THE MUKTINATH YARTUNG:  
A TIBETAN HARVEST FESTIVAL  
IN ITS SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

LE YARTUNG À MUKTINATH:  
UNE FÊTE TIBÉTAINE DE LA MOISSON  
DANS SON CONTEXTE SOCIAL ET HISTORIQUE

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Summary: The author describes in detail “harvest” celebrations which occur each summer in the Baragaon region of the Upper Kali Gandaki Valley in West Nepal. There are, in fact, three “harvest” festivals: that celebrated by the people of Khyingar and the commoners of Dzlar, that of the villagers of Chongkhor, and that of the nobles of Dzlar. The article is primarily concerned with the participation of the Bon-po Luba villagers in the festivities at Muktainath. Both literate and popular traditions are summarized and attention is drawn to the Carnival aspect of the proceedings. The description underscores tensions between Bon-pos and Buddhists and between present-day social ranking and an obsolete, local social order. Taking his cue from V. Turner and C. Geertz, the author suggests that the Yartung of the nobles is, today, both a “model of” and a “model for” Baragaon society.

Résumé: L'auteur décrit dans le détail les célébrations en rapport avec la moisson qui se déroulent chaque été dans la région de Baragaon dans la partie supérieure de la vallée de la Kali Gandaki, dans l'ouest du Népal. Il y a, en réalité, trois fêtes: celle célébrée par les gens de Khyingar et le peuple de Dzlar; celle des villageois de Chongkhor, et celle des nobles de Dzlar. L'article concerne principalement la participation des villageois bon-po de Luba aux festivités des nobles de Dzlar à Muktainath. Les traditions littéraires et orales relatives à ces réjouissances sont résumées; et l'auteur souligne l'aspect carnaval de ces fêtes. Sa description fait ressortir les tensions qui existent entre Bon-pos et Bouddhistes et entre la stratification sociale actuelle et un ordre social local, disparu. S'appuyant sur les analyses de V. Turner et de C. Geertz dans d'autres parties du monde, l'auteur suggère que le Yartung des nobles est, de nos jours, à la fois un «modèle de» et un «modèle pour» la société de Baragaon.

The existing literature on the subject of Tibetan harvest festivals is surprisingly sparse. Where these celebrations are mentioned in the accounts of visitors to Tibet they receive little more than a passing reference, while a few writers have limited themselves to recording the dance-dramas and incidental rituals, which often attend them. Bhotia (ethnically Tibetan) communities outside the political confines of Tibet also hold harvest celebrations in one form or another, and the present essay will describe one such festival, the Muktainath Yartung, which takes place annually in the Baragaon region of the Upper Kali Gandaki in Nepal.

2 Duncan, M., 1955.

The Yartung is one of the three annual seasonal festivals, the relationship between which is expressed in the saying (dpe): *dgun thsong-gugs / dpvdi mda’-chang / dbyar dbyar-ston;* “In winter (there is) the New Year, in spring the Archery Festival³, and in summer the Yartung”. The name Yartung itself is almost certainly the local pronunciation of *dbyar-ston,* “Summer festival”, although none of my informants offered this etymology. One derivation which I heard was *g.yar-thang,* to “lend and drink” (“because we lend one an other horses, clothes and money and then get drunk”) while a more reasonable suggestion was *dbyar-stong,* the “end (lit. emptying) of the summer”⁴. The latter is a plausible etymology because of the implicit opposition between the Yartung and the *mda’-chang* spring festival. The latter is described as the “door to summer” (*dbyar-kyi sgo*), while the Yartung takes place in the eighth Hor month (the seventh agrarian month, corresponding to September). It is difficult to assess the extent to which the Yartung is a harvest or a summer festival, although the distinction may not be a meaningful one in this situation. Das describes a Central Tibetan festival called “jon-gyu” which was held in September after the summer retreat (*dbyar-gnas*) observed by the monks. The occasion, which was celebrated by the lay and monastic communities alike and included racing and feasting, coincided with the harvest. The author also cites a midsummer festival “when the people and nobility dress tents, and for several days amuse themselves under them, picnicing, dancing and singing” (1902: 214, 260-61). If the Muktinath Yartung is related to the harvest, the association is obscured by the fact that there is no single occasion when the settlements of the region are united in gathering the year’s produce. One village does not necessarily grow the same crops as another, and the lapse between sowing and reaping in any case varies as a function of altitude. Lubra, for example, which is situated at around ten thousand feet, harvests its first crop (wheat) in June and its second (sweet buckwheat) in October. Wheat ripens slowly, and the higher-altitude villages are more likely to plant barley (to be harvested in July) in order to ensure a second crop, generally of bitter buckwheat. Villagers of Chongkhor (at twelve thousand feet) may sow a few fields of sweet buckwheat and wheat and harvest them as late as August or September, in which case a second crop is impossible. The entire harvest season therefore spans four months and the Yartung falls towards the latter end of this period.

Other Tibetan communities in Nepal hold summer festivals that apparently relate to the harvest. The best documented of these is probably the Tarap *dbyar-

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³ The usual Tibetan word for New Year, *Lo-gsar,* is not used in this region. *Tshong-gugs* (lit: “bringing back the merchandise”) is so called because it is at this time of year that the village men return home from trading abroad. *nDo’-chang* (lit: “arrow beer”) receives its name from the ritualised archery that takes place. It is similar in many respects to the old European Maying, to the extent that men and women gather branches from different trees and festoon their clothing with greenery.

⁴ Although the pronunciation “yartung” is closer to *dbyar-stong* than to *dbyar-ston,* I shall follow Jee's (1968) use of the latter form. The Tibetan vowel “o” is commonly raised to “u” in the vernacular (*shyar; “jur”, *s gam-phug; “gumphug”, etc.) and whereas the termination “-ng” is sometimes replaced by an “-n” (*ning, meaning name, is regularly heard as “min”*), I know of no cases where the converse is true. However, the pronunciation of proper names, whether of festivals or places, is often different from that suggested by their etymology, and we may repeat Snellgrove's complaint that such names are frequently intractable, for no Tibetan speaker here is sufficiently educated to give the spelling reliably” (1981: 36).
ston which has been recorded on film by Corinne Jest, and the beginning of the commentary gives some idea of the importance of this festival.

Au milieu de l'été se déroule la cérémonie la plus importante dans la communauté tibétaine de Tarap... Lorsque les yaks sont revenus du Nord avec les charges de sel, les villageois préparent le dbyar-ston, la cérémonie du milieu de l'été. Pendant que les laïcs peignent en blanc les murs du temple, les religieux de l'ordre rahi-ma-pa recitent les prières du texte de "l'union des trois précieux" [i.e. dkon-mchog spyi 'dus] et ordonnent le rituel du homa. Pendant douze jours, prières, rituels et danses religieuses se succèdent: accumulation de mérites qui protégeront la communauté pour l'année à venir.

Since the festival takes place in July — two months earlier than the Muktinath Yartung — Jest understandably describes it as the "midsummer festival" (la fête du milieu de l'été); but even here there is an implicit anticipation of the harvest since the commentary states that "on peut déjà espérer une bonne récolte d'orge".

However representative of its type it may be — and, in the absence of comparable accounts of other harvest festivals, the description will at least reveal themes that place it in a distinct genre of folk ritual — the feast is distinguished by certain features absorbed from its immediate cultural environment. Within the broader referents of an agrarian festival, the ritual processes of the Yartung provide us with a means of observing ancient religious tensions and an obsolete social order in vitro, as it were, but these features will emerge only after a close examination of the festival in a historical context and against the background of the region's social organisation.

The Yartung in the context of ethnicity and social stratification

a. Social ranking

What is generally known as the Muktinath Yartung is actually one of three harvest festivals which take place in the Muktinath valley during the month of September. The main celebration, which is held at the time of the full moon on the fifteenth day, is properly called the dpon-po'i dbyar-ston, (the Yartung of the nobles), and is the one with which this essay is principally concerned. There is also a Yartung on the tenth day, and one on the thirtieth, all celebrated by different groups of villages, and to understand this multiplicity it is necessary to consider briefly the ethnic composition and social stratification of the area.

The inhabitants of Baragaon are divided into four "ranks", rgyud-pa, a term which is also used to designate a patriarchal clan. The nobles (properly dpon-po, but sras-po is used far more commonly) are the highest, and they are opposed to the remaining ranks who are indiscriminately classified as commoners (phal-pa). The highest-ranking commoners are the priests (bla-mchod, more rarely mechod-gnas), who are grouped into two distinct settlements. One of these is Lubra (Khu-brag), a

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* Film entitled dbyar-ston: la fête du milieu de l'été à Tarap, 1968, Paris: CNRS.
* I have used the term "rank" rather than "caste" because the latter suggests a more rigid system of endogamy and pollution than is actually the case, and may have irrelevant Hindu connotations.
small Bonpo village located to the south of the Muktinath Valley, while its
Buddhist counterpart Chongkhor (Chos-khor) stands very near to Muktinath itself.
These lay priests are distinct from the celibate monastic population of the area
whose membership cuts across the social hierarchy, and the status is transmitted
patrilinially like any other rank (although, as we shall see, residence may be an
important determining factor). The eldest son in each family is trained as a
household priest, but younger sons too may be so educated if they wish. Although
the people of both Chongkhor and Lubra are classified as bla-mchod (described as
bla-ma'i rgyud-pa) in terms of rank, the practitioners themselves are referred to by
various titles apart from the vague term lama. The priests of Chongkhor are called
sngags-pa ("tантристы") in contrast to the Lubragpas' grwa-pa ("monks", which they
themselves admit is a misnomer because of the implied celibacy), but there is a
separate classification which emerges in response to questions concerning the type
of lama each of these is: the religious community of Chongkhor are dpam-pa, while
the priests of Lubra are described as bon-po. There is a suggestion that, when it is
opposed to chos-pa (Buddhist), the term bon-po connotes something other than a
follower of the Bon religion, and the possible implications of this will be discussed
below.

Beneath the priests in the social hierarchy are the ordinary commoners who are
sometimes called phal-pa in a narrower sense of the word. Within this rank is the
'u-lag subdivision which will be examined in more detail presently, and finally there
come a small number of outcaste artisan families (ngar-ba)⁷. Although most of the
ngar-ba now own land, and the work of smiths is performed by Nepalese kami
families (gsar- or lcags-hzo-ba), their lowly status has remained unchanged. While
the nobles and the artisans are endogamous, the priests and commoners all
intermarry freely, but the difference in status is objectivised in the payment of a
higher fixed bridewealth (nu-rin) for women of priestly rank.

b. The Kingdom of Serib and the ethnic composition of Baragaon

Baragaon is a Nepalese administrative term encompassing eighteen or nineteen
villages, not twelve, as it implies, and David Jackson observes that "the name seems
to be a catch-all for whatever lies north of Panchgaon, south of Lo (Mustangbhot),
east of Dolpo, and west of Nyeshang (Manangbhot)" (1978: 196). In discussing the
general inadequacy of the term Baragaon, Jackson resurrects the obsolete—but far
more useful—expression Serib (Se-rib), which is used in the earliest Tibetan
chronicles to designate a kingdom corresponding roughly to Baragaon and in-
cluding the Thak Khola. While Hugh Richardson suggests that "the Se-rib in

⁷ ngar-ba is one of at least three terms which are commonly used, "Mendrik" (smad-rigs),
meaning "inferior type", is inappropriate because of its pejorative overtones, and because it does not
signify the ngar-ba alone, but may for example, be applied to the offspring of an incestuous union. The
term "meptr'" (me-khrul) is similarly inadequate; it means "hearth" (lit: "fire" tax", and although it
was traditionally applied to landless artisans on the grounds that they possessed only a hearth (like the
slad-chung of Tibet), the expression may be used in certain circumstances to designate a household of
any—including noble—status.
question was located in the Mustang district of Nepal". Jackson concludes that "it is possible to be even more specific, by locating Se-rib in the Kali-Gandaki valley south of Lo" (1978: 200). Although the term Serib is no longer in currency, "Se-skad" is still used to refer to the Tibeto-Burman language spoken throughout the Thak Kholo and in the villages of Tshuk, Tangbe, Tsele, Gyaga and Tetang north of the Mukthinath Valley.

Instead of regarding the northern Se-skad speaking villages as being sandwiched between the Tibetan-speakers of Mukthinath to the south and of Lo to the north, we should rather think of the Baragaon Tibetans as the odd-ones-out in the land of Se-rib. It seems likely that the earliest inhabitants of the Mukthinath Valley were Se-skad speakers, for although the current language is a dialect of Western Tibetan, certain plots of land bear names that are distinctly recognisable as Se-skad. A small gorge near the village of Chongkhor is called Tangargyung, Se-skad for "bean valley"; near Dzar there is one patch of land called Tangasa, the "bean area", and another called Molewa, the "turnip area". There are other linguistic grounds to support this suggestion. While each village in Baragaon has its own distinctive accent, two of them, Khyingar and Phelag, have a high percentage of Thakali words in their vocabulary. David Snellgrove says of the village of Dangardzong (by which he is apparently referring to Phelag) that "the people here are classed as bhotia, viz. Tibetan, but Thakali is still spoken". (1981: 188) Now Khyingar and Phelag are considered to be of low rank by the other villages of Baragaon. Like the Se-skad speaking villages to the north, they were once obliged to provide unpaid transport facilities (u-lag) for the local rulers, and the name u-lag is still used to describe their somewhat inferior position. It is only to be expected that here, as elsewhere in the world, the indigenous populace should be allocated a menial role by a conquering power. Moreover, I was told that until a few decades ago the village council of Khyingar used to exact a fine from anyone who was heard to speak Se-skad, apparently in attempt to suppress the language that distinguished them as a separate and lower social category.

While it is not possible to demonstrate the Tibetan origin of all the other Baragaon inhabitants, a large percentage of them are known to be comparatively recent migrants. Predictably enough, the nobles claim to be from the north, and

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8 It should perhaps be mentioned that these terms are not remotely similar to the Tibetan equivalents, which would probably be srod-(ma) lung-po, srod-(ma bha-b-) sa and "thula" (bha-b-) sa respectively. (Dialect words for which I have been unable to find a proper Tibetan spelling will be presented without italics and between single inverted commas.)

9 Dangardzong is a very small settlement which lies a short distance from Phelag across a gorge. The absence of Phelag from Snellgrove’s map, the proximity of the two villages and the fact that the inhabitants of Dangardzong speak a pure Western Tibetan dialect suggest that the author is confusing the two under the name of Dangardzong.

10 Although the ancestors of some of the Tibetan speaking inhabitants of Serib must have arrived nearly a thousand years ago, I shall nevertheless continue to describe them as “migrants”, “newcomers”, and so forth during the course of the article, simply to distinguish them from the indigenous Se-skad speakers. Conversely, it may be that the “indigenous” or “native” population did not arrive in the area much before these Tibetan speakers, and there is the possibility that some Se-skad speakers may even be late immigrants from areas where a mutually comprehensible dialect was spoken (such as Nyeshang). Even if the expressions “migrant” and “newcomer” as I use them here are temporally accurate, their social significance is more important than their historical validity.
although there is little space here to assess the historical evidence, local oral tradition provides an interesting summary of their arrival in the area. They were once a family of ministers (blon-po) under the King of Lo, who sent them to Serib to collect taxes and to act as his representatives, but they later came to govern the region independently. They built a castle in a village which stood at a narrow point in the Kali Gandaki gorge, and from here they were able to monitor the passage of goods (wool, salt and grain) between north and south, and to exact revenue accordingly. Due to the strategic nature of the castle the village came to be known as “the Block” (bKag). At some later time a branch of the family established a fort (rdzong) towards the top of the Muktinath Valley, at a place from which Kag was visible, and the settlement was accordingly known as Dzong. A third outpost was established by the nobles on the southern side of the valley, forming a triangle in which each village could signal to the others. This village was called Dzar, which in the local Tibetan dialect means “improvement” or “superior” (perhaps cognate to mdzes-po, meaning “beautiful”), since it was better situated to observe movements between Nyeshang and Serib. The Muktinath Valley is consequently referred to by its inhabitants as Dzar-rDzong yul-drug, “the six villages including Dzar and Dzong”.

There can be little doubt that this tradition is a condensation of the historical facts relating to Tibetan migrations into the area, which probably took place at various periods during the political dominion of Serib by several different powers11. It should be understood as a typically curt statement in the popular idiom to the effect that certain groups in Baragaon are not indigenous.

But what of the other Tibetan-speaking villages in the area? Two of them, Pagling and Putra, are considered to be “overspills” from the larger settlements (Kag and Dzong); Lubra was founded in the twelfth or thirteenth century by a lama from Central Tibet12 and is now populated by five clans, all demonstrably from Tibet or Lo; the people of Chongkhor all claim descent from a lama of Upaling (’Ug-pa-gling) in Tibet, while the dominant clan in Purang, called Lhagyal Pungyi, is said to have come from Lo. The inhabitants of Tshongnam are organised into three households of Tibetan-speaking lay priests, primarily of the Lo Shari Pungyi clan. They perform religious functions for the five neighbouring Se-skad speaking villages, who even today provide the lamas with unpaid agricultural labour. I have no historical information yet about the small settlements of Dangkardzong, Tiri and Sangdag, the last three of the nineteen which are said to comprise Baragaon.

It does not follow, however, that if the inhabitants of Khyingar and Phelog are descended from indigenous stock, all the inhabitants of, say, Dzar and Dzong are of recent Tibetan extraction. It has been pointed out above that of the various ranks, only the nobles and the outcaste groups are endogamous, while the priestly rank

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11 See Jackson, 1978: passim.
12 Snellgrove, 1980: 4, n.4; Jackson, 1978: 205. A detailed review of the literary and oral sources concerning the establishment of this village are to be found in Ramble, 1983.
and the commoners (including the 'u-lag) intermarry. It has been shown that residence is often a more decisive factor than descent in determining status among Tibetans\(^{13}\), and this is also true of Baragaon. Clan names, where they exist, are transmitted patrilineally, but the status of the clan may change according to residence. Thus the commoner Lhgyal Pungyiita and the noble Jambal Thogyal clans are represented in Lubra, where they are ranked as priestly lineages, and the offspring of Lubragpa men who marry into Phelag households are of ‘u-lag, not priestly rank\(^{14}\). It is therefore a safe assumption that the commoners in Tibetan-speaking villagers of mixed ranks such as Kag, Dzar and Dzong are descendants of the indigenous population, for settlements may well have existed on all these sites before the Tibetans established fortifications there. The identity of the Phelag and Khyingar villagers is more clearly preserved by their residence apart from the Tibetans and because the role of ‘u-lag was assigned to these two settlements alone, not to the entire native population of the valley. Moreover, the local populace who shared the same village with Tibetan speakers would have found it easier to suppress their own language. Even now, the residual content of Se-skad in the Khyingar dialect is less marked than that of Phelag, which lies at some distance from the Muktinath Valley.

c. Three Baragaon harvest festivals

The first of the harvest festivals to be held in Muktinath takes place on the tenth day of the month and is celebrated by the people of Khyingar and the commoners of Dzar. The two villages ride the short distance to Muktinath to circumambulate the sacred site, and after lighting offering-lamps return home for festive eating and drinking. On the thirtieth day of the same month the villagers of Chongkhor have their own Yartung, which is celebrated in a manner similar to that of Khyingar.

Between these two, on the fifteenth day, falls the nobles’ Yartung. All the remaining villages in Baragaon as well as several from Dolpo and Manang traditionally come to Muktinath to celebrate this (although they may have their own regional Yartung besides, and Kag attends only on alternate years), but the number of participants has declined considerably in recent times. But whereas these outsiders visit the shrines, eat and drink copiously and participate in the dancing, they are little more than satellites around a threefold central group: the villages of Lubra and Purang and the nobles of Dzar, from whom the dpon-po’i dbyar-ston receives its name. The celebrants are set apart from those of the earlier Yartung by the fact that they are not descended from the native Se-skad speakers, and their exclusive relationship is distinguished by a special terminology. The representatives

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\(^{13}\) Cf. Aziz, B., 1973: passim.

\(^{14}\) The Lhgyal Pungyiita clan in Lubra is descended from an uxorial marriage between a Lubra woman and a Purang man, while the Jambal Thogyal clan came to Lubra five generations ago as the illegitimate son of a Lubra woman and a man from Dzar. Illegitimate Lubragpa men are generally not so fortunate as to obtain an inheritance, but enter into uxorial marriages with commoner and ‘u-lag women — hence the presence of Lubragpa men in Phelag.
from Dzar, Lubra and Purang and known respectively as dbon-po, bon-po and dpon-g.yog. dPon-po, meaning noble, is a more formal expression than the synonymous sras-po used in everyday language. Dzar was the seat of the main lineage of the Jampal Thogyal clan, the dominant noble family, which is presumably the reason why they, and not the nobles of Dzong and Kag, are the focus of the celebrations. The names applied to the other two groups suggest a definition in terms of function rather than status; bla-mchod, it is true, may refer to a client priest, but while it is a generic term for the rank as a whole the word bon-po, as we shall see, designates a particular kind of specialist. Similarly, the villagers of Purang, whose commoner status would be expressed by the term phal-pa, are referred to in this context as dpon-g.yog, the servants of the nobles (dpon-po’i g.yog-po).

While the foregoing account must serve as a rough background to the Yartung and to the main social categories in Baragaon, a more detailed analysis of their relationship is possible only after examining the sequence of events which constitutes the festival. Since much of it takes place in individual villages, away from the focal site of Muktinath, the following description will trace the course of the celebrations from the point of view of one of the three principal communities, the Bonpo village of Lubra.

The Muktinath Yartung: a description

Although the climax of the Yartung is the fifteenth day of the month, when the moon is full, preparations for the festivities begin several days beforehand. The men of Lubra are organised into two groups called “dapa” (zla-dpa’; mda’-pa’), which convene separately before and after their visit to Muktinath. Each group has two stewards (spyi-pa) who, with their wives and daughters, are responsible for the catering, and also one superintendent (gnyer-pa) whose rather less functional role is described below. The stewards work commences several weeks before the Yartung, when they begin to brew the beer for the forthcoming celebrations, using grain that has been set aside for this festival earlier in the year. Shortly after the wheat harvest in early summer, the Lubragpas assemble to dispense with all matters of commerce involving wheat. They pay the land tax (sa’-gro) due to the village fund, contribute their portion of grain allocated annually to the landless village kami, and hold the yearly meeting of the rotating grain-fund (‘bru-khor).
Among the various other obligatory payments of grain each man must contribute five zo-ba of wheat (gra) or six-row barley (nas) which is kept aside for use at the Yartung. The two men's groups alternate annually in using as their venue a room adjacent to the village temple (lha-khang), while the other group meets in the house of the older steward. The stewards themselves are changed each year in rotation, but the superintendent is appointed (bshkas-pa) by the senior members of the group. Whereas the women of some villages such as Chongkhor cannot be said to celebrate the Yartung, the women of Lubra have their own groups for festive eating and drinking. There are five of these groups, each with a single steward (also called spyi-pa) in whose house the members assemble, but there is no superintendent. Since they consume less beer than the men, the women contribute only three zo-ba of grain each.

On the morning of the fourteenth day, the men dress up in their finery, which may include silk brocade robes (gos), riding boots and an assortment of traditional and modern hats. It is fashionable among the younger men to wear sun-glasses and prestigious purchases from trading trips abroad, such as denim jeans and cowboy-boots. The groups assemble briefly to drink the first of the beer, and after gathering in the temple to say a short prayer they process down to the edge of the village where the women are waiting with their horses. As soon as the riders have departed, the women leave on foot, taking a more precipitous but shorter route that will bring them to Muktinath before the men. Just before reaching their destination the women stop to put on the festive clothing that they have brought with them. The riders halt a short distance outside the village to perform the annual reanconsecration of the cairn which is the home of Lubra’s protective deity (pho-lha or yul-sa), Kyerang Dragme. Branches of silver birch decorated with coloured prayer flags are planted in the top of the cairn, a libation of beer is made and prayers are said. The procession moves slowly, with the riders dismounting frequently to drink beer, and songs are sung to extol the merits of beer and companionship. The song which is heard most frequently at Yartung and during other secular festivals, such as wedding processions, runs as follows:

The sun has risen in the East, the warmth-giving sun is shining,  
The sun’s rays are shining down on this holy place,  
Seated here we are like a bow, and the bow is unbroken;  
As we travel we are like an arrow, and the arrow does not fly off course.  
Let us rejoice and go about undyingly --- say why this should not be so!  
Even if we attain to the gods after death, the offering water [which they receive] is nothing more than water!  
As the red dye of India is the finest of dyes, and silk is the finest of cloth,  
So our gathering of friends of the spirit is the finest of families.  
A single rainbow holds the meadow, two rainbows hold the river,  
and three rainbows hold our friendly bodies.

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(Another type of rotating fund, which is less common but which may still be found in villages in Mustang, involves the circulation of young goats (rab’khor).  
17 This zo-ba is equal to four “drudra’ (‘hra-drä’), a measure of volume slightly smaller than the Nepalese mōna.)
Our gathering of friends of the spirit is the egg of a white hen;
Offer this flawless egg to the hands of the lama!
Offer this flawless egg to the hands of the Enlightened One.18

The men and women meet near the Rani Powa, an old rest-house for pilgrims about ten minutes' walk from Muktinath itself, and finish the last part of the journey together. They go to the temple called Mar-me lha-khang, an ancient Nyingmapa building located near the sacred water-spouts, which has now served as the Lubragpas' billeting at Yartung for seven generations. The Tibetans refer to Muktinath as gnas-chen chu-mig brgya-rtsa, the holy place of the hundred-odd [i.e. one hundred and eight] water-spouts, but the site contains a number of other temples and sacred locations besides. Detailed accounts of the place have been published elsewhere19 and will not be repeated here.

The men continue to eat and drink in the main room on the upper floor of the temple, while the women drink and prepare food apart in a smaller room. On the same day the Buddhist monks of Dzar and Purang begin to circumambulate the site, lighting butter lamps and saying prayers in the various temples before returning to their villages. One of the Lubragpas remarked to me with some satisfaction that "today we are subordinate (chung-ba) to them, but tomorrow they are subordinate to the Bonpos".

The morning of the fifteenth day begins early, when all the Lubragpa men make a brief circuit (skor-ba) of the sacred site, and return to Marme Lhakhang for breakfast. Later in the morning there is a more formal circumambulation. It begins below their quarters, in the shrine room of Marme Lhakhang, where the men face the altar to sing prayers and everyone performs prostrations. The two superintendants carry a vessel containing melted butter which has been collected in equal proportions from each Lubra household, and replenish the altar lamps in each temple. The procedure is the same in the other Buddhist temples, although the actual prayers are different.

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18 Nyi-ma shar-mas shar-byung / shar-kyis dron-dag nyi-ma
Nyi-ma'i 'od-gzer ma-la gnas-chen pho-la shar
bZugs-nkhan gshu-mo yin zer / gshu-la 'gus-chag med
'Gro-nkhan nua-ma yin zer / nua-la g.yan-drung med
Ma shi dga'-dga' 'gro-'gro' ci-la mi-byed gsung
Shi-ste lha-la tsho-kyi rgyud / ye-ka tsho-kyi rgyud
rGya-tshas tshos-kyl dang-ma / bka-bas ral-kyi dang-ma
U-rang chos-gros 'dzom-bu sha dang ru-pa'i dang-ma
Ja' geig spon-ga' zugs / ja' gneyis chu-la zugs
Ja' gsum 'tonlo' rags-pa's shu-gzugs-la zugs
U-rang chos-gros 'dzom-bu / bya-mo dkar-ma'i sgo-nga
sGo-sa' gas-chag med-nkhan bla-ma'i phyang-du phul
sGo-sa' gas-chag med-nkhan sangs-rgyas phyang-du phul

Note: I have edited the words of this and the two subsequent songs to remove the numerous redundant syllables with which the lines are typically filled. Words in the local dialect for which I have not found a suitable orthography have been presented in double, not single, inverted commas to avoid confusion with the 'a-chung.'

On entering the last temple in the circuit, Gompa Sampa (dgon-pa gsar-pa, the "new temple"), the visitor is immediately struck by the huge carved wooden screen which divides the chamber. The Lubragpas were keen to point out to me that, although this was a Nyingmapa temple, half the swastikas on the screen were carved anticlockwise, in the Bonpo manner. The reason, they said, was that when the work was planned three generations ago the commission was given to a member of the Jarakhang clan in Lubra, and the artist was careful to mark the piece with an unmistakable token of his own religion. The actual circumambulation of Muktinath is made in a clockwise direction, in accordance with the Lubragpas' practice when they pass any essentially Buddhist sacred site. Conversely, when people from Buddhist villages participate in ceremonial processions in Lubra—at weddings, for example—they follow the Bonpo custom of keeping their left side towards chortens and temples.

When the Lubragpa procession returns to Marme Lhakhang, a few of the younger men and women go down to the vicinity of the Rani Powa to share in the general atmosphere of festivity. A day or two earlier, enterprising women from different villages will have set up tents near the Powa to sell food and drink to the visitors. Schuler gives a vivid description of the scene in the tents, where the young men

Boast and joke and buy round after round of drinks, tipping lavishly and conspicuously. The propitiresses of the tents, along with their various sisters, helpers and companions, act as catalysts for the men's potlatching. They flirt, tease and laugh, and hover over the beer glasses, flask in hand, ready accomplices in the men's game of forcing drinks and food on one another. With the right combination of shrewdness and charm a woman can earn a few hundred rupees' profit in a few days. Some of the women do their own potlatching, but on a lesser scale, forcing free drinks on customers and treating their female friends.20

In the afternoon, the villagers of Purang ride to Muktinath, and after circumambulating the sacred places join the Lubragpas in Marme Lhakhang. The last group to arrive is the contingent from Dzar, who in years gone by would sing a proceessional song different from that of the priests and commoners:

The exalted garden seems to shimmer from here,
The garden seems to shimmer from here.
We are meeting the lama who lives here,
We are meeting the lama who lives in this garden.
The hat of Padmasambhava looks becoming on him,
And the trumpet and drum slung around his neck are clearly visible from here.

The exalted garden seems to shimmer from here,
The garden seems to shimmer from here.
We are meeting the lord who lives here,
We are meeting the lord who lives in this garden.
The yellow hat of the Mongols looks becoming on him,
And the purple sash around his neck is clearly visible from here.

The exalted garden seems to shimmer from here,
The garden seems to shimmer from here.
We are meeting our parents who live here,
We are meeting our father and mother who live in this garden.
The white gleam in the middle of their turquoises looks becoming,
And the twin strings of shells around their necks are clearly visible from here.21

One’s lama, lord (dpam-po) and parents comprise a threefold object of reverence which appears frequently in songs of the area, and it is interesting that it should remain unchanged even when sung only by the nobles (dpam-po) themselves. The third person in the procession is the current heir of the principal lineage from the Jamdul Thogyal clan. Like all nobles, his name is prefixed by the title Hrewo (hras-po), but since informants explained to me that he was “like the king”, I shall refer to him as “the prince” for want of a more succinct and accurate sobriquet. He is preceded by his bodyguard (sku-stung) who carries a bow and a quiver of arrows. The entire procession is led by the striking figure of the prince’s private chaplain (bla-mchod or mchod-gnas, but more specifically bon-po) who is dressed in yellow robes and carries a spear decorated with coloured cloths. The spear (mdung-dar) represents the guardian deity (srung-ma) of the Jamdul Thogyal clan, Abse Dungma (A-bse mdung-dmar: Abse the Red Spear), and it must always be kept in an upright position.22 It is said that when the clan first came south to the upper Kali Gandaki from Lo, the chaplain of the present prince’s ancestor rode at the head of the expedition carrying the same spear. Although Dzar is predominantly a Buddhist village with a Sakya monastic community, the prince’s private chaplain is a Bonpo. The position is patrilineally transmitted, but if the chaplain should die before his son is old enough to succeed him, the office is temporarily filled by a lama from Lubra. The guardian Abse Dungma is a Bonpo deity, and only a Bonpo may carry the spear.

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21 Plu yar-ba ’gil-ba ’dli-nas “ling-se-ling” (?)
Gling-ba ’dli-nas ling-se-lung
’Di-la bzhugs pa’i bla-nas mjal bzhiin-dug
Gling-la bzhugs po’i bla-nas mjal bzhiin-dug
Phu-la U-gyan Pal-zhwa “thing-se-thing” (?)
sKe-la rtags dang ba-du ’dli-nas rgyang drag che
’Di-la bzhugs-pa’i dpam-po mjal bzhiin-dug
Gling-la bzhugs-po’i dpam-po mjal bzhiin-dug
Phu-la Sog-zhwa ser-po thing-se-thing
sKe-la sugs-dar smung ’byung ’dli-nas rgyang drag che
’Di-la bzhugs-pa’i pha-ma mjal bzhiin-dug
Gling-la bzhugs-po’i yab-yum mjal bzhiin-dug
Phu-la g.yu’i gzhung grub-dkar thing-se-thing
sKe-la rtags dkar gnyis-stgriis ’dli-nas rgyang drag che

The expressions “ling se ling” and “thing se thing” are stock formulae of a type which occurs in folk songs and literature (cf. Stein, 1956, “Mots descriptifs” section of glossary, pp. 395-399). The precise meaning of these terms is not clear and I have accordingly glossed them somewhat non-commitally.

22 Michael Aris describes the use of a similar spear in the Bhutanese New Year festival; this spear, too, must never be placed on the ground horizontally (1976, see especially Plate 1 facing p. 610).
The party, which may include several noblewomen on horseback, rides to Muktinath to circumambulate the site and joins the villagers of Purang and Lubra in Marme Lhakhang. The three parties spend a short time drinking beer together before riding down in their separate village groups to the vicinity of the Rani Powa. Carpets and low tables are set out on a low ridge overlooking the Powa, and here the Dzor prince sits with his chaplain and his bodyguard as well as a few kinsmen, drinking beer and watching the exhibitions of horsemanship taking place below them. The riding does not actually constitute a race—the strip of land in front of the Powa is little more than two hundred yards long—but involves the demonstration of skills such as performing headstands on horseback and picking up white scarves from the ground at full gallop. 

Towards dusk the men of Lubra, Purang and Dzor form a circle, at the centre of which stands the prince’s chaplain holding the spear. While two men of Purang beat out a rhythm on small drums the men, who all carry riding whips, dance slowly around the Bonpo, shuffling their feet in unison and occasionally exclaiming “So!” (swo?), an expression of general felicitation. The spectators offer the prince beer and auspicious white scarves as he dances with the other villagers. The rhythm gradually accelerates and the dance ends when all the men converge on the chaplain three times, with a loud shout of “So!” and as they surge forward for the last time they strike their riding-whips on the spear which he holds aloft. This action was interpreted variously as coercing Abse to carry out his duty and as a means of receiving power (dbang) from him. After this climactic end to the ceremony the Lubragpas return to Marme Lhakhang and the people of Dzor and Purang depart for their respective villages. The dance is known as the Drazur (dGra-zor).

The scene at the Powa is much the same as on the previous night: the tents continue to serve food and drink, and different groups engage in traditional Tibetan and Nepali dances. The latter are held by the large numbers of Nepalese government employees—mainly from Jomsom—present for Yartung, and their numbers are swelled on alternate years by a substantial detachment of the army, who occupy the Rani Powa for the night. There is now even a discothèque of modest proportions which is held in a room in one of the permanent restaurants near the Powa. It is attended exclusively by young Tibetans from the area, who wear the denim and nylon uniforms of modern Bangkok, and speak disparagingly of the traditional dances which are performed each year by a dwindling number of stalwarts.

The Lubragpas begin the sixteenth day with a brief circumambulation of the sacred places of Muktinath, and spend the remainder of the morning in the temple in festive eating and drinking. This is later followed by the more elaborate circuit described above. After lunch they leave for Lubra, and on this return journey the women accompany the men on foot. The horses are ridden at walking pace all the way, and the procession is painfully slow, pausing at frequent intervals to resume the drinking or to remount a rider who has fallen, unconscious, out of the saddle.

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23 A brief description of the spectacle is given in Führer-Haimendorf 1975: 181.
The women play an important role in breaking up the fights which invariably erupt between the men. Other villagers who have come to celebrate the Yartung also depart today, and some contingents, such as the people of Kag, return in mounted processions. When the Lubragpas arrive home—generally after dark—they separate into their different feasting groups for the remainder of the evening.

An essential ingredient of the Yartung is meat, and this requirement is fulfilled on the seventeenth day when a number of yaks are butchered. The purchase of the animals—if there happens to be none in the high pastures of Lubra at the time\textsuperscript{24}—is left to one of the younger village men, who brings back the requisite number from an earlier trading trip to Lo, where they can be obtained more cheaply than from the nearby Thakalis. The different groups will have stated in advance how much meat they are likely to require, and individual households may order a certain amount for private consumption. The basic division of the yak is the quarter ("sho")\textsuperscript{25}, which refers not to any particular part of the body but literally to a quarter of all the organs and members. Whoever buys a "sho" receives a quarter of the meat from each leg, a quarter of the blood, the lungs, intestines, head, one hoof and so forth. The "sho" is subdivided into four ilu, or one sixteenth\textsuperscript{26} of the whole carcass. Because the Lubragpas, as members of the priestly rank, are reluctant to slaughter an animal for fear of incurring sin, the task is left to the impoverished village kami, who benefits by receiving a quantity of offal as "sin-money" (sdig-sha) in compensation for the karmic backlash of his action.

When the meat has been distributed, the various groups assemble again and make sausages and momos (mog-mog: steamed meat ravioli), and the men consume portions of raw meat, blood and tripe. As a gesture of goodwill, each group sends a helping of momos to all the others, and this provides an opportunity for obscene jocularity between the two sexes. The men send the women momos fashioned in the shape of female genitalia, while the women reciprocate with phalluses of dough which they first char in the fire as an additional painful jibe.

After the midday meal on the eighteenth day, the villagers climb the hill above Lubra and assemble at the ancient Gumphug Gompa (Goom-phug dgon-pa, the Meditation-cave Temple), a now-derelict building constructed around the small cave where the founder of the village spent nine years in retreat. Beside the temple is an area in which there are to be found one hundred and eight rocks (though many are said to have sunk into the ground): bearing the sacred footprints of lamas and of different animals. The mistresses (khyim-pa-mo) of the nine principal households (grong-pa) in Lubra, attired in their ceremonial shawls and turquoise head-pieces ("shule")\textsuperscript{27} form a line beside the temple and sing a song extolling the holy places which are the focus of the Lubragpas' Yartung:

\textsuperscript{24} The Lubragpas do not breed yaks for animal husbandry, and only purchase them for food.

\textsuperscript{25} The "sho" apparently corresponds to the zug or gaug which appears in Jäschke.

\textsuperscript{26} According to Jäschke, one ilu may also be one-twelfth or one-eighth of a carcass. For a symbolic analysis of yak dismemberment and the possible social referents of the ilu among the Tamangs and Sherpas, see Maedonald, 1980: 205.

\textsuperscript{27} I was told that these "shule" may be worn only by women who have both born children and have living husbands. However, this rule is not strictly observed in Lubra. The "shule" itself is a long
The sun has risen in the east, the warmth-giving sun is shining.
The sun’s rays are shining down on this holy place.
Here upon the right-hand lotus is the holy place of Muktinath;
If you make offerings here you will not suffer rebirth in the lower realms.
If you offer sacred water here you will become a successful traveller in the afterworld.

Here upon the left-hand lotus is that sacred place, the hermitage of the hundred-odd footprints.
If you make offerings here you will not suffer rebirth in the lower realms.
If you offer sacred water here you will become a successful traveller in the afterworld.

Inside the temple itself the men say prayers and the women sing songs and dance, and the group then moves on to a private temple which belongs jointly to the Jarakhang and Lo Chotshong clans. Prayers are said here too, and after everyone has been served with beer by representatives of one of the two clans (who alternate in this service on an annual basis), the circumambulation of the village is completed with a similar visit to the main Lubra temple (Phun-’shogs-gling dgon-pa). Near the entrance is a prayer flag which approximately represents the centre of the village, and a group of mainly women and the girls gathers around this to sing and dance until after dark, when they return to their groups for the evening meal.

On the nineteenth day, which sees the close of the Yartung celebrations, the young men are given an opportunity to display their theatrical talents. Apart from the masks of deities that are used for sacred dances (’cham), the village possesses a number of a more frivolous nature. Some of these represent characters from popular stories—an old man and his children, two goddesses, a dog, a monkey and so forth—and these are produced on certain occasions for the entertainment of the villagers. One particularly hideous mask represents Jagpa Melen (’Jag-pa me-len), a protector of the Buddhist faith (chos-skyong). Although I was unable to discover much about this character, local oral tradition has it that he was originally a renegade monk who became a ruthless bandit. His magical powers made him practically invincible until a mighty lama succeeded in killing him by stuffing down his throat a charmed silk scarf (kha-brags) on a pole, thereby suffocating him. As a malign ghost he was even more troublesome than in his lifetime, but he was eventually bound with an oath to protect the doctrine. The main significance of the mask’s use during the Yartung is that Jagpa Melen is associated—locally at least—with Abse Dungmar.

strip of felt adorned with huge turquoises and gold, which is worn along the middle of the head and down the back. Noblewomen alone wear a headdress known as a “höje”, which is attached around the head as a kind of double tiara, and features seed pearls, coral, turquoise and gold.

28 Nyi-ma shar-nas shar-byung | shar-khyis shad-jag nji-ma
    Nyi-ma’i ’od-gzer na-la gna-ch’en pha-la shar-khyis
    gYas-phogs pad-ma’i steng-du ’di-ru gna-ch’en Chu-mig brgya-rtsa
    De-la mchod-pa phul na | ngan-song myong-rgya-med
    De-la yon-chab phul na | bar-do gshegs-pa ’byung
    gYon-phogs pad-ma’i steng-du ’di-ru gna-ch’en Grom-phug brgya-rtsa
    ’Di-la mchod-pa phul na | ngan-song myong-rgya-med
    ’Di-la yon-chab phul na | bar-do gshegs-pa ’byung
Muktinath is a sacred place for Hindus as well as Buddhists, and various festivals see a large influx of scantily-clad ascetics into the area. Thus another of the masks which is worn on this occasion parodies the Indian holy men who sometimes wander into Lubra asking directions for Muktinath and begging a little food. It represents an old man, called simply Lama Dzuki (i.e. Jogi), who has a wrinkled brow and white beard and wears his sparse hair bound into a topknot. The wearer goes about the village clad only in a loincloth and smeared in ashes, and harangues his audience in Hindi. Last year, while Lama Dzuki and the other characters paraded around the village, two trekkers were seen walking down the rocky valley below Lubra, having apparently come from Muktinath. They walked with the characteristically long stride of foreigners, pausing occasionally to examine fossils and to take photographs, and eventually crossed the log bridge— with the familiar hesitancy of foreigners— into the village. A few women produced woollen blankets and scarves in the hope of selling them to the tourists, but it was only when the pair reached the centre of the village, asking directions and enquiring about the temple in faltering English, that they were recognised as Lubragpas beneath the clothing and other paraphernalia borrowed from the anthropologist. The women are also parodied by young men who, dressed in the appropriate clothing, carry bundles of rugs representing babies which they manhandle and occasionally beat against the rocks when their "crying" becomes intolerable; they screech at each other in strident voices and perform the triple prostration before any remotely holy person or object.

Towards evening the villagers return to their groups for the last night of feasting. The morning of the following day is spent in finishing the beer that each group has made, and the accounts— especially outstanding sums for the purchase of meat— are settled. On the thirtieth day of the month (nam-gang) those Lubragpas who for some reason were unable to attend the Yartung walk or ride to Muktinath to circumambulate the holy place and light butter lamps in the temples.

*The Yartung as a Tibetan Carnival*

The predominance of certain elements brand the Yartung quite unmistakably as a kind of carnival, and in structural terms it bears a striking resemblance to its European counterpart. "There were three major themes in Carnival", we are told by one historian: "food, sex and violence. Food was the most obvious. It was meat which put the carne in Carnival."29 The heavy consumption of meat during the Yartung stands in marked contrast to the typical food of all other festivals; the spring Archery ceremony is not characterised by any food in particular, while the customary preparations for the New Year is a soup of grains and pulses with no more than the usual quantity of dried meat and fat. Even when the villagers butcher yaks later in the year to replenish their stocks of dried meat, a small amount of the flesh is eaten raw and a few households may make momos, but the slaughter does not open a four-day spell of carnivorous indulgence as it does here.

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