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# Assessing and Adapting Rituals That Reproduce a Collectivity

## The Large-Scale Rituals of the Repkong Tantrists in Tibet

Nicolas Sihlé

■ **ABSTRACT:** Tantrists, non-monastic religious specialists of Tibetan Buddhism, constitute a diffuse, non-centralized form of clergy. In an area like Repkong, where they present a high demographic density, large-scale supra-local annual ritual gatherings of tantrists are virtually synonymous with, and crucial for, their collective existence. In the largest of these rituals, the ‘elders’ meeting’ is in effect an institutionalized procedure for evaluating the ritual performance, its conditions and effects, and, if necessary, for adjusting aspects of the ritual. At a recent meeting, the ‘elders’ decided to abandon a powerful and valued but violent and problematical component of the ritual, due to its potential detrimental effects on the fabric of social relations on which the ritual depends for its continued existence. Thus, a highly scripted, ‘liturgy-centered’ ritual (per Atkinson) can be adapted to the social context. The specialists of these textual rituals demonstrate collectively an expertise that extends into the sociological dynamics surrounding the ritual.

■ **KEYWORDS:** conflict, liturgical ritual, ritual aggression, ritual assessment, ritual change, ritual violence, tantrists, Tibetan Buddhism

In discussions on processes of ritual assessment and modification, the rituals examined are most often of a ‘performance-centered’ nature.<sup>1</sup> I am drawing here on Atkinson’s (1989: 14–15) useful distinction between ‘liturgy-centered’ and performance- or performer-centered modes of ritual. This is the contrast between, say, a precisely preordained Vedic sacrifice or a Roman Catholic Mass—rituals marked by a strong degree of (sometimes *longue durée*) ritual conservatism—and a shaman’s séance—characterized rather by protean negotiations of power (Atkinson 1989). The above-mentioned emphasis on the performance-centered pole of the ritual spectrum also appears to some extent in the studies gathered in the present special section. This should not surprise us: in the case of liturgy-centered rituals and their often institutionalized clerical officiants, the validity of the ritual is guaranteed to a large extent by the authority of the tradition, and critical scrutiny and evaluation are thus probably less central than in performance-centered ritual forms marked by more open-endedness, indeterminacy, often ‘inspirational’ ritual specialists (Turner 1968: 439), and collective negotiation of the ritual process (Schieffelin 1985).



Liturgical forms of ritual, however, change as well, in two major ways. First, as with all forms of ritual, there are variations of a contextual and pragmatic nature. These can be linked to questions of place, practice, and agency (e.g., ritual patronage, authority), or of performance (a dimension that is not absent in such forms of ritual). Furthermore, the ritual action can be mobilized in various discursive strategies.<sup>2</sup> We should thus beware of the fallacious tendency to reduce liturgical forms of ritual to their (supposedly invariant or, in Rappaport's terms, 'canonical') textual dimension (Sihlé 2009b). Second, this text-based dimension is itself subject to change, even if, on the whole, it occurs more slowly than the ever-shifting drama of shamanic séances.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I would like to examine the case of a northeast Tibetan annual ritual characterized by complex relations with its associated 'communities' (to use this term somewhat loosely). On the one hand, the ritual has a federative and, one could say, almost existential character for several hundred ritual specialists who reside in the area where it is held. On the other hand, it is supported financially by the larger lay community of the area, which derives various forms of benefit from the ritual. In this case, a crucial feature is that the ritual can include a powerful but ambiguous, semi-occult, and potentially violent component, which aims not only at the suppression of misfortune but potentially also at the ritual aggression of one's human enemies—a possibility that is quite clear to the main actors involved.

In the ritual as it is performed in this particular setting, procedures are followed for assessing and managing certain aspects, such as the designation of ritual functionaries for the following year. In 2013, in the course of that assessment, it was decided that the said powerful, ambiguous component would be eliminated once and for all from the ritual sequence. At stake here, I will argue, was the issue of managing the inescapably problematic character of ritual violence—not so much, in this case, the moral implications for the practitioners (see Sihlé 2013b) as the risks of possibly adverse consequences in terms of the endurance of the ritual and of its associated collectivity of ritual specialists. Analyzing ritual through the lens of associated risks is thus important, not only for performance-centered modes of ritual action, the context in which this dimension of ritual was first emphasized (Howe 2000), but for liturgy-centered ritual as well.

## The Tantrists of Repkong and Their Large-Scale Collective Rituals

On the whole, compared to other Buddhist traditions, Tibetan Buddhism is of a strongly ritualistic character. This is particularly true of its large tantric component, at the core of which one finds ritual forms based on the liturgical and mental evocation of deities, the empowerment of practitioners and substances, and, more generally, the mobilization of ritual power through a wide variety of ritual techniques, such as the repetition of mantras. Typically, in such a ritual, a variety of divinities are invited and receive offerings, and blessings are requested. Powerful protector deities are exhorted to take action, according to the aim of the particular ritual: ensuring success or prosperity; healing; pacifying or forcefully subduing obstructive beings; exorcizing demons or even defeating enemies.

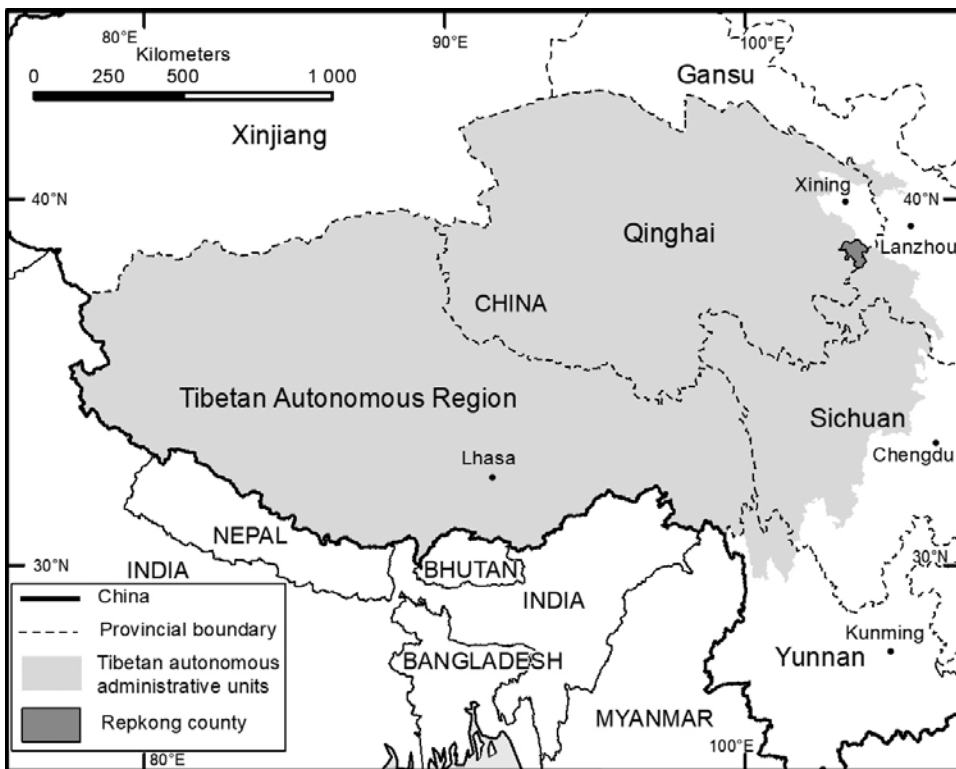
The more powerful end of the ritual spectrum is particularly associated with a distinctly Tibetan type of Buddhist religious specialist, the *ngakpas* [sngags pa], or 'tantrists', as they are most commonly called in Western languages.<sup>4</sup> As opposed to monks, these practitioners do not pronounce monastic vows and typically constitute family lineages in a paternal line, from father to son.<sup>5</sup> They are also on the whole more strongly specialized in these tantric rituals. In Tibetan understandings, tantrist lineages transmit religious qualities: the accumulation of religious blessings over the generations endows the descendants of such a lineage with a special religious

potential. Through their own accumulation of tantric practice, and in particular through periods of retreat devoted to the ritual service of chosen tutelary tantric deities, tantrists then develop the key attributes for which they are valued: their ritual expertise and, most of all, their ritual power. Both monks and tantrists are trained in the practice of tantric rituals, but the latter are more exclusively so and constitute the pre-eminent specialists for powerful and/or violent (*wangdrak* [dbang drag]) forms of ritual.<sup>6</sup>

Sociologically, the tantrists constitute a weakly structured, non-centralized form of clergy.<sup>7</sup> A common pattern in most Tibetan areas consists of more or less isolated tantrist family lineages distributed across some of the villages, with rarely more than one such family line per village.<sup>8</sup> However, in some areas, for instance, in parts of the Himalayas or of Amdo/northeast Tibet, one finds larger concentrations at the village level, with a substantial percentage—sometimes even a majority—of the village family lines (*gyüpa* [rgyud pa]) or houses (*drongpa* [grong pa] or *khyim* [khyim]) identifying as ‘*ngakpa* lineages’ or ‘*ngakpa* houses’. A large part of the collective religious life of such “tantrist village communities” (Sihlé 2013b: 78) is often centered on a temple associated with the local tantrist community.

The Repkong [Reb kong] county in far northeast Tibet (see fig. 1) stands out as probably the area with the highest density and largest number of tantrists—something on the order of 2,000 tantrists for approximately 80,000 ethnic Tibetans. They thus comprise more than 5 percent of adult men, a figure that is comparable to the proportion of monks in a Tibetan society already

Figure 1: Repkong county in northeast Tibet (Amdo)



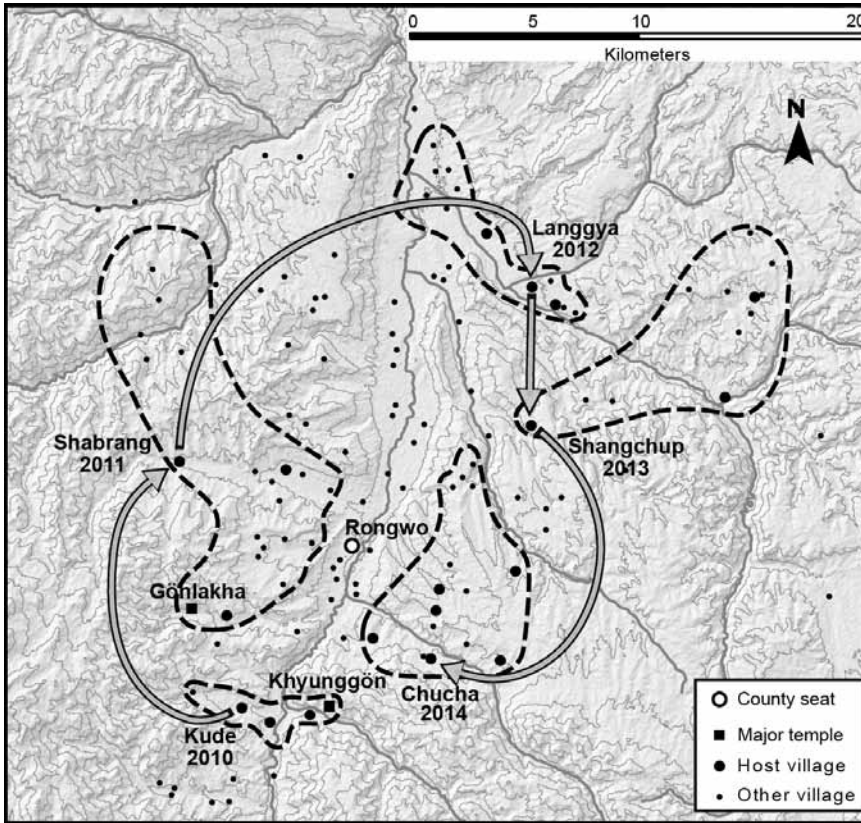
known for its “mass monasticism” (Goldstein 1998: 15).<sup>9</sup> The Repkong tantrists are spread among several dozen villages, with very loose forms of organization, as we will now see.

Most of the Repkong tantrists are affiliated with one or the other of three major religious/ritual traditions, two of them belonging to the Nyingma [rNying ma] (Ancient [translation of the tantras]) order, and one to Bön [Bon], the Tibetan quasi-Buddhist religion, which is very close to the Nyingma order, both sociologically and in terms of religious content. For the present discussion we will focus only on the Nyingma tantrists. As in all of the Tibetan Buddhist orders, within the fold of the Nyingma one finds a variety of tantric ritual traditions.<sup>10</sup> Practitioners of one such tradition are often neither initiated nor trained in the other traditions, and, as a result, one can observe a certain partitioning between different practice communities. In the case of Repkong, the villages to the east of the Guchu [dGu chu] river, known as the ‘shady side’ (*sip* [srib]), are affiliated primarily with the Minling [sMin (grol) gling] tradition of tantric practice, and those to the west, the ‘sunny side’ (*nyin* [nyin]), primarily with the Longchen Nyingtik [Klong chen snying thig] tradition.

It is within these communities of practice that tantrists are trained and initiated and gather for collective ritual practice in ‘religious assemblies’ (*chötok* [chos thog]), which are devoted to the cult of the high tantric deities central to the main tantric cycles within their tradition. At the village level, most of these assemblies take place on a monthly or, more often, yearly basis. Additionally, a small number of larger, supra-local yearly ritual gatherings are held, either in certain fixed locations—important temples that for instance can be associated with the residence of a local incarnate lama, who then presides over the ritual—or in rotation between several subsections of Repkong county. The ritual we will examine here belongs to this last type. It is a ritual invoking the one hundred ‘Peaceful and Wrathful [deities]’ (Zhitro [Zhi khro]) from a ritual tradition, Karling [Kar gling], which is widespread throughout Tibet. Today most tantrists on both sides of the valley are trained in this ritual, and the Zhitro has thus the particularity of bringing together participants from the whole of Repkong, which was the very purpose of its institution in the 1940s. In keeping with the ritual’s wide federative aim, the mode of organization that was decided upon was a rotation of the village hosting the ritual among five sections of Repkong county (see fig. 2). Every five years, the ritual returns to the same section and is held in a different village, in rotation among the villages of that section (see fig. 3).

At the village level one finds a modest degree of collective organization among tantrists, the pivot being the ‘tantrists’ temple’ (*ngak-khang* [sngags khang]), as it is most commonly called. The tantrists’ participation in the village rituals may be enforced through a system of fines, but on the whole there is very little hierarchical structure among the tantrists of a given community. Certain ritual functions, such as temple caretaker (*konyer* [dkon gnyer]), disciplinarian (*gekö* [dge bskos]), officiant of the daily cult of the protectors (*kangdön[pa]* [bskang ’don pa]), or chant master (*umdzé* [dbu mdzad]), who is in charge of leading the chanting during ritual assemblies, are typically distributed (if necessary, among the qualified tantrists of the village) on a rotational basis for a fixed period of one or several years. Particularly knowledgeable tantrists and/or the best ritual experts of the community serve as teachers for the young tantrists or tantrists-to-be; this part of the religious sphere is usually organized very informally. If a master resides in the locality or in a temple just outside the village, the local religious life tends to be characterized by more intense master-disciple interactions and more occasions for religious teachings. Otherwise, the tantrists are highly autonomous religious agents.

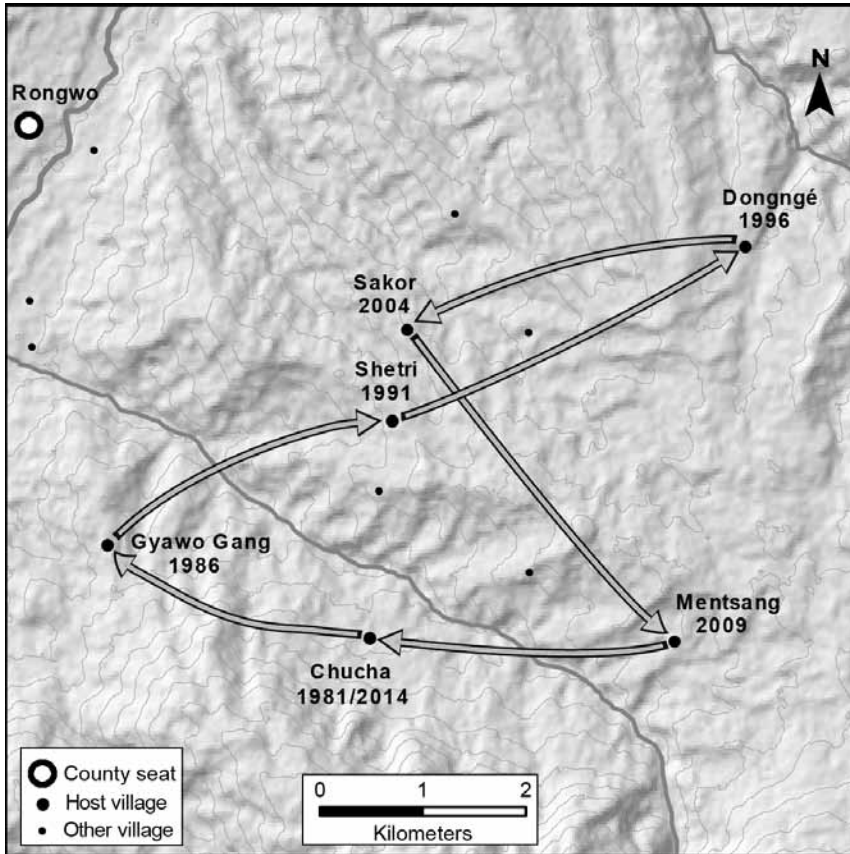
At the supra-local level, there is even less structure among tantrists. Master-disciple relations constitute networks within which interactions only seldom occur. In rare cases, a prominent religious expert residing in another village may be solicited for part of a tantrist’s training. In effect, for most tantrists, the main structural components at the supra-local level are the few yearly ritual gatherings that draw participants from whole sections of the county.<sup>11</sup> For these large-scale rituals

**Figure 2:** The rotation of the Zhitro among five sections of Repkong

as well, functions such as chant master or disciplinarian are distributed sometimes on a rotational basis and sometimes in accordance with long-established prerogatives of certain territorial subsections of Repkong. In the case of the Zhitro, which is based, as we have seen, on a rather complex rotation scheme, the ritual is hosted in a different village virtually every year, and difficulties may arise: for instance, some communities may be hesitant about joining the rotation scheme. In the late 1990s, in a context of inter-village tensions, the designated host village refused to hold the ritual, and the rotation was blocked for three years—a momentous crisis that is still well remembered. In order to oversee the smooth functioning of the Zhitro and to avoid such calamitous events as much as possible, a group of roughly seven or eight tantrists, all from different villages participating in the rotation, function as managers (*khanggowa* [kha 'go ba]). The relatively large number of managers is not directly linked to the amount of work they have to perform. (Indeed, over the past decade, one of these managers—I will call him Dorjé Gyel [rDo rje rgyal]—has taken charge of most of the Zhitro affairs almost single-handedly.) Rather, its justification surely lies in large part in the ability to ensure that wherever a problem arises, or threatens to do so, at least one of the appointed managers will be acquainted with the local particulars, in the hope that the issue can be handled with success and the ritual preserved.

One last major element that 'structures'—or, since it is quite disputed, one might rather say 'informs'—this milieu of tantric ritual specialists and is intimately linked to some of the largest ritual gatherings, including the Zhitro, is a collective identity that is linked to a prestigious

**Figure 3:** The rotation of the Zhitro within one of the participating sections of Repkong



collective designation. Since the early nineteenth century, the tantrists of Repkong have been known as the ‘Repkong Tantrist Collectivity, the 1900 Ritual Dagger Holders’ (Repkong Ngak-mang Purtok Tong dang Gupgya [Reb kong sngags mang phur thogs stong dang dgu brgya]). The ritual dagger (*purpa* [phur pa]), as a tantric ritual implement used particularly for the destruction of demonic forces, is an attribute strongly associated with the figure of the tantrist. The above designation evokes the notion of an uncommonly large number of powerful tantrists, which sums up, in effect, the collective reputation that the Repkong tantrists enjoy throughout large parts of northeast Tibet and beyond.

Among the Repkong tantrists, the question of who this highly valued designation actually refers to today is the object of quite some contestation: is it all Repkong Nyingma tantrists, or (for certain historical reasons) primarily those of the ‘shady side’, as a number of people are ready to argue? For our present purposes, suffice it to say that a ritual like the great annual Zhitro gathering is perceived by many—tantrists and laity alike—as a manifestation of the Repkong Tantrist Collectivity, or the Repkong Ngakmang, as it is known in short. In recent history, there have never been more than 500 to 600 tantrists gathering for a Zhitro ritual, and in that sense the assembly (composed of not quite the same participants every year, but nevertheless clearly showing some continuity) is a sort of metonymic manifestation of the ‘imagined’ collectivity—in Anderson’s (1983) sense—that constitutes the Repkong Tantrist Collectivity. The link between

the Repkong Ngakmang and a handful of major Repkong ritual gatherings like the Zhitro is all the stronger because there are virtually no other ways in which this collectivity concretely exists. Outside of people's imaginations and the stories they tell, the Repkong Ngakmang collectively manifests and perpetuates itself through these rituals. Thus, for instance, the Zhitro managers are also referred to as the "managers of the Ngakmang." In some strong sense, these rituals *are the collectivity*—the Repkong Ngakmang. In passing, we can note the shift from Durkheim's ([1912] 1995: 351) theory of collective ritual, according to which the *gods* are the symbolic expression of society. These periodic Repkong rituals are virtually synonymous with the enduring existence of the Ngakmang collective entity and are therefore perceived as crucial, in particular among the small group of tantrists who assemble each year, on the penultimate day of the ritual, to manage and reflexively assess the ritual. Both these small group meetings and the problematic, semi-occult component that was discussed at the 2013 meeting take place discreetly, in secluded locations, and are somewhat independent from the ritual's overall logical structure. Let us first give a brief outline of the rest: the public face of the ritual, as it took place that year.

### The Public Face of the Zhitro Ritual

The Zhitro takes place in the summer, on the last four days of the fifth lunar month (roughly July), in the temple of the host village. Several days of work have been necessary to prepare the temple and gather the food and other resources. A whole crew of ritual managers, cooks, and waiters has been designated among the villagers, in anticipation of the arrival of several hundred tantrists.<sup>12</sup> The temple's assembly hall (*dukhang* [ˈdu khang]) can accommodate only a small fraction of the tantrists; among those who are seated there are the holders of key ritual functions such as the chant master (*umdzé*). Some other officiants are seated on a platform right outside the doors of the assembly hall, while most of them are seated a few steps lower in the temple courtyard, in long rows protected by tarps, since rain is not uncommon at this time of the year.

The ritual, based on the 'one hundred peaceful (*zhi*) and wrathful (*tro*) deities,' which are important in the context of death, is a collective and rather developed version—sometimes called the 'Great Zhitro' (Zhitro Chenmo [chen mo])—of a ritual that can also be carried out at the domestic level, primarily as a funerary rite for the recently deceased, but occasionally also for the benefit of the living (the ritual, it is said, enables one to avoid rebirth in the lower realms). Its basic structure is quite classic for tantric rituals; here the ritual action culminates in a series of consecrations (*wangkur* [dbang bskur], Skt. *abhiṣeka*) carried out by one of the more expert ritualists toward the end of the second and third days. During these consecration phases, charged with blessings, which are the most powerful moments of the Zhitro, many laypeople, in particular women, gather near the officiants in the courtyard. Many of them recite mantras or prayers of aspiration (*mönlam* [smon lam]), some of them with their eyes closed, focusing on an attitude of deep faith.

What I have been calling the 'Zhitro ritual' (with a capital 'Z') is, in effect, a more complex whole, with a modular structure. The core of the event is based on the daily performance of the *zhitro* ritual properly speaking. However, additional, more or less ritualized and sometimes optional components that are independent with regard to the *zhitro*'s internal ritual mechanics are present as well, with some of them taking place outside the temple. The core *zhitro* ritual texts are read three times: on the second, third, and fourth days. The first day is much shorter. During its first hours, the tantrists assemble, some coming from neighboring villages, others from much farther afield. Those who come from the same place tend to cluster together, but the seating order in any given row should reflect the hierarchy of age. The resulting seating process is thus complex and protracted. Then the ritual begins, focusing primarily on a protector deities

propitiation rite (*kangwa* [bskang ba]). The second day is mainly devoted to a full reading of the *zhitro* ritual texts. At noon on this day and on the following one, each of the two disciplinarians also delivers an ‘assembly speech’ (*tsoktam* [tshogs gnam]). These speeches, presented in an oratorical style, emphasize some key points of religious discipline, but also situate the event in its broader religious historical context, recalling the names of the great founding figures of the Nyingma tradition, in general, and of the Repkong Ngakmang, in particular. They conclude with comments about more contemporary events.

On the second and third days, one of the breaks is also the occasion for a special procession, called *ngakrup* [sngags rub, lit., ‘mantra gathering’] (or other such name). In preparation for this, water has been carried through all the rows, the tantrists being asked to blow mantras on it in order to empower it. This empowered water is mixed with a larger quantity of water, along with some milk (a substance often used in purificatory aspersions), so that each tantrist can be given a full cup of the resulting liquid. They then exit the temple in a long procession, each with his cup. In the meanwhile, outside the temple, a few hundred laypeople (in particular those who are ill) have lined up along the side of a village lane, many of them baring their backs. As the procession nears, they all bend forward, so that the tantrists can blow or sputter some drops of the liquid on their heads and backs—powerful, beneficial blessings.

On the third day, the *zhitro* textual component is more condensed, as there is a substantial additional component in the afternoon that needs to be fit into the long day of ritual. Most of the tantrists assemble on a grassy spot outside the village, with everyone sitting and facing in the same direction. A large fumigation (*sang* [bsang]) has been started nearby, and the tantrists recite a fumigation offering (*sangchö* [bsang mchod]), a common ritual aimed at pleasing the worldly deities and place gods. At the same time, a small group of reputed tantrists, selected for their ritual know-how, gathers at a more distant location for a purification ritual (*ritrü* [rikhrus]). When these activities are over, the tantrists enjoy a few moments of relaxation on the grass, and then they all head back to the temple to continue the *zhitro* ritual—except for a small group of 15 to 20 men known as the ‘elders’ (*genpa* [rgan pa]). The ritual is drawing to a close, as the fourth and final day will be devoted to a rather condensed reading of the *zhitro* texts, which enables the participants to leave early and reach their homes on the same day. The time has now come for the ‘elders’ meeting’ (*gentsok* [rgan tshogs]), an institutionalized procedure for assessing the ritual and making plans for the following year.

### **The Elders’ Meeting and the ‘Suppression of the Enemies’ Ritual Component**

As the other tantrists are making their way back to the temple, the elders choose a secluded spot for their meeting. This can be on the grassy slope where the fumigation offering just took place, or in a lateral courtyard of the main temple as in 2004 (see fig. 4), or in a large room that has been put at their disposal in the house of one of the villagers. These elders are not necessarily among the oldest tantrists: some of them may be only in their forties, and some belong to the *Zhitro* managers. In particular, throughout his tenure Dorjé Gyel (mentioned above) has always been involved as a sort of group leader figure. But basically these elders are all representatives of different tantrist villages. The designation of the participants in the elders’ meeting is an informal affair. After the fumigation offering, Dorjé Gyel and a few others go around, inviting certain tantrists to join them for the meeting. Some tantrists decline, others accept. The final number of participants as well as the composition of the group vary from year to year.

Over the years, I have attended the *Zhitro* ritual four times and the elders’ meeting twice, in 2004 and 2013, each time with an assistant and the first time also with permission to record

**Figure 4:** The elders' meeting in 2004

Photograph © Nicolas Sihlé

the discussions.<sup>13</sup> I attempted to attend a third meeting in 2015, but was denied permission.<sup>14</sup> Finally, I also received detailed accounts of two meetings that I had not attended, in 2012 and 2015. I shall describe here the 2013 meeting in which a radical ritual change was unexpectedly decided upon, although, ironically, when I initially approached Dorjé Gyel, requesting permission to attend, he readily agreed, indicating that nothing of particular consequence was to be discussed that year.

The 18 men sat on the gentle grassy slope roughly in a half-circle, facing the village below, without any visible order of precedence. In Tibetan societies, seating order in gatherings generally follows highly codified rules according to hierarchies of gender, age, and other dimensions of status; among tantrists, age is often the key ordering criterion. Here, hierarchy was obviously de-emphasized, and the meeting was also devoid of any formality in its structure or framing. This was clearly a non-ritualized moment—part of the sequence of actions that constitute the Zhitro in a loose sense, but one that was located spatially and structurally outside of the strongly ritualized core of the ritual.

The tantrists started the discussion with the easiest item, in effect, a simple confirmation. It was agreed that the next year's Zhitro would be held in the Gyawo [rGyal po] section of Repkong, more precisely, in Chucha [Chu cha] village, which had already secured agreement among the Gyawo parties. The next item was relatively straightforward as well. Two disciplinarians were designated for the following year's ritual—as always, one from the next host village and

one from the current host village. Dorjé Gyel also reminded the group that in the following year the Zhitro managers, himself included, were to be replaced and that being a manager was no easy task, as it could entail travel and dealing with people's bad moods. (In the end, he was later persuaded to remain in charge for another year.)

The discussion then turned to a less common topic. The host village had requested that the tantrists perform a further ritual component that in recent years had been carried out only irregularly, the last time being two years before—a ritual component that until that day, despite my abundant inquiries about the Zhitro (and despite the fact that it corresponds well with a key element of tantrists' ritual identity), I had never been told about. This was the 'suppression of the enemies' (*dradrup* [dgra brub])—a ritual for destroying harmful entities or manifestations.

When the host village requests such a ritual—for instance, in cases of intractable conflicts with neighboring villages—the elders generally designate a half-dozen powerful tantrists who are to carry out the *dradrup* in a secluded location, beyond the assembly hall. The ritual is not publicized, but word will spread that a *dradrup* has been performed; to some extent, one could speak here of semi-occult circumstances. A reputed ritual expert is chosen as the head officiant for the ritual—a role for which the term 'master of the violent action' (*drakpön* [drag dpon]) is sometimes used. In the tantrists' subculture, the mastery of powerful, violent ritual action is valorized, and one *drakpön* among my acquaintances found the designation somewhat flattering. The *dradrup*, which takes a couple of hours, is carried out toward the end of the third day while the consecrations are being performed in the assembly hall. Two years before, the village that had then hosted the Zhitro was facing conflicts and difficult issues on several fronts and had requested four *dradrup* rituals, one for each cardinal direction. The *drakpön* for that occurrence of the ritual, whom I happened to know well, later told me that he himself had taken the responsibility to write on the ritual effigies the categories of harm (*lingka* [ling ga, from Skt. *liṅga*]) that were to be suppressed. He insisted that it was only within the host village itself that anything could be legitimately suppressed—violent suppression in the neighboring villages was out of the question. He then added, chuckling at the irony of the situation: "And then, five years later, when the Zhitro is back in the same area, perhaps one would violently suppress the present village, in a *dradrup* performed in the neighboring village!" We may note here how the post-Durkheimian discussions of the relations between collective ritual and in-groups as well as out-groups (Baumann 1992; Platvoet 1995: 37–41) need to be further nuanced. As the Repkong tantrists astutely observe, concerning the patrons at least, the out-group with regard to today's ritual can become tomorrow's in-group and vice versa.

It must be emphasized that the 'suppression of the enemies' optional component of the Zhitro is not unique. Many other large ritual gatherings of Repkong tantrists present a similar feature, which in some cases can be strongly institutionalized. Thus, Khyunggön [Khyung dgon] temple hosts every year the most important collective ritual for the tantrists of the 'shady side,' a ritual associated with Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. The temple is flanked by a separate chapel called the Chapel of the Eight Pronouncements, or Kagyé-khang [bKa' bryad khang], from the name of an important set of tantric teachings. This chapel is dedicated to the performance, parallel to the main ritual, of structurally secondary and optional but very powerful rituals invoking the eight wrathful deities at the center of the Kagyé. These rituals may aim at ensuring that the large ritual gathering does not face any obstacles, but, similarly to the *dradrup* performed alongside the Zhitro, they may also respond to instances of collective disorder or misfortune, such as inter-village conflicts within Repkong.

At the 2013 elders' meeting, following the request of the host village to have a *dradrup* carried out—a request that usually is always honored—the elders' discussion took an unexpected turn. It was a well-known fact that the host village had strained relations with a neighboring village, which currently did not take part in sponsoring the Zhitro, although it had contributed

donations to the officiants in the past. The suggestion had already been made for years that that village in question might join the rotation scheme and shoulder the task of hosting the ritual, but twice since then this situation had not materialized. “(Fortunately, each time, other villages had been willing to step in instead.) Now a number of people hoped that the village might agree to host the ritual the next time around, five years later. In that context, one of the older participants in the discussion objected strongly to the idea of holding a *dradrup* in the current year—in fact, he claimed, pushing the logic to its ultimate consequences, the powerful ritual component should be abandoned once and for all. He spoke with the authority of age as well as of longtime participation, not only in the Zhitro ritual, but also in elders’ meetings: already in 2004, I had seen him taking part in the *gentsok* meeting. He argued that in a context of tense inter-village relations, as in the present case, if a *dradrup* ritual were carried out, the people in the neighboring village might well think that the ritual had been performed in order to harm them, which would then necessarily impact their relations with the current host village as well as with the Ngakmang in general. In the present case, such a course of action would risk reducing the neighbors’ potential willingness to join the rotation of villages hosting and sponsoring the Zhitro, thereby weakening the support base of the Ngakmang. One middle-aged tantrist—speaking perhaps for the host village, to which he belonged—replied that the usual practice of performing the *dradrup* component when it was requested ought to be honored on the basis of the principle of fair and equal treatment. The discussion lasted for several minutes, the protagonists listening carefully to all the arguments offered. Finally, although unanimity was not achieved, the side in favor of the abandonment of the *dradrup* prevailed. The majority felt that it was a decision made in view of the long-term interests of the Ngakmang—or (more largely) of ‘the doctrine’ (*tenpa* [bstan pa]), as this is often put. One of the tantrists summed it up in a striking formula: the Repkong Ngakmang has a ‘big name’ (Am. *nyang chenpo* [ming chen po]), but is ‘feeble, vulnerable’ (*nyak trapo* [nyag phra po]). If villages withdraw their support for the Zhitro, the Ngakmang will decline.

The elders’ discussion then moved on to the final topic: the perceived lack of proper ‘discipline’ (*driklam* [sgrig lam]) during the Zhitro, in the sense of proper practice (reading/recitation and instrumental techniques) and proper conditions for the practice (seating order and dress code). These last points are not unrelated to ritual efficacy: proper attire, for instance, is part of what makes a fully qualified officiant and thus contributes to a ritual’s overall efficacy, or perhaps its ‘felicitous’ character, in Austin’s (1962) sense.<sup>15</sup> Even if our present focus is on the process that led to the abandonment of the *dradrup* and its significance, it should be said that for the tantrists who took part in that elders’ meeting and whom I later asked for their impressions, the most important topic seems to have been the issue of discipline—a recurrent point of concern in the elders’ (and others’) discussions. One of my interlocutors recalled that the older tantrist who had pushed for the abandonment of the *dradrup* had been momentarily overcome by emotion at that particular point, his eyes filling with tears as he pleaded for measures that would counteract the perceived decline in levels of discipline—a point on which many tantrists agreed.

The elders’ meeting ended as informally as it had begun. The discussion started to drift into lighter topics for which no action or decision was necessary. After a while, seeing a young man walking up the slope toward us, Dorjé Gyel, the main Zhitro manager, gave him some money and asked him to fetch sodas for the group. After their drinks, I asked whether the elders would like me to take a group picture (see fig. 5). They rarely resist the pleasure, and I try to follow up as soon as I can with a distribution of prints. Finally, everyone returned to the temple, where the Zhitro ritual was still under way.

I later solicited comments about the decision regarding the *dradrup* from other tantrist acquaintances, whose reactions were also diverse. A number of interlocutors agreed with this change, while some observed that, in a sense, this decision went against what constitutes one

**Figure 5:** The participants in the 2013 elders' meeting, after the discussions

Photograph © Nicolas Sihlé

of the defining features of the tantrists—their mastery of powerful forms of ritual that repel or destroy agents of misfortune. As one of them put it, the *dradrup* constitutes simply one of the tantrists' activities, just like, more generally, the rituals of *nen sek pang sum* [mnan bsregs 'phangs gsum], which involve the three (*sum*) categories of entrapping, burying under the ground, and 'pressing down' (*nen*), destroying in a wrathful fire offering (*sek*), and 'casting out' (*pang*) and destroying devices into which demonic entities have been drawn. Another tantrist in favor of this activity insisted that the *dradrup* was not a ritual of outright aggression or cursing (*mö* [dmod]). But as we saw, the explanations of one of the 'masters of the violent action' imply that opacity and thus ambiguity are in fact involved. Will the officiants in charge of the ritual of 'suppressing the enemies' choose to suppress manifestations of harm only within the host village itself, or will they perhaps accept requests to aim at the 'enemies' properly speaking? Who knows for sure what is written on the *lingka* effigies? As one former tantrist put it: "One never knows who the 'enemy' is."

### **Conclusion: Risks and Adaptations of Liturgy-Centered Rituals**

What these meetings and discussions about the Zhitro vividly exemplify is the fact that even in the case of a very scripted, liturgical ritual, sanctioned by tradition, the performance and reproduction of the ritual are far from a simple matter of mindless, invariant repetition. In this particular case, what causes some of the discussion and concern is, in a sense, a key component of what contributes to the fame of the Repkong tantrists: their mastery of powerful rituals on the

forceful, violent end of the ritual spectrum. The tantrists have to manage the problematic character of ritual violence—a tension found within a number of tantric traditions (Dalton 2011; Freeman 1991; Sihlé 2013b).

As we have noted, one first necessary step in the analysis of the 2013 modification of the Zhitro consists in the nuance that needs to be brought here to the term ‘ritual’. The Great Zhitro, as it is called, is a ‘ritual’ only in a somewhat approximative sense. It is more precisely a complex whole characterized by a modular structure, with a liturgical text-based core, but it comprises other elements that are more or less ritualized, more or less thematically convergent, and more or less essential or optional.

One non-ritualized, strikingly informal, and, from the perspective of ritual practice, somewhat peripheral component is the elders’ meeting, an institutionalized device for managing and assessing the ritual. We are unambiguously dealing here not with reflexivity *of* the ritual, but with reflexivity *on* the ritual:<sup>16</sup> a discursive process of critical reflection on the ritual, conducted in this case during but, properly speaking, outside the ritual sequence.

This critical, reflexive activity usually assesses what could be called ‘peri-ritual’ features (e.g., the quality of religious discipline during the Zhitro ritual gatherings), which are not central to the ritual logics, but remain important for a proper performance. It can extend, however, as in the case of the *dradrup*, to components of a properly ritual nature. What is at stake here (as opposed to a number of cases documented in this special section) is not the formal efficacy of the ritual but its pragmatics. Ritual violence and the conditions of its legitimate application constitute an inescapably problematic question, and the tantrists maintain a certain opacity around it. As a result, the elders find themselves in the position of having to assess the impact that the semi-occult ritual performance may have on unstable conflictual social dynamics. Thus, in the case of the *dradrup*, what the elders attempt to manage is not so much ‘accidents’ or ‘glitches’ (common features of reflexive procedures in ritual contexts, as Gobin in this special section rightly points out), but rather risk, or more precisely “extrinsic risk,” as Howe (2000: 68–69) terms it in his study of Balinese ritual—risk that accompanies the ritual without being integral to it. What is key is not what the potent tantric ritual of ‘suppressing the enemies’ can achieve, but what people in the neighboring villages will imagine about it, about the words inscribed in some secluded chapel on the effigy, about the precise identity of the publicly unstated ‘enemy’, and where these thoughts might guide them.

Ritual experts of a complex text-based religious tradition are seen here under a new light—a light that scholars have more commonly shone on rituals of a performance-centered nature such as shamanic séances, but rarely on rituals of a liturgical character. What the elders’ assessment of the ritual shows is a certain collective sociological expertise, including an understanding of the fluidity over time of the categories of in-group and out-group. Their assessment of the *dradrup*’s potential deleterious effects on the fabric of social relations upon which the Great Zhitro ritual depends for its continued existence led them to abandon the ambivalently valued ‘suppression of the enemies’ component. One can hardly speak here of ethicization: it was not the potential harm inflicted on others—either directly by the ritual, something that most tantrists claim is not the purpose of the *dradrup*, or indirectly through an increase in inter-village tensions that the ritual might unwillingly generate—that was at the heart of the discussion. Instead, the issue was whether maintaining the practice of the *dradrup* was in the Ngakmang’s own best interests. In the end, a ritual realpolitik prevailed, even if it entailed, as a consequence of the change, a certain emasculation of the ritual sequence, which clearly was not fully satisfactory for all those involved.

In closing, the question should be asked, what happens in other large ritual gatherings of the Repkong tantrists? In many of them, another mode of evaluation exists: the rituals are overseen by a certain religious master, who at times may decide to implement changes in aspects of the

ritual. The Zhitro's elders' meeting is a sort of functional equivalent of this in the case of a federative, rotating ritual that is devoid of any main supervising authority—an equivalent that externalizes the assessment process, rendering it visible to the outside observer. It clearly shows the pragmatics that can lead very scripted rituals to be evaluated, fine-tuned, and sometimes even quite radically modified in order to adapt the ritual to the social environment and to achieve a major aim of a periodic collective ritual—that is, continuity. In the case at hand, what is at stake is the continuity of the collective cult of the Zhitro deities, which is understood to be virtually synonymous with the continuity of the Repkong Ngakmang collective body of ritual specialists.

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## ■ NOTES

1. This is also the case much more generally in anthropological studies of ritual, as we are reminded by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994: 8).
2. For a detailed example of such an analysis, see the treatment of the *sinön* (or *hrinen*) [sri gnon], or 'pressing down of the *si* demons' exorcism in Sihlé (2013b).
3. There is, for example, substantial literature across disciplines on the history and evolution of the Catholic liturgy. For a summary, see Bell (1997: 212–223).
4. On this term, see Karmay (1998: 9), Ramble (1984: 30), Sihlé (2013b: 15–16), and Stein ([1962] 1987: 65). In order to make the reading of Tibetan terms easier for non-Tibetanists, I provide phonetic transcriptions according to the relatively standard "THL Simplified Phonetic Transcription of Standard Tibetan," proposed by David Germano and Nicolas Tournadre (2003). The language of Amdo [A mdo], or northeast Tibet, is actually quite different; for toponyms, or in cases where the local pronunciation matters, I adapt the transcription slightly to the Amdo—or more precisely Repkong—pronunciation, with the indication 'Am.' I add the transliteration in square brackets at the first occurrence of a term, following the version of the so-called 'Wylie' system (with capitalization of root letters) used mainly in European academia (see Cantwell and Mayer 2002). Sanskrit terms are marked by 'Skt.'
5. Throughout the history of Tibetan Buddhism, tantrists have been almost exclusively male, although this is starting to change in certain areas (Hyytiäinen 2011: 22–27; Sihlé 2016).
6. See Sihlé (2013b) for an analysis of these ritual modalities, their socio-religious logics, and the ethical tensions that stem from this use of violence.

7. The term ‘clergy’ is used here to refer simply to a collective (and not necessarily structured) body of religious specialists. One could talk of ‘priesthood’ as well, in the sense of a collective body of specialist intermediaries with the divine. However, this is only one facet of the tantrists’ religious profile, as they also engage in (often more valorized) individual or collective religious practice.
8. For patterns of tantrist presence in the Nyemo area in Central Tibet, see Sihlé (2009a).
9. To these, one needs to add a rapidly growing contingent of female tantrists—according to local estimations in 2015, something of the order of 1,000 (Sihlé 2016).
10. In the context of Tibetan tantric Buddhism, a ‘tradition’, as the term is used here, is defined primarily by a set of key tantric cycles (collections of ritual practices focused on one given form of a high tantric deity) that are passed down in one or several lineages of teaching and initiation. These lineages are often based in major monasteries and their incarnation lines, from which the teachings radiate outward. Locally inflected forms of these traditions can exist in numerous local monasteries or tantrist communities, where the practices are passed on in their localized forms. Initiations, however, are sought preferably from high-level lineage holders.
11. Although participation in these rituals is optional, there is a sense of obligation to continue if one starts to take part in a ritual that is overseen by a master. On the dynamics of participation in these large-scale rituals, see Sihlé (2013a).
12. Since 2012, a year marked by a lay donor’s initiative to offer newly printed copies of the ritual texts to all participants, the participation level has risen strongly to around 500 tantrists.
13. Having an assistant with me on such occasions is crucial, as my mastery of the Amdo dialect is incomplete and sometimes insufficient to follow discussions with people whom I am not used to hearing. My assistants are generally able to translate into the standard central Tibetan dialect, which ensures, comparatively speaking, that only minimal information is lost in translation.
14. The reason provided by Dorjé Gyel for his rejection of my request to attend was the ‘sensitive’ nature of issues that were to be discussed. He did not elaborate, but it appears he had in mind in particular the designation of the next chant master, a key position with regard to correct ritual performance, as well as one (held for three years) that entails substantial material benefits, as a result of which its attribution can be heavily disputed.
15. In a complex ritual like the Zhitro, there are multiple understandings of the ritual’s efficacy, ranging from the instrumental to something that (following Austin 1962) we could call the ‘felicitous’, not to mention functions such as enhancing the laity’s faith. In general, the ritual is expected to produce massive, diffuse blessings and beneficial effects—and particularly powerful blessings in the case of the consecrations. Merit is also accrued, both by the officiants and by the laity who sponsor them, provide the material basis for the ritual, and offer donations. For the officiants, there is also a dimension of maintaining their relationships with tantric deities.
16. See Gobin’s introduction to this special section, in which her analysis of critical reflexivity reformulates distinctions made, for instance, by Højbjerg (2002: 6–8) and Rozenberg (2011).

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