

Brill's Encyclopedia of Buddhism

Volume II:
Lives

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Spirits of the Soil, Land, and Locality in Tibet (*sa bdag, gzhi bdag, yul lha*)

Tibetans have always believed that various local spirits, gods, and demons fill the spaces around them, living in rivers, lakes, trees, rocks, and mountains, and have worried that if their places are disturbed by humans, these spirits would cause diseases and other calamities in return. However, if they are not offended, but rather properly propitiated, these beings can provide aid and protection. *Sa bdag* (owners of the soil, lords of the earth), *gzhi bdag* (owners of the ground, lords of the site), and *yul lha* (deities of the locality, gods of the territory) are all *genii loci*, spirits of the soil, land, and locality. They are part of Tibet's animated topography, where the landscape is not only a domain of danger, but also an abode of blessing, power, and opportunity. In certain propitiatory texts, the deity of the territory (*yul lha* and *gzhi bdag*) is the master or chief of the lords of the earth (*sa bdag*) (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, 221), and there are other sources where all three designations (*sa bdag, gzhi bdag, yul lha*) refer to the same category of local spirits and deities of a land or territory (Karmay, 1997e, 443).

Owners of the Soil (*sa bdag*)

Sa bdag are important deities in Tibetan divination and astrology. One important Tibetan language source for their study is the *Vaiḍūrya dkar po* or *White Beryl* (BDRC W30116; Gyurme, 2001), written in 1685 by Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705). This voluminous treatise of Tibetan astrology gives a description of various groups of *sa bdag*, such as the *sa bdag* of the eight main and intermediary quarters of the world, as well as the *sa bdag* king, The se rgyal po, along with his family and court. There are many other classes of *sa bdag*, such as those who live in the diagram of nine squares called *sme ba dgu*, frequently used in Tibetan astrology; those whose seat is the geomantic diagram called the *spar kha*; the *nang gi lha*, who is “the house god,” and so on. Usually, *sa bdag* are depicted with a human body and an animal head, and are believed to be omnipresent (for a

detailed description of their different types, see de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, 291–298). The *nang gi lha*, for example, has a piggyish head and flowing robes, and occupies different parts of the house at different seasons. If this spirit's place is disturbed, tea and beer must be offered as recompense (Waddell, 1895, 39–41). Mount Meru, the center of the Buddhist universe, and other historically significant places of Buddhism in India are also said to have their own *sa bdag*; even years, months, and days have numberless *sa bdag* related to them. Schuh (2012) suggests that *sa bdag* should be called “Lords of Time” rather than Lords of the Earth, as they are spirits wandering through time as well as space.

In territorial cults, the *sa bdag* is a kind of earth deity attached to a specific locality – the owner of the soil who is subjugated and venerated during soil rituals (*sa chog*) (for a detailed description of these rituals, see Cantwell, 2005; Gardner, 2006). Digging the soil (*sa brko*) and carrying away stones (*rdoslog*) are considered to be violent acts in Tibetan societies. This is not only because Buddhist monastic texts warn against harming insects by tilling and plowing, but also because Tibetans in general believe that breaking the soil and taking possession of the land will injure earth deities. According to Stein, this is a non-Buddhist element of Tibetan religion, but Buddhist rites transmitted from India, China, and elsewhere also reflect this belief (Stein, 1972, 243–246; Gardner, 2006, 12). For instance, one type of *sa bdag* is the *lto 'phye* (Skt. *mahoraga*), a subterranean serpent that lies on its side and rotates in the earth; its head moves a bit each day to the right, returning to the same spot year after year. The unusual name for this *sa bdag* comes from its snakelike shape, it is a “stomach (*lto*) crawler (*'phye*)” (BDRC W20578, vol. LIV, 97–107). This spirit is the invisible owner of the soil, surrounded by a retinue of lesser soil owners, from whom the land should be borrowed before erecting a building. The *lto 'phye* is depicted with an animal or human head, a human upper torso, and from the waist down it has a serpent's tail. During the so-called earth rituals (*sa chog*), astrological calculations are combined

with tantric rites, and through the subjugation and worship of the *lto 'phye* the land is stabilized and reorganized for human occupation. Serpent spirits (*klu*) look like *lto 'phye*, even though they belong to a different class of aquatic beings. Although the class of *klu* goes back to a pre-Buddhist Tibetan origin (Tucci, 1949, 712), they were quickly perceived as equivalent to Indian *nāgas*. They live underground, or in springs, lakes, and rivers, and if their place is disturbed or polluted, retribution may come in the form of leprosy or other serious illnesses (Cohen, 1998, 360–400; Stuart & Dpal ldan bkra shis, 1998; Cornu, 2002, 247–248; Vargas, 2009, 368).

Owners of the Ground (*gzhi bdag*) and Deities of the Locality (*yul lha*)

The *yul lha*, or “deity of the locality,” is usually thought to dwell at high altitude, on mountain tops or rocky outcrops, and its domain is limited by the boundary of the territory that it oversees. *Yul* does not mean “country” here, as it often does, but refers instead to this defined locality. If the *yul lha* is male, he may be married to a lake goddess (*mtsho sman*); if the *yul lha* is a lake goddess, she may be married to a *btsan*, a rock deity (Pommaret, 2004, 46).

The *yul lha* is often locally called *gzhi bdag*, the “owner of the ground,” or *gnas bdag*, *gnas po* (both words meaning “owner of the place” or “host”), *gter bdag* (“lord of treasures”), etc. The *gzhi bdag* can be male or female – it is called *gzhi bdag mo* in the latter case. Famous *gzhi bdag mo* are the Tshe ring mched lnga, “the five sisters of long life,” who are the five goddesses of the La phyi region in South-Western Tibet. During rituals, the word *gzhi bdag* is often used as a collective term for all the unnamed deities and spirits of the region.

The deity of the locality plays various roles in the life of a community. For example, very often this deity is identical with the birth god (*skyes lha* or *khruṅg lha*) to whose area of control someone’s birthplace belongs, and to whom one must give lavish offerings every year (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, 305). →Tsong kha pa, the founder of the Dge lugs pa school of Tibetan Buddhism, provides an interesting example of how important the worship of the *yul lha* and the *skyes lha* is: he established a cult to propitiate his own *yul lha* and *skyes lha*, Rma chen Spom ra – the local deity of his birthplace in Amdo – at the Dga’ ldan Monastery near Lhasa

(Buffetrille, 1996, 87). Sometimes, the deity of the territory is conflated with the enemy god (*dgra lha*), depicted wearing armor and a helmet, who symbolizes the protection he ensures for all members of the community against the enemies of the Teachings (for a more elaborate analysis of the meaning of *dgra lha* and its relationship with the Bön term *sgra bla*, see Gibson, 1985; Berounský, 2009). The *yul lha* is always identical with the god of wealth (*nor lha*), who provides a good harvest, protects cattle from disease, ensures well-being and fertility, and controls the whole landscape as its owner. As Pommaret notes, “the deity of the territory emerges like an anthropomorphic lord ruling an estate with a large range of rights over individuals but also duties regarding their protection and well-being” (Pommaret, 2004, 62). The god of wealth is usually pictured in the form of Nor lha Dzam bha la or Rnam thos sras (Vaiśravaṇa), whose golden body sits on a golden throne, and who often holds a mongoose vomiting jewels. However, this deity can be depicted in various other forms and body colors as well. The god of wealth is a type of enemy god, protecting people’s wealth and well-being from negative forces (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1956, 330–332).

The deity of the locality in Sikkim, Gangs chen mdzod lnga, is a lineage god (*pho lha*) – chief of all supernatural beings in Sikkim – an owner of the ground, and also an enemy god (Balicki, 2008, 98). In Langtang, an area on the Nepalese side of the Himalaya, the deity of the locality is the mountain Langtang Lirung, who is often likened to a parent watching over his children. Langtang Lirung is considered to be a family god or lineage god (*rigs lha*) of all Langtang villagers. When a child is born to a household, the first ritual to be performed by the head of the family is the offering of incense to Langtang Lirung, in order to acknowledge and thank the god as the ultimate source of life (Khek Gee Lim, 2008, 174).

A Historical Overview

Participation in “territorial cults,” “mountain cults” (Blondeau & Steinkellner, 1996), or the “cult of height” (Stein, 1972, 204) has been an essential element of rural Tibetan life and identity since the earliest times. The mundane *numina* are worshipped and appeased collectively in the framework of traditions that have not been institutionalized.

These cults are deeply rooted in early Tibetan belief. Textual sources indicate that clan society was associated with territorial division, and it was organized on the basis of territory, chief clans, castles, and local mountain deities. It is also mentioned that when a chief annexed a new territory he had to adopt the deity of that new locality (*yul lha*) (Thomas, 1957, 290–353) and propitiate it in order to safeguard his new gains (Karmay, 1997e, 437). Dotson – basing himself on early Tibetan texts – even suggests that political territory was delimited as the domain of a mountain deity, and that human rulers were invited at the behest of each mountain deity to rule their territory (Dotson, 2012, 167). In Tibetan origin myths, the first king and the nine mountain deities of Tibet were thought to have originated from a common divine ancestor (Karmay, 1997e, 433). It is possible that the familial appellations; *a myes*, grandfather, *a phyi*, grandmother, *jo mo*, elder sister, used today when referring to the deity of a territory are reminiscent of the genealogical relations that existed between men and deities in the origin myths (Karmay, 1997e, 434). In early Tibet, the king was connected to the mountain through his *sku bla* (literally, body-soul/life), while the mountain god was the support of his vital principle (*srog* or *bla*). The health, prosperity, and authority of the king was dependent on the well-being of the *sku bla*. Therefore, the ancient mountain gods were objects of propitiation not only by the kings but also by their subjects. The expression *yul lha* is already used in a list of different spirits in an old Dunhuang divination text, found in PT 1047 (Karmay, 1997e, 442, n. 35). Macdonald assumes that this text was written during Srong btsan Sgam po's time (Macdonald, 1971, 291), and dates it to circa 640. Stein and Yamaguchi think that the text may very well postdate the events that it discusses (Stein, 2010, 120).

From the 8th century on, Buddhism had greater influence and the king became King of the Dharma, the representative of universal law in the human world. According to later Tibetan Buddhist sources, →Padmasambhava, an Indian Tantric master, was invited at that time to subjugate the “old” spirits of Tibet. The list of Tibetan indigenous deities and spirits subjugated by Padmasambhava is found in the 60th chapter of the *Padma bka' thang* (BDRW 3CN7499, ff. 126b–128b; trans. Toussaint, 1933; subsequently trans. into English in Douglas & Bays, 1978). This influential treasure text (*gter ma*), revealed by O rgyan gling pa (1323–1360; BDRW 3CN7499, fols. 258,), lists 29 occasions on which

Padmasambhava met various mountain deities and spirits who wanted to destroy him. Therefore, he had to defeat them and force them to take an oath (*dam la btog*) to become protectors of the Buddhist teaching. Padmasambhava forced the local deities to hand over their life essence (*srog snying 'bul*), then gave them secret names which became their Buddhist protector names (*gsang mtshan btog*), and he entrusted treasures to the protectors (*gter gyi gnyer ka gtad*) for future revelation. The secret name given to a deity is rarely a completely new name; it is usually a *prénom* like *rdo rje* (*vajra*, ritual sceptre) or *dge bsnyen* (*upāsaka*, Buddhist devotee who observes the five vows) that is added before the pre-Buddhist name to emphasize the act of subjugation and a new Buddhist status. Since these pre-Buddhist deities, mountain gods, and spirits of Tibet were integrated into the Buddhist pantheon as guardians (*srung ma*), they have to be regularly reminded of their vows and their appointed tasks through offerings. These deities were also allowed into the *maṇḍala*, mostly as the retinue of higher tantric divinities.

Theoretically, after a territorial deity becomes a Dharma protector (*chos skyong*), it no longer belongs to the category of *gzhi bdag* or *yul lha*. However, in practice, the deities of the territory are often seen as emanations of enlightened beings, manifesting in numberless forms, and depending on the case, a specific role (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*, *gter bdag*, *chos skyong*) can be given greater emphasis. In spite of the fact that prayer books refer to the *yul lha* as an oathbound deity (*dam can*), lamas often avoid talking about subjugation. For instance, in Yolmo, Nepal, in the case of A ma G.yang ri, the mountain goddess and deity of the territory, local lamas would say that she is a *srid pa chags pa'i lha*, a goddess present since beginningless times, who did not need to undergo the humiliation of taming (Gelle, forthcoming; →Worldly Protector Deities in Tibetan Buddhism).

Domain of Influence and Power

The domain of the deity of the territory is a “liminal zone,” usually the upper part of the mountain, which is encompassed by a larger area over which he presides. The residence of the deity is his palace (*pho brang*), which is considered to be sacred; typically a shrine (*la btsas*) is built to mark its location. If the domain of the deity is disturbed, the people living

around it may fear retribution. In order to avoid this and protect the flora and fauna, which are the possessions of the *gzhi bdag* or *yul lha*, certain Tibetan communities apply “territorial sealing” (*rgya sdom pa*). Its purpose is to protect valuable economic resources such as animals, fuel, and medicinal plants, and to guard against any activity, such as hunting and gathering, that would anger the deity of the territory. The breach of sealed places by rival neighboring communities or strangers was always a cause of anxiety for local communities, and it often led to feuds and vendettas (Huber, 2004, 142). As the abodes of territorial deities are usually situated in mountain areas and water sources, such sites are often identified as “fierce hills” (*ri gnyan po*) or “fierce springs” (*chu mig gnyan po*). Local people have a very clear idea of the exact limits of the *yul lha*'s territory, and the boundaries between territories are often marked with prayer flags on poles (*dar lcog*) or even gates made of wood. The *yul lha* rarely extends his power outside the defined territory.

The deity of the territory looks after the water supply and people often live on the water coming from his snowy abode. His responsibility is to aid agricultural works, ensure good weather, bless the ground with fertility, and provide enough harvest for the community. If the deity of the territory is offended, he or she can destroy the crops by hail or drought. In order to maintain harmony, in most regions a ritual is performed for the *yul lha* at each important step of the agricultural calendar: plowing, sowing, planting, and harvesting (*Gnas chen yol mo gangs ra'i gter bdag mchod pa bzhugs so*, 1990; Balikci, 2008, 189–215).

The livestock and grazing periods are other important areas of control. In places where the seasonal migration of livestock takes place, there are several examples of a migrating *yul lha* as well (Pommaret, 2004, 50; Hazod, 1996, 96; Buffetrille, 1996, 87; Gelle, forthcoming). For example, Pommaret found that in Kha gling, Eastern Bhutan, the deity of the territory, named Drang ling, leaves his lake palace high up in the mountains and migrates to the warmer south in the 11th month, returning only in the 2nd month of the Tibetan calendar. Until the deity of the territory returns from his winter migration, one cannot go to the high pastures with yaks and sheep. The return of the deity is celebrated with alcohol and butter, as well as a rededication of the animals to the *yul lha*, since he is also the deity of wealth (*nor lha*) who ensures the well-being of the community and its livestock (Pommaret, 2004, 50).

If disease breaks out among the cattle, it is always attributed to a breach of social norms or pollution that angered the *yul lha*.

Worship and Ritual

The type of ritual most often performed for the spirits and deities of the territory is the smoke offering (*bsangs mchod*). The *bsangs* is a fumigation ritual in which aromatic herbs, especially juniper (*bsang shing*), are burnt to produce a sweet smelling smoke that creates a state of purity. There are two types of smoke offering rituals. One is the *sgrib bsangs*, which is performed to appease the local deity when there are fears that someone has performed a polluting act; the goal of this rite is to restore the culprit's position in the proper social order. The other type is the *lha bsangs*, which is enacted on various occasions, such as during a marriage, for good health, to promote prosperity, to engender success in a new enterprise, to ensure a safe journey, and so on.

Many communities perform a smoke offering ceremony shortly after the lunar New Year (*lo gsar*) and on important days of the agricultural cycle, such as the opening of the summer pastures in the spring and their closing in autumn. A *lha bsangs* ritual in Eastern Nepal and Southern Tibet, dedicated to all the territorial and clan deities, takes the form of a journey from the village to the high pastures, with ceremonies held on different spots. People burn incense and put up prayer flags, village lamas recite the smoke offering ritual, *lha bon* priests recite prayers, and by naming all the local spirits and deities they invoke the territory as a whole. The purpose of the ritual is to purify the relationship between the community and its deities, and to ensure that they bestow their blessings and grant prosperity for the coming season (Diemberger, 1994, 144–153; Samuel, 1993, 180–182). Similar kinds of *lha bsangs* rituals and propitiation ceremonies called *gsol ka* or *mchod pa* can be witnessed almost everywhere in the Tibetan cultural domain (Ramble, 1998, 123–143; Schicklgruber 1998, 115–132; Gelle, forthcoming).

The origin of *bsangs* rituals goes back to pre-Buddhist times in Tibet (Tucci, 1980, 201; Stein, 1972, 199, 259; Kohn, 2001, 168). One of the most widely used *bsangs* ritual texts is the mountain smoke offering (*Ri bo bsangs mchod*), revealed by Lha btsun Nam mkha'i 'jigs med (1597–1653) in Tashiding,

Sikkim (BDRC W13779, vol I: 829–834; Kohn, 2001, 166; Tib. text with ET also in <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/lhatsun-namkha-jigme/riwo-sangcho>). Bdruk 'joms rin po che 'Jigsbral ye she rdo rje (1904–1987) added a few verses at the beginning of this text that concern taking refuge, generating *bodhicitta*, the seven-branch practice and self-visualization, as well as verses of dedication at the end for daily practice (BDRC W20869, 527–533). The *bsangs* ritual can be performed by itself or in combination with other rituals, most often “windhorse” (*rlung rta*) or “attracting fortune” (*g.yang 'gug*) rituals. This latter ritual is accompanied by the offering of a sacred goat (*g.yang ra*) to an assembly of local gods; this is done symbolically, mostly with the help of an effigy (*bla lug*). During the *bsangs* ritual, a pillar of smoke is created in order to force open the door of the sky and give access to the heavens. Offerings are first given to the upper guests, the assembly of gods, then to the lower guests, those to whom one owes karmic debt. In addition to incense, ritual cakes (*gtor ma*) and golden libations (*gser skyems*) are also offered. *Bsangs* ritual texts contain a list of deities and spirits related to a particular region, which makes them a great source for learning about local pantheons. Lamas often composed short *bsangs mchod* texts for their communities, which became part of their collected works (*gsung 'bum*), famous examples of which are by Tāranātha (1575–1634; BDRC W22277, vol. XVI, ma, 110–112); Karma chags med (1613–1678; BDRC W22933, Vol. XXVII: 575–580 = folia 559–564); the first Pañchen Lama (1570–1662; BDRC W9848, 40v–42v); and Mkhan po 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933–2004; BDRC W1PD95698, vol. I, 69–70).

In some regions the *yul lha* has an intercessor or medium – a *rnal 'byor ma*, *dpa' bo* or *dpa' mo*, *gter bdag*, *lha 'bab*, *lha pa* – who is requested to become possessed by the deity, in the case of a disturbance in the community or a family. The deity reveals through the medium the cause of the problem and helps to reestablish harmony. For certain occasions, divinations or exorcisms are performed by the same medium (Pommaret, 2004, 56; Samuel, 1993, 195; Stuart & Dpal ldan bkra shis, 1998, 38; Diemberger, 2005). Some mediums have even reached a particularly high status in Tibetan history, for instance the Gnas chung Oracle possessed by Pe har, the famed guardian deity of Bsam yas Monastery, who was tamed by Padmasambhava and eventually became the State Oracle of Tibet (→Worldly Protector Deities in Tibetan Buddhism).

Concluding Remarks

When we talk about the spirits of the soil, the land, and the territory, we are referring to a complex religious tradition closely linked with the environment. The various gods and spirits of Tibet may originate from different belief systems and religions like the “nameless religion” (a term coined by Stein, 1972), Bon, Indian Buddhism, and the like, but today they are fully integrated entities of Tibetan Buddhist and Bon practice, operating in a complex web of interrelationships. Mountain cults and ancestral traditions provided a sense of common identity for Tibetan communities throughout history, their rulers being perceived as embodying the divine force of the people's ancestral mountain. With the advent of Buddhism, these indigenous gods and spirits were incorporated into Buddhist practices, and tantric ritual incorporated indigenous Tibetan elements into Buddhist soteriology, mythology, and metaphysics.

In the vision and practice of lay communities, territorial deities and spirits are the main forces controlling the environment, their single world universe. Some scholars dismiss these practices as folk religion or treat them as examples of syncretism. However, for the site's patrons and the community, the Buddha – often in the form of Padmasambhava – can be a translocal divinity with a specifically local identity, interacting with humans and spirits alike in their local world. From their relative viewpoint, these deities and spirits of the locality need careful management because they can be potentially problematic forces.

Monastic communities view local deities as lesser divinities in a pantheon of numberless buddhas within a myriad of universes. After their subjugation by Padmasambhava, these deities and spirits became part of the *maṇḍala* as the entourage of higher tantric deities. Often, the same propitiation texts for these deities are used by monastic and lay communities, but the aim of the ritual is different. Local communities pray for prosperity, health, and good harvest when symbolically offering a sacred goat or sheep, while tantric rituals in a monastic setting pray to the “sacred goat of the rainbow body,” asking for “the true attainment of the great rainbow body transference” and other spiritual achievements (Kohn, 2001, 168).

The image of the deity of the territory can be found in every Buddhist temple, either in the protectors' chamber (*mgon khang*) or in a special

shrine, or just in the form of a mask or wall painting. They are routinely offered ritual cakes (*gtorma*) on the altar and honored with prayers. The territorial cult is still a thriving tradition in Tibet and the Himalaya. The deities of the territory (*yul lha*, *gzhibdag*) keep imparting a strong sense of identity on local communities living in the territory, and are worshipped as ancestral deities for protection.

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