189).

<sup>40</sup>For instance, in Bswi gung nyams med rin chen's (1522) *gNas rnying rnam thar* we find stories about the increasing fame of the local deity near gNas rnying monastery (fol. 64.1) and Panchen 'Jam dpal snying po, abbot of gNas rnying, who was offered water and yak meat by a mountain deity while meditating in the mountains near rTa sgo in 1502 (folio 71). In the autobiography of Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin nor bu (2004) of Rong phu monastery at the foot of Mount Everest (vol. *ga*), there are several references to him performing fumigation offerings (*lha gsol*) to mountain deities in order to prevent drought and epidemics (see bibliography below).

<sup>41</sup>*Je btsun rnam thar*, p. 144 (Havnevik 1999, vol. 2, 285). A relatively large academic literature on such revelatory texts and objects (*gter ma*) have been published in Tibetan studies, but this theme lies outside the scope of this study.



**Figure 12.** Young men riding horses to the summit of Amnye Taklung; a reminiscence of the large-scale horse races arranged before 1958. © 2017 Niangwujia.

Tibetan plateau, although a few Tibetan and high Himalayan women reached eminence (see e.g., Gyatso and Havnevik 2005; Havnevik 1989, 1999; Makley 2007).

This fluidity between ontologies and lay and expert elements in the mountain deity cult is evident also in Buddhist and Bon manuals authored by elite masters.<sup>42</sup> The textual sources to the Taklung *laptse* give detailed descriptions of its construction, the iconography and mythology of the mountain deities, the offering substances, the chanting, and the rituals.<sup>43</sup> Traditionally, the circulation of such handwritten texts was limited to a small number of lay tantric specialists who were either assigned to perform *laptse* rituals or were consulted on the correct procedures (Figures 13 and 14).

Most ritual texts and objects were lost during the Democratic Reforms campaign, and a scarcity of manual texts and knowledge about the building of *laptse* in the early 1980s has been reported across Tibetan areas (Karmay 2005, 65; Figure 15).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup>Several manuals and texts have been used in the revival of Amnye Taklung's mountain cult, two written by Rig 'dzin dpal ldan bkra shis (1688–1742), the founder of the Nyingma community, one written by Blo bzang tshul khriims rnam rgyal (1742?–1796), one written by sKal ldan rGya mtsho (1916–1978), the highest Gelugpa lama in Rebong, and one composed by the Bonpo master Tshul khriims bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho, see Niangwujia (2021, 42). In his analysis of *ovoo* worship in Mongolia, Davaa-Ochir has translated parts of Lonsangnorbusherab (1701–1768) and Lobsangtsulim's (n.d.) practical guide to *ovoo* construction entitled *gTer bum sba tshul dang la brtse brtsig tshul gyi lag len 'dod dgu'i dpal 'byor byung ba'i gter chen* (32 folios), see Davaa-Ochir (2008, 65–66, 70–103); for a facsimile of the Tibetan text, see appendix, Davaa-Ochir (2008, 141–162).

<sup>43</sup>The two Nyingmapa texts were composed by Khams Bla gNam mkha' rgya mtsho (1788–1859), *dPal mkhar la brtse gang du stod, lha rten gzhi brtsig gi cho ga'i ngag 'don rab gsal bsam 'grub nor bu'i gter mdzod bzhugs* and *Sa bdag klu gnyen mnyes byed lha rten brtsigs 'bul gyi lag len nyi zla'i nor bu bzhugs so* (for the second text, see figures 13 and 14; see also Niangwujia 2011, 42–43 and 185–189). For translations of excerpts of myths circulating about Amnye Taklung, see Niangwujia (2021, 101–124).

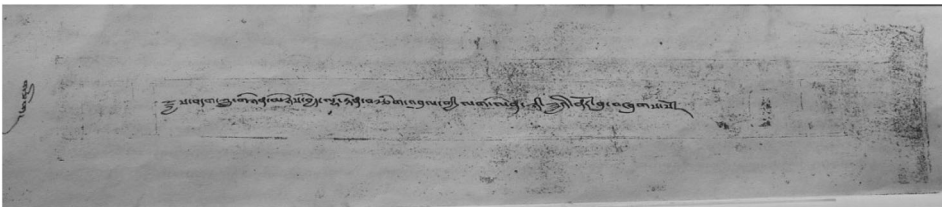
<sup>44</sup>Several books by international scholars have been published about Tibetan texts. For a book with beautiful photographs of Tibetan volumes, information about the production of texts and their fate in Tibet and beyond, and the digitalization of Tibetan literature, see Elliot, Diemberger, and Clemente (2014).

Villages where ritual manuals survived, and where there were elderly religious specialists who could read and understand them, took a lead in the revival in Amdo, and their detailed descriptions have been essential for recreating and legitimizing the *laptse* cult as an ‘authentic’ tradition in the minds of the worshipers. With the spread of new technology since the 1990s, photocopied ritual texts became available and private donors and committees distributed printed texts. For example, three volumes of collected Nyingma chanting texts, which included some invocation texts of Amnye Taklung, were distributed in 2016 during an annual ritual gathering of Gonlaka (dGon la kha). While manuals were kept secret and accessible only to a few tantric ritual specialists in the past, the urgency of sharing has been vital for the contemporary survival of the cult. With the adoption of digital technologies, textual knowledge has been spread throughout Tibetan regions and become part of the revival of the *laptse* cult itself (see Niangwujia 2021).

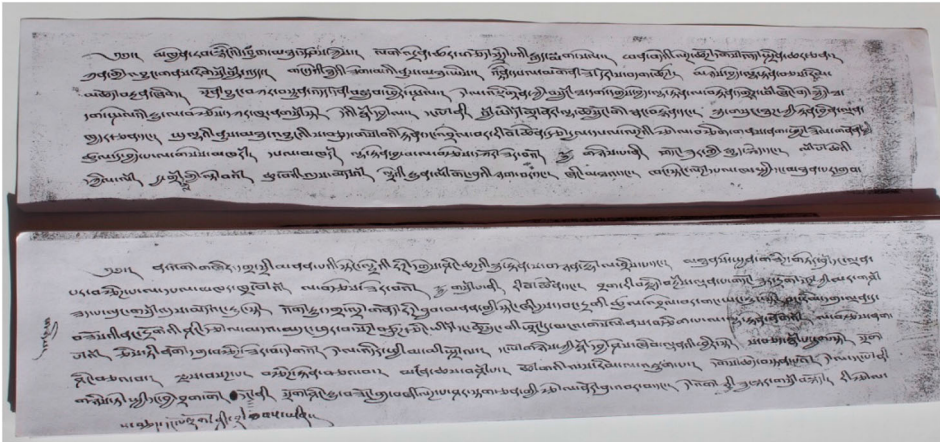
### Buddhification of the cult to Amnye Taklung

Ancient mountain deity cults have changed during the centuries depending not only on political and economic factors, but also due to Buddhist proselytizing. Mountain deity worship has been described as ‘the unwritten tradition of the laity’ (Karmay 1994, 1998, 426; Samuel 1993, 185), and although laypeople play a predominant role in the cult, this truism has made several scholars overlook the contributions of Buddhist (and Bon) ritual specialists. Since the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet in the seventh century CE, the taming (*’dul ba*) of autochthonous spirits and their conversion to Buddhism have been ongoing processes. The Buddhist cultural hero Padmasambhava’s victory in the cosmic battle with hostile spirits serves as a paradigmatic model and legitimizes the authority of Buddhist lamas and monks over mountain deities. Samten Karmay maintains that when mountain deities were buddhified, the martial character of the cult became less pronounced, and it was oriented more towards the general protection of the inhabitants (1996b, 1998, 447).

In Tibetan communities two different cosmological conceptions related to mountains developed: that of the *yulha* and the *neri* (*gnas ri*). While the *yulha* (or *gzhi bdag*) mountains are seen to be inhabited by ancient anthropomorphic deities, worshiped by men at *laptse* for apotropaic purposes, buddhified *neri* are mandalized mountains ruled by high tantric deities where pilgrims perform circumambulations in the hope of a good rebirth or release from *samsara* (see, e.g., Huber 1999). Usually, the two types of deities, their



**Figure 13.** The front page of *Sa bdag klu gnyen mnyes byed lha rten brtsigs ’bul gyi lag len nyi zla’i nor bu gzhus so*, a Nyingmapa text composed by Khams Bla gNam mkha’ rgya mtsho (1788–1859). © 2023 Niangwujia.



**Figure 14.** Page one and two of the text above © 2023 Niangwujia.

cosmologies, and accompanying rituals are connected with different mountains. While some scholars have emphasized antagonistic relations between these ontological universes (Mumford 1989; Samuel 1993), in many cases the worldviews and ritual practices are fluid and intermixed, and we find both types of mountain cults co-existing for instance at Amnye Machen, Mount Murdo, and possibly in Halji in Limi (Hovden 2016; Karmay 1996a, 1998, 451; Sehnalova 2019; e-mail communication with Rinchen Loden and Hovden, December 8, 2022). While Amnye Taklung in Rebgong is mainly a *yulha*-type mountain, different conceptions are reflected in the oral and written traditions, respectively. While oral myths and narratives portray Amnye Taklung as a powerful local anthropomorphic being with whom humans maintain a precarious balance of reciprocity, literary sources authored by Buddhist lamas and monks



**Figure 15.** Old religious texts (*phyag dpe*) in Tibetan script in the Limi valley in Nepal. © 2018 Hanna Havnevik.

emphasize the deity's demonic character and his subjugation to Buddhism, presenting the mountain as a tamed sacred place. These literary sources conceive of Buddhist masters as hierarchically superior to Amnye Taklung, and although lamas and monks have a peripheral role in the ceremonies, their authority is reflected in their consecration of sacrificial offerings, knowledge of the ritual texts, chanting, the initiation and blessing of the deities' mediums (*lha pa*), and in the mediation of conflicts during ritual procedures. At Mount Amnye Taklung, the fact that the Buddhist monastery plants its arrow first in the *laptse* aptly expresses the Buddhist hegemony.<sup>45</sup>

Other forms of buddhification are also evident at Taklung *laptse*. Some Bonpo followers attribute the founding of the Taklung *laptse* to Bonpo religious specialists, who constructed the cairn according to Bonpo manuals, but villagers have observed a gradual conversion of the cult over time.<sup>46</sup> In the renovation in 1979, a major step towards buddhification happened when male villagers buried statues of high Buddhist deities at the *laptse*'s foundation and monks and lay tantric specialists performed Buddhist and Bon consecration rituals (see above). Tibetan interlocutors have conflicting views on the storage of Buddhist statues. Some claim that mountain deities need the presence of Buddhist deities to accomplish their mission, while others believe that mountain deities cannot reside in the *laptse* due to their hierarchical inferiority to Buddhist deities. These contesting claims lead to bewilderment concerning the 'spiritual owner' of the Taklung *laptse*, and devotees are not sure to whom they make their offerings.<sup>47</sup>

A Bonpo ritual specialist, who was previously assigned to perform rituals during the *laptse* festival, has stopped participating since 2004. However, in 2017 some Buddhists were chanting during the rituals, and Bonpo villagers expressed resentment. They accused Buddhist villagers of having disassembled another smaller Bonpo *laptse* next to the main one. One informant in 2007 claimed that there used to be a separate Bonpo *laptse* next to the main *laptse*, and he accused Buddhist villagers of having disassembled the Bonpo one. Buddhists, on their side, replied that this was a children's *laptse* that has now been replaced with a pile of prayer flags (Figure 16).

The ongoing buddhification process has also led to the abolition of animal sacrifice. Amnye Taklung is conceived as a black wrathful deity, one who both punishes and helps and who is pleased by blood offerings. This aspect of the deity was more prominent before 1958, when animal sacrifices were performed annually. Goats, sheep, chickens, and pigs were sacrificed in *luro* festivals in Rebgong,<sup>48</sup> and previously at least three ritually pure sheep were brought to the Taklung mountain on the sixteenth of the sixth month and ritually burned and sacrificed at midnight.<sup>49</sup> Parts of the meat were offered to the deity (head and feet), the chieftain, and the Bon ritual chanter (the skin). At the end of the rituals, all villagers shared the remaining meat in a communal

<sup>45</sup>For a discussion of the role of monks in the *laptse* rituals, see Niangwujia (2021).

<sup>46</sup>According to Karmay (2005, 50), it is among the Bonpo population that the mountain deity cult has its most distinctive autochthonous characteristics.

<sup>47</sup>For the maintenance of ritual songs not understood either by the locals in the high Himalayas singing them or by researchers, see Ramble (1990).

<sup>48</sup>In the past, three sheep were sacrificed during Taklung *laptse*; the offering was made for the sake of Amnye Taklung, but it also had a social function since meat from the sacrificed animals affirmed social relations that continued in gift exchanges during *laptse*, especially between the chieftain and the Bonpo ritual master, between the chieftain and villagers, and among the villagers in the communal feast (Niangwujia 2021, 264).

<sup>49</sup>In the Limi valley families used to offer either a goat, horse, sheep, or yak to their *yulha* Apchi, according to their economic condition (information by e-mail from Rinchen Loden, December 8, 2022; see also Hovden 2016, forthcoming).



**Figure 16.** On the summit of Amnye Taklung with the town of Rongbo and Rongbo monastery in front. Young men are hanging cords (*mutak*) and prayer flags (*gyal mtshan rtshe mo, dar lcog*) between the *laptse* and the pile of prayer flags located on the south of the *laptse*. © 2017 Niangwuja.

meal. Animal sacrifice was practiced at Mount Amnye Taklung until the mid-2000s but has become increasingly controversial due to the ongoing Buddhist proselytization, not only on the Tibetan plateau, but throughout the high Himalayas and in Mongolia.<sup>50</sup> At Mount Amnye Taklung, the Gelukpa lama Alak Mentshong attempted to ban animal sacrifice in 1991. In 2003 there was a wide ban on animal sacrifices in Rebgong, and 2004 was the last year when such sacrifices were carried out at the Taklung *laptse*. After the ban, villagers have offered animal parts bought in the market, dough sculptures of animals, and animals freed from being slaughtered (*tshe thar*), a common Buddhist practice throughout the Tibetan plateau, in the high Himalayas, and in Mongolia.<sup>51</sup>

Arguments for banning animal sacrifice are that Amnye Taklung has been converted to Buddhism and has taken lay monastic vows (*dge bsnyen*),<sup>52</sup> and that animal sacrifice is connected with ‘black Bon,’ a denigrating designation of the Bon religion. In the

<sup>50</sup>A number of researchers have discussed animal sacrifices in Tibet and Himalaya, see, e.g., Ramble (1990, 2008), Diemberger and Hazod (1997). Buffetrille (2019) provides new information on animal sacrifices in Amdo. For a discussion of ‘the freeing of [animal] life’ (*tshe thar*), see, e.g., Coma-Santassusana (2020). In the 1990s vodka bottles, crutches, and blue prayer scarves could be found on *ovoos* in Mongolia along with Buddhist statues and ritual implements (Havnevik, several field trips to Mongolia with Agata Bareja-Starzyńska, Byambaa Ragchaa, and Ganzorig Davaa-Ochir between 1998 and 2003 in connection with a collaborative project between the University of Warsaw and the University of Oslo on the revitalization and recreation of Buddhism in Mongolia after 1990. In an e-mail exchange (December 2022), Bareja-Starzyńska informed me that due to Buddhist proselytization, vodka bottles are probably no longer found on Mongolian *ovoos*).

<sup>51</sup>*Tshe thar* on Mount Amnye Taklung stopped when villagers no longer kept animals, see Niangwuja (2021, 275). Karmay (2000, 386) writes that sacrificing a yak was a frequent practice in the *yulha* cult up until recently. Hovden describes that in Limi, in northwestern Nepal, a rinpoche advised villagers to offer a yak to the deities (*lha g.yag*) to avoid future floods (Hovden 2016, 201–202 and 238, fig. 7.35). Yaks as offerings to mountain deities are also mentioned by Diemberger and Hazod (1997). During New Year celebration in Ulaanbataar in 2001, rump of sheep could be observed on Buddhist altars (Havnevik’s observation); see also Buffetrille (2019, 15); Hovden (2016 forthcoming).

<sup>52</sup>For a discussion of conversion strategies, see Karmay (1998, 446).

Buddhist revival that has swept northeastern and eastern Tibetan areas since the 1980s, young elite practitioners have become increasingly concerned with animal ethics and vegetarianism, a current concern in global ‘eco-friendly’ Buddhism (Huber 1997; McMahan 2012, 218–222 and Buffetrille 2021).<sup>53</sup> Since the late 2010s, buddhification is reflected also in other changes: the Bonpo ritual master no longer has a role in the Taklung *laptse* festival, and the chieftain no longer acts as patron or mediates between the different denominations, as expressed previously in symbolic gift exchanges. It is a paradox that the banning of animal sacrifice has been enforced by normative Buddhism at the same time that blood rituals during *lurol* have increased in the central Rebgong valley. Historically, the banning of animal sacrifice on the Tibetan plateau has been the most telling sign of Tibetan Buddhist dominance over ancient local deity cults.

### Socio-political and economic changes

Since the late 1950s, religious practice in Tibetan areas of the People’s Republic of China has been suppressed. During the Cultural Revolution, mountain deity cults were labeled ‘blind faith’ (*rmong dad*), condemned as backward remnants of the old feudal society, and totally forbidden. In 1962 there was a temporary relaxation, but restrictions were reinstated in 1963. Reform of the agricultural and animal husbandry sector in the late 1970s led to de-collectivization and the development of a market-oriented economy, which continued during the 1980s under the household responsibility system (Ch. *baochandaohu*). Following the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in 1978, several economic reforms were inaugurated, and the reemergence of individual religion was permitted in the 1982 constitution. Liberalization led to increased autonomy for minorities and the revival of ethnic cultures, and since the beginning of the 1980s Amdo saw a rapid religious revitalization where lay religious worship, including that of mountain deities, re-emerged (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998; Huber 2002a, 2002b). All over Amdo, stone cairns with arrow-poles on mountains sprang up, including at Mount Amnye Taklung. Later on, monastic Buddhism, which was more closely surveilled, reappeared.

In the past the mountain cult was intimately connected with an agropastoral lifestyle, but the transition to a market economy, started by Deng Xiaoping, led to major transformations that continued throughout the 1990s. The Great Opening of the Western Regions Campaign (Ch. *xibudakaifa*) in the 2000s inaugurated large-scale investments in infrastructure and industry in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands. This changed local livelihoods in Rebgong and elsewhere, as people abandoned agriculture and herding to take salaried jobs in the construction, service, and transportation sectors to meet increasing food prices, more expensive housing, and higher tuition in schools. Campaigns during the early 2000s, such as the Urban-Rural Coordinated Construction (Ch. *chengxiang-jianshe*) and the Construction of a New Socialist Countryside (Ch. *xinnongcunjianshe*), accelerated urbanization, small-scale industrialization, and economic growth, improved infrastructure, and introduced public service facilities aimed at decreasing the rural-

<sup>53</sup>In the large Serthar Larung Gar (gSer rta bla rung sgar) monastic community in Sichuan there is an ongoing energetic movement to promote vegetarianism, see, e.g., YAK HERDERS & VEGETARIANISM – Rukor; Buddhist Contemplation, Science, and Secular Society: A Dialog with Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro | Contemplative Sciences Center (virginia.edu).



urban gap. Even though targeted measures to alleviate poverty (Ch. *jingzhunfupin*) have been introduced recently, economic development is still unevenly distributed, leaving outlying farming areas poor while towns have profited from heavy investments. These changes have affected the Amnye Taklung *laptse* festival because the time for seeking seasonal employment in cities in inner China and for harvesting caterpillar fungus (*dbyar rtswa dgun bu*) in the mountains coincide with the celebration. As fewer people depend on agriculture, seeking help from mountain deities to increase the herds and regulate the weather has become increasingly irrelevant. However, in some villages in Amdo, farmers still craft effigies and perform annual rituals to prevent local deities residing in the landscape from sending hailstorms, which damage vehicles and plastic and glass roofs that have become popular recently in rural villages (see above).

Local residents believe that offerings to mountain deities can give protection, luck, fertility, and prosperity. Modern needs, related to success in education and business, are readily incorporated in the repurposed propitiations. For example, middle and high school graduates from the town of Rongwo come to the summit of Mount Amnye Taklung to burn fumigation offerings in the belief that the deity will grant academic success in competitive examinations.<sup>54</sup> Being brought up in a new society and educated in modern schools, young people are less religious and have become unfamiliar with such practices as singing traditional folk songs and giving orations, which are central elements of the *laptse* festival. In the old society, post-ritual festivities and playful activities where young people could meet and court by singing love songs and dancing in the open area were a significant part of the Amnye Taklung *laptse*, but in modern society there are other arenas for socializing. Contemporary youth culture, with its preference for international fashion, new music styles, and consumer goods, has estranged many young people from the 'traditional' festivals in the central Rebgong valley. Paradoxically, the *lurol* summer festival, with its celebration of possession rituals and mutilations of the body, enjoys greater prestige partly due to increased interest from official representatives and national and international tourists.

### The participation of communist cadres

In Rebgong, elite Communist cadres from the county (Ch. *xian*) and prefecture levels (Ch. *zhou*) are honored by gifts and given honorary seats during the mountain deity festivals, while cadres from the village level take on important ritual roles.<sup>55</sup> In the *lurol* festival of the village of Harapathur, the Communist party secretary leads the fumigation offerings and communicates with the possessed deity medium on behalf of the villagers. Likewise, as Diemberger has shown, in Sogpo in the Henan Mongolian Autonomous County in Qinghai, six county leaders organized *laptse* by operating, within a religious context, as the six previous chieftains in the old regime (Diemberger 2007, 126). In an in-depth study, Makley (2007) has analyzed the intricate struggles between a village deity medium, the elders, and the party secretary over land ownership and political representation in the *lurol* festival in Jima in the Rebgong valley during the mid-2000s. The

<sup>54</sup>Tsering suggests that the increasing popularity of the mountain deity cult in Fudi is partly a response to young Tibetans' marginalization in Chinese-language education programs (2017, 120–121).

<sup>55</sup>Cadres from the national level do not participate in the festivals; for China's tiered administrative system, see Wangmo (2019, xviii).

conflict diminished the authority of the deity medium and the elders, and the village lost its control over ancestral land. The festival itself was eventually transformed into a colorful communal event (2007, 250). While the Gyalbo chieftain's diminished role in the Amnye Taklung festival is a cause of regret for the leader's family and village elders, the inclusion of Communist leaders in *laptse* and *lurol* festivals shows the flexibility with which Tibetans revitalize their old religious traditions, and how, even in the face of large-scale secularization and competing modernities (see, e.g., Havnevik et al. 2017), the main elements of mountain cults survive. The complexity of the revival shows significant regional and local variation, but while state and local interests at times clash, there are occasions when Tibetan villagers, Communist cadres, and representatives of state business ventures and development schemes collaborate. In an analysis of changes brought about since 2000 by state urbanization programs in the village of Lhagang (Lha sgang) in Ganzi Prefecture (Tib. dKar mdzes, Sichuan Province), Sonam Wangmo has analyzed Tibetan villagers' various strategies for channeling economic resources to their community's tourism sector. She shows that these villagers had some success in monopolizing 'the trade' by marginalizing newly settled residents from other villages (Wangmo 2019, 79–150).

### State heritagization of mountain deity cults

As part of the Chinese state's promotion of ethnic culture, the mountain deity cult has become a stage for expressing regional or national pride (Bian, et al. 2011). In 2006, Rebong *lurol* (Ch. *regongliuyuehui*) was included in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List,<sup>56</sup> and in 2008 several festivals, including *laptse*, entered the Intangible Cultural Heritage List at the prefecture level (mKhar rtse rgyal 2010, 5; see also Hutchins 2021). As a result, small-scale projects, such as the construction of paved roads to the ritual sites and public shelters and toilets, have been financed by the state and the prefecture in some communities. Several deity mediums, painters of *thangka* (*thang ka*) scrolls, and sculptors receive state allowances for their contribution to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. While some mediums have been promoted to the level of national 'inheritors,' others have been given titles at lower levels.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, local scholars in Qinghai have identified intangible cultural heritage tourism as a vital resource and a significant driver of the region's economic development (Bian et al. 2011, 6851).

Increasingly, indigenous Tibetan cultural landscapes are also being protected by the state in its aim to generate ethnic tourism, with economic development as part of the plan (Coggins and Yeh 2014, 14–15). In order to increase tourism, national parks have been established in ethnic areas in order to protect mountains, rivers, wild animals, and plants (Ling 2020, 220–224). This process of touristifying minority regions, called 'Shangrilazation' by some authors (Coggins and Yeh 2014; Kolås 2008), contributes to the folklorization, heritagization, and commodification of 'traditional' culture. In the central Rebong valley, *lurol* draws large crowds of tourists and spectators. Young men are eager to perform blood rituals as mediums and allow themselves to be cut

<sup>56</sup>In 2009, Rebong art in the central Rebong valley where *lurol* is celebrated was included in the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ratified by China in 2004.

<sup>57</sup>Personal communication with mediums from Rebong by Niangwujia, October 2021.

with knives in front of camera lenses for a fee. Possessed deity mediums pose for photographers together with Communist cadres and popstars, *laptse* and *lurol* festivals feature in television documentaries, and photos and films of exotic scenes are shared in social media, including YouTube, by Tibetans as well as by outsiders. Ritual implements are increasingly being manufactured outside of the villages and sold commercially in the market.

## Conclusion

Several scholars have emphasized the function of mountain deity festivals in upholding community cohesion (e.g., Buffetrille 2008; Karmay 1994, 1998; Nagano 2000), and one of the roles of the festivals in the past was to maintain social structure and unity, reminding us of Émile Durkheim's (1912) highlighting of these aspects. Static functionalist models have, however, failed to explain social and cultural change; such models of society tend to see social harmony and overlook disorder and the agency of various 'players,' in this case of lamas, monks, lay tantric specialists (*sngags pa*), elderly and young laypeople of both genders, administrators and party members, politicians at the national level, as well as tourists, who all have vested interests in re-establishing, reinventing, and repurposing ancient mountain deity rituals. Today we see that mountain cult festivals serve a number of purposes, and while social and political stability might have been part of the functions of the festivals in the past, currently the Taklung *laptse* reminds elderly Tibetans of ritual chaos and the breakdown of social structures. Collaboration between the nine Gyalbo villages has withered away. Not only do locals fiercely compete in their pole-planting activity at Amnye Taklung; offerings are also haphazardly carried out and women are invited to participate. Individual interests and needs have come to the forefront, as young men perform fumigation offerings to increase their individual vitality and luck, leading to the decentering of community concerns and elderly males' authority (Makley 2013b; Niangwujia 2021).

Martial rituals have lost their role in modern society, and male mountain deity worship has increased in some communities due to new ideas of the mountain deity's function as a person's natal spirit. Mountain cults also offer the potential to reinvigorate Tibetan male identity, suppressed so harshly with the dismantling of the old Tibetan political hierarchy and monastic institutions starting in the 1950s, a process Makley (2007, 269–270) has coined 'emasculating secularization pressure.' While some educated young men, according to Epstein and Peng (1998, 135), find the spectacular sacrifices of human blood to mountain deities during the *lurol* festival repugnant and old-fashioned, Snying bo rgyal (Niangwujia) and Solomon Rino (2008) document that young Tibetan men are eager to participate in the blood sacrifices and see them as a source of pride and a mark of Tibetan identity.<sup>58</sup> Makley maintains that the main reasons for the growth of *lurol* and *laptse* festivities during the last decades are to be found in competing modernities in the frontier zone, and as a response to the nostalgia for lay masculinity among alienated men (2007, 238–241; see also Tsering 2017, 109–135). Her interesting analysis does not,

<sup>58</sup>Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) have analyzed what they call 're-mystification' of Sri Lankan religious beliefs and practices in the face of socio-economic problems in the 1980s.

however, explain the decline in mountain deity cults in remote areas of Rebgong and in other parts of the plateau and in the high Himalayas (Dollfus 1996; Karmay 2000).

The Amnye Taklung *laptse* was celebrated as a major nine-village intercommunal summer festival until the late 1950s. It was totally forbidden during the Cultural Revolution but has been revived as a multireligious event where Buddhist and Bon specialists as well as ordinary laypeople participate. The repurposed contemporary festival has adapted to new political and administrative structures and economic reforms, changes that accelerated after the Great Opening of the Western Regions in the 2000s, resulting in the replacement of the agropastoral livelihood with a capitalist market economy. Although the mountain cult appears to be more vital in Amdo than in other Tibetan Buddhist communities, the Amnye Taklung *laptse* has changed from what before 1958 was an annual complex and spectacular festival celebrated over several days, to a downscaled one-day offering where the main elements are the fumigations, the planting of arrow-poles and the tossing of *lungta* attended by a small number of participants. There has been a shift in the worshippers' practices: before 1958, they asked for fertility of the fields and protection of their animals, but currently they pray for individual success in education and in the wage labor market. During the last decades the mountain deity cults have grown in the central river valley of Rebgong but declined in more remote areas. On the one hand, we have observed processes of traditionalization in that iconography, ritual manuals, and recitations are strictly adhered to; on the other hand, we see standardization in the commodification of ritual implements and exoticization in ritual procedures driven by state heritagization, as well as the state increasingly turning the mountain festivals in the Rebgong valley into tourist events. Within social and structural frameworks that are perceived as restrictive, however, villagers have made space for celebrating their mountain deities in ways that powerfully signify Tibetan identity and culture.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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