SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS
TO LOCAL DEITIES IN LADAKH

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In 'A discourse on the early history of Tibet' compiled by bsTan-'dzin rnam-dag, a former teacher of Smanri, it is said:-

"When Tibet first came into being, people came to settle near the four lakes around Mount Kailash, and depended for their livelihood on yaks, sheep and goats of the rocky slopes and snow mountains. At that time, a harmonious relation developed between people and animals, and the country was known as gnyan yul\(^1\). After that, empowered by the klu\(^2\), pastures, forests and orchards came into existence, and people began living in river valleys. When they disturbed the environment, the klu caused misfortune. The land was known as the klu na-ra seng-nginx. After that, the btsan\(^3\) came to power. They lived in crags, rocks and forests, and caused humans both harm and good. At that time, the practice of propitiating the local deities spread for the first time, and the country was known as the land of the red-faced ones."

When calamities occurred, the local deities were propitiated with sacrificial offerings. Since this tradition has no relation at all to Buddhist practice, it should be described as a local custom. This practice, which arose quite naturally as a local custom, is the very same as the one which survived in Ladakh until recent times.

This kind of practice spread among Ladakhi and 'Brog-pa\(^4\) people alike. At the time of childbirth in a household, both the father and mother had to observe avoidances for a month.

As for the differences between the deities of the 'Brog-pa and central Ladakhis, at the time of marriage in central Ladakh and other villages, people must go to the place of local deities at night, whereas in the 'Brog-pa areas the local deities must be visited during the day. After the local deities have been welcomed with drumming and entertainment, offering scarves can be given. The 'Brog-pa worship khyab 'jug as their chief deity and they make five sacrificial offerings.

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1. i.e. the land of the gnyan: lit. wild sheep, but also kind of spirits.
2. earth/water spirits. (see P.Kaplanian "L'homme dans le monde surnaturel du Ladakh", Recent Research in Ladakh 4, 1995).
3. beings of the Middle World.
4. Tibetan term for nomads, but Ladakhi term for the settled people living around Da Hanu, Dards.
in a year to the male and female local deities: twice at New Year; once at strib-lha; once at sngo-la; and once in the eighth month of the Tibetan calendar. Although it is said that the 'Brog-pa regard both cows and ibex as deities, this is not true. Whereas the deities are pleased to see the ibex and are offered ibex horns after the hunt, they do not like beef, nor milk, nor butter, and these should not be given.

The seven sister deities worshipped by the 'Brog-pa people are: shug-pa lha-mo in Hemis Shupkachan; brag-nag jo-mo in Khalatse; hang-la jo-mo in Skyindiang; gyak-ra jo-mo in Domkhar; ur-bis jo-mo in Urbis. The last is also the local deity of Tagmachig and Ledo. It is customary to make a sacrificial offering once a month to phu-gkar jo-mo. Six of the oracles of these seven local goddesses are Buddhist, and the oracle of hag-nis jo-mo is sha-dkar drag-shos-pa'i ma-ha-mad who is the oracle of Purig and Chigtan.

In 1896 the 36th Ladakhi king, bSod-rnam Nam-rgyal, invited 'Brug-pa rin-po-che and 'Bri-gung Chung-tshang chos-kyi blo-gros to Ladakh from Tibet. When Chung-tshang reached Skyurbucan in Sham, he was displeased by the monthly offering to the local deities. When he reached Lamayuru, he invited the oracle from Tagmachig who went into trance, and he asked "Is it sufficient to make sacrificial offerings to the local deities once a year?" The deity replied, "We deities subsist on flesh and blood, but on this occasion we cannot disregard the lama's order". After that, sacrificial offerings to local deities were made once a year, at the time of New Year. At that time, Chung-tshang chos-kyi blo-gros said that, instead of sacrificial offerings, incense should be given, and he composed a suitable offering prayer and along with the burning of incense added a prayer of atonement.

In 1943, having completed his studies, Ba-ku-la thub-stan mchod-nor came to Ladakh from Tibet, and began teaching religion. In 1944/5 he gave teachings to several villages and asked them to abandon the practice of sacrificial offerings to local deities. Although many people obeyed, the practice survived in a few remote villages. In 1960, rTogs-Idan bstan-pa'i rgyal-mtshan came to Ladakh from Tibet. He visited places like Lamayuru in Sham and elsewhere, and forbade the practice of sacrificial offerings. Many were able to give it up, but even then a few were left. In 1975, sKyabs-mgon che-tshang kun-bzang 'phrin-las lhun-grub came to Ladakh from Tibet. As a result of his repeated visits to 'Brog-pa areas like Dahanu, and his requests that sacrificial offerings be abandoned, since 1991 the custom of sacrificial offerings has been abandoned completely.

5. Harvest rites.
6. Greening of the mountains.

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