

PILGRIMAGE AND INCEST:  
THE CASE OF CHORTEN NYIMA (MCHOD RTEN NYI MA)  
ON THE TIBETO-SIKKIMESE BORDER

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“La société n'interdit que ce qu'elle suscite”<sup>2</sup>

Among the many benefits said to accrue from pilgrimage to a sacred site is the purification of misdeeds, defilements and sins. Pilgrimage may also allow a person to regain his or her former standing in society after having committed a misdeed or indiscretion that disrupted the community. The case of mChod rten nyi ma is a particularly striking one of the power of such a pilgrimage.

I. MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

I first heard of a sacred place called mChod rten nyi ma in 1989. I had asked an old woman, a native of the village of Chiplung,<sup>3</sup> in gTsang, what, in her view, were the most important pilgrimages. The first one she mentioned was that to mChod rten nyi ma, adding that it was particularly efficacious in three cases:

- When “somebody sleeps with a relative,” *spun zla nyal po byed pa* (i.e., in cases of incest);
- Following parricide or matricide;

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<sup>2</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss ([1947] 1967: 22).

<sup>3</sup> Tibetan spelling not restored.

- If one has a close relationship with a person of low status (*rigs ngan*).

She immediately made it clear that, although she had made this pilgrimage herself, she did not do so for any of these three reasons, and that pilgrims came in great numbers not only from Central Tibet but also from Khams.

The sacred place included, she said, a spring that Padmasambhava created with his stick; a mountain in the form of the shoulders of a lama wearing a cape; a sacred lake which gave rise to visions (usually that of a monastery which appeared in the lake to those who were successfully purified). She added that for the unsuccessful this same image was still perceptible, but upside down. She also mentioned the presence of a *stūpa* and a monastery.

I eventually discovered that this sacred place was very well known to many Tibetans. I had only to mention mChod rten nyi ma in the presence of people from gTsang or dBus, or to many Sherpas as well, and as soon, the notion of incest was invoked. Parricide and matricide were often mentioned as well. People would sometimes recite the reasons to go to mChod rten nyi ma like a litany, as had my first informant. Each informant also denied having gone there for one of these purposes; all considered this sacred place to be particularly potent and said that they had gone there for this reason alone. The A mdo ba and the Khams pa whom I questioned, however seemed not to even know its name, and there were many among them for whom the idea of a pilgrimage to purify the defilement of incest seemed almost unimaginable; if some would admit that this transgression might exist in Central Tibet, they denied completely the practice in the eastern provinces.

The literature contains occasional reference to this place, particularly the pass bearing the same name. The latter is located on the frontier between Sikkim and Tibet, and has been negotiated by various explorers including Captain J. Noel (see Lhalungpa 1983: 151); pandits such as Rinzin Namgyal<sup>4</sup> (see Das [1902] 1970); climbers (see Freshfield [1903] 1979); and political officers (see White [1909] 1984: 92).

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<sup>4</sup> Rinchen Namgyal traveled around the Gangs chen mdzod lnga (the Kanchenjunga of the alpinists) in 1885. Letter from H.E. Richardson: 11-1-1991.

1. *mChod rten nyi ma* in Western literature

*mChod rten nyi ma*, also called *rDo rje nyi ma*, is a sacred place to the south of *Sa skya*, on the border with Sikkim but still in Tibetan territory (see map). Located in a wide valley, it is dominated by high cliffs and snowy peaks. The *mChod rten nyi ma* Range consists of fourteen such peaks, with an average height of 6,700 meters; the highest, called *mChod rten nyi ma*, rises to 6,927 metres (Chan 1994: 806). D. Freshfield went there at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and he describes the place as having a lake (from which a river issues), a *stūpa*, some monastic cells and carved stone walls. He adds that every year pilgrims from all parts of Tibet, as well as from Mongolia and China, make their way there. A. David-Neel arrived in 1912. She was struck by the beauty of the landscape and the aridity caused by the high altitude. At that time the monastery lay in ruins, she writes, though this does not appear clearly in her photographs (1979: 28). She speaks of one hundred and eight springs, some cold, others hot, the majority of which can be seen only by “those who have a particularly pure mind”<sup>5</sup> ([1929] 1977: 73-77) and notes that she rode on horseback for four days from *mChod rten nyi ma* before the golden roofs of the monastery of *bKra shis lhun po*, at *Shigatse*, came into view (quoted by Miller 1984: 156). Lama Anagarika Govinda ([1969] 1976: 24) describes “a large and open place with, here and there, snowy peaks which pierce the sky, which is of the dark blue typical of these high altitudes.”<sup>6</sup> V. Chan (1994: 808) locates the site within a one-day walk from Sikkim: a newly built road leads there from the bridge at *Sa skya*; the pilgrims from Central Tibet now come by truck, their numbers often reaching one hundred a day during the season (which is not specified). In the past, this monastery accommodated a community of monks and nuns. When A. David-Neel passed through, there were four nuns in residence. V. Chan (1994: 806) places the number at “12 nuns and some monks.” According to an informant from *rTsa skor*, a village located to the south of the sacred mountain of *rTsib ri*, on the road leading from Nepal to Lhasa, the religious community resides there only in summer, conditions being too harsh during the winter because of the high altitude. V. Chan indicates (1994: 801-10) a line of *stūpas* at the entrance of the monastic complex, the presence of three other

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<sup>5</sup> My translation.

<sup>6</sup> My translation.

*stūpas* and a monastery, the most important chapel of which, on the western side, is dedicated to Hayagrīva.

## 2. Oral testimonies

All the informants agree on the presence of a lake, a spring, a mountain, a monastery and a *stūpa*, but the number of the latter varies from person to person: sometimes they speak of one, other times three, occasionally four (one big and three small), and once thirteen (which may correspond to the set V. Chan mentions). According to information A.M. Blondeau obtained in 1991,<sup>7</sup> one finds there the Gu ru mchod rten, the history of which is as follows: when Padmasambhava came to this place, there were three demons (*bdud*) one of which was called Srin po. In order to defeat them, the Indian saint drove his stick into the earth. One black *stūpa* was built there, and the demon is confined beneath it. This *stūpa* stands alone and is located in a deserted place (*sa cha stong pa*).

Two of my Sherpa informants localized the source of the spring as being under a *stūpa* (they did not specify which one). The lake that gives rise to visions is commonly noted not only for its purifying role but also for its function as a mirror: young single women can see in it the village into which they will marry (informant from Walungchu Gola, eastern Nepal). Also, not only one lake may be mentioned but two, one white ('O ma mtsho) and one black (Nag po mtsho).<sup>8</sup>

There is general unanimity on the motives that lead people to go on pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma, the most striking being purification from incest.

During an interview I conducted in 1989, in Nepal, with an inhabitant of the village of bKong rtsa, located to the north of rTsig ri (southern Tibet), I learned that there was a case of incest among his kin. The daughter of one of his "aunts" had a relationship with the son of a relative (he could not specify the degree of kinship). The couple considered leaving but eventually decided to stay. Once the facts were known, they were beaten by the villagers and sent to mChod rten nyi ma. There they were compelled to bathe in the lake and then in the

<sup>7</sup> Her informant came from gTsang and was about forty years old.

<sup>8</sup> The theme of a malevolent black lake inhabited by a demon and located close to a beneficial lake is common. For other examples of malevolent counterparts, see K. Buffetrille (1993: 106).

spring. After the bath, they went to the monastery to obtain a letter affixed with a seal certifying their compliance with the rite. (To have gone back to bKong rtsa without this paper would have been equivalent, in the eyes of the community, to not having gone on the pilgrimage, and would have led the villagers to send them back to mChod rten nyi ma once more.) When they returned, they re-entered their respective families and regained their former position in the community. One child was born from this union but died almost immediately, which obviated the determination of its status.

In this story, it is stated clearly that the *couple* was sent to mChod rten nyi ma; but the villager from Walungchu Gola provided another scenario: if, in the guilty couple, the man belongs to a superior social class, his mother accompanies him, but if it is the woman who enjoys a superior status, her father accompanies her. Thus far, I have no other testimony corroborating this assertion. Other versions were not as detailed but did contain another contradiction: it is not always the couple who is sent to mChod rten nyi ma but sometimes only the man.

One Sherpa informant who had lived in Lhasa for a long time maintained that the offenders were sent to mChod rten nyi ma on a bullock and were accompanied by a man on a horse. On the way back, the pair had to walk. This information, although isolated, seems important. The expulsion of criminals by means of a brown bullock is, as we will see, a punishment already noted in the literature (Karmay 1991: 362).

My informants never mentioned any stigma being attached to incestuous persons who returned to their village with the certificate.

### 3. *The stories*

The information provided by Prince Peter of Greece (1963: 455) corroborates in part the preceding. In 1952, he met the abbot of the monastery of mChod rten snying (?) ma in Kalimpong (Bengal), and inquired into his past:

It appeared that he was the abbot of the monastery at Chöten Nyingma, and that the latter was a very special one in Tibet, because the waters of the lake had the property of being able to wash away the sin of incest. Anyone having had sexual relations with somebody within the prohibited degree of consanguinity could be purified of the pollution by making a pilgrimage to Chöten Nyingma Tso (lake) where, after having

plunged in its waters, he or she would make an offering to the monastery. The abbot whom I met would, in exchange, deliver a certificate that the person was now absolved of all sin, and the petitioner could go home satisfied and appeased. It appeared that the principal source of revenue of this particular monastery came from this trade in certificates, and that this was the reason for the prosperous appearance of the Incarnation whom I just met.

One of the nuns at the monastery when A. David-Neel visited ([1929] 1977: 92) asserted that the lama of the place resided in Grang lung,<sup>9</sup> a one-day walk away, and was a very rich Tantrist, able to perform many wonders such as making rain or hail fall or stop. It is well-known in the Tibetan world that devotees make donations to the monastic community in proportion to their wealth or to their requests, which is a sufficient background to explain putative cases of affluence among the priesthood.

## II. QUESTIONS RAISED BY MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

### 1. *Incest in the Tibetan world*

Incest is a subject people only discuss reluctantly. People will often say that they have never heard of actual cases but recognize that the practice may occur. Most of my Sherpa informants maintain, however, that it does not exist in their homeland. Here, I will survey references to Tibetan incest in Western literature, references that are often at odds with the information I obtained from numerous interviews with Tibetan refugees in Nepal.

One may note that one term exists for incest in Tibetan (*nal*), unlike in Turco-Mongolian languages.<sup>10</sup> The term *nal*<sup>11</sup> is unknown to the

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<sup>9</sup> According to a Tibetan refugee in Paris who visited mChod rten nyi ma, the name Grang lung ("Cold Wind") is justified by the icy wind that often blows there.

<sup>10</sup> Oral communication of R. Hamayon (Paris 1995).

<sup>11</sup> A Dunhuang manuscript that R.A. Stein studied (1971: 528 *passim*), which he called "Le conte des trois sœurs," speaks of a demon who kills his father, eats him, puts on his clothes and returns home to sleep with his mother (*brnal*). Stein (*ibid.*: 529, n. 112) refers to "*rnal/mnal*: sleep? or *mnol*: defilement and *nal*: incest?"

majority of contemporary Tibetans, and S. G. Karmay suspects that it is a word encountered only in ritual texts, and which has been retained there to the present.

The Penal Code of Byang chub rgyal mtshan (1302-1373), the *Zhal lce hco lnga* (1989-3: 74), includes cases of adultery and (a rather limited range) of incest under the single expression *byi byas pa* (?), defined as: “to have [sexual] relations with the wife of someone else or one’s [own] mother or sister.”<sup>12</sup> The punishment consists in exiling the offenders after one of their limbs has been amputated.<sup>13</sup> These two misdeeds are thus dealt with identically on a penal level. The modern dictionary *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (p. 1523) describes *nal* as a household of the “same bone” (*rus gcig pa'i khyim thab*). To be of the same bone means, in Tibet, to belong to the same patrilineal descent group (*rus rgyud*).<sup>14</sup> If one follows the definition provided by this dictionary, it appears that the possibility of incest on the maternal side, on the side of “flesh” (*sha*), is not considered. One can immediately see the contradiction between this definition and that of *Byang chub rgyal mtshan*: mother and son are of the same “flesh”, not of the same “bone.” Theories about conception explain why bone figures in patrilineal filiation: “The father's semen generates bones, the brain, and the spinal cord. The mother's menstrual blood generates flesh, and the solid and hollow organs”<sup>15</sup> (Meyer 1981: 111). Such ideas are very widespread in India (Jaggi 1973: 97-101) as well as in the rest of Asia: “from Tibet to Assam, and on through all of China”<sup>16</sup> (Lévi-Strauss [1947] 1967: 454), and also in Siberia (Hamayon 1990: 103).

How can we define incest in the Tibetan world? The exogamic rules differ in Tibet and in the Tibetan populations of northern Nepal. In Tibet itself, one needs to be cautious: we know now that it is rarely possible to assume the existence across Tibet of facts or rules observed in a particular area. In Central Tibet, there is at present no clear matrimonial prescription, or even preference. Marriage is prohibited between those with a kinship status traceable over seven generations on the paternal side and between five and seven generations on the

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<sup>12</sup> *gzhan gyi chung ma dang ma'am sring mo dang brel ba'i phyogs la byi byas pa.*

<sup>13</sup> *yan lag gi phran bcad nas yul gzhan du spyugs par bshad kyang.*

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the concept *rus*, and its meaning among the Nyin ba, a population of Tibetan culture in the northwest of Nepal, see N. Levine (1984).

<sup>15</sup> My translation.

<sup>16</sup> My translation.

maternal side, according to the region (Guigo 1986: 109). It is likely that marriage with a cross-cousin was widely practiced in the past. Father Desideri ([1937] 1995: 192), a Jesuit who lived in Tibet from 1715 to 1721 and who had a keen eye for detail, asserts that intimate relations with somebody of the same “bone” (*rus*) is regarded as incest, regardless of the degree of proximity; on the other hand, while it is prohibited to have such relations on the side of “flesh” with a person of first degree kinship (an uncle cannot marry his niece), wedding a maternal cousin (the matrilateral cross-cousin) is allowed and is not rare. Marriage with a matrilineal cross-cousin is even preferred in some Tibetan-speaking communities, including Dolpo (Jest 1975: 252); the Nyin ba community of western Nepal, where marriage occurs with cousins on both sides of the family (Levine 1988: 59); and Baragaon, where marriage with a patrilateral cross-cousin is accepted and marriage with a matrilateral cross-cousin is preferred (Schuler 1983: 183; Ramble 1984: 138).

Is it possible to know one’s ancestors back to seven generations? There is no clear consensus. D. Guigo maintains that “Tibetans do not always have a very precise idea about the definition of exogamic kinship. At the first degree, it is obvious that all unions with first cousins are prohibited, but from the second degree the picture sometimes becomes blurred.”<sup>17</sup>

This would mean that exogamic rules belong to the realm of norms and that the gap between them and actual practice can be great. According to S.G. Karmay, most of the families of his native area (Shar khog in A mdo) possessed a kind of written “genealogy” (*rus yig*), such that it was possible to trace roots back to seven generations.<sup>18</sup> During funerals, there was a ceremony for transferring merit to all dead ancestors (men and women alike), whose names were written on a paper called a “dedication support” (*bsngo rten*). The name of the most recent deceased was added at his or her death.

In the mGo log vocabulary, an incestuous relation with a close relative is compared to murder (Guigo 1986: 113), which may explain why the three major crimes that lead people to mChod rten nyi ma are parricide, matricide and incest.

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<sup>17</sup> My translation.

<sup>18</sup> Genealogies may be oral: G. Condominas ([1957] 1974: 106) shows that some Mngong Gar of Central Vietnam are able to recite long genealogical poems that go back to the fifteenth generation.

How was incest understood in the Tibetan world? Here, too, information gleaned from the scholarly literature is contradictory.

G. Patterson (quoted by Prince Peter of Greece 1963: 455) asserted that he knew the case of a father and daughter living together openly and publicly which, he claimed, aroused some reprobation but more commonly no more than a feeling of curiosity.<sup>19</sup> Again, Prince Peter of Greece (1963: 455) reports that an unnamed British commercial agent told him in 1939 that Tibetans do not attach “moral stigmata” to such a practice, considering it only harmful to the health of the couple and detrimental to the offspring of such a union. Nevertheless, the statements Prince Peter of Greece quotes relating to incest contradict this affirmation: “Kill the issue of incestuous relations” (*pha spun mnol zhing nal bu gsod*); “incest between brother and sister must be confessed”<sup>20</sup> (*bu sring rus nal pyas [hyas?] pa mthol lo bshags*); also “brother and sister [who sleep together commit] black incest” (*ming sring nal nag*); “incestuous brothers and sisters must be separated” (*ming spun gyis shag nal*), “divine incest by the teacher” (*slob dpon gyis lha nal*). In the end, most of the Western authors (for example B. Aziz 1978b: 58) and all Tibetans interviewed agree that incest is regarded as a particularly horrible crime in the Tibetan world, and the difficulty in obtaining information is a further indication of the taboos surrounding the subject.

In the Himalayan and Tibetan world, the offence weights most heavily, of course, on those who have committed it. But incest is regarded also as an anti-social act, in that it invites calamities to befall the community as a whole.<sup>21</sup> It is natural, therefore, that the whole group should be troubled by such an act. Incest disturbs the order of nature. All my informants said that if there was an incestuous couple in the village, storms, hail and avalanches would occur, the members of the offenders’ families would die at an early age and all their undertakings would be doomed to failure. In the Limbu heartland of

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<sup>19</sup> G. Patterson is perhaps extrapolating. In Tibet it is possible for a step-father to have relations with his step-daughter.

<sup>20</sup> This pronouncement and the following ones were provided to him by R.A. Stein in January 1955. The expression *slob dpon lha nal* occurs in “a very widely practised confession of sins containing a list of sexual relations regarded as “incestuous” or “prohibited” (my translation). This text called *Sa bdag bshags 'bum* is a xylograph of seventeen pages, without the author’s name (R.A. Stein [1962] 1981: 129 and 132).

<sup>21</sup> C. Jest (1975: 259), G. Gorer [(1938] 1984: 151), P. Sagant (1982), S. Mumford ([1989] 1990: 238).

Nepal, “the village closes in on itself, being itself affected by the defilement”<sup>22</sup> (Sagant 1982: 167). Other supernatural sanctions may occur. The old woman from Walungchu Gola who went on a pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma added that grass turned yellow under the footsteps of offenders. In the Nyin ba population of West Nepal (Levine 1984: 57), those who violate this prohibition will develop cracks in their bones, verified after their death—a punishment that fits the crime, incest being unlawful relations between two people of the same “bone.” Among the Rai, incest is actually called *hadphora*, “breaking the bones.”<sup>23</sup> In Ding ri (southern Tibet), the guilty are condemned to a state of perpetual pollution (Aziz 1978: 58), as are the Khumbo of eastern Nepal (Schicklgruber 1992: 733). The function of mChod rten nyi ma is all the more striking in this light.

Traditionally, incest could be punished by death, as was the case in Dol po (Jest 1975: 259), where offenders were sewn into a yak-skin and thrown in the river, the same punishment for the murder of one’s father or mother in Sikkim (Waddell [1899] 1978: 107), and which in general was reserved for major criminals. Often the incestuous couple was expelled from the community and exiled far away,<sup>24</sup> “beyond seven passes and seven rivers.”<sup>25</sup> In the Tibetan community of Gyasumdo<sup>26</sup> (Central Nepal), carnal relations between a celibate lama and one of his nun disciples are regarded as “the worst kind of incest” (Mumford [1989] 1990: 238). There is no consanguinity in this case, but the relation between a religious man and his close disciples is regarded as a filiation, as the terms *sras* (“son”) and *thugs sras* (“spiritual son”) which refer to close disciples suggest, recalling the phrase quoted by Prince Peter of Greece, “divine incest by the teacher” (*slob dpon gyis lha nal*). One can qualify this relation as “second-degree incest” in the words of F. Héritier (1979) for whom “the symbolic aspect of incest, resting as it does on the solid pillars of identity and difference, does not necessarily have any connection with real consanguinity, properly genealogical; on the contrary, it presupposes a logical, syntagmatic relationship that unites diverse orders of representation with each other:

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<sup>22</sup> My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Oral communication of C. Ramble (Paris 2001).

<sup>24</sup> G. Gorer ([1938] 1984: 152), S. Mumford ([1989] 1990: 238), P. Sagant (1982).

<sup>25</sup> *la bdun dang chu bdun rgyab nas*.

<sup>26</sup> The Tibetan spelling is uncertain: it may be rGya gsum mdo.

representations of the individual and his parts, genetic representations of vertical and horizontal transferences operating between individuals by way of filiation or contagion, representations of the relationship between the sexes and of the world of kinship, as well as representations of the natural world and the social order in their intimate relationship with biological man" (1979: 239).<sup>27</sup> The village of Tshap (Central Nepal) experienced such a case in the recent past. The accused was the lama of the village. He had actively taken part in the propagation of Buddhist doctrine and in the abolition of the blood sacrifices practised by the neighbouring Gurungs; the nun was the daughter of the chief of the village. The whole community was shattered. The father of the young woman confessed that his honour had been stained: "They have cut my nose," he exclaimed, an expression which recalls the punishment sometimes inflicted on an adulterous woman (Duncan 1964: 69; Tucci 1969: 260).

The mythology of numerous populations of Tibetan culture or of speakers of Tibeto-Burman languages contains stories relating to incest and the consequences which ensue. Among them are myths with a cosmogonic framework; these are frequent in Tibetan literature and form the mythical background of various rituals.<sup>28</sup>

Myths often have a social purpose: in the Eastern Tamang community, the first human marriage was one of primordial incest between a brother and a sister of the same clan (Steinmann 1987: 188, 195-97), just as it was in the Gurung community of Gyasumdo (Mumford [1989] 1990: 143) or among the Khumbo of eastern Nepal (Diemberger 1991: 145, Schicklgruber 1992: 724). The latter have a myth of the origin of defilement (*grib*) among human beings. This myth relates the incest between a human son and his mother, an "emanation of Earth-Foundation-Mother" (*sa gzhi a ma'i sprul ba*). This first incest resulted in the curse which leads all human beings to return to where they came from: to the womb of Earth-Mother. The

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<sup>27</sup> "La symbolique de l'inceste qui repose sur les piliers solides de l'identique et du différent n'a pas nécessairement de lien avec la consanguinité réelle, proprement généalogique: elle suppose par contre un rapport logique, syntaxique, qui unit entre eux divers ordres de représentations: les représentations de la personne et de ses parties, les représentations génétiques des transferts verticaux et horizontaux qui s'opèrent entre individus par voie de filiation ou de contagion, les représentations du rapport des sexes et du monde de la parenté, mais aussi les représentations du monde naturel et de l'ordre social dans leurs rapports intimes avec l'homme biologique." (My translation.)

<sup>28</sup> Oral information received from A.M. Blondeau (Paris 1995).

myth further explains that since that time, birth, death and conflicts are the defilements which must be purified if one wants to belong to the social order ruled over by clan organization (Schicklgruber 1992: 723-734).

C. Lévi-Stauss ([1947] 1977: 29, 35) explained that the prohibition of incest “constitutes the fundamental step on the basis of which, by means of which, and more particularly during which the passage from nature to culture is accomplished [...], and it expresses the passage from the natural fact of consanguinity to the cultural fact of marriage alliances.”<sup>29</sup> These myths delineate a cycle, from a state of social disorder that comes to a head with an act of incest, to order being restored by marriage rules, the transgression of which again plunges society into chaos.

### *2. Fate of offspring born from an incestuous union*

All my informants agree on at least one point: a child born from an incestuous union has no place in society. It is generally described as afflicted with physical defects, it will be blind according to the Shar wa of A mdo (Guigo 1986: 109), or else paralysed, dumb, or facially deformed; Lepchas and Nyin bas believe that such a child will be retarded and short-lived (Gorer [1938] 1984: 151, Levine 1984: 57). Some add that the birth of a child excludes all possibility of purification and leads to the permanent expulsion of the couple and the child.

### *3. Ordeal or simple trial*

From the various interviews I conducted, it seems clear that the pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma has something of the nature of a trial, and perhaps even of an ordeal (in which there is a divine intervention). To be purified, one must bathe, but the water is so cold, people said, that even the bones are affected; some informants added that if one dips one’s finger into the lake, circulation stops, and that if boiled tea or boiled soup is not drunk immediately, death ensues. At the village of gNas 'og, to the north of rTsib ri (southern Tibet), I was told that one

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<sup>29</sup> “La prohibition de l'inceste constitue la démarche fondamentale grâce à laquelle, par laquelle, mais surtout en laquelle, s'accomplit le passage de la nature à la culture [...] et qu'elle exprime le passage du fait naturel de la consanguinité au fait culturel de l'alliance”. (My translation.)

must dip one's arm in the lake: if it comes out stiff and frozen, one is condemned, and death will follow shortly; escaping unscathed is the sign that the misdeed has been purified. Information that A.M. Blondeau obtained indicated that common people guilty of incest had to bathe in the frozen water of the Black Lake and that most of them died from this. An informant of hers related that if a Sa skya pa hierarch takes a woman from an inferior social stratum, he breaks the lineage of the lamas (*bla ma'i brgyud*). To atone, he must bathe several times in the White Lake, or Milk Lake, which only lamas, regardless of their school, are allowed to enter. When the defilement is purified, the *stūpa* emanates light ('od). I never was able to determine whether a lama also has to obtain a paper testifying to his sojourn.

Ordeals are not unknown in the Tibetan world. One law code stipulates that in order to ascertain the guilt of a thief, two stones, one white and the other black, be placed in a tub full of boiling oil. The defendant has to dip his hand into the oil and draw out one of the two stones; if he takes out the white one, he is judged innocent; if the other, he is guilty.<sup>30</sup> Tibetological literature provides other examples. Some centuries ago, a quarrel arose between two hamlets in northwest Nepal, one inhabited by Nyin ba people. The argument was settled, according to the traditional custom, by an ordeal which consisted of inserting a red-hot iron into the mouth of a representative of each group. The one who was unscathed was recognized as innocent (Levine 1984: 65).

There existed at least one other type of trial in the Sharwa area (A mdo), namely the ritual hunt, which in some respects, is comparable to the case of mChod rten nyi ma. The wildlife in the surrounding mountains and forests belong to the territorial god (*yul lha*), master of the soil, and as such, cannot be hunted. Nevertheless, every year a great hunt of herbivores was organized; to participate in this hunt could lead to death, and the hunters who survived were the "elect" of the territorial god (Karmay-Sagant 1998). The risk they incurred was real; the outcome, whether good or bad, was regarded as a "sanction," which may be compared with the "sanction" of mChod rten nyi ma; we will return to this in the conclusion.

The example of mChod rten nyi ma shows that the defilement produced by incest can be "washed" away by going to this particular place, provided one survives a fearsome physical test. As far as I know, this kind of rite during a pilgrimage is very rare. Moreover, one should

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<sup>30</sup> Oral communication of S.G. Karmay, who refers to a text of laws he is unable to identify at present (Paris, May 1995).

note that the possibility of being purified by circumambulating one of the *stūpa*, the lake or the sacred place, while reciting *mantra*, performing prostrations and making offerings (usual pilgrimage practices), was never raised; the unique nature of the trial is a mark of the serious and specificity of the misdeed.

Is mChod rten nyi ma the only case, or are there other places of pilgrimage known for their ability to expunge the defilement resulting from such crimes? I know of the following examples:

- An informant from Baragaon, in Nepal, confided to C. Ramble that a one-week walk from Muktinath there exists a place where pilgrims go in cases of incest. He said he knew a myth on that topic but refused to give more details because it was necessary that the name of the site remain unknown so that those who go there may do so anonymously. This confirms the difficulty of obtaining information on so sensitive and taboo a subject.
- The upper cave of Halase-Maratika in south-eastern Nepal contains four “paths to hell” (*dmyal lam*).<sup>31</sup> When one enters such a narrow crevice, one is unsure whether one will be judged innocent or guilty. The notion of ordeal is present, and with it that of supernatural sanction. The Sherpa lama of the place, Maratika Lama, assigns to one of these “paths” the ability to purify the defilement generated by incest or by carnal relations between a monk and a woman. Pilgrims seem to be unaware of the specific nature of the path, or do not devote any particular attention to it; it is only the pilgrimage guide written by the lama<sup>32</sup> that indicates its properties.
- The Tibetans who settled about one hundred years ago in the area of Gyasumdo, east of Manang, in Nepal, also make pilgrimages in order to be purified of serious defilements. In the 1980s, a Tibetan from a high family ran away with a woman of low birth. When he

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<sup>31</sup> These “paths to hell” are one of the constant features of pilgrimage places. They often take the form of narrow cavities burrowed in the rock or narrow paths between two rocks that the pilgrims cross to purify themselves and to overcome fear of the intermediary state between death and rebirth (*bar do*) at the time of death.

<sup>32</sup> The translation of this guide is in K. Buffetrille (2000: 326-31, in particular p. 329).

came back, he was compelled to undertake a pilgrimage to Muktinath (western Nepal)<sup>33</sup> and wash his mouth out with the water of the springs in order to be purified before being able to partake of food and drink with his peers (Mumford [1989] 1990: 46). One should note in this case that only the man (not the couple) was sent on the pilgrimage, and that no stigma seems to have been attached to him upon his return.

However, an essential difference exists between the two sacred sites cited above (Halase and Muktinath) and mChod rten nyi ma: the great fame of the latter in matters of incest. To this day mChod rten nyi ma appears to be a most uncommon, if not unique, case.

### III. THE PILGRIMAGE GUIDES

The unanimity of pilgrim informants on the impulse that drove them to mChod rten nyi ma was striking. All of them said that their knowledge came from pilgrimage guides. I have found two such guides.<sup>34</sup>

The first one bears the title “Pilgrimage Guide of rDo rje nyi ma, Secret Register” (*rDo rje nyi ma'i gnas yig gsang ba'i dkar chag*).<sup>35</sup> Its subtitle is: “A Pilgrim's Guide to the Hidden Land in Sikkim Revealed from Its Place of Concealment by Rig 'dzin rgod kyi ldem 'phru can (1337-1408).” It was published in Delhi in 1983. Written in block capitals (*dbu can*), it is composed of twenty-four leaves each with five lines (with the exception of the first three, which have one, two and three lines.)

The main theme is the story of the construction of the various *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma (not called mChod rten nyi ma but in actuality the same place). The father Rig 'dzin mthong mchog, of Hūm ra lineage, had a son called rDzi bu (shepherd) on account of his primary occupation. In fact, he was Nam mkha'i snying po, one of the twenty-

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<sup>33</sup> On Muktinath, called in Tibetan *Chu mig brgya rtsa* “Hundred Springs,” see D.L. Snellgrove 1979: 73-170 and [1961] 1981: 199-202; and D. Messerschmidt (1982 and 1992).

<sup>34</sup> F.K. Ehrhard provided me with the first text; I found a second copy, not long after, in the library of 'Khrul zhig Rinpoche, in the monastery of Thub bstan chos gling (Sherpa country, eastern Nepal); A. Chayet brought the second one to my attention. I wish to thank both of them. The translation of these two guides is in K. Buffetrille (2000: 201-26).

<sup>35</sup> Henceforward: *Dorje 1*.

five disciples of Padmasambhava. Mahākaruna was his tutelary deity, and his faith was so deep that various miraculous signs appeared. One day, the Red Hayagrīva issued from the heart of Mahākaruna. The shepherd asked him to be allowed to build a *stūpa* to “clear away the defilements of the living beings in these degenerate times.” He was granted his wish [1-7]. On the tenth day of the fourth month a yak appeared on the Gangs chen mdzod lnga (Kanchenjunga), and the shepherd followed him with his flock of yaks and sheep. He eventually arrived in Tibet and, in a vision, saw Padmasambhava and Ye shes mtsho rgyal. He questioned the Indian saint about the corrupt conditions and the signs of the times. Making a spring of nectar miraculously gush from the base of the throne, Padmasambhava answered:

From the base of the throne of the Buddhas of the three times, a hundred springs of nectar have appeared. If one bathes in them, sicknesses will disappear [and] demons, [the creators of] obstacles will be pacified. If one drinks from them, karma and defilements will be purified. In particular, [a time will come during which] one will commit the ten non-virtues<sup>36</sup> and the five deeds of immediate retribution<sup>37</sup>. During the degenerate times there will appear a sign, which is incest between brother and sister.<sup>38</sup> At that time the essence of the earth, having been weakened, will be swept along by the wind, and it is certain that people will go to the hell of *vajra*. Because people will have had [sexual] relations with [someone] from a low social stratum or because they will have carried a corpse, their intelligence will be blocked and the ducts of sperm will be dried up. [11] This will be clear as [in] a mirror of polished [copper]. Nevertheless, all misdeeds, such as the five

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<sup>36</sup> See Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, II: 166).

<sup>37</sup> The *mtshams med lnga* are: patricide, matricide, murdering an Arhat, maliciously causing blood to flow from a Buddha, and causing dissension in the monastic community.

<sup>38</sup> *snyigs dus spun zla mi(ng) sring 'dzol ba'i ltas*. The *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* (2349) gives for 'dzol ba: *nor ba'am 'khrul ba dang 'gal ba*: to make a mistake or to breach the norm (i.e. to do something beyond the acceptable), to disturb the harmony.

forgivable sins,<sup>39</sup> will be purified. [...] The central mountain is the sacred mountain (*gnas ri*), seat of the planet Rāhula. Behind [it] there are three lakes, one of gold, [another] of turquoise and [a third] of conch. The next descendants of the shepherd are designated by prophecies to open this place.

A short description of the sacred site follows; it mentions a lake in which one's own karma appears as everything that will happen in the next life, and a mountain with images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Ye shes mtsho rgyal then questioned the Master on the degenerate times. Before answering, Padmasambhava stuck his stick into the ground, and in that place "a nectar, medicinal water with the eight qualities," started to flow; then he explained the beneficial qualities of this water.

Next comes the story of the construction of the three *stūpa*, one by the shepherd (that is, Nam mkha' snying po), the other one by Ye shes mtsho rgyal and the third built by the two of them together, according to the instructions of the Master. One day, while the sun (*nyi ma*) rose, the shepherd saw in a vision a *vajra* (*rdo rje*) with five points appear in space, hence the name of the place, rDo rje nyi ma, "[19] As for the names [of these *stūpa*], they are called, on account of the omens described above, the *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma (*Vajra*-sun), and their fame echoes like the sound of the summer-drum [= the thunder]."

The benefits obtained by doing prostrations and circumambulations and by making offerings to these *stūpa* are numerous, including, among others, obtaining children in the case of women [19]. In a short description of this sacred place, rDo rje nyi ma is described as "the northern door which gives access to the hidden land of Sikkim" [22-23]. The text ends with the history of this treasure-text, the pilgrimage guide, its having been written and hidden by Ye shes mtsho rgyal and then discovered by one of the descendants of the shepherd, "the second Rig 'dzin tshe dbang, scion and emanation of the word of the shepherd," and in the end printed by an heir to the Hūm ra lineage.

The second text, "a Short Summary of the Pilgrimage Guide of the *stūpa* of rDo rje nyi ma" (*rDo rje nyi ma'i mchod rten gyi gnas yig nyung bsdus*)<sup>40</sup> is, as the title indicates much less detailed than the previous one. It was narrated by the Lord of Oddiāyina

<sup>39</sup> The *nye ba lnga* are: raping a female Arhat, killing a Bodhisattva, killing a monk, taking property belonging to the monastic community, destroying a *stūpa*.

<sup>40</sup> Henceforward *Dorje 2*.

(Padmasambhava) to Ye shes mtsho rgyal and recorded by her. It is attributed to the treasure-discover (*gter ston*) rDo rje rgyal mtshan.<sup>41</sup> The version I have is written in block capitals (*dbu can*) and is composed of five folios with an irregular number of lines (from four to six). The spelling mistakes are numerous, and were corrected for me by religious scholars living in Nepal.

The text begins with an encomium to Avalokiteṣvara, rDo rje nyi ma being the meditational place devoted to him. The site is composed of “a high snowy peak, and a river of nectar with the eight qualities flows through it” [1b]. Ye shes mtsho rgyal wants to know “the marvellous signs [manifested] in this place excellent above all.” In response, the Master sets forth the various qualities of rDo rje nyi ma, then the specific benefits that the site confers:

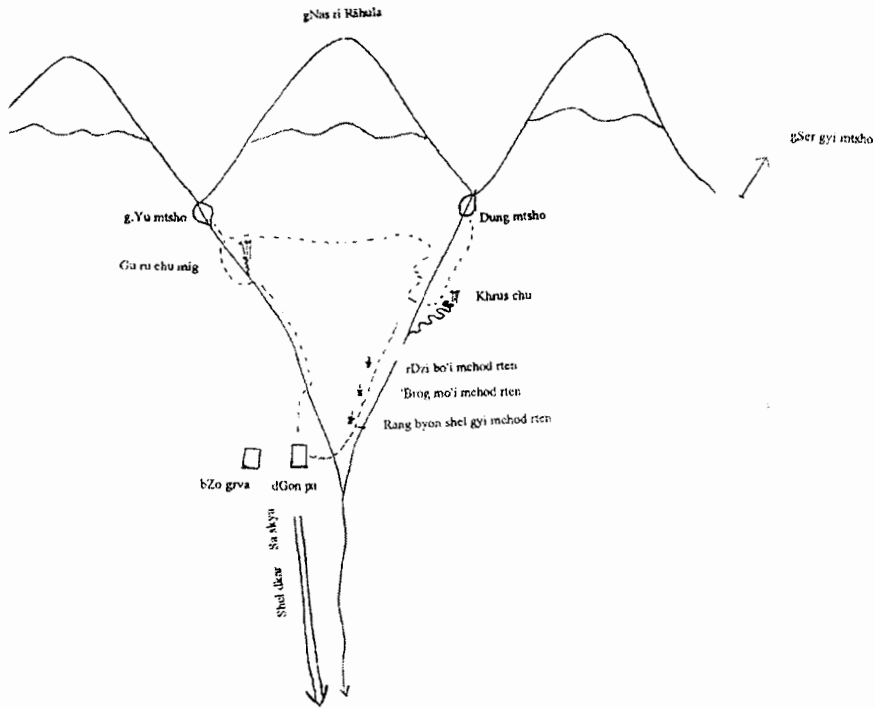
[4b] If one makes prostrations and circumambulations in this place, the five sins without remission, the five deeds of immediate retribution, the five forgivable sins [and] the ten non virtues will be purified. All wishes will be spontaneously fulfilled, and one will obtain *siddhi*, the common as well as the supreme. In particular, [it is] an excellent [place] for a woman who wishes for a child. The fruits obtained by merely hearing the name [of these *stūpa*] [will lead one to be reborn] as god or as human.

The sacred place is described as containing self-arisen *stūpa*, a lake that produces visions to living beings who, untainted by the defilements of bad karma, possess good fortune.

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<sup>41</sup> Unidentified. May be another name of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem.

## MCHOD RTEN NYI MA



## IV. TWO TRADITIONS, TWO DISCOURSES?

1. *The oral tradition*

According to oral and written traditions, mChod rten nyi ma was created, or rather, “opened”, by Padmasambhava. It is a perfect sacred place, featuring a lake and a mountain and also a spring, three characteristics of the landscape informants never fail to cite; it is only as an afterthought that they add to their description what must be regarded as the main element of the site, if toponymy is any indication: the one or more *stūpa*. In fact, in none of the collected stories does the *stūpa* play a role except when the guilty lamas bathe in the Milk Lake and light is emitted from the *stūpa*, the sign of the purification of these religious dignitaries. According to two Sherpa informants, the only function of the *stūpa* seems to be to shelter the spring. Although all the

people I questioned knew the name rDo rje nyi ma, “*Vajra-Sun*”, they only used its other name, mChod rten nyi ma, “*Stūpa-Sun*,” thus recalling the presence of the one or more *stūpa*, of which the stories hardly speak. A. David-Neel ([1929] 1977: 73-74) explains the name mChod rten nyi ma by reference to a *stūpa* “containing precious relics [which] miraculously transported itself through space, from India to this place.”<sup>42</sup> This story of a flying *stūpa* was never confirmed to me.

If one follows the oral tradition, the *stūpa* of mChod rten nyi ma have no particular value for pilgrimage, which leads one to think that they are later constructions (both literary and physical), an interpretation put forward by Buddhists to divert attention from its original significance. The light which is said to emanate when a monk or lama purifies himself merely confirms this hypothesis. The importance of the monastery is more pronounced in the stories: it is there that offenders obtain the letter testifying to their presence and to the fact that they have been purified, and thus to the success of their undertaking. Unfortunately, I have yet to learn when the monastery was built.

The main role, however, is played by the waters, those of the lake or of the spring that Padmasambhava tapped. The stories are not always very clear on this point. The oral tradition takes no note of a benefit clearly mentioned in the two guides, which commonly leads Tibetans to go on the pilgrimage, i.e., obtaining a child. Only two informants seemed to be aware of this, the most detailed information on the subject having been collected by A.M. Blondeau. If a childless couple performs a circumambulation (of the lake?/of the *stūpa*) and has sexual relations that evening, they will be blessed with a child, to whom they will be expected to give a name that includes the term Gu ru; for example, Gu ru sGrol ma if it is a girl or Gu ru Tshe ring if it is a boy, in recognition that the child was born following a wish made at mChod rten nyi ma, the sacred place of Padmasambhava.

## 2. *The written tradition*

The written tradition highlights the construction and the existence of the one or more *stūpa* from which the sacred place takes its name. The presence of a sacred mountain is cited in the two guides (*Dorje* 1: 11 and *Dorje* 2: 1b). The one discovered by Rig 'dzin rgod ldem recalls the

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<sup>42</sup> My translation.

rise of incest as the true sign of degenerate times, as are sexual relations with someone from a low social stratum or the act of carrying a corpse. It specifies in effect that these defilements (like those resulting from the five deeds of immediate retribution, the five forgivable sins and the ten non-virtues) will be purified if one goes on a pilgrimage to rDo rje nyi ma, the northern door of the hidden land of Sikkim.<sup>43</sup>

The second text contains nothing to suggest that there is any connection between this sacred place and the purification of defilement incurred from incest or sexual relations with someone from a low social stratum, unless a statement by the author in citing the benefits obtained at this site can be so interpreted: “What is there to say about the main pollution owing to the impurities?” [3a]. Is this a discreet evocation of the major pollution of incest? On the other hand, patricide and matricide are among the five deeds of immediate retribution (*mtshams med lnga*) which are explicitly purified at the site.

Incest is obviously not the main theme of these guides. There is thus a striking gap between the discourse of the laypeople and that of the texts [and therefore of the religious figures]. mChod rten nyi ma demonstrates that even if the priesthood proposes a scenario, laypeople provide their own emphasis. They are not two parallel lines of discourses; they are intertwined. One of the pilgrimage guides prophesies that during degenerate times the phenomenon of incest will appear, and the oral tradition transmits the idea that the defilement of such an offence can be purified by going to mChod rten nyi ma.

Unfortunately no source provides any reason why this particular place is able to cleanse such misdeeds. Both of the pilgrimage guides and the informants are silent on this point. Only the place itself may hold the clue, but its location on the Tibeto-Sikkimese border makes access difficult.

## V. AN ATTEMPT TO INTERPRET THE PILGRIMAGE OF MCHOD RTEN NYI MA

The pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma appears to be a means of responding to the transgression of a forbidden act, a crime which

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<sup>43</sup> The guide points out, fols. 18-19, that “the benefits [obtained] by doing prostrations and circumambulations and by making offerings to these *stūpa* [19] are equal to the benefits [obtained] at these springs (Chu mig brgya rtsa), that is Muktinath.” It would be interesting to know if the people with whom S. Mumford worked knew this text.

rebounds against the community as a whole, unleashing various calamities. It allows reintegration into the group for those offenders who survive the trial of freezing water, proof that they have been purified. The presentation of a myth may help to understand the relationship between pilgrimage, incest and trial.

1. *From myth to reality*

One finds the following amazing passage in the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* (1989: 305-06), "The Testimony [of Srong btsan sgam po] Hidden in a Pillar", a treasure-text discovered, according to tradition, by Atiḥa (982-1054).<sup>44</sup>

At the time 'Bum thang monastery was being built, King Srong btsan sgam po left for 'Phan yul to look for craftsmen:

[305] There were there a father and a mother who did not have a clan-name and who had two daughters and two sons as beautiful as gods. Because they loved each other, [the girls] refused to leave [for somewhere else] as brides, [and the boys] did not agree to bring women [from outside]; but because they were ashamed [to do so], they did not dare to settle down as [married] couples [with each other]. They were craftsmen.

The king said to them: "You must come and become my craftsmen."

The craftsmen answered: "[There are four conditions]: 1. not to be compelled to follow the rules of decency; 2. not to have to seek another occupation; 3. to have a hot meal before [work]; [306] 4. to wear a cape. King, if you accept [these conditions], we will go."

The great king accepted and, having invited them, they worked as craftsmen in, among other places, 'Bum thang, Ra mo che, mKhar brag, Them bu kog pa, and Mig mangs tshal. They were

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<sup>44</sup> I am grateful to S.G. Karmay for drawing my attention to this part of the work. It is necessary to point out that the version of the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* published in *Literary Arts in Ladakh*, Vol. 1, Darjeeling 1972, in 14 chapters, and the one of the *Ma 'ongs lung bstan gsal ba'i sgron me* (sMan rtsis shes rig spendzod, Vol. 33, Leh 1973) in 12 chapters do not include the above extract.

happy. The four, brothers and sisters, were living as couples, and their children grew in number happily. It is said that there were seven large villages called the Seven Households of the Happy People.<sup>45</sup>

Ong Cong [the Chinese wife of the king] said: “These people are shamelessly increasing happily beyond bounds. [So] they received as clan-name that of Happiness ([s]kyi[d]).”

A Bon po from Sum pa<sup>46</sup> [called] Kakari said: “Your craftsmen having committed the impurity of incest, the king's *pho lha* has been struck by the impurity, [and the monarch] will fall sick and die. Do not let them act in this way. If they do not obey, I will perform black magic.” He made an evil spell of lice (*linga*) and cast it. In no time the lice became as large as pigeons. They filled the inside and the outside of the Seven Households of the Happy People; but whatever was done [the craftsmen] did not agree to leave and so it was said, their number continued increasing.

Then, the Seven Households of the Happy people took fright; the sister-wives were sent away as daughters-in-law, and the brother-husbands asked spouses to come [from outside]. Thus they multiplied even more than before and filled the whole of dBu ru [Central Tibet].

Because they said: “The center (*dkyil shod*) of this country is [the homeland] of the tribe of [s]Kyi[d],” the name dBu ru [s]Kyi[d] shod was given to it; and because they said: “We drink from this turquoise-blue river,” the name Kyi [=sKyi[d] chu sngon po was given to the river.

This story that the *bKa' chems ka khol ma* relates in providing the etymology of toponyms can be interpreted as a legend of the origin of a primal clan. From it one can see that incest and lack of shame existed before the organization of the clans, otherwise, the attitude of the king and the craftsmen would not be understandable. The former accepts

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<sup>45</sup> According to F.K. Ehrhard. (personal communication, December 1999), “The Seven Households of the Happy People ([s]kyi[d] mi) appears in the context of the first settlement in s[Kyi[d] [g]rong.”

<sup>46</sup> A place in north-eastern Tibet.

the conditions set by the craftsmen, which suggests that he is not aware of the possible consequences; the others insist not only on being allowed to continue in their incestuous relationship but also feel unashamed. This text explains that the *pho lha* of the king, affected by the defilement of incest, is responsible for the potentially fatal illness of the monarch. The legend of Gri gum recalls the seriousness of deserting the *pho lha*, *dgra lha* or *mgur lha* of a king.<sup>47</sup> The *pho lha*, god of the male lineage, belongs to the group of five gods born with men (*'go ba'i lha*), which reside on various places on the body. The list of these gods varies,<sup>48</sup> and authors do not even agree on the parts of the body the gods occupy.

S.G. Karmay (1995: 166) relates a legend taken from the *gZi brjid*<sup>49</sup> in which it is said that one day the demon Khyab pa lag ring threw a thunderbolt containing the nine impurities at the head of gShen rab mi bo with the aim of killing or at least polluting him, but without success. A list of these nine impurities is given: “Homicide/fratricide (*dme*)<sup>50</sup>, the birth of a child just after its father dies (*mug*), incest (*nal*),<sup>51</sup> shamelessness (*btsog*), imprecatory signs (*than*), bad omens (*Itas ngan*), something possessed by the mind (*hyu*), impurity owing to the death of a husband or wife (*yug*), pollution of the hearth (*thab mkhon*).

Another myth may help to understand better the implications and consequences of the offence of incest for Tibetans. While Bon

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<sup>47</sup> G. Tucci ([1949] 1980: 733), A. Macdonald (1971: 302), R. de Nebesky-Wojkowitz ([1956] 1975: 318), R.A. Stein ([1962] 1981: 195).

<sup>48</sup> See among others A. Macdonald (1971: 301, n. 407) and S.G. Karmay (1975: 193).

<sup>49</sup> This is the longest biography of gShen rab mi bo, the founder of Bon, according to tradition. See S.G. Karmay (1975).

<sup>50</sup> C. Ramble (1998: 130, n. 14) notes that in Baragaon (southern Mustang) where people speak a form of Western Tibetan called locally the Dzardzong dialect, “*nal* is never used in the Dzardzong dialect, and *dme* unquestionably signifies incest. The expression *dme sre ba* means ‘to commit incest’ (*sre ba*: ‘to mix’), and *dme phug* denotes a child born from an incestuous union. The apparent difference in meaning is perhaps resolved by the notion, common to both interpretations, of a prohibitively close degree of kinship within which an otherwise legitimate (or at least non-polluting) activity takes place. This suggestion is borne out by one of the definitions of *dme grib* given in the *Bod rGya tshig mdzod chen mo: snga dus kyi shod srol du rigs rus gcig pa'am/gnyen phyogs nang khul phan tshun gsod res byas pa dang pho mo bsdebs pa'i grib/* In popular usage in the past, impurity from reciprocal killing or sexual relations between members of the same clan or close relations.”

<sup>51</sup> My emphasis. The translation is also mine.

declined in Tibet, King Khri Srong lde btsan, following his order that Buddhism to be practiced by his subjects, fell ill and numerous scourges befell the country (Karmay 1972: 83-84 and 1991: 365). The monarch called a soothsayer to learn the reasons for this and to determine the most effective rituals. The soothsayer explained:

“O Lord, it is because of the pollution of a child born from an incestuous union and from the magic of the demon Nal mi zan snying dmar (Anthropophagous Incest, Red Heart) [...]. There are misfortunes in this country because the thirteen pure deities of this world are unhappy about the existence of this child.” Everyone was worried about [...]. The ministers said to him: “O clear-sighted soothsayer, we ask you to find this child and to tell us the ritual whose execution will be beneficial.” The soothsayer said: “[...] The eighteen Bonpos belonging to the various clans must perform the rite *Glang nag thur sel*.<sup>52</sup> For this rite, it is necessary to have a brown ox loaded with objects of offering and ransom for the man and the woman with, on top of these, the incestuously produced child. The expulsion must be in the southwest direction; this will be beneficial.”<sup>53</sup>

Several themes of this mythical story can be found repeated in the pilgrimage to mChod rten nyi ma, namely that of incest, the various calamities which befell the community, and the child which is the fruit of the incestuous union and which, if it survives, has “monstrous” characteristics.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. *Mountain-deities and incest*

S.G. Karmay explains in a footnote (1991: 365, n.157) that the thirteen pure deities are all mountain-deities. When angry, they send various calamities. By the ritual and the expulsion of the child on an ox loaded

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<sup>52</sup> This is the title of a ritual the text which has yet to be found. S.G. Karmay advised against attempting to translate the title under these circumstances.

<sup>53</sup> This part, translated by S.G. Karmay (1991: 365), is extracted from the *Srid rgyud* of Khod po Blo gros thog med (13th century), a text which deals with the expansion and decline of Bon during the royal epoch. (My translation from French to English.)

<sup>54</sup> The theme of the ransom (evoked by the expulsion of the incestuous couple on an ox) will not be touched on in this article for lack of space.

with ransom, the defilement of incest is eliminated and the mountain-deities are pacified.

The concept of mountain-deities being responsible for the order of nature and for prosperity is well-known in the Tibetan tradition. Dunhuang documents point out that “the prestige of the royal person and his health, the stability of the kingdom and that of the government, the absence of sickness among men and cattle, [and] the abundance of food”<sup>55</sup> depend upon the appeasement of the *sku bla*, “mountain-deities, ancestors and the support of the vital principle of kings” (*ibid.*: 309). We have already emphasized that all informants and the Tibetological literature recognize that in cases of incest, calamities (such as storms and hail) are bound to occur. When hail falls, say S.G. Karmay and P. Sagant (1987: 251), it is the *yul lha* who is called upon because “the attitude of all the other gods over whom he exercises his empire depends upon his good-will as the master of the soil (*gzhi bdag*).”<sup>56</sup> The *yul lha* (territorial-god and mountain-deity) is generally regarded as the ancestor of the population that lives around.<sup>57</sup> It is not surprising that the territorial-god, ancestor of the community, reacts in a violent way to incest, patricide, matricide, and even to sexual relations with someone of low birth. In a manner of speaking, one can say that it is a “family affair.” Becoming angry if he notices transgressions, he turns away, and the territory along with the population living in it no longer enjoy the protection of the god and are abandoned to all manner of malevolent forces.

#### VI. CONCLUSION: THE EXPUNGING OF THE “CRIME”

The nature of the rite performed at mChod rten nyi ma is difficult to determine with certainty. Let us be cautious and say that it is a trial which has characteristics of an ordeal. The judgment would be not of the guilt or innocence of the couple but on whether they are forgiven or not. Thus the transgression of the taboo on incest would not be entirely irremediable.

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<sup>55</sup> A. Macdonald (1971: 303). My translation.

<sup>56</sup> My translation.

<sup>57</sup> It seems that this concept is unknown in Bhutan (Pommaret 1996: 39-56), and in Zanskar (1996: 23-38).

The connection between incest and the calamities launched against the community by the *yul lha* leads to a possible interpretation of the purificatory rite at mChod rten nyi ma. For the community, would it not be the territorial god (*yul lha*) who is expressing his displeasure? (the written and oral traditions mention the presence of a mountain).<sup>58</sup>

This hypothesis is supported by the usual treatment reserved for the incestuous. By expelling them, the community hopes to escape from the supernatural retribution sent by the territorial-god. This expulsion must allow it to recover its lost honour. (Recall the father of the young nun in the village of Gyasumdo.)

But it is here that Buddhism intervenes at mChod rten nyi ma. The society requires certification of the trial that incestuous persons have undergone; this they will obtain in the monastery. Anyone who goes on a pilgrimage without having committed any serious misdeed does not need this certificate. Buddhist religious authority intervenes at the time the letter is delivered; it contents itself with ratifying an irrefutable fact decided by the trial. Thus Buddhism gives its seal of approval, recognizing that the pilgrimage has the capacity to purify the defilement produced by, among other things, incest. Without this certificate, the pilgrimage is null and void in the eyes of the community. It is proof that the man (the couple?) really has been to mChod rten nyi ma, that he has submitted to the trial and that he has been purified. His survival proves to the community that henceforth it will not be stricken by supernatural sanctions.

The case of mChod rten nyi ma shows that, in some parts of Tibet and in some populations of the Himalayan regions, the death penalty or definitive expulsion is not the only way to deal with members of the group who transgress the prohibition regarding incest.

We have already singled out the story of Lama Dorje. Although all the villagers agreed that his misdeed was a very serious one, and although some of them confessed that they no longer trusted the monk, most of them wanted him to stay on and were ready to forgive him and to see him return to the monastery, this time as a married lama. An old lama intervened and gave two possible reasons to explain the "crime" of Lama Dorje: the first was that, in a past life, he had committed a very serious sin, the retribution for which was the cause of the present tragedy; the second was that his qualities must have aroused calumny (*mi kha*), which brought about his fall, even though he was close to

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<sup>58</sup> If this is the case, it would mean that the jurisdiction of the *yul lha* extended over people not dependent upon his territory. The question is still open.

realization. As thus there was no truly malevolent intent on his part; the community was able to reinstate harmony without resorting to expulsion (Mumford [1989] 1990: 238-239). The villagers as well as the monastic community needed such an active religious figure, which explains the lama's intervention. Thus it is easier to understand the arrangement made to reintegrate him, as a lama married to his young disciple.

"To put things in order in the realm is essential for preparing the return to civilization and for allowing people to find again the purity necessary for their vitality, for their prosperity"<sup>59</sup> writes P. Sagant (1982: 167), and he shows how the same ideas exist not only in China but also in Southeast Asia, for example among the Mnong Gar of Central Vietnam (Condominas [1957] 1974: 97-134).

Buddhist authorities could not accept that the "crime" of incest was purified by a simple physical trial based, if my hypothesis is correct, on the traditional cult to the *yul lha*. They therefore transformed this site into a sacred place opened by Padmasambhava. Pilgrimage guides tell us, and travellers confirm, that a *stūpa* and a monastery were built. In this way, the monastery succeeded in controlling a socio-cultural unity with no previous link to Buddhism.

POSTSCRIPT: An article published in the journal *China's Tibet* (Vol. 6, No. 5, 1995: 22) sheds new light on mChod rten nyi ma. We learn that during the last millennium, Indians, Bhutanese, Sikkimese, Nepalese and Tibetan pilgrims came to immerse themselves in the waters of mChod rten nyi ma. Every day some eight hundred and twenty tons of water flow by. Numerous devotees go back home loaded with bottles filled with this water, which they offer to the members of their family and their friends. At the beginning of the 1980s, the inhabitants of the place realized the value of these sacred waters, and in 1989, they sent water samples for scientific testing. In 1990, the Tibet Autonomous Regional mChod rten nyi ma Holy Water Committee certified that it was, in fact, mineral water. In August 1992, the Chinese Ministry of Geology and Mineral Resources announced that this water contains rare elements beneficial to health that enhance the appetite, favour bone development, improve blood circulation, strengthen the heart and have curative effects on goitres. In 1993, the Tibet mChod rten nyi ma Development Company was established and a bottling factory began operation soon after. The first bottles were offered to the late Tenth Panchen Lama's funeral *stūpa*. The article does not mention the purification of incest

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<sup>59</sup> My translation.



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