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► **To cite this version:**

Pascale Dollfus. The Great Sons of Thang stong rgyal po: the Bu chen of the Pin valley, Spiti. Tibet Journal, 2004, 29 (1), pp.9-32. halshs-00175034

HAL Id: halshs-00175034

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00175034>

Submitted on 26 Sep 2007

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*The Great Sons of Thang stong rgyal po: the Bu chen of the Pin valley, Spiti*¹

Pascale Dollfus

GEOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL SETTING

Standing to the south-west, Pin is one of four units constituting Spiti², presently a sub-division of Lahaul-Spiti district of Himachal Pradesh that lies across the main Himalayan Range and shares its eastern frontiers with Tibet (Map 1). It includes the whole valley of the Pin river, a mountainous and tree-less tract, and numbers a dozen settlements that are anything from 3 to 10 kilometres apart (Map 2). Shut off from the rest of Spiti by high mountains, except where the stream forces its way through a rocky gorge, several kilometres in length, to join the main river, Pin has well defined boundaries in the waste and forms a secluded world. Apart from the two extremes of the nobility referred to as “high bones” (tib. *rus pa mthon po*) and the depreciated groups comprising blacksmiths and professional musicians who are qualified as “low bones” (*rus dma’ mo*), the inhabitants intermarry within the valley. They have almost no relationships—even economical or religious—with the inhabitants of the villages lying on both sides of the Spiti River and belonging to Töd (*stod*, “higher region”), Bar (*bar*, “middle region”) and Sham (*gsham*, “lower region”). In contrast, they maintain the closest ties with people of upper Kinnaur.

A short route practicable only in summer for laden horses and yaks goes over the Bhaba pass at the head of the Pin river to Wangtu, an important checkpoint located on the bank of the Sutlej, then to Kalpa in Kinnaur, and further down to Rampur, the major trading town and winter capital of the previous Bhashar state. This route previously followed by traders is still frequented, but by Kinnauri shepherds leading their flocks of sheep and goat to graze on the upper reaches of Pin valley renowned for its lush pastures, and from the opposite direction by Pin inhabitants collecting woods (mainly birch and deodar timber) required for building houses or making tools such as weaving loom or agricultural implements (ploughshares and hoes) on the other side of the pass.

But the links between the people of the Pin and upper Kinnaur are not only economical, but also religious. Though the dGe lugs pa is the most prominent Buddhist order in Spiti, the Pin valley shelters the only monastery belonging to the rNying ma pa,³ which had many followers among the Buddhist minority of Kinnaur. Henceforth, a few monks natives from Pin are appointed there as priests in charge of Buddhist temples at places such as Leo, Hango, Chulling, Chango and Kalpa. Every winter, religious specialists, both males and females, join them invited by local Buddhist families in order to chant religious scriptures and celebrate rituals. Among them are the *bu chen* described in early literature as “magicians”, “travelling lama-actors”, “strolling monks”, or “friars”, whose performances consist of “a medley of prayer, song, miracle play, and stone-breaking feats”⁴. They wander from village to village in small parties, telling edifying stories, dancing, and performing an impressive ritual in which a heavy stone is crushed upon the chest of a man in order to destroy the demon which has taken its abode in it.

As this “strange ceremonial”, known in Tibetan as *pho bar rdo gcog* (or *rdo gshag*), “breaking [or cutting] a stone on the stomach”, has been dealt with in detail by others⁵. So here, I will restrict myself to giving a general overview of its main sequences. My emphasis will be more on the social and economic context, and on raising questions such as who are the *bu chen*? How numerous are they? How do they make a living? What are their functions? How are their identity and status defined? And how are they recruited and trained? The material presented here is based on previous accounts⁶ and on my own data. I visited Pin valley three times during the summers of 1999 and 2000, and more recently in April 2001. I witnessed twice the ceremony of breaking the stone and attended once the fasting ritual during which the *bu chen* chant *mani* and recite edifying biographies.

BACK TO THANG STONG RGYAL PO, FATHER OF THE “GREAT SONS”

Foundation stories concerning *bu chen* tradition all refer to the great *siddha* Thang stong rgyal po born in Tibet during the last decades of the 14th century. This eclectic yogin and Buddhist teacher was also an architect and an innovative civil engineer who built numerous iron-chain suspension bridges, ferries, and religious structures (stupas, temples and assembly halls) throughout Greater Tibet. In addition he was an artist. He is said to have organised the first drama group in Tibet in order to collect donations for the construction of one of his bridges, and more generally, to have used theatrical means to win over demons and heretics, and teach sentient beings. As J. Gyatso (1986, p.96) points out, although Thang stong’s biography makes no explicit reference to his founding of Tibetan theatre, many of the incidents related therein reveal his natural affinities with the performing arts. Thus he sang songs and performed Dharma dances for large group of pilgrims, and taught a number of *mani pa* or reciters of *mani* (*id.* p.100)⁷. The *bu chen* perceive him as their founding preceptor, whose teachings were handed down orally from generation to generation. They conceive themselves as his “great sons”, in Tibetan *bu chen*.

According to the story told to J.B. Lyall in Spiti,

the *buzhan* order was found by one Thang-thong Gialpo under the following circumstances: A certain king of Lhasa perverted the people of Tibet from Buddhism to a new religion of his own. He succeeded so well that in the course of fifty years the old faith was quite forgotten, and the *Om mani padme hom*, or sacred ejaculation, quite disused. To win back the people Tsan-rezig, the divinity worshipped at Triloknath, caused an incarnation of himself to be born in king’s house in the person of Thang-thong Gialpo. The child grew up a saint and a reformer; he saw that it was impossible to reclaim the people by books, and he therefore adopted the dress since worn by the *buzhans*, and spent his life in wandering from village to village, offering to amuse the people by acting miracle-plays on condition of their repeating after him the chorus *Om mani padme hom* wherever it occurred in the chants or recitation. In this way the people became again accustomed to repeat the sacred sentence, ‘their mouths became purified,’ and the religion of Buddha revived. (Diack, 1994, part IV, p.89-90)

Concerning the origin of the ceremony of breaking the stone, it is said to have been performed for the first time in Tibet by Thang stong rgyal po himself (Roerich, 1932, pp.28-29).

At the time when he was erecting the monastery of gCung ri bo che located south of rNgam ring in Central Tibet, whatever was built by men during the day was destroyed by demons during the night. After performing the ceremony of breaking

the stone for the first time, the workers were able to achieve it. At the time of building the iron bridge over the river gTsang po at Chu bo ri, thirty-two miles south-west of Lhasa, a demon caused the water to rise above the bridge, and thus damaged it. After performing the ceremony of breaking the stone for the second time, work could be resumed. At this time in the capital of Tibet, a demon⁸ caused many diseases, which killed many people. Then Tsong kha pa, the founder of the dGe lugs pa school, sent a messenger to request the great wizard's help. At the request of the Precious Lord, the story goes, Thang stong came to Lhasa, riding on a great white-tailed eagle. Hearing that the spirit of the epidemic was under the threshold of the Jo khang door, he managed to trap it inside a stone and took it out into the market place where he broke it with another one shaped like a ritual dagger.

In certain versions, the stone in which the demon was imprisoned was shaped like a stomach (in Tibetan *pho ba*); in other cases, this very stone is broken on the stomach of one of the protagonists of the ritual.⁹

Nowadays in Spiti, this three-hour ceremony is performed to repel adverse circumstances and hindrances and, more generally to ensure prosperity and fertility, but not particularly to ban the spirit of disease nor protect people against floods. Every year, it ends the sacred masked dances held in the courtyard of Gunгри monastery before reaping the fields. It is also done in connection with the New Year celebrations, or at the occasion of wedding ceremonies to bestow fecundity. Lastly it is executed on special request for welcoming a high-ranking dignitary on visitation tour, or for any such important event.

THE CEREMONY OF BREAKING THE STONE

The ceremony of breaking the stone features theoretically five protagonists. They are the *lo chen*, short for *lo tsa ba chen po* or "Great Translator",¹⁰ who as the main actor does the selection of all the participants for the play and also directs the proceedings; a man clad in sheepskin and known as the "Shepherd" (*lug rdzi*) or the "Hunter" (*rngon pa*); a figure wearing a five-lobed crown (*rigs lnga*) and who is styled "Goddess" (*lha mo*)¹¹; and another two characters who play the part of *nyama* (*nya ma*) or "hearer of a Lama, without being a regular disciple", according to Jäschke's dictionary (1980, p.184).

Among these five characters, only the role of *lo chen* is passed from father to son. In contrast, the four other parts could be performed by anyone. Thus, anybody gifted with humour and endowed to play drama can act as the shepherd. As the saying goes, a good shepherd is one who makes people laugh. In daily life, he is usually depicted as a joker, who is very good at repartee.

These days however, the troupe is generally reduced to its two main performers: the *lo chen* and the shepherd, the latter playing different parts, turn by turn, as the performance goes on¹².

The ceremony was described in much detail by Roerich who attended it twice in Lahaul in the 1930s. Seventy years later, nothing has basically changed. It is always held outside on a flat ground, or in the courtyard of a monastery. An altar is erected, upon which the figure of Thang stong rgyal po pictured as a bearded old man is set up along with offering bowls and butter lamps. Behind two painted scrolls are hung on poles. One portrays the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who is the main tutelary deity (*yi dam*)¹³ of the *bu chen*; the other depicts one of the edifying stories

constituting their repertoire. The big stone to be broken is placed in front of the altar. It is a heavy boulder, rectangular shaped, about 80 cm long by 25 cm broad and 20 cm deep. Three syllables and a human figure with a prominent penis, receptacle of evil forces and called *lioga*, are drawn in soot on its surface.

The *lo chen* opens the ceremony blowing a conch-shell. He is dressed in monastic garment and wears a head-dress formed of a mass of streamers of bright coloured silk and on his feet Tibetan boots made of felt and cloth. He is adorned with disc-shaped earrings, conch-shell ornaments and heavy necklaces made of coral and turquoise beads. A relic box containing a little brass statue of *bu chen*'s former instructor and saint patron Thang stong rgyal po, is fastened to the large belt tying his skirt around his waist. Now, holding a rosary in one hand and a prayer wheel in the other, he recites a salutation prayer placing himself under the protection of Avalokitesvara and requesting the authorisation of the Thang stong's teachings (*Thang stong rgyal po'i bka' lung*). Incense is burned. Then, ringing cymbals, the *lo chen* leads a dance, at first slowly, then whirling with increasing speed. Next to him stands the "Goddess", played by a man finely dressed in red and wearing a five-lobed crown (Fig.1).

When the dance is over, the shepherd suddenly appears upon the scene, holding a dough ball and a sling to hurl stones. He is clad in a long sheepskin coat turned inside out and wears a comical hat. His face is smeared with tampa or roasted barley flour (Fig.2). He is a buffoon, whose character is farcical and hilarious.¹⁴ He provokes the *lo chen* who stands in front of him uttering prayers. He scoffs at him, and at Buddhist teachers and devotees. He is granted considerable freedom and does not even refrain from mimicking high-ranked figures and deities. When I witnessed the ceremony in Mikhim on the 6th August 1999 (25th of the fourth Tibetan month), he prostrated with caricatural gestures in front of Lochen Tulku¹⁵ in honour of whom the ceremony was held, and then moved towards the statue of Thang stong rgyal po. Getting no response after asking him to eat his food, he became very angry and began to threaten him with his sling, yelling at him in the following manner: "Hey You! Poor stupid gay, do what you want! You are said to be a great saint beloved by gods. So, ask your dear gods to provide you with food... myself I have to work hard to get my living and I am not willing to waste my food with a stupid mute. Anyway, I do not trust you anymore. All of you religious people are just profiteers".

According to Roerich, during this part of the ceremony the *lo chen* represents the *dharmaraja* Norzang (Nor bzang)¹⁶, the destroyer of evil, while the shepherd plays the Wild King of the North (Byang mi rgod rgyal po) in disguise. When Prince Norzang recognises his enemy, he challenges him. A fight takes place, which ends with the defeat of the Wild King of the North. Mortally wounded, he falls on the ground and dies singing a last song.

This scholarly interpretation is however unknown amongst ordinary villagers, who see in the man dressed in a sheepskin coat what he really looks like: a facetious and somewhat irreverent shepherd. A few designate him as "hunter", a name given to the narrator in Tibetan drama theatre, but does not gloss about it.

After this interlude which does not seem to be innerly connected with the ceremony of breaking the stone¹⁷, the third part starts. While other performers murmur prayers and do some offerings, the *lochen* prepares himself for the sword dance. He takes off his upper garment, and fixes a piece of cloth to his naked shoulders with

two pins. Then, he pierces his cheek with a long needle and draws a sword upon his arms to demonstrate his powers. Then taking another sword, he begins a slow dance, swinging and straightening the weapons in front of him with each step. Gradually the cadence increases. The *lo chen* points the two swords towards his belly, raising his body and balancing it on the sword tips, which are placed either in his armpits, or in his bare abdomen.¹⁸ This dance is accompanied by a chant in which each part of the body (crown of the head, skull, throat, chest, navel...) is mentioned as corresponding to the seat of divine manifestation (Roerich, 1932, pp.35-36). According to W. Kahlen (1993, p.145) the sword dance was earlier performed by Thang stong to convince the Demon of the Epidemic the superiority of his magic powers. But, as “he was unable to elicit any reaction from the demon, he decides that he will break the stone and thereby force the demon to appear to open light.”

Now the *lo chen*, dressed in his robes again, moves to the altar, where he offers food and libations while chanting the “explanation of the stone” (*rdo shad*) (Fig. 3). Then, brandishing a ritual dagger (*phur bu*), he performs a series of magical hand movements over the stone which is to be broken. Back in the stage, the *nya ma* carry on with *mani* prayers. Shortly after, the man on whose stomach the stone is to be crushed, joins the *lo chen* and kneels in front of the stone. Covering his head with his mantle, he breathes in the odoriferous smoke of burning juniper, praying in a loud voice. The rhythm of the invocation becomes faster and faster with every mantra. Then suddenly it comes to a stop. Then, in a complete silence, the man lies down on his back on a rug, which has been laid on a triangular figure previously drawn on the ground. A blanket is placed on his stomach on which the heavy stone is carefully balanced. The *lo chen* takes the second boulder, a round granite bullet with *om a hum* syllables inscribed on it, which he drops on the first one until it breaks (Fig. 4). In 1999 it happens at the first blow. The man lying down, then gets up quickly, while the public rushes forwards to pick up fragments of the broken stone, which they will take back home as “blessings” (*byin rlabs*). They are put into sheds in order to increase the lactation of milking cattle and inside barrels to improve the taste of beer.

According to the story relating to the origin of the ceremony,

...if one breaks the stone with the first stroke it signifies *dharmakaya*. If one breaks the stone with the second stroke it signifies *sambhogakaya*. If one breaks it with the third stroke it signifies *nirmanakaya*. If one breaks it with the fourth stroke it signifies the Lords of the Four Quarters. If one breaks it with the fifth stroke it signifies the five *dhyani* buddhas. If one breaks it with the sixth stroke it signifies the manifestation of Buddha in the six states of existence... (Roerich, 1932, p.29-30).¹⁹

The performance ends with a dance led by the leader of the troupe, taking women from the audience along with them. The *lo chen* and his companions sing popular songs and play string instruments, Tibetan lute (*sgra snyan*, lit. sweet-sounding) and vielle (*pi wang*).²⁰ Sitting on the ground among the public, a *bhe mo*, a female professional musician, beats time on a single-headed frame-drum,²¹ *dao* (*daph*).

BUCHEN AS STORYTELLERS

The ceremony of breaking the stone is only one among other *buchens*' skills. They are also professional reciters (*mani pa*) whose repertoire not only contains the mantra of Avalokitesvara, but also edifying biographies (*rnam thar*). Within the Pin

valley, *bu chen* act as storytellers during the fasting ritual (*smyung gnas*)²² which is held annually in every village and gathers monks, married priests and lay people for three days of prayer, prostration and ascetic practices focused on Avalokitesvara. Merit accumulated during this time is multiplied one hundred thousand fold.

The dates vary according to localities. In Mud, it occurs on the 7th, 8th and 9th of the third Tibetan month (2001 April 30th, May 1st and 2nd). The fasting ritual is conducted by a local priest and begins at dawn with the taking of eight vows. The next morning at 9 a.m., *bu chen* Dorje Puntsog holding his prayer-wheel and chanting a long vow prayer directed to the bodhisattva of Compassion, leads the practitioners into a circumambulation around the village (Fig. 5). Then, back to the house that shelters the fasting ritual, he sits next to the priest. As a storyteller, he is not clad in a special dress, nor capped with a particular headgear. He simply wears a woollen cloth robe and has his long hair plaited up into two braids coiling up like a crown around the head.²³ First, he begins with a short prayer, throwing barley into the air as offerings and requesting the authorisation of Thang stong's teachings, then he carries on with a narrative chosen from the dozen "biographies" constituting his repertoire. The recitation lasts about four hours, divided between a morning and an afternoon sessions, which take place between the three separate performances (*cho ga*) of the actual fasting ritual. It draws more audience than the rite itself. The vast majority of participants are women and middle-aged people.

In Mud, on the first day, *bu chen* Dorje Puntsog read the story of Gelongma Palmo (dGe slong ma dpal mo)²⁴, in a hand-written copy in printing form script (*dbu chen*) under the form of a Tibetan book. On the second day, called "the silent one" (*lkugs pa*) because silence is strictly observed by the practitioners, he told the narrative of Sangye Chözom (Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom) in a recent publication printed in Dharamsala under the form of a European format booklet²⁵. Both are biographies of *delok* ('das log) or accounts of people who "die" and then travel in the hells and paradises, before coming back to earth to tell what they have seen. The stories describe the preamble to the journey in the netherworld, the eighteen hells and the realm of hungry ghosts, the meeting with the Lord of the Death and his attendants, and end with a message for the living and an exhortation to practice religion.²⁶ From time to time, the *bu chen* interrupts his lecture to explain some passages in colloquial language. Indeed, as F. Pommaret (1997, p.501) notes "the vocabulary of *delok* accounts is simple. The use of everyday words makes the narrative easily comprehended by ordinary people. Moreover, stock phrases [...] are frequent." However according to Pin inhabitants all these stories are written in "Tibetan language" (*bod skad*) and not in their own dialect, and therefore sometimes difficult to understand. At the end of each chapter, the narrator stops to chant a short invocation to Avalokitesvara, to which the audience answer by singing in chorus the famous six-syllable mantra *om ma ni pad me hum*,²⁷ which when recited is believed to save one from the realms of rebirth. Incidentally, the *delok* claim to be bodhisattva's incarnations. Thus in the first sequence of the narrative of Sangye Chözom, where she is presented to the audience it is said:

In Bhutan, in the eastern region of Tashigang, in a place called Pakri Sangdün (Phags ri gsang gdung), there was a man named Sonam Döndrup (Bsod nams don grub), and a woman called Tsewang Gyelmo (Tshe dbang rgyal mo) who had all the signs of the *dakini* Yeshe Tsogyel (Ye shes mtsho rgyal, the Tibetan consort of Padmasambhava).

They had a daughter called Sangye Chözom (Sangs rgyas chos 'dzom) who was an incarnation of the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. (Pommaret, 1997, p.502)

The repertoire of the *bu chen* numbers four to five such *delok* stories. In addition to the accounts of Gelongma Palmo and Sangye Chözom already quoted, we find the narratives of Lingza Chökyi (gLing bza' chos skyid), of Nangsa (sNang sa), and of Karma Wangzin (Karma dbang 'dzin).²⁸ They all recount stories of women, who wanted to devote themselves wholly to religion from a young age, but were not free to accomplish their religious desires. Lingza Chökyi thus says: "When I was a little girl, I had thought of becoming a nun but my parents and my brothers did not allow it." (Pommaret, 1997, p.503). The same holds true for Nangsa. This tale, on which is based a very popular play, is about a beautiful girl called "The Brilliant above a Hundred Thousand Lights" (sNang sa 'od 'bum), who was forced to marry the son of a local lord. Soon, she was ill-treated and beaten by her in-laws until she died. But when she met the Lord of the Dead, knowing that she was capable of doing much good if allowed to live longer in the human world, he sent her back on earth to complete her life span and tasks.²⁹ Later the lord and his son were also converted to Buddhism.

The *bu chen* list also in this genre the account of the return from hell of Guru Chöwang (Chos dbang) (1212-1273), a great rNying ma pa "treasure-discoverer" (*gter ston*), who went to the netherworld to liberate his mother. The narrative describes the experience of the *bar do* and the retributions of sins, depicting at length the cold and the hot hells, and the tortures endured by people who had committed sins and the reasons for their punishments. Nevertheless, as F. Pommaret (1997, p.499) clearly argues, it is more of a "saviour story" than a *delok* story, because "the saint does not 'die' but, through his magical power, goes to hell with a definite purpose: to save a person who is close to him."³⁰

In addition to these biographies, the repertoire of the *bu chen* comprises a few edifying stories drawn from the *Jataka* tales of the Buddha), which all praise the victory of Dharma against heretics and the establishment of the good religion. Besides the story of Prince Norzang which has been previously mentioned, there are the stories of Dime Kundan (Dri med kun ldan) drawn from a story titled "Crown Prince Sudana Sutra" and which describes how a prince named "the omnipotent pure one" sacrificed his own life to give alms to others and finally became a Buddha;³¹ of Zugi Nyima (gZugs kyi nyi ma),³² a kind and beautiful maiden who underwent suffering and lastly became a nun; of Drowa Zangmo ('Gro ba bzang mo)³³ which tells the adventures of her two children fleeing a female demon whom their father King Kala Wangpo (Ka la dbang po) had married earlier and who had decided to kill them; and of Pema Öbar (Padma 'od 'bar)³⁴ which concerns a former life of Padmasambhava and takes place a thousand years ago in India, under a king hostile to Buddhism.

These stories are also the foundation of very popular dramas, known in Tibet as *A lce lha mo*, and which are performed throughout the country by professional lay actors and actresses. The plot is traditionally presented in the form of a chanted narrative in the course of which several leading characters come forth and speak for themselves. While an actor sings, others behind the stage sing in chorus. The actors are all clad in suitable costumes and wear masks or make-up expressing their temper. While green colour for instance symbolises virtuous people, reddish

brown colour characterises jealous people, full of bad thoughts and anger.³⁵ Between the acts, are comic interludes, greeted with much laughter by the audience, and the staging on buffoons.³⁶

According to inquiries led by I. Henrion-Dourcy in Tibet,³⁷ a troupe of professional actors used to perform both *A lce lha mo* and the ritual of breaking the stone at gCung ri bo che until 1940. It occurred during the *mani bum dbang* festival, which was held from the 11th to the 20th day of the 12th Tibetan month in the courtyard of the monastery. The former six days were devoted to sacred masked dances (*'cham*). Then Norzang was staged for three days, and lastly Nangsa. It was during this very play, just when the heroine was in the *bar do*, that the breaking of the stone was performed. A few times prior, a sword-dance competition was held between the drama narrators known as "Hunters" to name the man who will be entitled to blow the huge boulder said to be "as big as a 3 years old yak".

The situation appears to be reversed in the Pin valley. There, it is not the ritual that is included in a drama play, but rather the ceremony of breaking the stone, which comprises theatrical interludes taken from the Tibetan repertoire. Nowadays, only one sketch is staged: the meeting, followed by a fight, between Prince Norzang and a shepherd representing the Wild King of the North. However earlier accounts suggest some differences from the present day. Thus, J. B. Lyall, who is again being quoted, reports:

A long screen is first put up formed of pictures illustrative of the legends, and quaintly painted in brilliant colours on cloth edged with silk. An image of the patron saint or founder of the order is enthroned in front of the screen; [...] Conch shells are blown to collect the crowd, and barley thrown into the air as an offering to the saint: the proceedings then commence by an introductory chant by the leaders to the accompaniment of a kind of guitar, every now and then the whole crowd of men and women join in with the chorus of *Om mani padme hom* which they give with much fervour, keeping good time, and blending their voices harmoniously. After a time the rest of the company come forwards *dressed up and masqued*,³⁸ and perform a play with interludes of dances to the music of cymbals, the dancing ends in the wildest gyrations. [Later on] "One curious sort of conjuring trick is performed by the *buzhans*, the breaking of a block of stone over the body of a boy, one of their number." (Diack 1994, Part IV, p.90).

Further on Lyall gives more details concerning the gist of the legend, which was being recited and enacted, presumably the story of Zugi Nyima.

"A certain anchorite who had lived alone for twelve years in an inaccessible forest one day washed his robe in a pool in the hollow of a rock. A doe drank the water in the pool, conceived therefrom, and gave birth at the door of the anchorite's cell to a creature in the form of a girl. Under the anchorite's care she grew up into a beautiful woman, was called sun-face, and married a king. The other queens conspired against her and accused her of being a witch and eating human flesh; they murder her child, and make the king believe she killed it to feast on its body. Sun-face is driven out, and leads a wandering life in the forests till the king discovers the plot, puts the conspirators to death, and recalls her." (Diack 1994 Part IV, p. 90)

In Spiti, from what I know, even in former times, the *bu chen* never staged the plays in full-length.³⁹ They told only some sequences and these sketches were, and still are, always twinned with other performances such as the ritual of breaking the stone or the recitation of narratives. Moreover, they never played dramas as

professional actors, but only mimed prominent characters of the stories they were telling them; they were sometimes wearing masks. Mes Sherab, now a retiring *bu chen*, remembered that many years ago when he was young, his father used to tell the stories of Dime Kundan and Drowa Zangmo. The old man still keeps at home a narrative painted-scroll depicting Dime Kundan's *rnam thar* and a blue triangular mask adorned with cowrie shells especially worn by the Hunters of Tibetan drama. Another *bu chen* showed me a mask depicting the ugly female demon Hacang Düimo (Ha cang bdud mo), one of the leading characters of the Drowa Zangmo play.

The *bu chen* are functionaries in the service of others' motivation, and the merit they generate accrues to their benefactors rather than themselves. However, unlike the professional musicians who do not normally play outside their own village and its neighbourhood, the *bu chen* are not "owned" by the village community. They are free to perform their skills everywhere they like.

THE *BU CHEN*'S JOURNEYS

The *bu chen* hold their performances throughout Spiti and in the neighbouring areas of Kinnaur, Ladakh, Lahaul and Kulu. Their tours, which are always combined with religious purposes and trade, take them from the Pin valley for about six or seven months per year. Indeed they travel a lot, but they are not nomadic people, who lead itinerant lives. They own permanent homes and land.

Usually, the *bu chen* go on journey in small parties, which include a performing *bu chen* and his associate "the shepherd" with whom he forms a team, plus two or three assistants (*ya do*), either lamas or lay people. In the beginning of summer, when the mountain passes are free from snow, they start on their journey to Ladakh taking horses for sale. The Pin horses are a very famous bred, sure-footed and capable of great endurance, but very expensive too according to Ladakhi nomads who purchased it. The small troupe cross the Parang Pass leading to the Tsomoriri Lake and Ladakh, then continue through nomad areas up to Gya, the first Ladakhi village on the road from Rupshu. When the men reach encampments or settlements, they stay four or five days taking time to hold trading negotiations as well as religious performances. They chant mantras, recite biographies and perform the ceremony of breaking the stone. As a fee, they get food, wool and some money. In previous times they were occasionally given sheep and goats and these were brought back home. With the money they get from the sale of their horses, they purchase yaks, skins, blankets, sacks of sheep and yak wool, and a little pashmina.⁴⁰

During the months of June-July 2000, *bu chen* Tsering Tobgye from Par journeyed to Ladakh's Chang thang (Byang thang). A *bu chen* of Sangnam, two lamas natives from Par, and a trading fellow, accompanied him. They went along with nineteen horses and were back home six weeks later for the harvest leading a small caravan of fifteen yaks (both males and females) carrying on their backs rugs, blankets and sacks of wool.

Earlier, the *bu chen* used to walk up to Central Ladakh and visit the monasteries on the way. They stopped at Shera in Eastern Ladakh, where they paid homage to the Ladakhi *mani pa* living there, asking him for the authorisation to practice, before going further on. But these days, they no longer visit Ladakh. They only go to Choglamsar near Leh, where the Tibetan refugees and the Kharnak and Rupshu

migrants⁴¹ have settled. They complain that Ladakh has changed a lot and that the Ladakhi do not value their skills anymore.

Alternatively, the *bu chen* spend the winter in Spiti and Kinnaur. They start their long journey in November, staying a few months at the same place, and living with the family who engage them. They tell stories for three or four hours per day in the evening, and eventually perform the ceremony of breaking the stone. In addition, they are frequently requested, either on a private or village basis, to read Buddhist texts (such as *Prajñāparamita* in 8000 verses) and perform ritual for bestowing fertility, promoting good health and turning back “malicious gossips” (*mi kha*). Wherever the *bu chen* sing *mani*, read edifying biographies or Buddhist scriptures, or perform rituals, they are provided with food and beer in abundance. The households which include among their members a pregnant women or a girl newly married are said to be especially generous, because chanting mantras and reciting biographies are good deeds, which bring happiness (*bkra shis*) and good luck (*rten 'brel*).

Before leaving a place, the *bu chen* blows conch-shell to collect the crowd. Then he reads loudly a list of the benefactors, first giving their names and then describing precisely how much everyone has offered in terms of food, cloth, and money. Every benefactor is heartily thanked and a *om mani padme hum* being chanted on his behalf. Eventually, the *bu chen* organises a *chedo* (*mched do*, “pair of sisters/brothers”) ceremony, very similar to the pairing of *chos spun* (“religious siblings”) which occurs in Ladakh. The individuals involved (both males and females) give a small personal possession (ring, necklace, safety pin or prayer beads). The *bu chen* proceeds to gather the articles, pairs them off randomly, and finally holds them up for identification. The owners of the paired articles become *chedo* partners throughout their lives, well into old ages.

The *bu chen* return home in March or April in time for ploughing and sowing, loaded with Kinnauri local products such as apples, dried apricots, nuts and buckwheat.

All *bu chen* say that they enjoy visiting upper Kinnaur very much, especially Nako and Poo which are mainly Buddhist areas. The climate is milder than in Pin valley, and fruits are in abundance. The people are friendly and generous, and never treat them as fools or scroungers. The audience burst into tears while hearing the self-sacrifice of Nangsa and other pious characters, and listens with special attention the description of hell and the punishments awaiting those who do not behave properly.

During the winter 2000-2001, *bu chen* Rigzin from Sangnam restricted himself to Spiti. With a ‘Shepherd’ belonging to the same village, they wandered from village to village, first in Kaza area and then in the upper part of the Spiti valley up to Losar through Ki, Kibar, Rangrik, Khurik... On the other hand, *bu chen* Dorje Puntsog, native from Mud, accompanied by two assistants from Sangnam visited upper Kinnaur. First, they went to Mailing. Then, they walked to the neighbouring village of Nako where they spent three weeks. Later on, the small company went to Tsopema (mTsho Padma), a holy lake connected with Padmasambhava⁴² and situated near Rewalsar in Mandi District. On the 10th day of the month (*tshes bcu*), Dorje Puntsog performed there a ritual in honour of Padmasambhava. The pilgrims asked him to recite a *rnam thar*, and he answered telling them the life of the child

Pema Öbar, which fits especially well with the sacred place because it deals with a former life of Padmasambhava. Then, on the way back, the small party stopped at Kulu and Rampur.

In former times, the *bu chen* attended annually the trading fair held early November in Rampur. It was said to be the biggest fair in Western Himalayas and gathered thousands of people from Kinnaur, Lahaul, Spiti, Kulu, Ladakh as well as traders from Punjab plains and lower hills. During the day, raw wool, blankets, shawls, colts, horses, mules and even yaks were exchanged all over the town but at night dances and music were organised around small bonfires; the *bu chen* took place with the performers. Many *bu chen* also used to trade in a small way by bartering grain for salt with the Tibetans, and then exchanging the salt with the Kinnauri people for iron, buckwheat, or honey. In addition they earned their living carrying loads for travellers across the passes (Diack, 1994, Part IV, p.89).

BU CHEN IDENTITY AND STATUS

When discussing about *bu chen*, people always do the same gesture. They point their thumbs towards their belly, thus evoking the dance in which the *bu chen* balance their bodies on the points of their swords. This sword dance (*gri rtsed pa*) and the breaking of the stone (*rdo gcog*) which ends it and gives its name to the entire ceremony are labelled as special *bu chen*'s "knowledge" (*shes*), "skill" (*mkhas*) or "act" (*byed*)⁴³. They work as the *bu chens*' identity markers. Throughout Spiti, these very skills separate the *bu chen* from the *mani pa*,⁴⁴ with whom they share the function of professional reciters. Within the Pin valley itself, this enactive knowledge along with the physical capacity of performing it, distinguish between those who are given the title *bu chen* and those who are not, even if they belong to *bu chen* lineages, have executed these actions before, and still play supporting parts on stage.

These skills are qualified as "men's activities" (*bu tsha'i las ka*), like hunting, raiding or butchering. Women are regarded as being physically too weak to do it, even though they carry out most agricultural work. That is the reason why, people say, *buchen* are exclusively males, unlike reciters of *mani* and storytellers who belong to both genders. However it seems that females predominate.

Bu chen's knowledge and abilities are confined to particular lineages (*brgyud*) and transmitted from father to son or paternal uncle to nephew. In the past, the *bu chen* households tried to contract marriage with households of the same lineage in different villages, as did other lay religious specialists such as *em chi* (physician) and *lha ba*, who is both a medium and the official in charge of the cult of the village god (*lha bdag*). But nowadays, they intermarry into any household of common villagers. The *brgyud* of such specialists does not set them apart from ordinary people in term of status. According to my inquiry, the *bu chen* belong to "middle bones" group (*rus pa bar ma*) and are ranked among commoners. They are neither rejected at the lower end of the scale with blacksmiths and professional musicians belonging to "low bones" (*rus pa dma' mo*),⁴⁵ nor required to live at the edge of the village. They are not in the position of landless "still smaller person" (*yang chung pa*) holding a small house from the family from which they sprung, as it has been previously written.⁴⁶ Among the five *bu chen*, two at least are currently living in a "big house" (*khang chen*), an ancestor dwelling founded by the first inhabitants

and thereby endowed with a higher status than other households that is especially relevant in a historical or ceremonial context⁴⁷ (Fig. 6). Generally, performing *bu chen* co-reside in a single house with one or more brothers who are unskilled, sharing a housing estate and arable land (*zhing khang*). Now, in the position of household chief, they might be appointed as village headman or “elder” (*rgan po*).

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Bu chen are only recruited from *bu chen* lineages and trained on the job at home. In the designation of a successor, the rank of birth does not appear as a decisive factor. Eldest son as well as younger ones can perpetuate the function. The recruits are boys between the age of 12 and 15. They are taught by their father or paternal uncle (*a khu*) to read Tibetan texts and learn by heart prayers devoted to Avalokitesvara, the Supreme Compassion bodhisattva being considered as the *yi dam* of the *bu chen*'s lineage. They study also the dozen biographies constituting their repertoire as storytellers. Besides, they learn folk songs and how to play the lute and eventually vielle. Later, when they reach around 20, they do their first retreat (*mtshams*)—six months at least—secluded in an isolated place with a master from whom they receive instructions on yoga and breathing techniques in order to perform, without bleeding (*khrag ma bing*), their peculiar skills such as piercing their cheeks with a needle or drawing swords over their arms.

Indeed, against an idea widespread in Western literature,⁴⁸ when performing such impressive deeds, the *bu chen* are not possessed. Unlike *lha ba* or male hereditary mediums,⁴⁹ they claim to keep the entire performance under control and to remember all that happened.

After this initial retreat, the “*bu chen* in learning” (*bu chen slab mkhan*) is initiated in Avalokitesvara meditation by a senior lama who usually belongs to the rNying ma monastery of Gungri. Without this formal initiation (*dbang*), he is not allowed to practice. At first the “new *bu chen*” (*bu chen so ma*) might play supporting roles by the side of his instructor or other entitled *bu chen*. When he succeeds his father (or uncle), he inherits some parts of the ritual paraphernalia, such as the swords (*gri*), a long iron cane (*thang ber*), the head-dress (*thod ka*) and the earrings worn during the ceremony of breaking the stone. But he also acquires the lineage's travelling altar which is known as Thang [stong]'s box (*thang rgam*). This wooden box (about 30 cm x 45 cm) closed with a double door contains among other items, a little figure of Thang stong rgyal po, a white conch shell, a dagger, a small two-sided drum, a big needle and a trident, the safety pins and the piece of cotton to be fixed on the skin of the *bu chen*'s back during the last part of the ceremony of breaking the stone (Fig. 7). On journey the *bu chen* carries the travelling altar on his back wrapped in a large scarf or a shawl. Otherwise, it is usually kept at home.

Throughout his career which lasts 20-25 years or “a generation” (*mi rabs*), the *bu chen* undertake regular retreats and pay visit to sacred pilgrimage sites, especially to Tso Pema near Rewalsar (*supra*) and to Triloknath in Pattan valley where there is a white marble self-manifested image of Avalokitesvara. They also attend mass empowerments (*khrom dbang*) such as his Holiness the Dalai Lama giving a *Kalacakra* initiation. These religious practices are said to strengthen their powers, but also to teach them how to work for the welfare of all living beings. In fact, the

bu chen conceive of their activities as consisting of propagating the Doctrine and spreading Avalokitesvara's cult on a large scale. They follow the path of their spiritual father Thang stong rgyal po, for whom entertainment was a high-prized tool in educating the people in religious values.

Although training and practice are closely connected with the Buddhist religion, at least in its rNying ma pa component, the *bu chen* are neither monks nor even lamas, a term designating locally lay practitioners who perform a range of ritual functions for the village community. They style themselves as lay people (*skya bo*, "one clothed in light grey", and not in red or yellow as monks are), or as "men of religion" (*chos pa*), an appellation which only suggests that you are learned enough to read religious scriptures.

Several interrogations remain concerning the spreading and handing over of this peculiar tradition which is apparently restricted to few, but distant places. We wonder why the *mani pa* performing the ceremony of breaking the stone have remained limited to several valleys only, while the storyteller tradition is very widespread throughout the Tibetan world. The question needs more research, but there are numerous indications that this impressive ritual was presumably "invented" in Central Tibet, reached afterwards the western edge of the Tibetan plateau, then the Pin valley of Spiti and next Ladakh, where two *mani pa* were performing it until recently. According to Murup Stanzin, the *blon po* of Alchi in Lower Ladakh, the *mani pa* tradition dates back to the "Kings period" (*rgyal po'i dus*); and a *mani pa* was commonly appointed at court.⁵⁰

In 1871, they were some nineteen families of *bu chen* in the Pin valley. In 2001, everyone agree that they were now only five *bu chen*: one in Par, one in Tsud, one in Mud, and two in Sangnam belonging to distinctive lineages. Many lineages have died out (*brgyud grongs song*). Potential *bu chen* went to school, and afterwards, most of them did not succeed their father or uncle. In fact, this new generation conceives of the job as being very tough, requiring a long apprenticeship and afterwards not bringing in much money. In 1931, Roerich predicted that these religious performers would die out in the coming decades. However, 70 years later, and in spite of major changes affecting the area, the tradition is not dead. New *bu chen* are still emerging. During the winter 2000-01, two novice *bu chen* and one new *bu chen* were undertaking a six months retreat secluded in a hermitage next to Mud, where the nuns of this village used to live. Nevertheless these days, not only the area they serve but also the repertoire that the *bu chen* play is becoming smaller and smaller. Like the ponies bred in the valley, *bu chen* are conceived like a "peculiar speciality of the Pin", and mentioned as such in guidebooks. Their performances are staged more and more during folkloric fairs or at the special request of tourists and journalists. Their last visit in Central Ladakh was some years ago for the cultural festival held at Leh in September. In that context, can we speak about living tradition?⁵¹

Notes

1. This paper was delivered at the 10th Colloquium of the International Association for Ladakh Studies, September 7-10, 2001, Oxford. I would like to thank Nicola Grist who corrected my English.
2. There are different explanations of the meaning of the Spiti (*Spyi ti*) name: according to Gergan, *spyi* means "general" while *ti* means "water"; according to Singh, the name *Spyi ti* means the "middle country", and according to Vitali, it means "ladle" and refers

- to the shape of the country. See De Rossi Filibeck 2002, p.320.
3. In Spiti, the Sa skya pa hold the monasteries of Kaza (Ka ze) and Tengyud (sTeng rgyud) while the bKa' brgyud pa have none.
 4. H. L. Shuttleworth, 1922, p.254.
 5. See especially G. Roerich, who attended it twice in Lahaul in the 1930s and gave us a brief historical outline on the origin of the ceremony as told by the preceptor and the trainer of the rest of the troupe. Further information were supplied by the Hebers (1978) who witnessed it in Ladakh in the 1920s and Prince Pierre de Grèce (1958 and 1962) who saw it on July 1938 at Patseo. More recently in 1988, W. Kahlen claimed to have "discovered" the breaking of the stone, and recorded it in full with 16 mm film, video, photographs and sound equipment. On the other hand, R. A. Stein (1959) and S. Hümmel (1968), while they did not attend the ceremony analysed it from second hand data.
 6. One of the most detailed account about this "curious set of people" is due to a British administrator J. B. Lyall, who was Settlement Officer of Kulu during the years 1865 to 1872. His report was first published in the *Report of the Land Revenue Settlement of the Kangra District 1865-1872*, and then extensively quoted in the *Gazetteer of the Kangra District 1897* edited later on by A. H. Diack, and more recently in most of the publications dealing with Spiti, with or without quotation marks (see for instance Verma 1997).
 7. According to R.A. Stein (1981, p.152) the *mani pa* tradition goes back to the 12th century, "[à cette époque] les *mani-pa* étaient des religieux munis de l'initiation d'Avaloki tesvara-c'est-à-dire en tibétain du "pouvoir" (*dbang*) de réciter la formule-. De nos jours, les *ma-ni-pa* sont des conteurs ambulants qui récitent des contes édifiants en montrant les épisodes sur une peinture, mais ils exécutent encore, en même temps, des rites (briser une lourde pierre sur la poitrine, se coucher sur la pointe de deux épées) qui montrent leurs pouvoirs exceptionnels." However, certain people attribute the founding of the *manipa* tradition to mKhas grub nor bzang rgya mtsho (b.1478) in the 15th century
 8. The cause of the epidemic is identified as the demon dBang rgyal or Ha la rta brgyad or Drang srong chen po gza' bdud (Rahula with the sea-snake). See Roerich 1932 p.28; Kahlen 1993: 145.
 9. This story is very well known among the *buchen* of the Pin (see Roerich 1932). A similar one was collected in Ladakh during the first decades of the XXth century (Stein, 1959, p.514), and recently by I. Henrion-Dourcy at gCung ri bo che in Tibet (personal communication).
 10. The female lama Jetsun Lochen Rinpoche (1865-1951), who was a famous woman religious practitioner and *mani pa* denies this etymology. Born at Rewalsar in India, she roamed the valleys of Kinnaur, Lahaul, Spiti, Kulu, Zanskar and Ladakh during her childhood. Then she went to Tibet where she was active up till the Chinese occupation. In her autobiography, she "informs us that her title 'lochen' has nothing to do with the great 'lotsavas' of the past, but is rather the title for humble 'mani-pas beggars' in Western Tibetan dialects." (Havnevik, 1998, p.90).
 11. It is worth adding that in *A lce lha mo* Tibetan theatre, the narrators are called "Hunters" (*rngon pa*) and the fairy choir is referred to as *lha mo* or *rigs lnga*. For an overview of *A lce lha mo*'s bibliography see Attisani 2000.
 12. *lha mo* and *nya ma* 's characters do not appear clearly to me. People do not talk a lot about them and they are not mentioned in the previous literature. Furthermore the fact that one solely actor plays both roles along with the shepherd part causes confusion.
 13. *Yi dam* is sometimes rendered into English as "tutelary deity", but as D.S. Lopez (1997, p.16) points out "the *yi dam* offers much more than protection. The *yi dam* is the tantric Buddha with which the meditator identifies in daily meditation and whom he or she propitiates in daily rituals".
 14. The figure of the so-called "shepherd", "hunter" or "wild man", clad in sheepskin coat

- turned inside and the face smeared with flour, is widespread throughout Tibetan areas. In Ladakh such characters occurred during the New Year festival and, in Zanskar, at the occasion of the first ploughing ceremony too. See Riaboff, 2000, p.158, “parmi les acteurs de cette mascarade nuptiale, le personnage de l’oncle maternel *a zhang* se livre à d’incessantes singerie: lui aussi a le visage blanchi, et, de plus, il porte une peau à l’envers - la fourrure tournée vers l’extérieur.”). See also Stein (1959, p 443-4 & 558-60) concerning the *’dre dkar* or “white demon”.
15. Born in Shalkar (upper Kinnaur) in 1961, Tenzin Kalsang *alias* Lochen Tulku is the 19th Incarnation of Lo tsa ba Rin chen bzang po and the head lama of the dGe lugs pa monastery of Kyi.
 16. Norzang is a popular Tibetan play adapted from the famous Sudhana *Jataka*. A young prince named Norzang leaves his own country in search of his beloved wife who went to the palace of heaven to escape the plot woven by jealous concubines. On his journey he has to overcome innumerable obstacles and fight against the wild men of the North and their king. See Bacot 1987, Dundrup 1996.
 17. According to Stein (1959, p.515-8) this sequence staging on Norzang is linked to Thang stong rgyal po: “Celui-ci a fait le voyage au Nord, comme le *cakravartin* de la pièce. Il a érigé un *stupa* pour arrêter les Hor, et toute son activité a été rapportée au Nord du Tibet. [...] Le berger, le roi sauvage du Nord, tué par le *cakravartin*, doit correspondre au démon enfermé dans la pierre: celui-ci s’appelle Huit Chevaux (*rtā brygad*), thème du Nord s’il en fut.”
 18. According to A.R. and K. M. Heber (1978, p.209), the points can even be placed in the cheeks. In addition, Prince Pierre de Grèce (1962, p.68) notes: “He also does the same [that is balancing onto the tips of the swords] with the one blade, holding its point under his neck.”
 19. See Roerich (1932, p.29-30) for further details.
 20. For a description of both instruments see Helffer, 1994, p. 277-284. The Tibetan lute (*sgra gnyan*) is closely related to Thang thong rgyal po. In a Ladakhi song, the lute personalised under the name of bKra shis dbang rgyal, says: “N’allez pas croire que moi le Bien-sonnant (*sgra gnyan*) je n’ai pas de maître religieux, le maître religieux que, d’après vous, moi le Bien-sonnant bKra-shis dbang-rgyal je ne possède pas, c’est le siddha Thang-stong rgyal-po. Tel est mon maître religieux, à moi, le Bien-Sonnant.” (Helffer, 1994, p.284).
 21. Whereas the *bhe mo*, female player of *daph* (single-headed frame-drum) and the *bhe da*, male player of *sur na* (oboe), belong to a same endogamous status group, the *lda man* (kettledrums) players, exclusively men, are called “craftsmen” (*bzo pa*) and rank above with the blacksmiths referred to as “iron craftsmen” (*lcags bzo pa*).
 22. On fasting ritual, see Jackson 1997.
 23. According to the Gazetteer (Diack 1994 Part IV, p.89), in 1868-69, when one of the three grand lamas of Tibet, presumably dGe lugs pa, made a visitation tour through Lahaul and Spiti, the *buchen* were admonished to cut off their hair, at the unclerical appearance of which the grand lama professed himself greatly scandalised. Apparently, they did not follow this advice. Indeed, some decades later, the Hebers (1978, p.209) were by turn amazed by “their long hair plaited up in braids, close to their heads in front and hanging down to their waists behind, giving a curiously effeminate effect to their moustached faces.”
 24. For the legend of dGe slong ma dPal mo, a tenth century nun born a princess into a royal Kashmiri family and descriptions of the fasting rite she founded, see among others: Gutschow (1999, p.153-8), Havnevik (1990, p.112-3), March (1979, p.277-90) Tsomo (1989).
 25. At Tarap, in Northern Nepal, during the fasting ritual which is held during the first Tibetan month, the *mani pa* Tsering Puntsog reads successively the biographies of Milarepa and *delok* Tenzin Chödon, and the stories of Prince Norzang and King Dime

Kundan (Jest, 1973, p.332-333).

26. For a detailed pattern of *delok* narratives, see Pommaret 1997 and 1998.
27. The six-syllable *mantra* have frequently been translated into English as “Hail to the jewel in the lotus !”. But as M. Kapstein (1997, p.71) clearly states, this popular Western interpretation is not supported by any known Indian or Tibetan sources. On the other hand,
- The Indian interpretation, known also to Tibetan scholars trained in the study of Sanskrit grammar, understands *Manipadme* to be a term of address for Avalokitesvara, meaning “[possessor of] jewel and lotus”, for these indeed are the objects most frequently held by the bodhisattva in his iconographic representations. *Om* and *hum* are purely symbolic expressions, not capable of translation, but commonly used in the formation of mantras.
28. For more information about these *delok*, see Pommaret (1997, p.185-93).
29. For more details on this story, see Bacot 1987, Waddell 1974, Wao 1986 b.
30. For a summary of this narrative, see Pommaret 1997 and 1998.
31. For a translation of the eponymous play into French, see Bacot 1987; into English, see Waddell 1974.
32. See Bacot 1957.
33. See the translation into English by Josayma (s.d.); into French by Bacot 1987.
34. See Blondeau 1986.
35. Dorje 1990.
36. H. Richardson (1986, p.10) thus depicts buffoons “miming of an oracle priest with rolling head and wild gestures”.
37. Personal communication from I. Henrion-Dourcy. The ceremony of breaking the stone was performed there for the last time in 1940.
38. Emphasise are mine.
39. At rGyal mkhar chos rdzong, in Tibet, they were traditionally two companies - one of *A-lce lhamo* actors, one of story-tellers (*manipa*), who both played the same repertoire. But while the former staged on the stories in extenso (*rgyal rabs rgyas pa*), the latter told only short version (*rgyal rabs khug pa*). I. Henrion-Dourcy, personal communication.
40. *Bu chen* complain that they purchase now only a little pashmina, because they are unable to match the high prices offered by Leh traders since the closing of the Indo-Tibetan border in the 1960s.
41. The nomadic communities of Kharnak and Rupshu are both located on the Changthang plateau of eastern Ladakh on the south bank of the Indus river.
42. The king of Zahor tries to burn Padmasambhava alive. But he transforms the fire into a lake and establishes Dharma in the land of Zahor, taking Mandarava as his consort.
43. Knowledge of *bu chen*'s art is not dissociated from the idea of being able to perform it and the terms *mkhas*, *shes* and *byed* are used almost interchangeably. Same is true for other specialised skills such as instrumental music.
44. The same doesn't hold true throughout Tibetan areas. In Dingri (Southern Tibet) for instance, *bu chen* is synonymous with *manipa*. See Havnenik (1998) and Buffetrille (1996, p.125), “Tous les informateurs s'accordent pour dire qu'il n'y a pas de différence entre un *bu chen* et un *ma ni pa*, *bu chen* étant le nom local de *ma ni pa*. [...] Il pouvait être de sexe masculin ou féminin, laïc ou religieux. Sa fonction n'était pas héréditaire: c'était l'objet d'un choix et il lui fallait avoir étudié auprès d'un autre *bu chen*.”
45. Traditionally, relations with this lower status group are characterised by avoidance. They cannot have sexual relations, nor share food, drink, cooking pots, or clothes (including bed-clothes) with ordinary villagers. When invited, they have to wait at the entrance of the house and in any case to sit away from hearth, near the door, on low

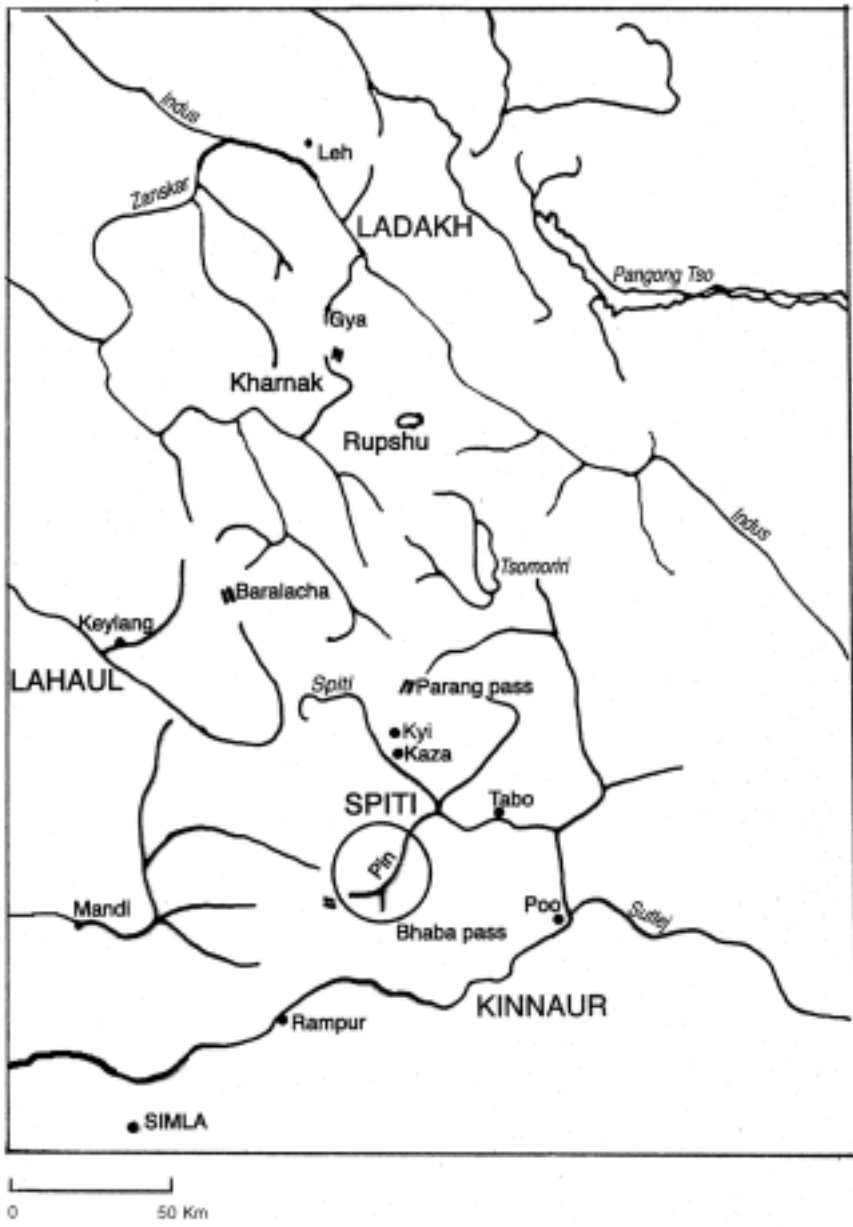
- cushions or on the bare floor.
46. See for instance, Lyall in the *Gazetteer of the Kangra District* (Diack 1994 Part IV, p.84) or Heber (1978, p.209).
 47. In Mud, a village that numbers 35 households, only five are recognised as “big houses” (*grong pa che*). The *lha ba*, hereditary officiant and possessed medium, belongs always to such big houses.
 48. See for instance Stein (1959, p. 332-333), Kahlen 1993.
 49. People call *lha* (god) or *lha ba* (god-man) the medium who acts as the temporary embodiment of local god and use the term *lus g.yar*—one who lends his body—for the human being out of trance. The same holds true for Ladakh. However, in contrary with Ladakhi cases, the mediums of Pin are exclusively males. Furthermore they do not have necessarily to be elected through an initiatory madness. They inherit their gods from a parent—father, uncle or great-father—and belong to medium lineages, *lha'i brgyud*.
 50. Marianne Chaud, personal communication. Other testimonies bear witness to the significant role occupied previously by *mani pa*—at least those reciters of *mani*—for high religious dignitaries and kings in Tibet. Thus, we hear that *mani pa* Lobzang Nyima surrounded by lay devotees offered ritual butter lamps in front of the Panchen Lama at the occasion of the New Year festival in 1669 Stein, 1959, p.402). On the other hand, Jetsun Lochen (1865-1951) who roamed the valleys of Kinnaur, Lahaul, Spiti, Kulu, Zanskar and Ladakh during her childhood, tells us in her autobiography that she also recited *mani* for ‘the Ladakhi king’ and became his favourite. In Rampur too, she was invited by the king of Bashar who had heard of her fame, placed on a high throne and requested to give a recitation of *mani* for a large crowd (Havnevik, 1998, p.90)
 51. According to Jean Pouillon (1991, p.712), “D’une tradition vivante, on ne parle pas.[...] La tradition dont on a conscience, c’est celle qu’on ne respecte plus, ou du moins dont on est près de se détacher.”

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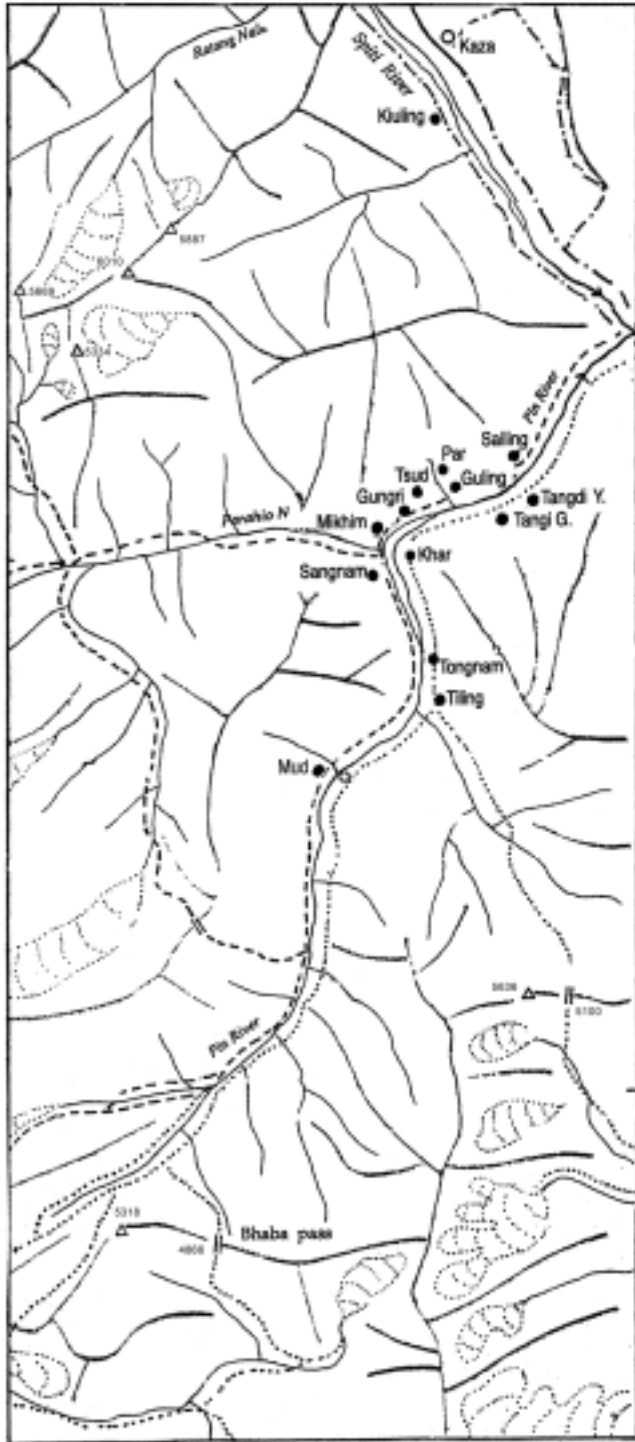
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Map 1 Sketch map of Western Himalayas locating Spiti and the Pin valley



Map 2 The Pin valley



Fig.1 The lochen ringing cymbals and the «Goddess» (Iha mo) wearing a five lobed-crown, Gungri, Spiti, 2000.



Fig.2 The Shepherd or Hunter. Gungri, Spiti, 2000.



Fig.3 The lochen chanting the «explanation of the stone» (rdo shad),
Gungri, Spiti, 2000.



Fig.4 The broken stone.



Fig.5 The buchen chanting mani and leading the practitioners into a circumambulation around the village during the fasting ritual. Mud, Spiti, 2001.



Fig.6. The house of buchen Dorje Puntsog. Mud, Spiti, 2001.



Fig.7. Thang stong rgyal po's box (thang rgam). Par, Spiti, 2001.