

**The Evolution of a Tibetan Pilgrimage:
The Pilgrimage to A myes rMa chen Mountain in the 21st Century¹**

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Published in *21st Century Tibet Issue. Symposium on Contemporary Tibetan Studies*.
Taipei, Taiwan. 2003

In Tibet, pilgrimage is a complete cultural phenomenon, with religious, social, political, economic, literary, and today ecological elements. Tibetan pilgrimage experienced a revival in the 1980s, when a certain degree of religious liberalization occurred. As a consequence, the practice of pilgrimage became a manifestation of the political and cultural identity of the Tibetan people. The liberalization of state policy toward religion in the 1980s also provided the opportunity for research on the phenomenon of pilgrimage, and a number of studies on the subject have appeared over the last ten years. Such studies have tended to focus upon one pilgrimage (or sometimes several) performed in the same year.² However, it is now possible to gather materials on a single sacred place over a relatively extended period of time, and thus to observe the transformations that have occurred. The period of twelve years (as covered in this article) is particularly important because, according to the duodenary cycle that the Tibetans borrowed from the Chinese, the twelfth year in a cycle is considered a particularly auspicious time to make a pilgrimage to a specific site.

¹ I would like to thank M.D. Even, R. Hamayon and M. Lecomte for their corrections and suggestions. I am also grateful to D. Lopez for his careful reading of the article and his corrections of the English style.

² See among others, Buffetrille (1996, 1998, 2000); Macdonald (1997); McKay (1998); Huber (1999a, 1999b).

In my comments here, I will begin with a general description of the Tibetan practice of pilgrimage, and then will turn to consider the famous A myes rMa chen pilgrimage and its recent evolution.

In Tibetan, a pilgrim is called a *gnas skor ba*, “the one who goes around the sacred place.” Thus, the vocabulary characterizes the pilgrim by the rite he must perform at the end of his journey. Pilgrimage is a pervasive practice; in the course of my fieldwork, I have never met a Tibetan who has not, at some time in his or her life, gone on a pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is also a collective phenomenon in the Tibetan world: in general, a group of persons of the same family, of the same village, of the same encampment, or of the same monastery will form. Often, one or two monks or lamas will travel in the company of lay people and will provide them with information along the route, almost like a tour guide. Pilgrimage groups as a rule do not mix with one another. If, from time to time, there is an exchange, it is usually at the individual level, often in the form of a question to a local monk or inhabitant. The quality of *communitas* that Turner (1969, 1974, 1978) observes in all the pilgrimages he studied, is in general not present in the Tibetan world, except during very short periods. Along the ritual path, Tibetan society is present at all levels, but contrary to what one might think, differences of social status persist during the pilgrimage.

As a rule, one must walk during a pilgrimage. In the Buddhist world, it is said that the merit obtained is greater if one traverses the pilgrimage route on foot rather than on horseback. Thus, a pilgrimage can take a very long time, as pilgrims tend to visit all the sacred sites along their way. The time required is even greater, sometimes taking several years, if the pilgrim performs prostrations along the entire route from the

place he begins the pilgrimage to his destination at the holy site. Thus, along the way, pilgrims pass through new regions, encounter others (which sometimes result in weddings), pass on news, and transmit knowledge. Pilgrimage thus serves to transcend the cultural boundaries that crisscross Tibet. The pilgrim, like all travelers, is confronted with sometimes severe weather, steep paths, and the dangers of high altitude. Yet pilgrimage retains the air of festival, expressed in song, dance, games, and the consumption of alcohol. Pilgrimage has also an economic effect: it involves trade on both a large and small scale and a redistribution of wealth. Often coming from very remote places, pilgrims purchase various necessities in market towns along the way. And rare are those who do not leave home without offerings for the different monasteries they will visit, offerings on behalf of themselves but also provided by relatives who hope to receive some vicarious benefit from the traveler's collection of merit. From their side, monasteries must offer pilgrims ceremonial scarves (*kha btags*), blessed pills, and sometimes also food and lodging.

To undertake a pilgrimage is, however a matter of personal choice. When the pilgrim begins his journey, he generally does not turn back. For to begin a pilgrimage is to take an implicit vow; to fail to complete the journey would mean to break the vow and to prevent the full realization of the meaning and purpose of the pilgrimage.

A myes rMa chen Mountain

A myes rMa chen, rMa chen spom ra, rMa rgyal spom ra, sPom chen spom ra, 'Brog gnas rMa rgyal spom che and 'Brog gnas lha yi dge bsnyen:³ these are all the names of a territorial god (*yul lha gzhi bdag*), the chief of all territorial deities worshiped by the

³ Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975: 209-210).

inhabitants of the traditional Tibetan province of A mdo (Eastern Tibet). But it is also the name of a range of mountains called rMa rgyal gangs ri, rMa ri rab 'byams,⁴ and rMa g.yang rdo rje brag.⁵ It rises to the east of two lakes sKya rengs (Tsaring nor) and sNgo rengs (Oring nor), at 99° 33' longitude east and 34° 28' latitude north, in what is today the mGo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of the Chinese province of Qinghai. This range is formed by three main peaks.⁶ In the north is dGra 'dul lung shog, “Wind Wings that Conquer Enemies” the highest; in the south, sPyan ras gzigs (Skt. Avalokiteṣvara) and in the center, A myes rMa chen, the lowest, at 6282 meters.

This study is based on three pilgrimages performed around A myes rMa chen mountain over a period of twelve years. The first, in October 1990,⁷ took place during a Year of the Horse, a year regarded as particularly auspicious for the performance of pilgrimage; pilgrimage performed in a Year of the Horse results in greater merit than in other years. It was also the first Year of the Horse in which pilgrimage had been allowed since the Chinese occupation began. The political situation was rather different from what it is today, and the difficulties I encountered were considerable even before I was able to reach the mountain and begin the pilgrimage in the company of a young A mdo ba.⁸ Nevertheless, my curiosity was far from satisfied after this first pilgrimage, and I decided to go back in July 1992. Rain brought rising waters that blocked access to some of the sacred sites; I met only three pilgrims—three monks on horse and on yak—along the way.

⁴ This is also the name of a mountain located to the west of Lhasa upon which 'Bras spungs monastery is built (Wylie 1962: 116, n. 22).

⁵ A bu dkar lo (2002: 2).

⁶ Rock (1956: 114) and Wylie (1962: 116).

⁷ See Buffetrille (1997: 75-132 and 1998: 96-128).

⁸ I take this opportunity to thank once again Tshe ring for the help he provided me from his knowledge of the A mdo and Lhasa dialects.

In 2002, two events attracted me to rMa chen once again: a great festival was organized for the first time in honor of Gesar, the hero of the Tibetan epic, perhaps in response to the initiative of UNESCO, which declared the years 2002 and 2003 to be the years of the millennium of the creation of the epic.⁹ A similar festival occurred in rMa chu (Gansu province) at the same time, also dedicated to the great hero. But the links between A myes rMa chen and Gesar are close and numerous,¹⁰ such that rMa chen seemed to be the place where the festival would have a particularly interesting quality. Furthermore, 2002, like 1990, was a Year of the Horse, the year of the great pilgrimage around A myes rMa chen Mountain.¹¹

From the 23rd to the 27th days of the sixth Tibetan month (August 1-5, 2002), the town of rMa chen resounded with the rhythm of the festival dedicated to Gesar,¹² which took place in a vast pasture eight kilometers to the west. Numerous stalls had been erected and one of them sold a book composed by lay and religious scholars with a collection of both modern and old sources about the pilgrimage around A myes rMa chen (146 pages, *cf. infra*).¹³

rMa chen, which was just a small town in 1990 with only one street and some shops, in 2002 became a city of moderate size, where one could find shops, hotels, public showers, and even a cybercafe. A sizeable crowd was there, attracted as much

⁹ I indebted to I. Henrion-Dourcy for this information.

¹⁰ See Stein (1959).

¹¹ I made the pilgrimage with Elke and Peter Hessel.

¹² There are numerous political, social, and religious implications of this festival for both the Chinese and the Tibetans. I am in the process of writing a study of these implications.

¹³ I am currently completing a translation of all of these texts. Some have already appeared in Buffetrille 2000.

by the pilgrimage as by the Gesar festival, and the town experienced an economic boom.

In 1990,¹⁴ we had made the pilgrimage in eight days, starting at rTa bo zhol ma, “Lower rTa bo,” in 1992, in ten days, and in 2002 in seven days, starting at mTshal snag kha mdo,¹⁵ “Confluence of Vermilion and Ink” the last two times. Access to the pilgrimage is gained through one of three entrances depending on the pilgrims’ original point of departure (see diagram):

- in the south: mTshal snag kha mdo, linked by a road to rMa chen
- in the northwest, Nu bo dGra 'dul dbang phyug, “Younger Brother, Powerful One who Conquers Enemies,” where there is a road to rTa bo zhol ma
- in the northeast, Chu dkar sna kha, “Mouth of the White Waters,” located near the small city of Zho zan kung he (Ch. Xueshan).

Modernization and its Implications

The government of China undertook numerous projects during the twelve years following the 1990 Year of the Horse. Among these was a program to develop the western regions, inaugurated by Jiang Zemin in 1999. One of the consequences of this program has been the improvement of the roads in Qinghai province: today it takes only eleven hours to go by bus from Xining to rMa chen, when two days were the minimum in 1990. This improvement has led to a decline in the use of horses as a means of

¹⁴ See Buffetrille (1997: 76-87) for an ethnography of this pilgrimage.

¹⁵ During my first pilgrimage, I obtained the toponyms from informants with a variety of spellings. I also found other spellings in the pilgrimage guide written by Kun dga' mkhas dbang dpal bzang po (cf. *infra*). In 1991, Yonten Gyatso was kind enough to help me restore what we decided were the correct spelling. In this article, I provide the spelling found in the new pilgrimage guides.

transportation, with many pilgrims now traveling by bus, sometimes by motorcycle. The changes in the modes of transportation have brought changes to the size of the pilgrimage groups; although the groups may still come from the same region or the same family, they now tend to be smaller, even as small as two. The efficiency in transportation has also led to a decrease in the incidence of visits to traditional sacred places along the route. The motorized pilgrims no longer worship all the gods on the way to A myes rMa chen, in the monasteries, and at the passes. This has inevitably affected both the ritual character of the pilgrimage and the economy of the religious centers. At the same time, the new roads have allowed more pilgrims to come from greater distances.

The New Pilgrimage Road

At the place of pilgrimage itself, the most visible change is the construction of a road between rTa bo zhol ma and mTshal snag kha mdo; it continues to Shug pa g.yag rnga, “The Juniper and the Tail of the Yak,”¹⁶ stops and then goes on again from Gos sku chen mo, “The Great Needlework Hanging” to rTa bo zhol ma. By 1990, a short portion of the route was suitable for motor vehicles but, at that time there were no vehicles. Pilgrims on horseback, accompanied by their yaks, formed small caravans. By 2002, the road linked two entrances of the pilgrimage and a substantial number of pilgrims made the half circumambulation on motorcycles, with prayers flags hung on the handlebars; others, more well to do, were in cars. Some monks and lamas took advantage of the modernization: the monks of Lung skya monastery (dGa’ bde county, mGo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) arrived in a truck to perform the pilgrimage. Their lama, rGya bla Ngag dbang pad ma nam rgyal, was traveling in jeep, thus emphasizing the difference of status between the simple monks and their master. The road, built on the slope of the mountain and not paved, was very muddy, making it necessary for the monks to disembark from their truck and push the jeep.

This was not the first time that I saw pilgrims making a pilgrimage in a vehicle; in 1999, I traveled around the mTsho sngon po (Lake Kokonor in Qinghai) in a bus in the company of Tibetans. However, at A myes rMa chen mountain, only half of the ritual path is accessible to the motor vehicles. The road passes near the sacred sites, although it does not follow always the course of the old path, and the motorized pious

¹⁶ In 1990, some people told me that this site was called Klu gdung shug pa (?). In 2002, several informants gave me the name of Shug pa g.yag rnga, an appellation also provided in the new pilgrimage guide written by A bu dkar lo (2002: 17), which may be the source for my informants.

stop and make offerings. However, if they do not decide to walk, they cannot visit the sacred places located on the other part of the route. Still, the presence of the road allows pilgrims, constrained by their occupations and by time, to go on “pilgrimage.” A single day is now sufficient to go from rTa bo zhol ma to rMa chen by bus, car, or motorcycle; two or three days are required for those on foot. One can assume that this efficiency will lead pilgrims to come more often and in greater numbers. But what is the validity of half a pilgrimage? What is the merit acquired from half a circumambulation performed on a motorcycle or in a car? And is it still possible to call the pilgrim “one who goes around a sacred place,” *gnas skor ba*?

It is too early to predict that the long-term presence of a road will lead to changes in the Tibetan conception of pilgrimage. Such is the vitality of pilgrimage in Tibet, so rigorous is the pragmatism of the Tibetans, that adaptation to modern conditions is quite conceivable. Indeed, one can already observe some consequences of the construction of the road. The most immediate is the violence of the confrontation between those who walk or prostrate and those who ride in motorized vehicles. In this place that has always attracted practitioners who settled in hermitages laid out on the slope of the mountain for varying periods of time, the irritated and irritating horn of the impatient driver now resounds, and, like so many other places around the world, the pedestrian must make way for the automobile. In twelve years, when the road will perhaps be complete and when the number of cars will have dramatically increased, one wonders whether the pilgrims will still be able to prostrate along the ritual path. The noise of the vehicles not only disturbs the pilgrims but also the animal life; in 1990, fauna was nearly non-existent compared to the description given by the yogin Zhabs

dkar (1809-1810)¹⁷ who sojourned there over one year, or L. Clark¹⁸ or W.W. Rockhill.¹⁹

Thus, even the marmots have completely disappeared along the road but continue to proliferate in areas inaccessible by car.

The road also has an impact on social life: by allowing the completion of half a pilgrimage in one day, it has put an end to the communal and festive aspect of the pilgrimage for those who choose motorized travel. It was during the course of these days of walking, of evening gatherings, of encounters with a monk, a lama, an old man, a scholar, that stories circulated. Enclosed in their car or gripping the handlebars of their motorcycle, hastened by their schedule, the pilgrims cut themselves off from the life of the pedestrian community. The progressive oblivion of the oral tradition and thus of a part of the cultural meaning of pilgrimage is perhaps inevitable.

Nevertheless, the road was not built for the comfort and convenience of the pilgrims who come once every twelve years. It links villages which, before, were accessible only with a significant detour; it allows the transportation of goods and contributes to the development of villages like Chu dkar sna kha, which is booming, a boom that certainly is just beginning. It is located at the junction of three roads: the one which connects the small town of Zho zan kung he, the pilgrimage road, and another road under construction toward the north. Two inns, some restaurants, and shops have appeared since 1992. The population has increased and now comprises some Chinese. In the center of an enclosure there is a *stÉpa* (already there in 1990) and one can visit the temple (still under construction in 1992). It was built with donations from three neighboring villages: rTa bo zhol ma, Zho zan kung he, and Me tshang and is

¹⁷ See Ricard (1994: 154-178).

¹⁸ Clark (1954: 59, 126, 144, 170, 174, 257, 299-302).

¹⁹ Rockhill ([1891] 1975: 146).

dedicated to A myes rMa chen. A single monk serves the temple, called A myes rMa chen *lha khang*. On the altar, there are statues of Green Tara, Padmasambhava, and Tsi'u dmar po.²⁰ The thousand buddhas are depicted on one wall, and on the other, a fresco shows the path of circumambulation. A new *ma'i* temple (*ma'i lha khang*) has been built with large statues of Padmasambhava and dGu ru Bla ma Thub tshe (renowned as a great master of rDzogs chen²¹ and the abbot of dGu ru monastery, the only monastery along the ritual route on the northwest side of the mountain, until his death in 1995).

It is also thanks to this road, or because of it (according to one's perspective) that a new form of a (perhaps) temporary economy has appeared. In 2002, tent-restaurants and tent-hotels, brought in by horse or truck, were erected at some places along the route, leading to a new problem, this time an ecological one, that of waste. This is the case below the pass of 'Brog bsdu nyag kha, "The Comb Where Nomads Gather," where tent-restaurants and tent-shops were pitched at the foot of the mountain 'Brag ri rgyal mo,²² A myes rMa chen's mother. Erected to offer shelter and some food after a difficult passage, most of the pilgrims stopped, mainly to look, sometimes to buy a drink or biscuits. Those who break the journey to eat are in fact rare; most pilgrims carry their food (*rtsam pa* and tea) and cannot afford the high price of a meal, where the products brought from long distances are very expensive. The pilgrimage thus has an economic impact, with the town of rMa chen the chief beneficiary. The pilgrims, most of them nomads, must pass this way, and they take the

²⁰ On Tsi'u dmar po, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975: 166-176).

²¹ On this topic see, among others, Karmay (1988).

²² This spelling was provided by the manager, but one finds also Drag gi rgyal mo (Buffetrille 2000: 159).

opportunity to buy what they need. This has attracted numerous Chinese shops and restaurants.

In addition to the tents, more permanent structures have also appeared; a greenhouse has even been built near mTshal snag kha mdo. A permanent population, mainly Tibetan for the moment, has settled at lower altitudes on land that until recently belonged to religious practitioners and nomads, whose lives have been strongly affected by the Chinese policy on pastures. The hunting of animals, considered the property of the territorial god, is prohibited near the mountain, but cattle are allowed to graze. By 1990, the policy of fencing pastures in order to prevent overgrazing began to be enforced around the mountain and has continued in subsequent years. It is a controversial policy, not only because it is very expensive²³ but because “it also creates a new source of conflicts between neighbors and with herders on transfer from summer to winter pastures.”²⁴ This policy of the privatization of pastures damages the social fabric, in the sense that the migrations of the nomad community are disrupted. It has also an impact on the pilgrimage. In 2002, fences were erected almost everywhere and sacred sites, such as Go mtshon, “Weapons,” were no longer accessible. Nevertheless, it was here that in 1990 dGu ru Bla ma Thub tshe gave his blessings to the pilgrims. A throne has been erected in honor of this great religious figure but, standing in an enclosed field, it is not accessible to pilgrims. I asked several pilgrims and none knew the location of Go mtshon. This was not the case in 1990, as if the memory of the place depended on the ability to reach it.

Changes in the Pilgrims' Behavior

²³ Goldstein (1996: 22, 25).

²⁴ Horleman (2002: 260).

Until the 1950s, only the nomad populations surrounding the mountain performed this pilgrimage; the bellicose reputation of the mGo log tribes deterred outsiders.²⁵ This is no longer the case; the mGo log and other nomad tribes do not prevent “strangers” from entering their territory. Yet in 1990, the great majority still belonged to the surrounding tribes. In 2002, pious people from faraway regions were there, among others a group from Reb gong (Ch. Tongren, rMa lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) of more than forty people for whom A myes rMa chen is an important deity. There was even a monk from Khams. The improvement in transportation and in the roads is largely responsible for this change. The presence of Tibetans from outside the territory of A myes rMa chen may lead eventually to the decline of a feeling of regional identity, to be replaced by an increased feeling of national identity.

In 1990, the pilgrimage was performed at the pace of the yaks, without anyone noting the passing of time. Departure was generally at around 6 AM; sometimes we stopped at 2 PM. The tents were pitched and, after having taken the animals to graze, the evening passed by, drinking tea and conversing happily; each one told the stories he knew about the sacred sites. The pilgrimage unfolded at the rhythm of travel in traditional Tibet.

In August 2002, pilgrims were quite numerous despite the rainy weather and the high rivers. The climatic conditions therefore do not explain the absence of pilgrims in 1992. It seems that only the Year of the Horse attracts devotees these days. In 1992, the prayers flags (*rlung rta*) hung by pilgrims in various places (among others, rTa mchog gong kha, “Sovereign Excellent Horse,” sGos sku chen mo, or 'Brog bsdu nyag kha,) were in a pitiful state, torn to pieces, faded and even fallen onto the ground, clear

²⁵ See for example Guibaut (1947); Clark (1954); Rock (1956).

signs that the pilgrimage had not been performed for several years. Several informants told me that before the Chinese invasion, many pilgrims performed the circumambulation annually (although none of the written sources, to my knowledge, confirm this). Rock (1956: 115) gives the figure of 10,000 Tibetans, but makes clear that this number corresponds to a Year of the Horse.

In 1990, one encountered groups of horsemen and women dressed in wonderful clothes and often armed with guns, accompanied by yaks carrying the luggage, whereas in 2002, numerous pilgrims walked turning their prayers wheel and carrying their own belongings. Many had dispensed with their traditional dress in favor of trousers or even jogging clothes. The lay people, in 1990, exceeded the number of monks, and the followers of Buddhism, along with two Bon po tantrists, traveled clockwise around the mountain. Twelve years later, monks and lay persons seemed almost equal in number, but some Bon po (a group of five persons from Henan, Sog po Mongol Autonomous County, rMa lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) performed the circumambulation counterclockwise. According to a Buddhist pilgrim I met in 1990, the power of the god determines the direction of the circumambulation. Because, for him A myes rMa chen was a powerful Buddhist god, it seemed logical that all the pilgrims move in the Buddhist direction. This logic would seem to hold also for the Bon po mountain of Kon po Bon ri, where pilgrims move counterclockwise regardless of their affiliation²⁶, and at Tsa ri (Southern Tibet), where everyone moves clockwise²⁷. Yet at Kailash and Kha ba dkar po (Yunnan) everyone follows his own religious tradition. How, then, should one interpret the fact that in 1990 at A myes rMa chen, Buddhist and Bon po all moved in the Buddhist direction, but in 2002, each went his own way? Has the

²⁶ Karmay (1992: 531).

²⁷ Huber (1999: 13).

great god lost his power? Perhaps one can advance a more political hypothesis: for several years, the Chinese authorities have attacked Buddhism as a “foreign culture.” Such a claim, of course, is not new in Tibet; the Bon po have long had the same opinion. This championing of Bon as the authentically Tibetan religion may have given the small number of Bon po pilgrims the courage to display their identity, something they may have been unwilling to do in the past.

The conditions of daily life were also quite different in 2002 from what they had been previously. In 1990 all the pilgrims had tents. But in the summer of 2002, the only protection from the elements for many were large plastic bags, into which they slipped to sleep at night. If this afforded them little protection from the cold and the humidity, it also spared them from carrying a heavy load. The plastic bags were also a clear sign that they were not planning an extended pilgrimage. For those on foot in 2002, the journey could be performed in five or six days, rather than seven or eight.

The behavior of the pilgrims has also changed at some of the sites. At mTshal snag kha mdo, in 1990, the pilgrims stopped at the foot of the cliff in order to gather black and red earth, which they carefully placed in clean wrapping, for future use as a relic or as medicine. At that time, many pilgrims told me that this place was called mTshal nag kha mdo, “Confluence of Vermilion and Black” and their behavior matches this name. In August 2002, this tradition seemed to have been utterly forgotten, but another had appeared in its place: the presence of the Rigs gsum mgon po, the “Protectors of the Three Lineages” (Avalokiteṣvara, Manjuṣrī, Vajrapāñi) in the guise of a cliff of three different colors. A monk-physician, settled in a tent-hospital, showed it to all the pilgrims, emphasizing that this was explained in one of the pilgrimage guides.²⁸

²⁸ A bu dkar lo (2000:17).

rTa mchog gong kha is still one of the most important sites. In spite of the cold and the wind blowing in gusts, pilgrims stopped for a rather long time, prostrated, and performed one or several circumambulations around the large mast. In a recent development, a monk has taken advantage of the devotees' stopping there to sell cassettes of the teachings of his master. Yet no one offered horse-hair or a piece of reins in this place dedicated to the horses, as had been done in the past, and there was no trace of the mound of such things that had accumulated in 1990. Horse-skulls were still to be seen, scattered on the ground, but far fewer than in 1992. The custom had been to offer hair-horse and to bring the skull of a horse to this auspicious place in order to prevent the death of other horses and to quickly gain a new one. Is this custom disappearing? Travel by bus is certainly not conducive to transporting horse skulls, but their absence may be a further sign of the decline of the horse as means of transport.

But it is at Gos sku chen mo that the behavior of the pilgrims was most different from the past. In 1990, men and women alike carried heavy stones while circumambulating the mast; in 2002, they carried no such burden. In response to my question, everyone asserted that this action has to be performed at the neighboring site, gShin rje rgya ma dang me long, "the Scales and the Mirror of Yama," where I had observed it twelve years before. There, indeed, feverish activity prevailed. Numerous pilgrims lifted stones, which they carried around a *mañ* wall while walking. The pilgrimage guide of A bu dkar lo (2000: 10) specifies that at gShin rje rgya ma dang me long, there are stones called *pha ma'i drin rdo*, "Stones [showing] Gratitude towards Father and Mother;" and "if one lifts them while reciting *mañ* and performing circumambulation of the stone wall, it demonstrates one's gratitude to one's parents."

As before, pilgrims entered next into the *myal lam*, “Path to Hell,”²⁹ and then hung from an outcropping of the cliff to weigh their sins, tilting their head back in order to see “the mirror of Yama,” in fact, a rocky mountain facing gShin rje rgya ma dang me long (an action not prescribed by the guidebooks); up to that point in time, the available pilgrimage guides had recommended only three actions in a sacred place: prostration, circumambulation, and recitation.

In his text, A bu dkar lo textualizes the practice of the carrying the “Stones [showing] Gratitude towards Father and Mother” and institutes it in this place alone, integrated into a Buddhist context. Previously, this practice was unique to the oral tradition. No pilgrimage guide mentions it and, in 1990, one of my companions frequently referred to written instructions a friend had given him, including, “At Gos sku chen mo [and not at gShin rje rgya ma dang me long], one must . . . carry the stones of the ‘kindness of father and mother.’” What was the old custom? It is impossible to answer, but it is certain that the written sources from this point on will identify where pilgrims must do this.

A little further on, in the Ha lung (?) plain where g.Yas khog River, “River on the Right-Hand Side” runs, one could observe devotees in 2002 kneeling on the ground. They hammered rocks with a stone, chipping off small squares of pyrite called *dam can bla rdo*, “Stone Soul [of the Deities] Bound by Vow.” According to their report, they knew of these stones at this place from the pilgrimage guide of A bu dkar lo. In 1990 and 1992, no known written sources mentioned these stones, and even the oral tradition seemed unaware of them. Moreover, at that time one had to ford the river,

²⁹ These are narrow passages between two rocks or in a cliff that the pilgrims cross to purify themselves and to overcome fear of the intermediary state between death and rebirth (*bar do*) at the time of death.

and this was the reason why one took the shortest route, and no one proceeded to the place where these pyrite stones are found. Today, where there is a road, bridges have been erected. One of them stretches across the g.Yas khog; the stones are found on the way to the bridge.

Changes in the Sacred Sites

Observations over a period of twelve years show not only the changes in the landscape and in the behavior of the pilgrims, but also in the sacred sites that stretch along the pilgrimage path. Some seem to sink into oblivion, like Go mtshon, while others are identified, enlarged, or emerge with the passing years. Are they new creations, or do scholars, who excavate memories and write pilgrimage guides, contribute somehow to their revival?

At Shug pa g.yag rnga, two small structures have been erected on the other side of the river. The height of the water prevented the crossing, but a monk who was there pointed them out, one as a *tsha khang*³⁰ and the other as a longevity vase (*tshe bum pa*). But he was unable to give more information, even about when they were built.

It is at Mo ba dang gto ba,³¹ in a recess extended by small stone walls, that the great yogin Zhabs dkar (1781-1851) stayed during his sojourn at A myes rMa chen.³²

At the site of the small stone hut built with the help of his two companions, there now

³⁰ A *tsha khang* is a small structure in which the Tibetans place miniature *stĕpas* or small votive clay sculptures (*tsha tsha*) made sometimes with the ashes of a dead person.

³¹ I follow A bu dkar lo's spelling (2002: 18) but my previous informants as well as Kun dga' mkhas dbang dpal bzang po gave the name as Mo ba gto ba. The *mo pa* is a soothsayer and the *gto* is a "powerful exorcistic ritual" (Tucci 1988: 177). The *gto ba* is perhaps one who performs the *gto*. In a text of offering of fumigation (*bsang mchod*), Mo ba gto ba [and not Mo ba dang gto ba] is said to be a "Great God [...] residing at the border of China and Tibet" (see Buffetrille (2000: 161).

³² See M. Ricard (1994: 155-178).

stands a small house that bears the name Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol gyi grub phug, “Meditation Cave of Zhabs dkar Tshogs drug rang grol.” It was built in 2001 by donors, as the Chinese inscription on the wall testifies. When I was passing through, two monks from Serthar³³ were living there and were carving stones with the Avalokitesvara formula, *Oṃ mañ padme hṛīḥ* for sale. Not far from there, a footprint of the yogin, unknown in 1990 and 1992, is identified with the inscription: Zha (sic) dkar *zhabs rjes*, “Footprint of Zha(bs) dkar.”

A little further on, beside the path between Mo ba dang gTo ba and Bye ma 'bru til, “Sand [which forms] Scattered Grains.” there rises a large rock overloaded with offerings: banknotes, coins, ceremonial scarves, pictures of the Dalai Lama and religious masters. On a projecting ledge numerous hats have been deposited. No one noticed the existence of this rock in past years,³⁴ yet today this site is the object of the veneration of pilgrims who all, except one, were unaware of what the rock symbolized. It seems to represent the hat of rGya tsha Zhal dkar, Gesar’s elder half brother. It is not identified in the guides, and it is impossible to say if, in naming it, we assist in the creation of a new site or in the revival of a place fallen into oblivion through the vicissitudes of time. This identification is interesting for two reasons: first, it makes a claim for the presence of Gesar in this region. The hero of the epic plays a significant role in the sense of identity of Tibetans, in particular in the mGo log area; the appearance of a (new?) site related to him only underlines his importance. Second, the mother of rGya tsha Zhal dkar is said to have been the daughter of a Chinese emperor. Hence, he is half-Chinese half-Tibetan, and thus “politically correct.”

³³ See Germano (1998: 95-119).

³⁴ Even in 1998, this site was unknown. During the pilgrimage, I met Bessho Yusuke, a Japanese student doing his master’s thesis on A myes rMa chen pilgrimage. I am indebted to him for this information.

It was obvious that pilgrims went earlier in the year to visit sGrol ma'i grub chu, "Water of Tara's Realization." on the other side of the g.Yas khog River. In August, the summer rains prevented crossing it to reach the spring. Nevertheless, numerous bright prayers flags showed that the site was still very active.

Going on his way, the pilgrim arrives at the bank of the Chu sngon, "Blue River." It is possible to cross it during the summer if one starts early in the morning and in 2002, a small flag was even erected indicating where the waters were at their lowest level. On the other side of the river stands a rock covered with prayers flags called Nu bo dGra 'dul dbang phyug, "Younger Brother, Powerful One Who Conquers Enemies." the younger brother of A myes rMa chen. It bears a handprint, which some people told me was that of sKu phyogs rgya li rdo rje, a monk from Rwa rgya dgon pa,³⁵ but also the one of Zhabs dkar, although two mGo log l met maintained that it was hewn by a human hand. But here too, the written sources confer an "authentic" identification to this handprint; the guide of A bu dkar lo (2000:12) attributes it to sKu phyogs rgya li sku gong ma (also called, so he says, lHa lung dpal rdor).³⁶ Since 1992, three thrones were erected, among them was one for Bla ma Thub tshe of dGu ru monastery, which stands a half hour walk above this place. This monastery has enlarged during these twelve years and is still under construction. The young reincarnation of Bla ma Thub tshe lives there in the company of 150 monks; there were 20 in 1990. But Nu bo dGra 'dul dbang phyug is also one of the entrances of the pilgrimage and as a result of the construction of the new road, trucks, jeeps and motorcycles were passing through or were parked there.

³⁵ See Gruschke (2000: 75-78).

³⁶ lHa lung dpal kyi rdo rje?

The last sacred site between Chu dkar sna kha and Tshal snag kha mdo, but without a name, is a rock face that also bears a hand print. Identified in 1990 by some mGo log monks (who were the only ones to stop at this place) as that of rGya tsha Zhal dkar, it is now marked by numerous prayers flags and no one can ignore it. A small paper hung on the rock indicates that it is the handprint of gSer shul rdo li mdo sngags bstan 'dzin ni (nyi?) ma³⁷ and attributes to it the power of “suppressing all obstacles and liberating by the view.”

Pilgrimage Guides and their Present Function

As we saw above, pilgrimage guides play an important role in the behavior of pilgrims and in the evolution of the sacred sites. Following the Chinese invasion of 1950, attacks on religious life in Tibet led to the destructions of temples and monasteries, but also to a great many books. The composition of new pilgrimage guides today by local scholars emphasizes their awareness of the risk of oblivion and thus the loss of part of their cultural inheritance. At the same time, the birth of a written text can mark the death of an oral tradition; the written text serves to demarcate and codify a tradition, through a process in which the author includes some things and, consciously or unconsciously, excludes others. The power of authorization provided by the written text is particularly strong in Tibet, where the book is a sacred object of respect and veneration.

In the Year of the Horse 1990, a scholar from western Tibet, Chos dbyings rdo rje, composed on the occasion of the Year of the Horse, year of the great pilgrimage of Mount Kailash as well, a pilgrimage guide divided in two parts: in the first, he provided

³⁷ Not identified.

several texts written by great holy men who performed the pilgrimage; in the second, written by him, he describes very precisely the pilgrimage path, fixing all the sacred sites along the way.³⁸

In the same way, the Year of the Horse of 2002 saw the publication of a collection of pilgrimage guides in the “collection of books of the tourist office of the mGo log Prefecture and of the cultural center of Gesar from the country of rMa,” (*mgo log khul yul skor cu'u dang rMa yul ge sar rig gnas ste ba'i rig gnas dpe tshogs*). It is entitled “Pilgrimage Guide of A myes rMa chen, *A myes rMa chen gyi gnas yig*, and even bears an English subtitle, *Animachen (sic) Pilgrims' Guide Book*. His long title is *Bod srid pa'i lha gnyan rMa rgyal gangs kyi ri bo'i gnas yig phyogs bsdus ngo mtshar rdzogs ldan sprin gyi bla bre*, “Pilgrimage Guide of the Snowy mountain rMa rgyal, Awesome God of the Realm of Tibet, Marvelous Collection, A Canopy of Clouds.”

This collection of texts dedicated to A myes rMa chen offers both modern and older sources. The introduction is written by a monk, O rgyan bsod nams, who also composed a text entitled *rTogs brjod nor bu'i 'khri shing*, “Biography, Tree of Jewels.” A bu dkar lo, presented as a historian, wrote a new pilgrimage guide of 30 pages (p. 1-30): *rMa chen gangs ri'i gnas kyi ngo sprod dad gsum sgo 'byed nor bu'i lde mig*, “Identification of the Sacred Place of A myes rMa chen, Jeweled Key Opening the Door to the Three Kinds of Faith.” He emphasizes the holiness of the place by quoting the great religious masters who have come there; he describes the pilgrimage route and recommends the appropriate behavior for pilgrims at specific sites. He also provides short biographical notes on some of the authors (Vairocana: 37-38; Kun dga' mkhas dbang dpal bzang po: 88-90; mDo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje: 68-70; sNgags sa'i

³⁸ See Buffetrille (2000: 15-99) for a translation of the pilgrimage guide.

dge bshes: 75-76 and dGu ru Bla ma Thub tshe: 110-111). The latter composed a text (91-110), *Sa bcu'i dbang phyug chen po yul skyong rMa rgyal spom ra'i gnas kyi bkod pa rags bsdus kun gsal 'phrul gyi me long*, “Rough Summary of the Sacred Setting of the Protector of the Land rMa rgyal spom ra, Great Lord of the 10th Stage, Magical Mirror Illuminating All” which describes his vision of practitioner. O rgyan sKu gsum gling pa of the monastery of Lung sngon (dGa' bde County) is the author of *rMa g.yang rdo rje brag gi gnas bshad rig 'dzin grub pa'i zhal lung*, “Explanation of the Sacred Place rMa g.yang rdo rje brag, Words of the Accomplished *Vidyadhara*,” in which he presents the story of the subjugation of rMa chen spom ra by Padmasambhava (112-119).

Among the old sources, one finds a pilgrimage guide attributed to Vairocana³⁹ (31-37); one by Kun dga' mkhas dbang dpal bzang po (77-88), Jo nang pa monk of the 19th century, and a text from the Fifth Dalai Lama (p. 125-134).⁴⁰ The editors offer also a text (38-67) from the great rNying ma pa master mDo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje, himself a mGo log (1799-1859): *rMa g.yang rdo rje brag gi gnas bstod rdo rje'i thol glu*, “Hymn to the Sacred Place rMa g.yang rdo rje brag, Spontaneous *Vajra* Songs” and one by sNgags sa'i dge bshes (70-75), a dGe lugs monk of the 19th century, *rMa rgyal gangs ri'i gnas gtod*, “Hymn to the Sacred Place of the Snow Mountain rMa rgyal.” Several texts of offering of fumigation and prayers are listed:

- *rMa rgyal gyi bsang mchod bsdus*, “Brief Offering of Fumigation of Juniper to rMa rgyal” (134-136) by Pan chen Blo bzang chos rgyan⁴¹

³⁹ Famous translator and yogin of the 8th century claimed by both the Buddhists and the Bon po.

⁴⁰ For the translation of these texts, see respectively Buffetrille (2000: 133-147; 117-133; 157-167).

⁴¹ Pan chen Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1567-1662).

- *lHa chen rMa rgyal spom ra'i bsang mchod*, "Offering of Fumigation of Juniper to the Great God rMa chen" (136-140) by sKu phyogs Shing bza'⁴²
- *rMa chen bsang bsdus*, "Brief Offering of Fumigation of Juniper to rMa chen" (142) by Klong gsal snying po⁴³ (1625-1692)
- *rMa gnyan gsol bsdus*, "Brief Prayers to rMa gnyan", (141) by Ra ga a sye⁴⁴
- *rMa chen gsol bsdus* "Brief Prayers to rMa gnyan," (143) by the great rNying ma pa scholar 'Ju Mi pham (1846-1912).

O rgyan bsod nams, the author of the introduction, explains how necessary it was to publish this book in order to revive the culture after the period of destruction it has suffered. "This book was written," he says, "for all those, Tibetans, Chinese, and foreigners who will come to the sacred place of A myes rMa chen in this Water Year of the Horse." But written in Tibetan, these texts will certainly not create a significant response among the Chinese and the foreigners.

The very limited distribution of these guides is striking. In 1990, it was possible to find the one dedicated to Kailash only in Dar chen, at the foot of the mountain. The A myes rMa chen guide was available in 2002 only in rMa chen and Xining, and only in one of the bookstores. While the Water Year of the Sheep (2003) is the year of the sixty

⁴² The shing bza' line is supposedly the incarnation of Tsong kha pa's mother (Rock 1956: 67). TBRC, resource code W22354 mentions eight incarnations. The author of this text is not yet identified.

⁴³ Disciple of bDud 'dul rdo rje (1615-1672). See Dudjom rinpoche (1991: 736 et 816-817) et Bradburn and al (1995: 253).

⁴⁴ Ra ga a sye is the Sanskrit name of Karma Chags med (information given by Gene Smith, Taiwan 23/11/03), 1605-1670, *gter ston* Karma bka' brgyud. For additional information about him, see G. Dorje and M. Kapstein (1991: 78, n. 1101).

year cycle when one should perform the pilgrimage around Kha ba dkar po (Yunnan),⁴⁵ the pilgrimage guide written by Rin chen rdo rje and Tshe ring chos 'phel in 1999 was in the only bookstore of bDe chen, a compulsory stopping place of the pilgrims. It seems that pilgrims are the only ones who have easy access to these new texts, published in western format.

In 1990, I met only one nomad with a pilgrimage guide (at the time, that of Kun dga' mkhas dbang dpal bzang po); in 2003, not only a reasonable proportion of devotees had this book but they had read it or were reading it along the way, and some of their actions were prescribed in the text (such as carrying the stones at gSin rje rgya ma dang me long or collecting the small squares of pyrite in Ha lung).

The specific changes that I have described contribute directly to larger cultural transformations. In areas of Tibet not dominated by Buddhism, mountains have traditionally been regarded as territorial gods (*yul lha*), with their own proscriptions and practices. For example, only males were permitted to perform rituals of offering on the lower slope of such a mountain. Over the course of Tibetan history, many of these mountains were incorporated into the Buddhist cosmography through the deeds of a Buddhist saint. This transformation would typically occur when a great religious figure “opened the pilgrimage” (*gnas skor phyed ba*) by subduing the negative forces—the local gods and spirits—that prevented access to the site. Once the mountain had been transformed into a Buddhist site, the practice of circumambulation would be performed

⁴⁵ I performed two circumambulations of the outer path and one of the inner one in September-October 2003. The translation of the guide is in process, along with a study of the pilgrimage.

by men and women alike, consolidating this metamorphosis. I have referred to this process of the transformation of space as “Buddhization.”⁴⁶

A myes rMa chen is one of the most famous mountains where the non-Buddhist notion of the territorial god or *yul lha* persists simultaneously with the Buddhist notion of the holy site or *gnas ri*. But the trend continues to move in the Buddhist direction. The ongoing process of Buddhization—in which the mountain is transformed from a territorial god whom laymen worship once or twice a year on the slope of the mountain into a Buddhist holy mountain around which pilgrims perform circumambulation—is being hastened by, among other factors, the publication and dissemination of pilgrimage guides.

Conclusion

Modernization, sinicization, tourism, and buddhization are four phenomena whose dynamic interplay will bring further changes in the pilgrimage around A myes rMa chen.

The improvement of the road network in Qinghai province and the construction of the road around A myes rMa chen will have more and more consequences. Whereas the pilgrimage guides emphasize the isolated character of this holy place where the practitioners came to meditate, the road will attract a growing population (Tibetan but also Chinese). To date, I have not seen Chinese immigrants or Chinese tourists around A myes rMa chen, but only some foreign tourists. The mGo log Prefecture has a program to expand tourism, and the A myes rMa chen pilgrimage is included in it. Two tourist agencies were already operating in 2002. But the emphasis at the moment is on the mass tourism. The consequences of this form of tourism can

⁴⁶ See Buffetrille (1998: 18-34).

be observed in Yunnan. In 2001, the city of rGyal thang (Ch. Zhongdian) and the surrounding areas was renamed Shangri-La (pronounced Shangalila), and most of the Tibetans and Chinese now use only this name. The media continually vaunt the beauties of the place. rGyal thang is now linked by plane not only to Kunming but also to Lhasa. Although it remains unlikely that Chinese tourists would venture to perform the great pilgrimage, which requires between 12 and 14 days of walking, one can see many Chinese (some coming from Beijing and even Shanghai) along the path of the inner circumambulation, which can be done in 4 or 5 days. A myes rMa chen has not yet become the object of this kind of enterprise, but it is obvious that the authorities have such an end in mind.

This is a region inhabited mainly by nomads, for whom the horse always was, until recently, the only mean of transportation. Little by little, it has been displaced by the bus and the motorcycle. The transportation facilities also contribute to the destruction of community life. Before, important groups of nomads of the same encampment came to perform the pilgrimage around A myes rMa chen. With the redistribution of the pastures, which has contributed to the breakdown of the social network, modernization will only speed this fracture.

As far as the phenomenon of Buddhization is concerned, we have seen that the proliferation of new pilgrimage guides, along with the construction or expansion of religious establishments, demonstrates that this process is still under way. There is more than a religious significance here. In a period in which Tibetans express their identity through their Buddhist culture, this process also has a certain political impact.

During the last twelve years, modernization and Buddhization had an influence on A myes rMa chen pilgrimage, without draining its vitality. But what will be the effects of tourism and sinicization?

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