

The Illuminating Mirror

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Naked, Mute and Well Hung: A Brief Ethnographic Comparison of *Kengpa* and Related Ritual Performers in the Eastern Himalayas and Beyond

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I. Introduction

The present study documents a particular type of male performer featuring in different rites staged by communities of the Mon yul Corridor (far west Arunachal Pradesh, India) and in adjacent parts of far eastern Bhutan. Such performers traditionally appear in local rites stark naked, although, as a recent gesture to modern prudery, underpants, shorts or loincloths are now often worn. Aside from being naked, they wear a mask covering their faces, carry an exaggerated wooden phallus in their hands or have a similar phallus strapped around their waists to mimic the male organ, while most of them remain mute during rites. Full nudity and overt sexual gestures in public are normative social prohibitions in all communities where the naked and mute performer is found. Thus, their participation in communal rites always represents an exceptional inversion of such norms.

These naked and mute performers belong to a diffuse cultural phenomenon with a variety of manifestations. They are ambivalent figures who take upon the roles, according to context and often simultaneously, of attractor of good fortune, agent of renewal, buffoon, exorcist, scapegoat and doer of ritually dangerous tasks. With but few exceptions known to me, such naked and mute performers are always laymen from the local community, as opposed to designated ritual specialists with a permanent status. Participation in these roles is usually voluntary and temporary, yet in a very few cases is subject to selection by a deity through divination. The overwhelmingly voluntary nature of participation is directly related to the ritual requirement of full nudity, and the sexual symbolism often associated with the performance. Indeed, the fact that the performers have masked faces, with an additional cloth bound around the remainder of their heads (which is actually a protection against spirits), and that rites involving them are often nocturnal, indicates the possibility, at least, for them to remain anonymous.

My aim with this brief presentation is to reveal the different ritual contexts in which these seldom-documented and poorly understood naked and mute figures feature, and investigate the main themes with which they are associated. In the final part, I draw brief comparisons between my east Himalayan data and examples of analogous performers elsewhere, namely those described at a few sites in highland Nepal, the Tibetan Plateau and Siberia. My own data derive from field surveys of communal rites, detailed observations for selected case studies, plus interviews with elderly participants to reconstruct changes occurring within living memory, all conducted between 2009–2014.¹ For reasons of space, my ethnographic descriptions to follow are kept to a bare minimum.

1 My gratitude goes to Dasho Karma Ura, Dorji Gyaltzen and The Centre for Bhutan Studies (Thimphu) for supporting my ongoing research in eastern Bhutan, and to the Hon. Chowna Mein and the state government of Arunachal Pradesh, Sangye Tsering, Pasang Tsering Sharchokpa and Yangkee Lhamo who all generously enabled

2. Distribution, Names and Types

Field research revealed that the high majority of more than forty recorded occurrences of naked and mute performers fell squarely within adjacent regions where the two East Bodish languages Dakpa and Dzala are spoken, namely the greater Tawang Chu catchment area, and further west in the Kolong Chu and Khoma Chu river valleys. This specific geo-linguistic zone defines their core distribution along the eastern Himalayas, with the most sites of occurrence being in Dakpa-speaking communities. The naked and mute performer also occurs in some Tshangla-speaking and mixed Tshangla-Dakpa-speaking communities around the peripheries of this East Bodish zone, mainly along sections of the Drangmé Chu and Gamri Chu river valleys in the Tashiyangtse and Tashigang districts of far east Bhutan, as well as in the Dirang district of the central Mon yul Corridor where a specific dialect of Tshangla is spoken together with languages/dialects of the tentatively classified Kho-Bwa Cluster. We can note that those established Dirang settlements with a longer, attested historical presence are known to have had much older and ongoing contacts with Dakpa-speakers to their north. There is a range of social, cultural and linguistic traces of such contacts, and the presence of the naked and mute performer appears to be one of them.

The most widely used designation throughout the core region just defined is *kengpa*, with spoken variants *khengpa*, *kiengpa*, *kyengpa* and *kengpo*. While the *-pa/po* is a nominalizer, *keng* derives from words meaning ‘naked’ and/or ‘skeleton/bones’ in regionally present Tibeto-Burman languages.² As we will see below, the ‘naked’ etymology meaningfully reflects the actual physical appearance of the ritual performers designated *kengpa*. Several educated informants also explained *kengpa* to mean ‘arrogant one’ (cf. Tibetan *khengs pa*), yet there are good reasons to be wary of such learned interpretations.³ At some sites the *kengpa* feature in rites as a pair of performers with identical appearance and accoutrements. When one asks about this couple, they are respectively identified as being the ‘male’ (*pho*) and the ‘female’ (*mo*) although the same name *kengpa* is generically applied to both. The *kengpa* occur in rites belonging both to organised Buddhism and to what have been commonly described in Himalayan ethnography as “shamanic” phenomena or the “shamanic tradition-complex”. Since most of the case study material presented below concerns such *kengpa*, I will not describe their types here.

South of Dirang, in several small and adjacent populations speaking Rahung Sartang, Bugun and Mey/Sherdukpen forms of Kho-Bwa languages/dialects, we also find a number of analogous naked and/or mute, phallus wearing/wielding figures featuring in local rites. Performers called *kengpa*, *kiengpa* or *kengpo* of exactly the same type found in the East-Bodish core distribution also occur among the Kho-Bwa speakers, but are possibly a recent advent associated

my field research in the Mon yul Corridor. I thank Michael Oppitz, Mareike Wulff and Dorji Gyaltzen for use of their photographs.

2 For example, Dirang Tshangla *terkong* ‘naked’ and *khang* ‘bone’, Saktin Brokpalo *terkhong* ‘naked’, written Dzongkha *sgyen mo* or *sgren mo* ‘naked’ and *keng rus* ‘skeleton’, Tibetan *sgren mo* ‘naked’ and *[r]keng rus* ‘skeleton’ (cf. *rkang* for various major ‘bones’), and so on.

3 This appears to be an intellectualist reading derived from a folk etymology for the ‘Kheng’ ethno-linguistic identity in present-day Zhonggar, one which occurs in the the only well-known regional history of eastern Bhutan and the Mon yul Corridor, the *Rgyal rigs*, *ibid.* 43b. Besides, the *kengpa* performer’s behaviour is locally described as being either ‘shameful’/‘embarrassing’ or ‘funny’.

with the spread of Buddhism from north to south down the Mon yul Corridor.⁴ Two other related performers appear exclusively in annual, communal festivals addressed to ancestral deities on behalf of various ‘bone-sharing’ kin groups, mainly clans or lineages. At Rahung during the annual clan festival called Chiksaybu, a performer called *mashee* (cf. Bugun *massi*)⁵ – the meaning remains unresolved – appears with a role and symbolism sharing close similarities with certain forms of the *kengpa* elsewhere, although, as we know them from recent decades, rather than being naked the *masheel/massi* perform dressed in ragged clothing (see below). Also at the Chiksaybu festivals, a stark naked and mute performer, with a large wooden phallus hanging from his waist, performs a rite related to hunting (see below). However, this figure has no specific name. A mute performer called *kukpa*, which means both ‘dumb’ and ‘idiot’ (Tib. *lkug pa*) in Dirang Tshangla and in the Tibetan liturgical language used locally, also features in certain festivals in this area, although I have no detailed data on them. Even further south in the Mon yul Corridor, the Hruso (Aka) population have a rite named *fachosum* featuring *kengpa*-type performers.⁶

There are several isolated outliers of the core distribution for the naked and mute performer further west in Bhutan, namely at Tshangla-speaking Tsakaling north of Mongar, as well as at Nabji and Khorphu in Trongsa plus a related case at the Jampai Lhakhang in Bumthang, with East Bodish languages spoken at these three, latter sites. At Tsakaling, a masked *kengpa* with erect phallus performs a ‘origin of the world’ narrative with a female figure as the opening event during a Buddhist ‘*cham*’ festival within a temple compound (Fig. 1). The Tshangla-speaking Tsakaling community in question, report their ancestral migration westwards from the Tashigang region, and thus from the immediate neighbourhood of Dakpa-speakers. The adjacent villages of Nabji and Khorphu in the Mangde Chu valley each stage annual community festivals during Winter in which naked and mute laymen with masked faces perform in a nocturnal rite.⁷ The dance is known as *tercham*, and the performers as *terchampa*. This terminology literally means ‘naked dance/’ based on a combination of words for ‘naked’ from various languages of far eastern Bhutan and the Tibetan term ‘*cham*’ or ‘masked ritual dance’. The origin of these terms is likely the Brokpalo language spoken at Sakten, where *terkhongcham* or ‘naked masked dance’ is the local expression for a similar rite, the naked, masked performers in which are called *terkhongpa*.⁸ Additionally at Nabji and Khorphu, a partially naked, masked figure

4 Niranjan Sarkar, who gathered data during the 1970s, documented *kengpa* performing in Sherdukpen *chos 'khor*, Niranjan Sarkar 1974: 165; Niranjan Sarkar 1980: 85f. While descriptions of Sherdukpen communities by Sharma during the 1950s do not report *kengpa* in *chos 'khor* rites at that time, Sharma 1960: 84f. Sarkar reported that the Bugun (i.e. his Khowa) had picked up dances from the Sherdukpen by the 1970s, and that *kengpa* had been incorporated into the final day of the Chasoai clan festival (the Kashyat-sowai, Chak-Sowai, Chchaksowa or Tchat Sowai of other authors), Sarkar 1974: xvi, 180. See also Pandey 1996: 87–88 who describes their rite without naming it.

5 Pandey 1996 appears to be the only published account of Bugun *massi* (see also his ‘clown’), *ibid.* 85f.

6 See Sarkar 1974 and Dutta 1984 on ‘male’ *ab ab* and ‘female’ *froh froh* figures who wear wooden phalluses and replica female genitals, respectively, and perform with “erotic movements”, Sarkar 1974: 135 and Dutta 1984: 39.

7 On the *tercham*, see Rdo rje rGyal mtshan 2011: 42–43. Khorphu Drup (*sgrub*) is staged over days 15–20 of the 11th lunar month.

8 One literate Buddhist interpretation of spoken *tercham* is *gter 'cham*, ‘masked ritual dance [from a] religious treasure [*gter mal*]’. However, there is no textual evidence to support this etymology in the case of Nabji, Khorphu and at the Jampai lhakhang in Bumthang where a closely related naked, masked performance occurs. One suspects *gter 'cham* has been recently coined to link an essentially secular rite to the Buddhist ‘treasure revealer’ (*gter ston*) lamas Rdo rje gling pa (1346–1405) and Padma gling pa (1450–1521) whose *cho ga* serve as the basis for Buddhist aspects of the festivals at Nabji and Khorphu, respectively, and whose ‘culture hero’ status has been promoted in recent decades in both villages and at the Jampai lhakhang in Bumthang.

known as the *hom*, who carries an untanned animal skin and who appears to be ritually similar to certain *kengpa*, performs a 'cham dance within the cycle of Buddhist masked dances. *Hom* itself is a technical term associated with certain Tibetan Buddhist rites for wrathfully expelling 'hindrances' (*bgegs*) and often employing fire.⁹

Finally, at Nyalamdung village in the Khoma valley of northeast Bhutan, a set of masked, phallus-wielding figures known as *Apa gadpo* or 'old father' and his 'sons' (*bu*) perform in an annual community festival during the 2nd lunar month. The festival includes a series of Buddhist 'cham and lamaist rites attributed to the Tibetan 'treasure revealer' (*gter ston*) lama Gu ru Chos dbang (1212–1270), an 'opera'-like performance locally named *A lce Sngang seng*, and a rite dedicated to agriculture in which the *Apa gadpo* and his 'sons' wear simple anthropomorphic masks and gesture with exaggerated wooden phalluses. Nowadays, the *Apa gadpo* group perform wearing pants and shirts – we do not know if they were once naked, but possibly – and do not remain completely mute since they engage in a short, set dialogue. This group must be considered here since they conduct a rite identical to certain forms of the naked *kengpa* elsewhere.¹⁰

3. Rites, Themes and Ritual Contexts

I will briefly consider the types of rites and ritual contexts these naked and mute performers can be found associated with today, and also during the recent past. The data allow several generalisations to be made. Firstly, naked and mute performers using the phallus as a ritual prop primarily feature in mundane rites directly related to domestic production. Such rites are dedicated to fertility, success in agriculture and hunting and clearly belong to a wider Himalayan shamanic complex. Second, naked and mute performers have become syncretised with, or appropriated into various ritual contexts where Tibetan-style Buddhist cosmology, rites and ritual specialists now form the dominant framework. Third, another apparent adaptation involves the particular combination of naked and mute performers together with a mundane rite of expulsion using fire which is staged within the dwelling space inside the house, and conducted for the wellbeing of its inhabitants. Like the distribution for naked performers themselves, the highest concentrations of such fire expulsion rites also occur in the Dakpa-speaking geo-linguistic zone, with limited extensions into adjacent communities immediately west and south. A final case to be considered below is that of the *masheel/massi* among Kho-Bwa speaking groups, which is somewhat anomalous yet interesting for comparative purposes.

9 See *hom* in the *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* : *bgegs kyi ling ga'am drag po'i mngon spyod*; (*hom sreg*) *drag po'i sbyin sreg* and *bgegs kyi ling ga mer sreg pa*, Zhang 1985: 3070.

10 Phuntsho Raptan 2004: 86-88 documented a phallus-wearing *Gadpupa* 'old man' performer in the *Chodpa* festival during the 10th lunar month at Goshing in Kheng Nangkor (a tradition locally explained as originally transferred from Bumthang Ura), in central-east Bhutan. *Gadpupa* shares some similarities with *Apa Ggdpo* and *kengpa*, yet any links the role may have had to millet (or any form of) cultivation which are fundamental for these latter performers are no longer apparent.

3.1 Production Cycle Rites

a. Swidden Cultivation of Millet

One widely spread rite in which naked and/or mute, phallus wearing/wielding figures feature concerns swidden cultivation of millet. Elderly villagers throughout the region report that, even up until a few decades ago, millet cultivation had a far more important place in local agriculture than it did during the period of my field research. Indeed, at many suitable sites we know it has recently ceased altogether. Concomitantly, the premodern consumption of millet as a cooked staple, as well as fermented and/or distilled as alcohol was also more common in the past, but is now absent or appears in rapid decline where it still survives, which is often only in the context of certain types of domestic and community rites. Due to a complex of reasons, millet has become displaced by rice, maize and to a lesser extent wheat and potato cultivation and consumption. Likewise, the use of swidden cultivation has declined dramatically across the research region during the past half century due to many interconnected factors related to modernisation processes. Thus, rites concerning swidden cultivation of millet now represent an aspect of the premodern life world of this region.

At all sites where naked and/or mute figures perform in rites related to millet, they are named *kengpa* (or close dialect variants), the only exception I know of being the group of *Apa gadpo* and his 'sons' (*bu*) at Nyalamdung in Khoma mentioned above, and this itself is a peripheral occurrence I will comment upon presently. Rites concerning swidden cultivation of millet featuring such figures always take the form of communal, calendric events occurring either during winter after the millet harvest is completed, or in Spring before or at the time of sowing a new crop in the following year. There is often a divination related to agricultural fortunes for the coming year. The exception, however, is when these rites have become adapted to fit within a Buddhist ritual context, they can occur at any time of the year. We find the majority of millet rites performed from around the 10th–11th lunar months onwards – since millet harvesting times vary between sites due to local ecological conditions – and again around the 2nd–3rd lunar month. Within the research region, this post-harvest period leading up to, and following the winter solstice¹¹ into Spring is the focus of other communal rites related to the renewal of life for the coming year, and focused upon fertility of humans and their animals, as well as success in cultivation and hunting. The most important example of this specific to the East Bodish geolinguistic zone and its peripheries are communal festivals intimately associated with the term 'Bon' during which ceremonial groups who share common descent worship ancestral deities for renewal of life powers and protection of their life status.¹²

Kengpa rites concerning swidden cultivation of millet share specific features. They normally involve a larger group of naked, masked male performers, and can even include participation by all men in a village.¹³ The rites are nocturnal, and staged around a bonfire. They occur within

11 Here one thinks of the old *so nam lo gsar* or 'agrarian New Year' locally set on different dates within this same period of the year in the adjacent region of Tibet, particularly across southeastern and eastern areas of the Plateau.

12 This is the phenomenon I describe as the cult of Srid-pa'i lha and term *srid pa'i lha bon*; see Huber 2013, Huber 2015, Huber In Press, Huber In Press a, and my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life*.

13 Reporting a *kengpa* rite staged one November during the mid-1970s at Bongleng on the south bank of the Tawang Chu, Nehru Nanda stated "It is performed only at night by all of the menfolk of the village who turn out in full force.", Nehru Nanda 1982: 124f. My 50-year-old informant at Ramjar (Bartsham Gewog, Tashigang) reported that two decades earlier, just prior to a major development of new Buddhist institutions in the village, twenty *kengpa* performed in the annual rite staged over three nights (12th–14th days) in the 10th lunar month. In 2010, my research assistant Dorji Gyaltsen witnessed around twenty men of all ages performing as naked *terchampa*

the precincts of the village, even in its centre, at some flat outdoor ground, rather than at a sacred grove or stone altar at a distance from the settlement, such as we find in the case of Bon worship of ancestral deities in the region. The wooden phallus that, besides the mask, is the main accoutrement, is held in either hand rather than being tied around the waist and hanging between the legs. The movements of the *kengpa* are accompanied by the steady, rhythmic beating of a drum – either small double-sided drums with a single handle or the large *rnga chen* drum with the same form used in lamaist rites and monastic contexts – or when this is missing by the rhythmic beating of a metal cymbal. The *kengpa* either move in unison with a sequence of deliberate steps and hand gestures around the fire in a circle – which can be either clockwise or anticlockwise – or they appear to act out a series of prescribed movements within a well-defined ritual space.

In the few published accounts mentioning *kengpa* rites of any kind, their hand and foot movements are invariably described as “dancing” and they are classified as “dancers”. The use of dance terminology is often a moot point in ethnographies of ritual movement. In the case of the *kengpa* and all related performers, I think use of a dance description is inappropriate or at very least merely superficial. Apart from a few sites at which Buddhist ritual terminology such as *'cham* has been applied to *kengpa* who perform within a wider framework involving Buddhist specialists, usually there is no indigenous term for ‘dance’ used to describe what *kengpa* actually do. Rather, the series of movements *kengpa* act out during the rites concerning swidden cultivation of millet are prescribed in a set sequence, each phase of which is termed a *le'u*. These *le'u* define ritual actions that the *kengpa* must mimic. Hence, mimicry, mimicking or perhaps even pantomime – due to the musical accompaniment, and the sometimes ‘comic’ tone of proceedings – are more accurate descriptions than dance alone in this context.

The word *le'u* simply means ‘division’ or ‘part’ in the Tibetan literary language that has been used for centuries in this zone of the Himalayas. However, *le'u* also occurs as a technical term with a specialised meaning in dozens of unique Bon manuscripts recording ritual texts dedicated to the worship of ancestral deities in the same region as the naked and mute performers occur. These local texts are self-styled as *rabs*, or ‘ritual antecedent narratives’, and share the same features as other ‘Bon’-identified *rabs* recorded in ancient manuscripts discovered in far north-eastern historical Tibetan territories and in the region of Lhodrak immediately adjacent to the Dakpa- and Dzala-speaking geo-linguistic zone.¹⁴ In both these local and ancient *rabs*, the previously ignored term *le'u* actually defines a unit of ritual activity as part of a sequence that constitutes a ‘rite’ (*bon*). It is something a ritual specialist creates but also ‘does’ in terms of the oral recitation of a ritual text.¹⁵ Thus, in local *rabs* we find the common formula *bon la le'u*

(about half actually wore underpants, but all had white scarves bound around faces and heads instead of masks) one night during the annual Drup (*sgrub*) festival staged at Khorphu.

14 The best studies of *rabs* to date are Stein 1971, Stein 2010 [1968], Dotson 2008, Dotson 2013.

15 For example, in the Old Tibetan document IOL Tib J 731: r37–r38, in the final lines of a *rabs*, and immediately before the start of a following *rabs*, it states, ‘[This] spoken method is the *le'u* of the *pha* [ritual specialist]; others should learn it. Here a small outline has been written’ (*cho [ga] smos pha'i le'u lagste gzhan nI lobs lagso 'dir ni gzhus chung zbig briso lI*); consulted at Old Tibetan Documents Online, <http://otdo.aa-ken.jp>. Note: some Tibetan dictionaries state that *le'u* can be combined with a number of words, including *cho ga* and its variants; see *Bod rgya tshig mdzod*: 2804. Another early example of *le'u* occurs in the first section of the *Byol rabs* in the Dga' thang 'Bum pa che manuscripts. This text tells the story of the rise of a demon named 'Bad Omen King' (*ltas ngan gyi rgyal po*) and the Bdud, and a certain type of 'ransom' (*glud*) rite necessary to 'avert' (*byol* cf. *mjol* and 'jol) them. The opening line of the text states, 'In the *le'u* of the *byol po snying glud* and the expansion of the Ltas ngan and Bdud ... [after which begins the tale in the *rabs*]' (*byol po snying glud dang / ltas ngan dang / bdud rgyas pa'I le'u la lI*);

dgu, ‘the nine divisions in a rite’, or the ritual specialist indicates when each ‘division’ (*le’u*) of a ‘rite’ (*bon*) is to commence by identifying it as a *le’u*.¹⁶ While we now know from ethnographic evidence that a publically chanted ritual text necessarily defines the content of a *le’u* in this context of *rabs*, the sequence of non-verbal actions a performer or specialist must also conduct along with the chant are usually alluded to briefly or in outline – a living transmission by experience is always implied – often in the form of a mythical narrative. *Kengpa* rites concerning swidden cultivation of millet are performed exactly following such a *le’u* scheme, with the unique exception that, since this type of performer is supposed to be mute, the memorised recitation aspect is internalised as a non-vocalised guideline for the *kengpa*’s external movements. These features are one of the reasons why the *kengpa* are sometimes recognised as ‘being Bon’, or as ‘doing Bon’ by people within the region.

I recorded three oral versions of the *kengpa le’u* at three very different locations within the distribution zone described above. Considering the distance between these sites, and the purely oral transmissions involved, the three texts are fairly consistent. Below, I present the eighteen *le’u* version used for *kengpa* at the Dakpa village of Jangphu (Tötshog Gewog, Tashiyangtse), and which is similar to that known at neighbouring Bleiting and Buri. Jangphu and neighbouring Buri are very old Dakpa-speaking villages situated west of the confluence of the Tawang Chu with the Nyamjang Chu, with both mentioned already in the account of Padma gling pa’s 1481 visit to the Tawang region (i.e. Shar La ’og yul gsum).¹⁷ Today, Jangphu lies in Bhutan just hundreds of metres west of the international border, while neighbouring Bleiting and Buri lay east of it within India. All three villages have a long history of social interaction, and of performing the same set of communal rites for both mundane affairs and Buddhist goals, of attending each other’s festivals, as well as exchanging ritual performers or specialists as need arises. For example, a former *kengpa* highly regarded for his performances in Jangphu actually came from Bleiting each time to participate in Jangphu’s rites. Village lamas here are hereditary, married practitioners of the Nyingmapa school, as is commonly the case in many rural settlements throughout much of eastern Bhutan and the neighbouring Mon yul Corridor. In Jangphu, other laymen householders with low levels of basic vows and some ritual training are called *gomchen*, and effectively form a corps of part-time, amateur Buddhist ritualists who serve the community during festivals. When I documented the *kengpa* rite at Jangphu, the *le’u* was maintained by the village lama, while his son, who was leader (*sozin*) of a group of *gomchen*, was the *kengpa* performing the rite. My gloss of each *le’u* is followed by a simple phonetic version of the Dakpa in parentheses, with a numeral for the *le’u* enumeration:

1. The *kengpa* gradually appears and prostrates to the lama and religious protective deities (*keng zhong du zhong say lama ning könchok chöchung sungma lay chaksel du*);
2. The *kengpa* seeks hindrances in the four directions (*chog brikay kengpa gi gek tso du*);

Dga’ thang: 13, f.17, l.1. In a *Sel rabs* manuscript setting out the origins and rites for a ‘great elimination’ (*sel chen*) ritual, and used today in the Khoma Chu valley, the sub-*rabs* series is narrated by the archetypal ritual specialist Ya ngal gyim kong, and introduced in this way: ‘Elder brother Ya ngal said, “The nine *le’u* [for a rite of] cleansing elimination combined as a part of the Great Elimination’ do not exist. [I] will now compose/sing the nine *le’u* [for] cleansing elimination” (*A’o ya ngal zhal na re // sel chen rnam du sdebs pa la // tshangs sel le’u dgu ma mchis so // tshangs sel le’u dgu da bzhangs ’shal //*); *Sel rabs* ff.9b, 5–10a, 2.

16 Historical and ethnographic evidence for the analysis of the *le’u* concept and the *bon la le’u dgu* scheme of ‘rites’ (*bon*) is too complex to present here. I take the topic up in detail in my forthcoming monograph *Source of Life*.

17 See Bu ri byang phug in *Padma gling pa’i rnam thar* 101a, l. Cf. *Rgyal rigs* 29b.

3. Displaying shameful behaviour [i.e. mimicking sexual thrusting with the hips] to the four directions (*chog brikay ngo tsa zhong du / pang long tou du*);
4. Taking possession of the ground and implanting stakes at the four directions (*chog brikay sachak maku purpa dab du*);
5. Cutting forest for swidden in the four directions (*chog brikay chaleng tsek du*);
6. Obtaining fire from the fire deity in the four directions (*chog brikay me lha shakay me long du*);
7. Setting fire to the swidden in the four directions (*chog brikay chaleng me tod du*);
8. Digging the fields in the four directions (*chog brikay leng kou du*);
9. Smoothing soil and broadcasting seed in the four directions (*chog brikay bremo ku sabon pot du*);
10. Sowing seed in the four directions (*chog brikay sa nyum sey bor du*);
11. Observing whether or not the seeds germinate in the four directions (*chog brikay sabon tong ma tong tewu du*);
12. Observing whether or not grains have matured in the four directions (*chog brikay suey matsu tewu du*);
13. Gathering the harvest in the four directions (*chog brikay bremo choss sey chub du*);
14. Carrying the harvest and observing whether or not it is dry in the four directions (*chog brikay chub sar sey wa du kem mi kem tewu du*);
15. Grinding and refining the flour in the four directions (*chog brikay kem sey tok du kemu gi yob sey pe kiu du*);
16. Making a fire, cooking millet porridge [in a certain manner, not understood]; then the porridge is ready in the four directions (*chog brikay me but sey zan tau yob sey lok sey si tag ma tag te sey zan chut du*);
17. Offering a meal to all types of beings [listed] in the four directions (*chog brikay tali kay choss sey könchok lay chöchung sungma lay nedak shidak lay lama lay chöpön lay chöpa ning mi mang lay dang du*);
18. Asking “Is it tasty or not?” to the four directions; replying “It is tasty” (*chog brikay lembu ni mu nu nek sey deu du / lembu ni nek sey shay du*).

When I observed this performed in the dark of night at Jangphu during August 2011, the lone *kengpa* methodically and graphically mimicked every action set out in this sequence of *le'u*. The *kengpa* in such performances always gesture with the wooden phallus to explicitly represent the content of *le'u*; it becomes the axe which cuts the forest, then the fire flint that ignites the swidden bonfire, the sickle for harvesting the heads of millet, and so on (Fig. 2). The symbolic collapsing together of procreative male organ and creative tools producing sustenance for life was not lost on anyone present, some of whom made side remarks about this. The performance was captivating for both the local audience, who crowded around in excitement, and for myself. While the naked, masked and candle-lit *kengpa* mimicked the entire cycle of millet production, the lama's *rnga chen* drum beat monotonous time in the background, and the audience slowly and repeatedly chanted in a somewhat menacing and ever rising tone *Nem chö beg pa da beg pa. Hau! Hau! Hau!* ‘The fire offering drum is a bad sound [lit. ‘flat’]. Hau! Hau! Hau!’ This pithy sentence referring to the sound of the lama's ritual drum, which usually signals something positive associated with organised Buddhist religion, now beats to announce the inversion of

norms represented by the public nakedness of the *kengpa*, his sexually suggestive mimicking and finally as the harbinger of the chaos and disturbance about to ensue during the *hoba* (or *nemchö*) fire expulsion rites that followed immediately after the *kengpa le'u* were completed and lasted for the remainder of the night (see below).

The eighteen (i.e. nine plus nine) *le'u* scheme of Jangphu represents a cosmological ideal, since nine stands for perfection or completeness in local thinking, as it does also in the 'Bon'-identified *rabs* literature which the *kengpa* is associated with in various respects – in fact, nine-fold schemes in cosmology and ritual are ubiquitous where the shamanic complex occurs in the extended eastern Himalayas and Siberia.¹⁸ In the very similar *le'u* scheme for the *Apa gadpo* rite at Nyalamdung village (Khoma Gewog, Lhuntse), there are twenty-one *le'u* to be acted out, quite a number of which consist merely of one or two words forming the prompts to be memorised.¹⁹ The final *Apa gadpo le'u*, called *shong* ('basket'), is perhaps the most interesting. It concerns *Apa gadpo* using a specific divination technique in which an implement or other object of uneven shape – always made of wood, or from parts of a tree – is tossed in the air, and the auspice depends upon which side it comes to rest on the ground. Exactly this technique – among scores of different divination methods – is used in communities along the extended eastern Himalaya and up into Siberia who maintain a shamanic complex which includes a cosmology with ancestral beings in a stratified sky world (among other parallel traditions).²⁰ In the *kengpa le'u* version recorded at the village of Kyaleng (Shongphu Gewog, Tashigang) in the Gamri Chu valley, there are fourteen *le'u* and they are rather close to the Jangphu version. The Kyaleng scheme probably represents the older *kengpa* as performed in the central area of Tawang. The inhabitants of Kyaleng (the word means 'swidden' in the central Tawang Dakpa dialect) and neighbouring Yerbinang are mainly descendants of migrants from Mukto (with a few from Khet, Lhou and Jang) who moved to Bhutan due to land shortage to resettle in the mid Gamri Chu valley about five generations ago. In the case of Dzala-speaking Nyalamdung, there are also historical connections to the Dakpa area. Migrants from Nyalamdung left the Khoma area around the beginning of the 20th century, and resettled at Shagshingma and its environs high

18 For examples elsewhere, see Strickland 1982: 17f., 69, 148, 207f., 212, 237, 240f. on the Gurung/Tamu, Jackson 1979: 207, 216, Appendix 2 and Rock 1952, I: 34, 39, 44–46, 52, 56, 67, 91, 116f., 147, 182, 188, 199, 210, 265, 277, 288 for the Naxi, Shirokogoroff 1935: 200, 214, 289, 311, 316 for Tungusic-speakers.

19 To clarify the often minimal *le'u* content, my gloss here is based upon both the original text and the ethnography: 1. *Apa gadpo* sends his sons to find suitable land for swidden (*Sa tsema*); 2. *Apa gadpo* sends his sons to see whether or not the trees are large or small (*Shing jigpa ne min ne mongo tei zangma*); 3. Cutting down forest with axes (*Seling segma*); 4. Seeing whether the felled trees are dry enough to burn (*Kyem mi kyem tei zangmo*); 5. Burning the felled trees (*Seling me todma*); 6. Clearing the burnt ground (*Ling serma*); 7. Ploughing the earth with a *mithun*-hybrid ox (*Badi norma*); 8. Smoothing the clods of earth (*Bongpo la tugma*); 9. Calling a woman named Pema to bring the seeds (*Pema Zompa sharma*); 10. Sowing by broadcasting the seeds (*Sabon podma*); 11. Seeing whether the plants are sprouting (*Trong ma trong tei zangma*); 12. Measuring the height of the crop (*Chechung*); 13. Seeing whether grains are forming (*Niu zhong ma zhong tei zangma*); 14. Seeing whether the heads of grain are bent over (*Khug ma khug tei zangma*); 15. Seeing whether the grain is fully ripe (*Sö ma sö tei zangma*); 16. Sharpening the sickles for the harvest (*Sorua dorma*); 17. Cutting the stalks (*Chodma*); 18. Threshing the harvest (*Phorma*); 19. Dividing and carrying the grain to each house (*Dru khesee bema*); 20. *Apa* distributes mixed grains (*druna*) to households [these are spread on fields to protect them from pests]; 21. *Apa* performs an annual divination for farmers with the grain basket (*shong*).

20 Other east Bhutanese examples of this divination technique from the Bon ancestral cult will be documented in detail in my forthcoming book *Source of Life*, but cf. Oppitz 2004: 35 fig. 47, Hamayon 1995: 15f. and Shirokogoroff 1935: 305.

above the Doksum confluence of the Drangmé Chu (i.e. Tawang Chu west of the Bhutan-India border) with the Kolong Chu. Other inhabitants of lower Khoma can trace migrant ancestors to the upper Gamri Chu valley. Additionally, we know that premodern Dakpa cattle traders visited Khoma bringing *mithun* oxen and *mithun* hybrids to sell. When the *le'u* are performed at Nyalamdung by the *Apa gadpo* and his 'sons', a few comic, verbalised parts are included, and these must be spoken in Dakpa rather than the local Dzala dialects.

The *kengpa le'u* for millet cultivation is rather typical of several core dimensions of 'Bon'-identified *rabs*. Together, the *le'u* yield a precedent or archetype for something to be repeated in real life, in this case a method of domestic production. As *kengpa* performance, the *le'u* also constitute a rite conducted in a ritual context by a special type of performer. What is missing here is an etiological myth or tale, one taking us back to primordial origins or to a first instance of something that we usually find in *rabs* texts. Perhaps a myth is superfluous in this context? In a sense, what the villagers who annually mimic the *le'u* for millet cultivation every post-harvest season as *kengpa* are doing is ritually resetting or renewing some vital aspect of their relationship with the world, of their place in the cosmos. The *kengpa le'u* is the archetype for a life-sustaining activity, one they themselves must – at least, in premodern times – repeat each Spring before the millet growing season of the new year. Many *rabs* containing mythical tales explain how specific rites which are the pure preserve of dedicated ritual specialists once came into being due to a unique circumstance. Basic methods of subsistence production, like the millet cycle, are non-specialist by definition since everyone in the community has to be involved in them, and thus require no further elaboration. The power of the rite lies in the mimetic sequence of the *le'u* put into action. It represents a perfect instance of millet production (and consumption!). Ritual mimicking of domestic activities is a basic pattern within the shamanic complex in both the Himalayas and in Siberia. Oral ritual texts reciting the steps for swidden cultivation of millet very similar to the *kengpa le'u* can be found in use by Gurung/Tamu shamans in highland Nepal,²¹ while the mimicking of a successful hunt and imitating the behaviour of game animals are the most well-known examples of this in both Siberia and the eastern Himalayas.²² I will now document a case of mimicking hunting involving a naked and mute performer.

b. Hunting

At Rahung (Dirang district, West Kameng), a complex clan ancestral festival called Chiksaybu was annually staged in mid-Winter (usually around January-February) during the period of my field research. At the end of the main day, in the pitch black of night, a single naked and mute – but unmasked – performer with an exaggerated phallus hanging down between his legs acted out a rite to ensure success during the hunt. The performer himself has no special designation, although when asked what this rite was my informants generically called it *sargangri* (or *sirgangri*), with one articulate person describing it as the *sargangri karmo söshe*. This refers to the 'worship' (*söshe*) of Shar Gangs ri dkar po ('Eastern White Snow Mountain'), an old mythologi-

21 Strickland 1982 notes two Gurung/Tamu *pé* – an oral genre very similar to *rabs* – called *kuseyema pé*, one which "describes the felling of trees, burning of debris, planting of millet (*kuseye*, colloq. *Nare*), its ripening and harvest", the other "the preparing of swidden fields for the planting, growth and harvest of millet", *ibid.* 296, 303.

22 For example, on Evenki ritual mimicking of a reindeer hunt, and the work of blacksmiths and tailors to create a shaman's costume, see Vasilevich 1957 and Lot-Falck 1974.

cal site in the regional Bon cult of clan ancestors.²³ This regional Tibetan language toponym identifies one of the high, snow-covered peaks of the Gorichen/Kangto massif visible to the northeast from high vantage points in this part of the Mon yul Corridor. The same peak is also worshipped by hunters in some neighbouring Tshangla-speaking settlements.

The *sargangri söshe* takes place in an area just off to one side of the sacred grove high above old Rahung village at which the main Chiksaybu festival is staged. The naked and mute performer moves around the base of a living sapling tree some 3–4 m in height, from which all side branches have been trimmed off the lower half. The performer mimics a bear – an animal hunted for its gall, fat and meat in this area in my experience – who shuffles back and forth around the base of the tree in an agitated manner. At intervals, he lies with his shoulders upon the ground right at the tree's base and stretches both legs, now crossed at the ankles, high up the tree. At this point he thrusts his hips with the phallus protruding outwards in the motion of sexual intercourse (Fig. 3). This action mimics the bear – and by extension other large game – being caught in a *shashong* trap which hunters set in the forest. The *shashong* consists of a strong and flexible sapling or small tree bowed over and affixed to the ground, where a trigger mechanism and foot loop are attached. Once the game animal steps through the foot loop, it triggers release of the tree under tension, which springs upright holding the snared animal upside down, a position in which they usually writhe wildly while seeking to escape. This whole mimetic sequence is repeated several times over a period of five minutes, while a large crowd of mostly male festival participants look on, illuminating the figure with their flashlights, cheering and hooting loudly. During this mimicking, the *mashee* (see below), who is a possessed figure wearing a wooden phallus around his waist, runs and jumps throughout the area. At the end of the performance, men from the community who are hunters go up to the tree and carefully inspect its lower branches with their flashlights. They search for tiny spiders that embody the 'souls' of game animals under the care of the *sargangri* being who is associated with the snow mountain. These soul spiders are attracted to the tree during the rite, and it is believed that when collected by hunters they will have control over life and death of the animals themselves. This reflects notions about the nature and manifestation of the soul or mobile vitality principle that are wide-spread in the eastern Himalayas.²⁴ Identical shamanic rites for hunting success involving collection of insects embodying the souls of game animals are also found among Tungusic-speaking peoples of Siberia.²⁵

As with the *kengpa le'u* millet rite discussed above, here again we see that annual mimicking of a form of domestic production to ensure its future success is the ritual preserve of the naked and mute performer. Their rites are entirely part of the Himalayan shamanic complex.

23 Shar Gangs ri dkar po is mentioned in 17th century Gdung origin narratives, as one stage in the *gshegs rabs* itinerary by which the sky ancestral *lha* (*gnam lha*) Gu se lang lings descends to earth from the top of the sky, *Rgyal rigs* 36b.

24 Rites and narratives featuring the search for, capture and manipulation of the 'soul' or 'life force' spider and the spider and certain insects as go-between are prevalent throughout eastern Bhutan and the Mon yul Corridor, as they are elsewhere along the extended eastern Himalayas. See Schrempf 2015, Schrempf In Press, Tamdin Dorji 2004, Strickland 1982, Swancutt 2012.

25 On the Šingke(n) concept and Šingkečlavun rites, see Vasilevich 1957: 164–170, Anisimov 1958: 15–55, 82.

3.2 Buddhist *Chos 'khor* Rites

The second, common regional manifestation of the naked and mute performer called *kengpa* is within the context of annual community rites orchestrated by Buddhist lamas, monks and/or *gomchen*.²⁶ The most wide-spread event of this type is the *chos 'khor* (or *chos skor*), meaning 'circling/circuit [with] the Buddhist Dharma', a rite performed in many Buddhist highland communities along the Himalayan chain albeit without any naked and mute performers involved.²⁷ Within my research region, *chos 'khor* is staged in different months depending upon the community, most frequently during the sixth or seventh, but also around the third and fourth months. In any case, *chos 'khor* is deployed during the warmer planting/sowing and growing/weeding seasons, exactly the opposite period of the year within which the millet cultivation and hunting rites we just discussed occur.

Local *chos 'khor* rites often have three phases. They begin with Buddhist specialists reciting texts from volumes of the Buddhist canon at the temple or monastery during several preliminary days. This is followed by the main public day of the festival when the volumes of the canon are carried upon the backs of laypersons in a procession that makes a clockwise circuit of all the main productive fields of a village, and during which the village lama and/or a group of Buddhist specialists playing musical instruments and bearing sacred objects lead this procession in front of all the laypersons carrying the books. In these two phases, it is the apotropaic value of the words in the Buddhist canon, in both chanted form and embodied within physical objects, which defines the rites. Finally, an expulsion or exorcistic rite based upon a *yi dam* and/or *chos skyong* cycle typical of the lamaist ritual tradition and conducted by the Buddhist specialists culminates in the driving away or disposing of any negative forces or harmful beings.

Within this larger ritual context of *chos 'khor*, the *kengpa* always appear as lone performers or as a pair during the procession around the fields that takes place during the daylight hours. In most cases, they are positioned at the very start and/or very end of the Buddhist procession. In *chos 'khor* that I have observed, the *kengpa* either carried a wooden phallus in their hands, or they carried a phallus-shaped ritual weapon (*gtor ma*, *gtor zor*) which has been created as part of the Buddhist expulsion rites, while in some cases they tied a wooden phallus around their waists so that it hung between their legs. As the *kengpa* pass by the festival participants, their hand-held phalluses of both types are also used to bless persons upon the crowns of their heads. The *kengpa* in *chos 'khor* are always masked and mute. They lack any set movements based upon *le'u*, and there is no oral or written text of any kind specifying their ritual role, which is, of course, unusual in a Tibetan Buddhist liturgical context.

Kengpa movements during *chos 'khor* can be highly variable and often appear spontaneous, dependent upon the particular style and experience or even whim of each man trying a hand at the role. However, invariably they involve some repeated form of sexually suggestive posturing, mainly thrusting of the pelvis and the phallus towards festival participants and even at the Buddhist specialists, or sometimes cavorting with members of the audience in a comic spirit. Once again, it is mimicking, this time of the male sexual act during intercourse, which most consistently defines how and what it is that the *kengpa* do. Nobody may openly criticise their behaviour, nor try to restrain them, and when a *kengpa* begs for money from bystanders – which

26 For examples from the research region including naked and mute *kengpa* performers, see Tsewang Norbu 2008: 101f., 113f., Sarkar 1980: 85f., Sarkar 1974: 151, 165.

27 See Childs 2005 and the literature conveniently cited therein, *ibid.* 48f., n. 3.

is often the case – it is considered highly inauspicious not to give him some cash or equivalent offering on the spot. There is a ritual reason for this. In relation to expulsion or exorcistic rites performed together with *chos 'khor*, when a *kengpa* is present he will be the person to carry off and dispose of the ritual weapon or device into which all of the hindering, harmful and negative elements afflicting a community are concentrated. This is considered a dangerous role, and it overlaps somewhat with annual rites staged on behalf of communities elsewhere in the region during which a naked or semi-naked human ‘scapegoat’ or ‘ransom’ performer appears (see below).

In my reading of the data, *kengpa* in the context of *chos 'khor* represent a typical example of syncretism or adaptation of elements from the shamanic complex found in the region. Even if we lack direct evidence of such agency being involved, at very least Buddhist specialists rhetorically claim the *kengpa* as belonging to their cosmology and rites. All informants in my survey, as well as in other studies of *chos 'khor* elsewhere, stress that the role of the procession around the fields in which the *kengpa* appear is fundamentally apotropaic, to protect crops, and the places they are grown, from all types of attack or harm – insect and animal pests, fungal and other crop diseases, and detrimental weather conditions cover virtually all the locally cited causes. Thus, while the arena of domestic production in which the rites are meaningful is the same as the shamanic millet rites, and thus a logical syncretic field for overlap, the goals of the two types of rites share nothing in common beyond the abstract, meta-level of both somehow supporting agriculture.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of *kengpa* in such Buddhist rites is the sheer variety of rhetorical narratives that Buddhist specialists employ to explain why naked and mute performers who completely invert social norms are included in their religion. I collected at least a dozen different Buddhist narratives or explanations around the region to justify the *kengpa*. These can differ from village to village and from lama to lama within the same area, and there are no doubt many more variations to be found. Here are brief summaries of just two representative types.

At Jangphu, I inquired about the formal Buddhist liturgy within which the *kengpa* occurred. I was told it is Padma gling pa's *Bla ma nor bu rgya mtsho*, and that a separate text entitled *Me lha bzugs so* defined part of the *kengpa*'s role in the fire expulsion rite used in the same festival. However, a search for any word resembling *kengpa* or description thereof in these texts proved fruitless. Additionally, the following origin tale of the *kengpa* within the frame of expulsion rites during *chos 'khor* was recited by the hereditary village lama of Jangphu:

The site upon which the Jangphu temple was erected was once a small lake with an autochthon (*gnas po*) dwelling in it. He had three heads, six arms and six legs and nine eyes. Two lamas who were brothers set out from Tibet and migrated to the region. Terchang Rinpoche was the one who settled at Jangphu, while his brother settled at Buri where the Manjing Lhakhang is located. When he first arrived, Terchang Rinpoche meditated for three years on the *Peling Ladrub* from the *Lama Norbu jamtso* at a site above the village overlooking the small lake. He observed that the autochthon of the lake devoured more than thirty thousand living beings during that time. Thus, he went to the lake and performed the *Kaje tukyi melong* practice there for three days. He threw a ritual weapon into the lake, and within that very night the lake dried up and the autochthon was bound by oath. He then wanted to build a temple at this spot, and so first he performed ‘taming the ground’ (*sa 'dul*). For this,

he stripped naked, wrote the powerful syllable *Hung* upon his chest and danced (*'cham*) the *kengpa*. The local earth spirits were both amused by his antics and offended or ashamed to see his nakedness, and being thus distracted Terchang Rinpoche was able to control them. He then successfully built the temple.

Every theme in this tale is well-known from an older corpus of Tibetan Buddhist hagiographical and historiographical narratives in wide circulation throughout Tibet and the Himalayas for many centuries.²⁸ This does not diminish the native creativity the story represents, but indicates the cultural resources available for local use. Obviously, the *kengpa le'u* for millet used by exactly the same *kengpa* performer at Jangphu has completely disappeared in this Buddhist narrative, as if it never existed.

Across the Tawang Chu/Drangmé Chu river valley from Jangphu, on the south bank, is the settlement of Melongkhar. It has no connections with Jangphu, and many of its inhabitants speak Tshangla while Dakpa is spoken more in the village's surroundings. I also documented *kengpa* rites in a Buddhist context at Melongkhar. Here, the *kengpa* are combined with the performance of a fire expulsion rite (called *hungla*, more typical for Tshangla speakers), and both rites are subsumed within an overarching tantric Buddhist liturgical scheme. This is exactly the ritual framework existing at Jangphu as well. When I asked about the origins of this complex expulsion festival, the local Buddhist specialist who lead the festival, a *gomchen* who was the *sozin*, told me it was introduced at Melongkhar by Tshongtshongma Rinpoche because of an epidemic which claimed many lives, and has since been conducted once a year to expel all negative forces from the village. Inquiring further about the Buddhist liturgy, I was given the manuscript of a *cho ga* locally attributed to Padma gling pa and focusing upon Mgon po Ma ning nag po, a wrathful form of Mahakala. When asking for the exact part of the *cho ga* in which the *kengpa* are mentioned, the *sozin* indicated with unhesitant precision the words *pho nya'i dmag tshogs 'khor dang bcas pa*, 'the retinue [of Ma ning Nag po] including a martial host of messengers'.²⁹ Thus, here we see the *kengpa* once again as part of the lamaistic apparatus of violent and wrathful conquest, albeit demoted to *pho nya* status, down in the lowest levels of Buddhist henchmen within the cosmological hierarchy.

As many commentators on Tibetan Buddhism have observed, the lama's popular status derives in large part from his perceived ability to tame or subjugate the local cosmos. Thus, in the hands of the lama, the Buddhist *kengpa* becomes merely one more technique in a seemingly limitless ritual arsenal at his disposal, the content of much of which has been historically appropriated from the indigenous cultural milieux within which missionary Buddhism made itself at home and became dominant. In the case of *kengpa*, this process is rhetorically facilitated by Tibetan verbs such as *'dul ba*, which equally describe 'taming' or 'subjugation' of anything which is non-Buddhist as an act of Buddhist 'civilising', and the mundane 'cultivation' of a field of soil by a farmer preparing to plant crops.

28 Compare the local narrative to justify *kengpa* at Sakten in far east Bhutan reported by Khaling Karma 2006.

29 *Pad gling mgon po ma ning*.

3.3 Fire Expulsion Rites

I have already mentioned cases of a fire expulsion rite used for the annual exorcism of negative forces from the domestic space, and that it occurs together with the presence of naked and mute performers, either combined closely together into the same individual rite, or as separate aspects within a common festival. This was a frequent correlation across all my data. Like the naked and mute performers, the fire expulsion rite has its highest recorded occurrence among Dakpa speakers. It goes by various colloquial names, including *hoba*, *hau* and *nemchö* in Dakpa settlements, while among neighbouring Tshangla- and Choca-ngaca-speakers it is called various *hungla* or *hungla sanyen*, *gektra*, *mela bokpey* and *mangi rimdro*³⁰, although the usage of these names can sometimes be shared between different language communities. In comparison to the other rites we have discussed above, the fire expulsion rite can occur as part of community festivals of different types throughout the whole annual calendar, and is not to be classified with stages of the production cycle.

In the core Dakpa-speaking zone, these annual rites mostly have the same basic elements and format. A group of men, frequently led by naked and mute performers called *kengpa* who move to the beat of a drum, go from house to house around a village to help expel hindering forces and harmful beings lurking within the domestic space inside the household, and also even about the bodies and in the clothing of the inhabitants. This group will, without any restraint and enjoying complete impunity, up-end and throw around many of the larger material chattels found outside and within the dwelling house, and man-handle and toss into the air (*chekma* in Dakpa) any of its inhabitants they can catch, regardless of age, gender or status, although women and girls who are most closely identified with the interior of the house are the prime targets. All this is done in order to dislodge unseen negativities. Following the first group, men armed with flaming torches and bags of inflammable powder – usually concocted from flour or grain husks mixed with pine resin – then produce dramatic, fiery flare-ups at the hearth place and in each room. Finally, one or more Buddhist specialists walk through the dwelling hurling small stones or blessed grains into all the corners of each room.

Another common feature of these events is that the male party who accompany the *kengpa* and conduct the rites loudly chant or sing songs with explicitly obscene, partly comic and mostly graphically sexual texts as they move from house to house. To demonstrate the flavour of these texts and what they appear to represent, here is one short example among many I recorded. This Dakpa text was one of those sung at Jangphu during August 2011 while the *hau* party moved between village houses during the middle of the night:

If you fuck today, a baby won't come. Hau! Hau! Hau!
If you fuck tomorrow, a baby will come! Hau! Hau! Hau!

30 Some of these names obviously have a Classical Tibetan derivation, since that is the major, written liturgical language of the region: *gektra* cf. Tib. *bgegs bskrad* 'banishing hindrances'; *mangi rimdro* cf. Tib. *dmangs gi rim gro* 'communal rite'; *mela bokpey* cf. Tib. *me la bag phyé* 'powder [for] dough in the fire' referring to the inflammable mix of roasted flour – from which an edible dough (*bag*) is commonly made – and powdered pine resin thrown into the fire during such rites; while *nemchö* is a pronunciation of Tib. *me mchod* by speakers of western Dakpa dialects. *Hungla* refers to the mantra syllable *hung* written using Tibetan script upon the bare chest of some *kengpa* and chanted aloud by others during rites, while *hungla sanyen* means something like 'the *hungla* [festival], free from work' due to the practice of ceasing domestic activity around the date of the rite. *Hau*, like *hungla*, refers to the chant *Hau! Hau! Hau!* during the rite by followers of the *kengpa*.

The cunt you fuck during *hungla*, is the cunt of a demon. Hau! Hau! Hau!
 If you fuck a *yeti*, it's hair will shake about. Hau! Hau! Hau!
 If you don't fuck today, then when will you fuck? Hau! Hau! Hau!
 If you fuck tomorrow, the fucker will be a demon. Hau! Hau! Hau!³¹

This and many similar texts chanted in these rites appear directly related to the idea of the *kengpa* as one who can control demons by both offending and amusing them. The message is clear: 'today' it is the demons who are going to get 'fucked', that is, suppressed and driven out, whereas 'tomorrow' – outside of the ritual context – fucking will just produce babies as it usually does, while it is we human beings who are going to get 'fucked', meaning plagued by the demons. The actions and songs of a *hoba/haulahungla* group which all invert norms of behaviour, ensure a great degree of chaos in every house and throughout the village as a whole. It is the *kengpa*, as a model for, and embodiment of the inversion of such norms, who arrives at the front of the group as a harbinger of this chaos about to descend upon the inhabitants and demons alike. In many respects, the roles and symbolism of the naked and masked performers in *chos 'khor* and fire expulsion rites, both of which are strongly conditioned by Buddhist agendas, are the same.

Questions remain about the origins of fire as a ritual medium for expulsion in this region, and the close and frequent ritual associations between fire and the naked and mute performers who use the wooden phallus. Of related interest in this context are shamanic fire expulsion rites of almost the same type conducted within the domestic space among the premodern Naxi and Mosso. Joseph Rock's descriptions of them mention they are called "Ya an mi ho la",³² with the *ho la* element being very close to the original Dakpa name *hoba* for the same rite.

3.4 The *Mashee/Massi*

As noted above, the performers called *mashee/massi* in certain Kho-Bwa-speaking communities have similarities with *kengpa*, although they deviate significantly from naked and mute figures in that they perform clothed, unmasked, and, in the case familiar to me, do not remain strictly mute but chant a particular sound as opposed to speech. The *mashee* I observed during January 2011 at Rahung performed only within the annual Chiksaybu festival to address ancestral deities, which is staged by ceremonial groups based upon clan and partiline membership. Only persons from a household in which somebody have recently died are excluded due to being ritually unclean. Chiksaybu is a post-harvest calendric rite of Winter and for which the central offering is alcohol and fermented harvest grains for the brewing of beer. It is set in a sacred grove above and beyond the village precinct, and is always held beneath an oak tree to which a sacrificial animal is tethered before it is set free. The *mashee* was dressed in old and dirty clothing, wore a cap of ragged cloth, a pair of rubber boots, held a ritual staff in one hand with which to beat the ground and sometimes members of the public, and had a flesh-coloured wooden phallus tied to his waist in an erect position (Fig. 4). Both the phallus and the cloth

31 *Dashi jag na shou ma ra. Hau! Hau! Hau! / No ngar jag na shou ra ri. Hau! Hau! Hau! / Tu hung jag ma hang ku tu. Hau! Hau! Hau! / Did poi jag na pu zing zing. Hau! Hau! Hau! / Dai ma jag gny jag ju. Hau! Hau! Hau! / No ngar jag na de jag ju. Hau! Hau! Hau!*

32 Rock 1952, I: 30, Rock 1959: 80of., 805f.

cap – the latter was said to have come originally from Tibet – were kept on a makeshift altar amongst all the fermented/alcoholic offerings to the ancestral deity. The *mashee* performance was entirely nocturnal. The young boy who took the role was selected by the *chopjido* shaman, who employed divination using small wooden models of genitalia. Following the selection, the shaman invoked an ancestral deity who dwells in the lower part of the sky just above a nearby mountain peak to come and possess the *mashee*. The boy's behaviour then became ambivalent, sometimes aggressive, other times comic. He was followed by a group of young boys for much of the performance. His activities included releasing the living sacrificial bull offered to the ancestral deities (this animal thereafter may wander anywhere without harm and is free from work), running and jumping excitedly about, leaping over the nocturnal bonfires of each clan or lineage group, and repeatedly calling out 'Waydob'. This is a variant of the ritual chant 'Wayo' commonly used in Bon ancestral festivals throughout eastern Bhutan, where most participants who use it state that it means 'fuck'. The sounds themselves are clearly a case of animal mimicry, representing the 'bugling' or 'roaring' of Cervid stags – and especially close to the sounds emitted by sambar and red deer in the eastern Himalayas – during the rut. Finally, from the time he becomes possessed, the *mashee* is said to be 'married' to a female tree deity in the area until the completion of the festival; the pattern of ritual participants being dedicated as spouses for ancestral deities is wide-spread in this region.

The few *mashee/massi* we know of are complex figures, although, at least in the Chiksaybu festival of Rahung, their profile has two main dimensions. They strongly project a symbolism associated with procreation and male virility, and they have the role of a shaman or medium as intermediary between two groups of beings in different spheres of the cosmos. To my knowledge, the *mashee*'s closest ethnographic analogue is found in Altaian societies of southern Siberia, in the form of a male performer known as the Koča Kan³³ (Fig. 5) who appears mainly in a post-harvest communal rite related to the production cycle. This rite, Pozo Kočazi, 'the Koča of beer', involves the brewing of beer from harvest grains prior to Winter hunts, with participation defined by clan membership, the clan shaman included. Only clansmen whose parents have died recently are excluded due to being ritually unclean. It is staged in a natural setting away from the village – a plain, wooded hill or riverside – but must always take place under a birch tree. The Koča Kan being dwells on the first level of the sky, and as a result of shamanising he descends to earth where the human performer of the role – usually a young man – embodies him. While performing, the Koča Kan wears a particular type of mask made from white birch bark, holds an exaggerated wooden phallus that is used for gesturing, plus a ritual staff or cane, and possesses several simple items of garment as accessories, especially a cloth cap which resembles that of a beggar and a pair of boots. The simple features on the otherwise plain Koča Kan mask are highlighted by underlining in charcoal or a red ochre of some kind. The Koča Kan's behaviour includes hopping, jumping and explicit sexual gesturing with the phallus, and he is also followed by young boys during his performance. Attendant upon rites involving Koča Kan is the public singing of more or less indecent songs.

Given that not only the east Himalaya *mashee/massi* and Altaian Koča Kan performers, but also their performance contexts, are highly comparable, and given the Siberian parallels with the *sargangri* hunting rites with which the *mashee* is associated, it may be worth considering the significance of the term *maši* in another Siberian context. Among some Tungusic-speaking

33 See Bazin 1977, Lot-Falck 1977, Chichlo 1978, de Sale 1995.

groups, *maši* meant ‘strong’ and referred to one form of the family spirit or protective spirit of the dwelling. The *maši* was represented as an anthropomorphic idol cut from a log of tree wood and kept in the dwelling. While in the dwelling, men hung their hunting idols upon the *maši* figure. For the annual clan festival, the *maši* was carried out and taken to the ritual site for the proceedings.³⁴

4. Comparisons

As in the case of the east Himalaya *mashee* and Altaian Koča Kan just compared, a range of ethnographic accounts from highland Nepal, the Tibetan Plateau and Siberia describe ritual performers possessing characteristics and roles that can be closely identified with those of the naked and mute, masked and phallus-using performers from the eastern Himalayas. Other scholars have individually discussed the roles and meanings of – and in one case, even compared³⁵ – such figures from these different regions. Here I can but briefly mention the existence of several, with particular attention to their appearance and accoutrements:

4.1 *Lâta kukur*³⁶

In Kham Magar communities of highland Nepal, a couple of ritual performers designated as *lâta kukur* and *lâti kukur* which are derived from Nepali and mean ‘idiot/mute dog’ and ‘idiot/mute bitch’, respectively, appear in rites performed by or related to the shaman, including exorcism and expulsion of negative forces during which the *lâta kukur* and *lâti kukur* carry the harmful and undesirable away from the community. For this, it is said they mimic intercourse together, and other obscene movements, in order to make bad spirits laugh and thus reveal their location. The physical mimicking counts for everything since the performers themselves remain mute. The male *lâta kukur* is naked except for a tiny loincloth, he holds an exaggerated wooden phallus that is used for gesturing in sexually suggestive and other ways, and has some old rags and bits of foliage covering the top of his head (Fig. 6). Instead of a wooden mask, his entire face is painted with white lime since this covering protects him from negative spirit powers, which is also the function of the head covering. His body may also have a series of markings applied to it with white lime.

4.2 *Dpa’ bo ro glud*³⁷

During late winter at Gyantse in Central Tibet, a near naked and masked ritual performer known as the *Dpa’ bo ro glud*, or ‘hero corpse ransom’, appeared in an annual communal ceremony related to the production cycle and successful harvests. Although remaining mute, he used a ritual staff in a divinatory fashion to scratch the ground indicating that the time for ploughing and sowing was at hand, after which he was driven out as a type of ‘ransom’ (*glud*)

34 See Uray-Köhalmi 1999: 60, 102, 154, Tafel II plate 7, and the references cited therein.

35 See de Sale 1995.

36 See de Sale 1995, and Oppitz *Shamanen im Blinden Land*, part 1, from 43 minutes. I thank Michael Oppitz for his many comments on these performers in the Magar villages where he conducted research.

37 See Clarke 1997: plate 92, and David Macdonald’s caption p.89; Richardson 1993: 71.

and/or scapegoat on behalf of the community. The Dpa' bo ro glud wore the stomach of a sheep with large eye-holes cut out of it as a mask covering his face and head, sheep's intestines over each shoulder which crossed in the middle of his chest and back, and an exaggerated phallus hanging below his waist formed from the trachea and lungs of a sheep (Fig. 7).

4.3 *Rngon pa*³⁸

The 'opera'-like events known as A lce Lha mo in eastern Himalayan and Tibetan settings normally open with a performance by so-called 'hunter' (*rngon pa*) figures who traditionally wore white, anthropomorphic masks ('*bag dkar po*) (Fig. 15), and who wield ritual arrows (*mda' dar*) – the Tibetan symbol of maleness (*pho*), an obvious substitute for the phallus – and wear an apron of braided string tassels (*thig ral*)³⁹ which hang down from the waist. Their movements during the prologue to a performance, and their most important contributions to an A lce Lha mo, are always described as 'clearing the ground' (*sa sbyang*) and 'cultivating the ground' (*sa 'dul*) by 'breaking' or 'stepping' (*bcag*, a synonym for 'cultivation') upon it. This is clearly a mimetic sequence⁴⁰ parallel to that for swidden cultivation. The *rngon pa* also sing verses replete with references to natural features central to the shamanic complex – 'the juniper which is the *lha's* tree' (*lha shing gi shug pa*), 'the grouse/pheasant which is the *lha's* bird' (*lha bya yi gong mo*), as well as movements which mimic a bird (*bya 'gros*, probably referring to the crow), and/or circle around a young tree that has been set up in the middle of the ritual ground. While formalised A lce Lha mo performances became regionally widespread, as an aspect of local village culture they are at their most common within the East Bodish geo-linguistic zone, but especially the Dakpa-speaking sub-region, where the historical origins of certain elements comprising them are most likely to be found.⁴¹

One could meaningfully extend this list to include still other ritual performers.⁴² While differences on certain points do exist, even cursory comparisons between ritual performers like the Koča Kan, *lāta kukur*, Dpa' bo ro glud and *rngon pa* and those I have documented here for the eastern Himalayas, as well as the main ritual contexts in which they appear, strongly suggest we are dealing with a coherent set of continuities and cognate cases all belonging to the shamanic complex as it extends between Siberia and the Himalayan chain. There are now other strongly documented cases of these shamanic continuities, such as the detailed comparison of

38 See Snyder 1979: 27f., Lobsang Samten and Henrion-Dourcy 2001. Note the introductory sequence of A lce Lha mo including the *rngon pa* is attributed to Thang stong rgyal po, whose cultural historical traces are thick on the ground across the East Bodish geo-linguistic zone.

39 The *thig ral* (lit. 'braided strings') accoutrement is usually compared to a "fishing net". This is unconvincing given the entire symbolic context of earth/cultivation/hunting (viz. what the shaman ensures mastery over/success in) and sky/avifauna (viz. very common references to the shaman and his shamanising). The *thig ral* do not form a 'net', but hang down parallel in a well-spaced series. Their closest analogue are the *ral po* fringes and bunches of similar wool braids frequently forming part of the costumes of Himalayan shamans.

40 Of this *rngon pa* sequence, Lobsang Samten and Henrion-Dourcy 2001: 70 n.22 carefully report "Actors say that these actions rely entirely on the dancing, and not on the meaning of what is recited or spoken ... the 'purification of the ground' [*sa sbyang*], called by some the 'stamping of the ground' [*sa bcag*] is done with the feet (which stamp the earth on [*sic*] a movement called '*kehrab*'); whereas the 'taming of the ground' [*sa 'dul*] is done with the hands moving in specific gestures in all the directions (the right one holding the ritual arrow, *mda' dar*)."

41 See Tashi Tsering 2001: 58, cf. Aris 1979: 128f.

42 For instance, see Kalsang Norbu, Zhu Yongzhong and Stuart 1999 on the semi-naked *wutu* with white painted faces and bodies illustrated with designs, who hold long ritual staffs and who expel negative forces from Monguor (Tu) villages in far north-eastern areas of the Tibetan Plateau each Winter.

morphology and use of the shaman's drum from the Himalayas to Siberia.⁴³ While a far larger comparative exercise would be desirable for these naked and mute, masked and phallus-using performers, in the present context I will merely compare their masks and face coverings, in order to contextualise the physical appearance of the *kengpa*.

5. Skull or Anthropomorphic Face?

All *kengpa* wear masks. Existing accounts mentioning *kengpa* describe this mask, and sometimes also the performer's general appearance, as being that of a 'skeleton'. As noted above, some possible etymologies behind the term *kengpa* itself may relate to words for 'skeleton' or 'bone'. However, most *kengpa* masks in use are simply not depicting a skull belonging to a skeleton, regardless of certain superficial similarities. For instance, like actual skull masks used around the region in the context of Tibetan Buddhist masked ritual dance (*'cham*), *kengpa* masks are frequently white. Yet, we know that *kengpa* and related masks are white for reasons other than an attempt to depict bone. White is a kind of 'base colour' for most of the masks of the ritual performers in question here, just as it is for the painted human faces – and frequently bodies, too – of performers with exorcistic roles. The ethnographies always yield the same explanation for the white face/mask: it protects the wearer from potential harm caused by the negative forces they must contend with while fulfilling their roles, and often it is stated that this is because it anonymises the wearer.⁴⁴ There is also the fact that – unlike any skeleton mask in the region – a few *kengpa* masks are not white, but coloured, usually black and ochre red (Fig. 10), or they have no colour applied at all. In the case of black and ochre red, one can note these are the outlining colours used on the Koča Kan mask from Siberia. While certain *kengpa* masks do have skull-like features – especially red lines representing the knitted joints of cranial divisions on a skull (Fig. 2) – such masks are actually rare outside of formal Buddhist contexts, and are crafted by Buddhist mask-makers who also create masks for the *dur bdag* or 'master of the cemetery' to represent actual skeleton figures in *'cham* performances.

A far more accurate description for *kengpa* and related masks is that they all aim at anthropomorphic representation in a particular style. I think this style is somewhat continuous between Siberian (Figs. 8–9)⁴⁵ and Himalayan or Tibetan (Figs. 10–15) examples of the anthropomorphic face represented in specific ritual contexts. Its main characteristics include:

- a general lack of facial detail;
- large circles defining the area of the eyes;
- a generous mouth, either as an oval opening – suggesting sound formation – or with ambiguously upturned corners – suggesting simultaneously humourful and sardonic smiles;
- an approximately triangular area defined between the lower rim of the eye circles and the mouth, and related to this, absence of any nose, or rather the nose being more of a suggestion within this space between the eye circles and mouth.

⁴³ See Oppitz 2013, Oppitz 2007.

⁴⁴ Compare also Rock 1959 on the Yungning Mosso *nda pa* specialists who paint their faces white before exorcistic rites "to scare the demons who are afraid of white", Rock 1959: 805f.

⁴⁵ Compare also the wooden mask from the Irtysh River, Tobolsk region, west Siberia in Moschinskaja 1963: 103 plate 4.

Many of the masks that have these features share specific commonalities with the appearance of unmasked human performers representing the same type of roles, and the latter may help to explain the otherwise unaccounted for iconographical characteristics of the former. For example, the white *ham* (a variant of *hom*) mask for an exorcistic performer from Chemrey Gompa⁴⁶ in Ladakh has a wreath of vegetation covering the top of the head (Fig. 14), the same as the vegetation the *lâta kukur* wears as a protective device atop his head (Fig. 6).

While morphological overlaps occurring between Buddhist skull/skeleton masks and *kengpa* masks can be explained in context, it is important to recall their existence is an epiphenomenon of Buddhist appropriation of the *kengpa*. Moreover, it is an epiphenomenon that obliterates or significantly elides the shamanic character of the *kengpa's* roots. So much for the mask; the *kengpa's* phallus now shares a similar fate in Buddhist hands. The exaggerated wooden phallus held by a public ritual performer has been subject to widespread appropriation into Buddhist monastic dances across Bhutan. Stripped of its ritual connections to domestic production and the cyclical renewal of life, this phallus is now crudely brandished in the hands of *atsara* figures representing ugly and stupid foreigners of some species or other – ‘Indians’ is the favourite identification – in order to entertain the often flagging Buddhist audiences who must patiently sit through Buddhist dance festivals for days on end. One can well imagine, that this particular monastic appropriation originally embodied a belittling spoof of the non-Buddhist rites of rural villages, but especially those of the peoples of far eastern Bhutan and the Mon yul Corridor, such as the Dakpa, who have long been viewed with ambivalence or disdain by holders of state and religious power further west.

Many ethnographers who have described Himalayan societies in which the shamanic complex is well represented have suggested links between their data and Siberian materials. In my opinion, their instincts are usually well placed. Producing convincing demonstrations of such links is yet another matter, if it may at all be possible in many cases, due to the nature of the contexts and data we are mostly dealing with: intensively colonised or rapidly modernising societies, oral literatures in moribund languages, ephemeral objects and the like. Nevertheless, the ‘critical mass’ of comparable ethnographic data now available should invite attempts to demonstrate such links, at the very least as robust hypotheses posed for further investigation.

46 The 17th century foundation of Chemrey belongs to the ‘Brug pa branch of the Bka’ bgyud school of Tibetan-style Buddhism, and long-term historical relations were maintained by agents of the Ladakhi and Bhutanese ‘Brug pa. This might explain why *ham/hom* masks resembling Bhutanese examples exist at this site, and at Sani in Zanskar.

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Padma gling pa'i rnam thar

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Fig. 1. *Kengpa* performing a 'origin of the world' narrative with a female figure, as the opening event in a Buddhist '*cham*' festival, Tsakaling, east Bhutan, 2013 (Photo: Dorji Gyaltzen 2013).



Fig. 2. *Kengpa* with a skull-like mask mimicking a *le'u* for millet cultivation, Kyaleng, east Bhutan, 2011 (Photo: Huber 2011).



Fig. 3. Performer wearing a wooden phallus while mimicking a trapped bear during the *sargangri* rite, Rahung, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, 2011 (Photo: Huber 2011).



Fig. 4. *Mashee* just prior to his possession during the Chiksaybu festival, Rahung, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, 2011 (Photo: Huber 2011).



Fig. 5. Altaian *Koča Kan* performer, southern Siberia (Photo: Chichlo 1978, 7).



Fig. 6. *Lâta kukur* and consort performing in a Magar healing ritual, Pelma (Dhaulagiri region), Nepal, 1978 (Photo: Oppitz 1978).



Fig. 7. Dpa' bo ro glut performer, Gyantse, Central Tibet, ca. late 1920s
(Photo: Richardson 1993, 71).



Fig. 8. Birch bark Koča Kan mask, Altaian south Siberia (Photo: Lot-Falck 1977, 78).



Fig. 9. Anthropomorphic face carved into a larch tree above an altar, Severo-Baykalskiy district, Buryatia, 1927 (Photo: Maxim Levin, private collection)



Fig. 10. *Kengpa* mask used at Jangphu, east Bhutan, 2011 (Photo: Huber 2011).



Fig. 11. *Kengpa* mask used at Yewang, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh, 2012 (Photo: Huber 2012).



Fig. 12. Dpa' bo ro glud wearing a sheep's stomach mask, Gyantse, Central Tibet, ca. late 1920s (Photo: Richardson 1993, 71).



Fig. 13. *Hom* mask used at Nyalamdung, east Bhutan, 2011 (Photo: Huber 2011).



Fig. 14. *Ham* mask used at Chemrey Gompa, Ladakh, 2012 (Photo: Wulff 2012).

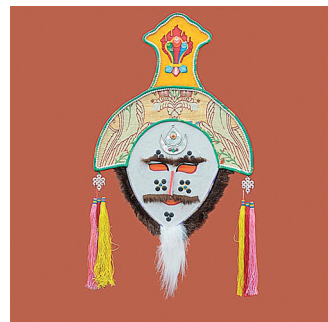


Fig. 15. Contemporary *rngon pa* mask used in A lce Lha mo, private collection (Photo: unknown).