

ASIAN HIGHLANDS PERSPECTIVES

VOLUME 6

Edited by

Charles Kevin Stuart

Gerald Roche

Tshe dbang rdo rje ཚེ་དབང་རྡོ་རྗེ། 才项多杰

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Rin chen rdo rje རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ། 仁青多杰

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Front Cover: This photograph by G.yu lha (of her mother) was taken in Siyuewu 斯跃武 Village, Puxi 蒲西 Township, 'Dzam thang (Rangtang 壤塘) County, Rnga ba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture (Aba zangzu qiangzu zizhizhou 阿坝藏族羌族自治州), Sichuan 四川 Province. Siyuewu Villagers are officially classified as Tibetans and consider themselves as such, but speak the Rgyalrongic Lavrung language.

Back Cover: Workers rest while building the wall of a prayer hall using traditional building tools. Photograph by Zla ba sgrol ma, Sman shad Region, Sde dge (Dege 德格) County, Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (Ganzi zangzu zizhizhou 甘孜藏族自治州), Sichuan Province.

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FROM THE EDITORS

Asian Highlands Perspectives welcomes submissions that allow us to better hear and understand voices from the highlands of Asia relating their experiences—what they mean and how they are understood—all with a view to enriching our knowledge of this vast area. We hope to feature autobiographical accounts and studies of songs, jokes, tongue twisters, weddings, divorce, funerals, 'dirty' stories and songs, love songs, rituals of romance, illness, medicine, healing, clothing, music, rites of passages, orations, gender, herding techniques, agricultural practices, trading, flora and fauna, the annual cycle of work in rural communities, 'development', language, religion, conflict, architecture, education, apprenticeships, art, and everything else that informs us.

Prospective authors are welcome to use theory to interpret what they report, however, the editors are particularly interested in careful, detailed, contextualized descriptions revealing local meanings of what is being described, and how this connects with relevant publications. It is especially hoped that local scholars who lack access to educational systems emphasizing theory will contribute. All submissions are peer reviewed. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* is available in hardcopy as well as on-line. Published authors receive PDF versions of their published work.

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Rin chen rdo rje

Editors

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THE BRAG 'GO WOLF BEGGING RITUAL
(SPYANG SPRANG)

Mgon po tshe ring མགོན་པོ་ཚེ་རིང་། (Independent Scholar)

ABSTRACT

A ritual performed in 1999 in Dge rtse (Genzhi 更知) Township, Brag 'go (Luhuo 炉霍) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi 甘孜) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan (四川) Province is described. The ritual involved a man, his son, and his nephew taking a wolf skin, visiting nine villages, and asking for donations to appease the 'owner of the wolves'.

KEY WORDS

Rtse ri Village, wolf begging, ritual, Tibetan

INTRODUCTION

A wolf begging ritual is practiced in Rtse ri dang bo (Zhiri yi 知日一), Rtse ri gnyis pa (Zhiri er 知日二), and Rtse ri gsum pa (Zhiri san 知日三) administrative villages (*xingzheng cun* 行政村), which are located in the south part of Dge rtse Township, Brag 'go (Luhuo 炉霍) County, Dkar mdzes (Ganzi 甘孜) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan 四川 Province. Locally, Rtse ri ma refers collectively to these three administrative villages; it is not an officially recognized term. The Rtse ri ma administrative villages were home to 182 households and a total of 634 people in 2005. All residents were Tibetan.

A century ago, there were only eight households living near the sacred mountain of Rtse, where the Rtse ri ma communities currently are located. Rtse Mountain was their tutelary deity and the vicinity of this holy mountain was their winter camp. Gradually, these eight households became the current, much larger community. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Rtse ri ma was divided into the contemporary three villages located in mountains where livestock were susceptible to wolf attack. Continuation of a livelihood based on livestock demanded that local people respond forcefully to wolf attack. The wolf begging ritual was held after killing the wolves as compensation to the *sde brgyad*,¹ the owners of the wolves.

It is necessary to examine more closely the particular circumstances of life in Rtse ri ma to better understand the

¹ *Sde brgyad* 'the eight types' refers to a class of eight non-human beings and is a short form of *lha srin sde brgyad* 'the eight types of deities and demons' (Samuel 1993, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993). The exact composition of the eight types varies (see Samuel 1993 for a classification) but, in the Tibetan worldview, the term refers to all sentient non-human, non-animal beings, both helpful and harmful.

ritual's significance. In about 1999, Rtse ri ma residents earned their main income from yaks that provided butter, cheese, meat, and hair that was collected and used to make tents local people lived in during summer and fall. They lived in simple houses made of stone and wood in winter and spring. Houses were one-story with rammed dirt walls making three sides of the house and two big windows covering the front side. An opening covered by a thick curtain on the left side of the front wall. Inside was a large room, used as a kitchen and for sleeping. Wealthier families owned around one hundred yaks while poor families had ten yaks in 1999. No children from these three communities had attended school in 2005 because official schooling was not valued and was deemed too expensive. Furthermore, children played a key role in herding and other work for the family.

SKINNING THE WOLF

In 1999 at the age of fifteen, I visited Uncle Her tres in Rtse ri dang bo Village, among the mountains in northwestern Dge rtse Township. He lived in a house in winter and a black yak hair tent in other seasons.

With my mother ('Tsham lha) and some other relatives, we reached Uncle Her tres' cottage on horseback. It had stone walls, and there was only one entrance and only one window in one wall. I saw smoke wafting from a pipe above the cottage as we approached.

Suddenly a child shouted, "Guests are coming!"

Uncle Her tres' wife, Aunt Sgron ma, came out and greeted us. I felt this was a bit strange because usually Uncle Her tres or his son, Rdo rje, greeted guests. I dismounted and looked around for Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje, while Mother and the other guests got off their horses and entered the house, but I saw no trace of them.

I entered the house and asked, "Aunt, where is Uncle

Her tres?"

"He is skinning a wolf behind that small hill," she said, pointing to a small hill facing the house. I rushed there without eating with Mother and the other guests. When I arrived, I saw Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje skinning a wolf.

"Uncle, what are you doing?" I asked, moving towards them.

"When did you arrive? Don't come close, just stand there," Uncle Her tres said.

"I just arrived. Uncle, why can't I come closer? I can help you skin the wolf," I said.

"If you come closer, the wolf's blood will get on you. Wolves are the livestock of *sde brgyad*, which are eight supernatural spirits. If the wolf's blood gets on you, then the *sde brgyad* will think you were involved in killing the wolf and will create obstacles and disasters for you," said Uncle, handing a knife to Rdo rje.

"What are *sde brgyad*?" I asked, sitting on a rock some distance from Uncle Her tres and his son.

"My dear nephew, to be honest, I don't exactly know what they are. But my uncle used to tell me that they are like mountain deities. If you bother them, they will cause problems for you," said Uncle Her tres.

I still did not understand very well about the *sde brgyad* but, for the moment, I was more surprised with the way Uncle Her tres began to skin the wolf. Generally, local nomads pull animals down on the ground and tie their feet firmly together when they skin them. However, Uncle Her tres had hung the wolf upside-down on a big pole and had started skinning from its feet.

"Uncle, why did you hang the wolf like that on the pole?" I said.

"To get the whole skin off the wolf," said Uncle Her tres.

"Oh," I said. I wondered, "Why does Uncle skin this wolf and why do they need to hide behind this small hill to

skin it?"

I asked, "Why do you skin this wolf? I mean, we can not eat wolf meat, right?"

Uncle Her tres put his knife near the pole, washed his hands in a wood bucket full of water, sat by me, smiled, and said, "Wolves kill our livestock so we sometimes kill them. But on the other hand, we believe that wolves are the livestock of *sde brgyad*, who can create disasters for us, so we hold the wolf-begging ritual. By holding this ritual as compensation for the *sde brgyad*, we appease the *sde brgyad*."

"Uncle, how did you kill the wolf? I heard that wolves eat people so aren't you afraid of them?" I asked.

"There are usually two ways to kill them. We find the den where the wolf lives, pile dung and other fuel in the mouth of the den, and set it on fire. The smoke wafts into the den and suffocates the wolves. The second way is to find the paths that wolves follow and scatter poisoned meat or *rtsam pa*. The wolves eat it and die. Actually, the second method accidentally kills other animals that walk on the path so we usually don't use poisoned food," said Uncle Her tres.

"Uncle, there are many dens around the mountains. How do you know which dens have wolves?" I asked.

"There are many signs that indicate where the wolves live. The dens among rocks usually belong to wolves and there is much wolf hair around the dens' mouths. And after the wolves give birth, the cubs stay at the mouth of the dens, enjoying the sunshine," said Uncle, standing up and helping Rdo rje.

I watched silently while they skinned the wolf. After finishing, Uncle spread the skin on the ground in the sunshine while Rdo rje chopped the carcass into pieces. Next, Uncle and Rdo rje put three stones near the river to support a pot to cook the meat.

"Uncle, why don't you cook the meat on the stove inside the house? The fire is better there and the meat will

cook faster," I suggested.

"No, we cannot cook the meat inside the house. The wolf is a very sinful animal. It is full of hatred and anger. If we put the meat over our stove, it will besmirch the stove deities and the vapor from boiling the meat will defile our house deities," said Uncle Her tres.

"If the meat is that dirty, then why do you cook it? We can't eat it," I said, handing Uncle the big pot near me.

"Yes, you're right. We can't eat the meat, but it is really good for our livestock, especially for the yaks. The wolf meat is very nutritious so if the yaks drink the meat soup, they will be healthier and become stronger," Uncle said.

"I see," I said. They began cooking the meat while I talked about my school life. After an hour or so, the meat was cooked. Uncle poured the soup into a big wooden bucket. Then they dug a big hole in the ground and buried the bones and the meat.

"Uncle, why do you bury them?" I asked.

"If we throw the bones and meat away, then other people will touch them unintentionally. Also, the meat has a very strong smell, so it will trouble some of the mountain deities nearby," said Uncle.

Rdo rje and I poured water on the fire while Uncle sewed the wolf skin to make a bag, put dried grass inside, and hung it up. We left the bucket of soup there to cool. We returned to the cottage with the skin, which Uncle hung near a corner of the house and commented that it would dry easily in the wind and sun.

BEGGING

Three months passed. I went home from school one weekend to my home in Dge rtse Township Town and found Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje there. Uncle Her tres had brought the wolf skin, with pieces of multicolored cloth tied on its nose.

"Uncle, what are you going to do with the skin? Are you going to sell it?" I asked.

"No, my dear nephew, the skin is dry now so I came to complete the wolf begging ritual that I mentioned to you before. We're going to beg with this wolf skin," said Uncle.

"Why do you beg from others? Isn't begging a bad thing?" I asked.

"Generally it is, but we will beg with this wolf skin and everyone will notice that we are holding the wolf begging ritual. Begging in this case is not considered a bad thing. We must beg from people in nine villages. Only obtaining various food and items from a number of households will satisfy the owners of the wolf," said Uncle Her tres.

"I see. But why do we need to beg from nine villages?" I asked, sipping tea from Mother's bowl.

"I'm not sure why. From generation to generation we have gone to nine villages to beg. Elders say that begging from nine villages will satisfy the *sde bgryad* as compensation for their wolf and appease their anger. I'm not sure what the nine means and why we go to nine villages," said Uncle Her tres.

"Oh, by the way, Uncle, later when you go to beg, may I go with you?" I asked.

"Of course. Actually I need your help to carry the things people will give us," said Uncle.

After lunch, Uncle Her tres, Rdo rje, and I went to the village behind my home. Uncle Her tres carried the wolf skin on his back by holding the colorful cloths hanging from its nose. We slowly approached the village.

"Uncle, may I carry the skin just for fun?" I asked.

"No. I am the real killer of this wolf. Carrying the skin while we beg is like punishment from the owner of the wolf for being the killer," said Uncle Her tres.

"Why did you tie those colorful cloths on the nose?" I asked.

"The wolves' noses are like human eyes. By smelling, they find the traces of animals. Therefore, I tied these colorful cloths in the nose of the skin and hold it while I carry the skin. It's as though I am leading the way for the wolf, showing respect," said Uncle Her tres.

Rdo rje and I ran ahead while Uncle Her tres followed slowly, carrying the skin. Finally we reached the village. When we reached the gate of the nearest household, Uncle Her tres put the wolf skin in front of the gate, making sure the nose of the skin faced the gate. The Uncle Her tres loudly said:

ལྷོང་ ལྗ་ ཅུང་། ལྷོང་ ལྗ་ ཅུང་།
wolf nose hit wolf nose hit

(Satisfy) the nose of the wolf. (Satisfy) the nose of the wolf.

After waiting a moment, a man opened the gate and gave us some food and then closed it again. Uncle Her tres chanted:

ལྷོང་ ལྗའི་ ལ་
wolf nose.GEN direction

ཕྱི་རུ རྫོང་
backward turn

The direction of the wolf's nose (will be) turned backward.

ཁང་ ཕྱོག་ མི་ལ་
house upper people-DAT

ན་ཚ་ འོང་མི་ཉན།
disease come-NEG-FUT

(May) disease not come to the people (living) in the upper (story) of the house.

ཁང་	ཞབས་	ཕྱགས་ལ་
house	lower	livestock-DAT

གྲོང་གུང་	ཡོང་མི་ཉན།
disaster	come-NEG-FUT

(May) disaster not come to the livestock (living) in the lower (story) of the house.

ཁ་ལས་	དགེ་དགོས།	རྒྱང་རྟ་	དར་དགོས།
luck	good-IMP	worldly-luck	flourish-IMP

(Have) good luck. (Your) worldly-luck (will) flourish.

After chanting this, Uncle Her tres carried the skin as before and we went to the next household. On the way I asked, "Uncle, why did you say 'satisfy the nose of the wolf' rather than saying, 'please give us some food'?"

"This ritual has its own rules. I told you that a wolf's nose is its most important organ. If we satisfy the wolf's nose, we make peace with its owner. That's why our ancestors created this verse this way," said Uncle Her tres.

"You chanted another verse after they gave us the food, right? What does that mean?" I asked.

"That expresses appreciation to the family for giving food. That verse is full of good words and wishes," said Uncle Her tres.

"But if a family does not give us food or money, then what do we do? Does that interfere with our ritual?" I asked.

"No, it doesn't. If they don't give us food, then we chant this," said Uncle Her tres:

ལྷུང་	སྒྲིའི་	ཁ་
wolf	nose.GEN	direction

ཁྱེད་	ཚང་ལ་	སྐྱོར་
you	family	turn

Turn the nose of the wolf (towards) your family.

ཁང་	ཕྱག་	མི་ལ་
house	upper	people-DAT

ན་ཚ་	འོང་དགོས།
disease	come-IMP

(May) disease come to the people (living in the) upper (story) of the house.

ཁང་	ཞབས་	སྤྱགས་ལ་
house	lower	livestock-DAT

ཁྱོད་གུད་	ཡོང་དགོས།
disaster	come-IMP

(May) disaster come to the livestock (living in the) lower (story) of the house.

ཁ་ལས་	དགའ་མི་ཉན།
luck	good-NEG-FUT

རྒྱུང་ཏྲ་	དར་མི་ཉན།
worldly-luck	flourish-NEG-FUT

(Have) bad luck! (Your) worldly-luck will not flourish.

"This chant is meant to curse the family. However, in the past, everyone gave food to those doing the wolf begging ritual because people were afraid of the curse and a family that refused would lose its social position and be labeled stingy," said Uncle Her tres.

"But if someone does not give us food and if we curse them, won't they get angry?" I asked, following Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje.

"No, they will not get angry, because this is part of the ritual. We only go to villages that honor this ritual, so everyone understands the rules. Moreover, no one likes to be called stingy," said Uncle Her tres.

On that day, we went to four villages to beg. Families gave us money and *rtsam pa* and other food. Uncle Her tres was right. No one refused to give food or money.

COMPENSATION

The next day, Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje went to five more villages to beg while I stayed at home and finished my homework. In the evening, Uncle Her tres and Rdo rje returned with what they had been given.

"Uncle, what are you going to do with all the *rtsam pa* and other things?" I asked.

"I will give the money to the monastery and ask the monks to chant in order to appease the *sde brgyad*. Then I will invite a monk to chant *gsur*.² During the chanting, the monk will give all the *rtsam pa* to the *sde brgyad* by burning it," said Uncle Her tres.

"Uncle, how does a monk give *rtsam pa* to the *sde brgyad*? Does this monk know the *sde brgyad*? Why does the monk burn the *rtsam pa*?" I asked.

² Monks chant while burning *rtsam pa* during the *gsur* ritual to satisfy odor eaters.

"The monk gives the *rtsam pa* to the *sde brgyad* by chanting. *Sde brgyad* are *dri za* (odor eaters). The *sde brgyad* get the *rtsam pa* through the odor of the burning *rtsam pa*," said Uncle.

"What else must you do?" I asked.

"That's the end of this ritual. There is nothing more I need to do. We can keep the skin. We will soften it; cut it into a square, like a piece of felt; put cloth around the skin to make it the size of a bed; and then, old people like our grandmother can use it as a pad since it is very warm," said Uncle, sipping tea from his bowl.

CONCLUSION

Although such villages as Ljog ri and Dgun 'brog in Dge rtse Township practiced the wolf begging ritual, I know no other places that this ritual played as prominent a role as in Rtse ri ma. Perhaps this is because most villages in Brag 'go depend on agriculture. The villages have few livestock and their concern about wolf attack is much less than herders.

In 2002, the wolf begging ritual was rarely practiced because herding had declined in importance and, with other sources of income, herdsmen were less likely to kill wolves. Elders from Rtse ri dang bo Village said that many local people vowed before the local monastery to not kill or hunt any wildlife in 2003, and that hunting wolves thus stopped.

SOURCES

Her tres (b. 1960) is an illiterate lifetime herdsman and a native of Rtse ri dang bo. He told Mgon po tshe ring about the ritual in 1999. Her tres is Mgon po tshe ring's mother's brother.

'Tsham lha (b.1952) is a graduate of Dkar mdzes Nationalities Cadre School. She told Mgon po tshe ring the history of Rtse ri communities. 'Tsham lha is Mgon po tshe ring's mother.

S

sde brgyad ལྗེ་བརྒྱད།
Sgron ma ལྗོན་མ།
Sichuan 四川

T

'Tsham lha འཚམ་ལྷ།

W

wolf begging ritual ལྷུང་ལྷུང་།

X

xingzheng cun 行政村

Z

Zhiri er 知日二
Zhiri er cun 知日二村
Zhiri san 知日三
Zhiri san cun 知日三村
Zhiri yi 知日一
Zhiri yi cun 知日一村

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