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The Increase of Shamans in Contemporary Ladakh Some Preliminary Observations

Abstract

Using narrative interviews as primary data, this investigation considers the recent remarkable increase in traditional folk healers (*lha-mo*, *lha-pa*, “oracle”) who perform shamanic curing and divination in Ladakh, northwest India. It relates this phenomenon to the severe alienation faced by the people of this Trans-Himalayan region in the last decades. Foreign pressures, such as a heavy Indian military presence, the impact of the Muslim-dominated state of Kashmir (of which Ladakh is a part), and Western influences that stem from Ladakh’s popularity as a tourist destination, have lead to severe stress within the region. The author argues that in this situation, the “proliferation of shamanism” offers one of a number of possible coping strategies.

Keywords: shamanism—Ladakh—alienation—coping strategies—folk religion

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THIS PAPER WILL FOCUS on a remarkable “proliferation of shamanism” in the western Trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh. The dramatic increase in shamanic folk healers, known as *lha-mo* (female) or *lha-pa* (male), in this very remote part of northwestern India during the last decades of the twentieth century has already been noted by a number of authors.¹ Until recently, however, there was a significant lack of data in terms of both an emic explanation for the increase of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*, and the relationship between the so-called “proliferation of shamans” and the tremendous impact of foreign influences which the sparsely populated region of Ladakh has confronted in the second half of the twentieth century. This article attempts to offer a few preliminary results regarding these two topics.

UNDERLYING RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The focus of this investigation was embedded in the wider context of the research project “Alien influences in Buddhist Ladakh. Facts, experiences and coping strategies—an empirical investigation of intercultural processes of adoption and rejection in the Indian Himalayas,” which was funded by the German *Volkswagen Foundation* in the years 1998-2001.² The general idea behind this project was that Ladakh provides a very striking example of a culture and society which is subjected to very strong outside influences. These influences include those from India, in the forms of the army and administration, Muslim influences from Jammu and Kashmir, and Western influences, which are mainly manifested in tourism. The underlying hypotheses of the investigation were that the pressure of these foreign influences has caused the increase in shamanism, and that healing and oracle ceremonies of the traditional folk religion provide a coping mechanism for people to deal with the rapid changes that have occurred during recent decades. Naturally, this article can only present a few selected results of this research project.

DATA

The author carried out fieldwork during several visits to Ladakh in the years 1999 and 2000. He participated in ten healing sessions conducted by shamans (commonly called “oracles” by English-speaking Ladakhis) in different parts of the region (namely, Sham [Lower Ladakh], Stod [Upper Ladakh]—including the capital of Leh—and in the Nubra Valley). More than twenty narratives and testimonies from oracles were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed and translated by Ladakhi collaborators. In addition, more than one hundred conversations concerning perceptions of foreign influences in the region were recorded with Ladakhis. The respondents came from a wide range of social strata and held various positions in secular and monastic life. These narratives were generated along the guidelines of an open questionnaire without restricting the conversation to this framework.¹

A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION AND ITS HISTORY

Ladakh (called *la-dags* in the regional language)⁴ is located in the extreme northwest of India. The region is geographically and culturally part of the Tibetan plateau and is influenced to a large extent by its culture, including Tibetan Buddhism. From the eleventh century onwards, Ladakh was a kingdom which was politically independent from Tibet. Starting in the year 1834 (BRAY 1998, 47; EPPLER 1982, 45), the region was forcefully integrated into the state of Jammu and Kashmir (MICHAUD 1996, 290) and was ruled by a maharajah of the Dogra dynasty. It became part of India in 1947 (MICHAUD 1991, 609–10). Following the partition of the Indian subcontinent, Pakistan occupied the western parts of Ladakh. After the Sino-Indian war of 1962, another eastern part (the Aksai Chin plateau) was occupied by the People’s Republic of China. Thus, the remaining parts of Ladakh, including the capital of Leh (roughly 20,000–25,000 inhabitants; BURKE-MASON 1997, 2) are “sandwiched in” (SONAM WANGCHOK 1995, 7th page) between territories controlled by China and Pakistan. The language of Ladakh, called *ladakhi* in Urdu or *la-daks-si skad* in the idiom itself, is usually considered to be a western Tibetan dialect, although it is not mutually intelligible with classical or colloquial Tibetan.⁵

After the independence of India, “white” outsiders were not admitted into the region until 1974 (BRAY 1998, 47; MICHAUD 1991, 610; 1996, 290). Since then, the number of tourists, travelers, and researchers of various sorts has risen considerably, reaching a peak with an estimated 25,000 visitors in 1999.⁶

Presently, the region of Ladakh consists of the two districts of Leh and Kargil within the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, and it is populated by roughly 200,000 inhabitants. Half of them are either Sunnite or Shi’ite

Muslims, and they live mainly in the district of Kargil. However, the Zaskar Valley, which also belongs to the same district, is an exception because it is predominantly populated by Buddhists. In Leh district, Muslims live in the capital and constitute minorities in a number of villages,⁷ but the district as a whole is largely populated by Buddhists. About 250 Christians live in Leh and its vicinity as a result of Moravian missionaries' efforts to convert the local population from 1885. There are Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs within the armed forces.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF SHAMANIC HEALING AND DIVINATION

Besides Buddhism and Islam, an indigenous folk religion with many shamanic features still prevails in Ladakh. As in other regions of the Tibetan cultural sphere, there are traditional shamanic⁸ healers—called *lha-pa* (male) or *lha-mo* (female, both meaning “divine person”; SCHENK 1994, 7, 228) in Ladakhi—who embody spirits or deities during trance states. English-speaking Ladakhis call these shamans “oracles.” Among these oracles, the so-called village oracles (*khyim-lha* [*jim-lha*]; SCHENK 1994, 225) must be distinguished from monastic oracles (DAY 1989, 10). While the monastic oracles serve the whole community, the village oracles practice healing sessions for individuals. Generally, monastic oracles have more prestige than the village oracles. The following analysis will concentrate on village oracles, who may be either male or female. In recent times, female oracles have outnumbered the males.

The ritual and social functions of village oracles consist of curing and divination. The oracles diagnose illnesses either by measuring the pulse (a diagnostic feature shared with *am-chis*)⁹ via palpation of the respective body part, or by performing divination on a small drum called *da-ma-ru* (Tibetan) or *da-ru* (the usual Lakakhi colloquial expression; SCHENK 1994, 224). The oracles usually do this by throwing barley or rice seeds on the drum (SCHENK 1994, 200 and 201). They perform therapy by sucking out disease-causing substances and objects from various parts of the patient's (or, better still, client's) body (SCHENK 1994, 198–200), either through a pipe (*pu-ri*), or directly through the mouth. The oracles later show these substances—usually black mucus or little tar-like chunks—to the patient and audience, and then spit them into a bowl or on the ground.

Animals, mainly bovines (cattle, *dzo*, *yak*, or *dri-mo*),¹⁰ are treated in very much the same way as humans, with an emphasis placed on sucking out needles (*khab*; SCHENK 1994, 228) and other disease-causing objects from the animals' stomachs. Sometimes a client is referred to a Western-style doctor or *am-chi* if the oracle decides that they will be able to provide better medical treatment (SCHENK 1994, 40). Besides physical complaints, mental

disturbances are also treated, including illnesses caused by black magic or malevolent spirits. One *lha-mo* in Choglamsar village near Leh stated explicitly that if people carry “poison” (*tug*) in their body as a result of black magic (DAY 1989, 331 and 335),¹¹ and all attempts by Western doctors to cure them have proved unsuccessful, they would need an oracle to heal them. “Poison” in the client’s body is said to be caused by the greed and jealousy of others. The same *lha-mo* stated that even Buddhist religious practice (*chos*) cannot counteract this kind of witchcraft.

Apart from curing diseases, oracles also perform divination (as the designation “oracle” indicates), offer advice to their clients, and work towards harmonious social relations within the community.¹² When performing cures and divination, an oracle enters into an altered state of consciousness (ASC; BOURGUIGNON 1976), which is accompanied by a complete change of personality. During a trance, the oracle usually switches languages to Tibetan or an idiosyncratic mixture of Tibetan and Ladakhi (SCIENK 1994, 202). In this state, the oracles are possessed¹³ by one or more deities (*lha*).¹⁴ According to their own perceptions, oracles rent their bodies to the god or goddess (*lus-gyar* [*luyer*], rented body; SCHENK 1994, 229) and serve as a vessel for the respective deity (or deities). Thus, this kind of practice might be called possession shamanism (JOHANSEN 1999, 42). It is different from the “classical” Siberian shamanism where the shaman travels to the upperworld or the underworld to meet his guardian or helper spirits. It is generally thought that the *lhas* (deities) can increase their merit by possessing humans and helping other sentient beings (BURKE-MASON 1997, 5).

Oracles begin a trance by inviting gods and goddesses (*lha*) of different power and rank within the divine hierarchy of the Buddhist as well as pre-Buddhist pantheons (such as the “five sisters of long life”, *tshé-ring tsheng-lnga*; NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ 1956, 117–81; KEILHAUER and KEILHAUER 1980, 175). Oracles offer rice, barley, water or *chang* (local beer) to the deities (SCHENK 1994, 224) during a trance, which they instigate and maintain by beating a small drum. They also use incense like mountain juniper (*shug-pa*) or mustard seed to a certain extent. It must be immediately added here that the trances of Ladakhi oracles are not drug-induced. Some oracles drink liquor while the *lha* possess them, but this is not regarded as part of the normal procedure, and its use is certainly not a prerequisite for achieving the trance state. They wear a special costume which consists of a five-pointed crown (*rigs-lnga*),¹⁵ a colorful cloak (*sto-dle* [*dole*]; SCHENK 1994, 225), scarves around the head and the mouth, and *ka-btak*s ([*katak*], white ceremonial scarves) that are placed in the crown. There are variations in the style of dress and performance. They employ both a *rdo-rje* ([*dorje*] SCHENK 1994, 226) and *gantha* (bell)¹⁶ during the ritual in a very similar fashion to

Buddhist ritual. They invoke deities in front of an altar, which is usually situated in the kitchen of their house. They often demonstrate their presumed invulnerability and possession of supernatural powers by holding the blade of a hot iron dagger or knife on the tongue without being hurt (BURKE-MASON 1997; SCHENK 1994, 191–97). All oracles claim to have complete amnesia concerning incidences that occurred during the trance state after the *lha* have left them.¹⁷

An oracle's "career" begins with a shamanic vocation which usually goes along with mental disturbance, an acute life crisis, and general emotional distress.¹⁸ In the biographies of oracles, invariably there are accounts of suffering and stress experienced during the vocation period (KUHN 1988, 76; RÖSING 1999a, 16–17). In these accounts, many shamans mentioned that during their initial vocation period they were severely "disturbed in their mind." High ranking *rinpoches* who were called upon for assistance considered this state of mind to be life-threatening. In former times, a career as an oracle is said to have been even more difficult (KUHN 1988, 76). One *lha-mo* who had been practicing for seven years revealed that she suffered severely from insomnia during her vocation period and had even lost three children. As she felt very bad and did not know whether she was alive or dead, she had considered selling her land and house and moving away. Another *lha-mo* described how she injured herself after jumping from a two-story building (RÖSING 1999a, 17).

Consequently, it is not surprising that the shamanic vocation is usually rejected in the initial stages, and that many oracles enter the trance state very reluctantly. In a conversation with five *lha-mos*, all agreed that they were not at all happy to act as shamans and revealed that they often felt so severely beaten up after a healing session that they could barely perform their daily duties at home and in the fields after a trance. Most oracles do not want any of their children to become shamans. On the other hand, in their opinion little could be done to counter an inherited possession by *lhas* in their own lineage. In certain instances, a special ritual called *tum* is performed to stop or prevent possession of people who have received the shamanic vocation (BURKE-MASON 1997, 10). Although possession and shamanic vocation occur involuntarily, many *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* think, "...it is better to be possessed by *lhas* than by bad spirits." According to one testimony, "...if there were no *lhas*, people would have severe problems—some would jump into rivers or from mountain peaks or simply become crazy." The *lhas* are said to be servants of the triple gem: They are bound to samsara and can increase their merit if they benefit other sentient beings (BURKE-MASON 1997, 5). In order to do this they have to possess people and use them as their vessel (*lus-gyar*, "rented body") or their tool. Accordingly, one *lha-mo* who had tried to

stop her possession by employing the *tum* ritual was asked by a high ranking *rinpoche* and the Dalai Lama himself to continue being possessed by her *lha* for the benefit of all living beings.

Possession can be caused by divine forces (*lha*) and malevolent spirits (*rde* [*de*])—both are always present in the body, or at least in the shadow of humans (RÖSING 1999b, 132), and can become active. Usually a Buddhist *rinpoche* is employed to approve the possession by one or several *lhas*, and to separate them from *rde* (SCHENK 1994, 81) or other spirits (including witches) who possess the oracle's body.¹⁹ Then, teachings and initiations (*lha-pog*) are given in consecutive stages by an elderly shaman (*ge-rgan*) who is selected by an apprentice (DAY 1989, 294–303; SCHENK 1994, 119–40). Sometimes several pupils are instructed together, or practice together with their *ge-rgan* (BURKE-MASON 1997). Some oracles received teachings from several instructors²⁰ or changed their instructor during their apprenticeship.

Most of the *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* I visited in 1999 said that they had pupils themselves—usually between two and fifteen.²¹ Only two *lha-mos* within the sample had no pupils, and they stated that the reason for this was that their *ge-rgan* would object to them instructing apprentices during his lifetime. Exceptions in the sample were those oracles who claimed to have between forty and fifty pupils, or even to have performed *lha-pog* (shaman's initiation) for three hundred or four hundred pupils altogether. As people are possessed by not only *lhas* but also so-called “demons” (*rdes*), pupils have to be selected with care. Furthermore, many *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* among the younger generation of apprentices tend to neglect their duties. This is said to cause dissatisfaction among the *lhas* who will then possess increasing numbers of young people.

A peculiarity of Ladakhi shamanism is that oracles have to be approved by high ranking lamas (preferably a *rinpoche*) of the Buddhist religion (DAY 1989, 269). In this way, the indigenous folk religion is subjugated under the rules and premises of Buddhism, which was not introduced to the Tibetan plateau before the seventh century CE (KAUL and KAUL 1992, 122).²² Furthermore, shamanic practices are tightly interwoven with Buddhist ritual practices, as indicated by the use of the bell (*gantha* or *dril-bu* [*tibu*]; SCHENK 1994, 200–201, 235; KALWEIT 1987)—which is normally employed in Buddhist *pujas*—or the five-pointed crown (*rigs-lnga* [*ringa*]). The crown is worn in tantric Buddhism (DAY 1989, 238; SCHENK 1994, 232) and can be considered to be a “contested symbol” (GELLNER 1997, 280) in this context. Within shamanic rituals, Buddhist invocations and refuge formulas are employed, and the personal guardian deity (*yi-dam* [*idam*]) plays a predominant role. One difference between Ladakhi shamanism and “classical” Siberian shamanism is that the former is caused by gods and goddesses of

both the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Tibetan pantheons instead of spirits. Thus, the ritual practice of Ladakhi shamans can be viewed as further indication that Buddhism and shamanism are tightly interwoven in the Tibetan cultural area (DAY 1989, 20–34; SAMUEL 1993; SCHENK 1994, 71).

THE RECENT PROLIFERATION OF SHAMANS—POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

During the last decades, a remarkable proliferation of village oracles has taken place in Ladakh, as has been described by KUHN (1988) and DAY (1989). Two thirds of the young shamans are female. Some people even mention prophecies indicating that one day there will be exactly three hundred and sixty-one oracles in Ladakh, most of whom will be *lha-mos*. According to BURKE-MASON (1997, 6), one hundred and fifty *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* were known to exist in the region in 1996.

The oracles themselves generally acknowledge that there is an increase in *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*.²³ A *lha-mo* in Sabu village near Leh, for example, revealed that although there were only three or four *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* who practiced in Ladakh in former times, there were over one hundred in 1999. Some tourist guides even take foreign visitors to well-known oracles (RÖSING 1999a, 23). Several *lha-mos* in Sabu and Choglamsar villages (which are close to Leh) mentioned that they had successfully healed foreigners (compare FRANK 1983). According to the testimonies of some oracles, the skills and abilities of the newly-possessed shamans of recent times are very different to oracles of former times. Their qualification depends entirely on the rank and the abilities of the respective *lha* or *lhas* possessing them, since in his or her daily state of consciousness, the oracle is only a body that is “rented” by the *lha*.

Naturally, the increase of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* affects their clients as much as the oracles themselves. It is unlikely that a proliferation of shamans would have occurred if there had not been an increasing demand for their services from people seeking advice, cures, and mental support. On the other hand, oracles are not always highly esteemed or venerated and their claims of supreme power are not accepted by everybody.

The following pages present empirical evidence for this proliferation of shamans and precise data in terms of an emic explanation for this phenomenon by the traditional oracle-healers themselves.

TESTIMONIES BY *LHA-MOS* AND *LHA-PAS*

As with all research partners, the conversations with oracles were conducted along the lines of a loose questionnaire; the construction and order of these questions were not very strictly observed. According to the resulting narratives and testimonies, their explanations run along the following lines:²⁴

Reference to the situation in Tibet

Since anti-religious prosecution in Chinese-occupied Tibet (T.A.R.) is so strong, the *lhas* are neither accepted nor respected there. In Tibet, people saw “lakes of blood” and “piles of bones” because so many monks and nuns were killed (BRAUEN 1980, 150). Therefore, according to the testimony of a *lha-mo* in Leh’s New Housing Colony, the *lhas* cannot possess people there and must escape to Ladakh to gain merit by helping and assisting sentient beings because, “...they are servants of the triple gem and are bound to *sam-sara*.” The oracles who are possessed by the *lhas* that come directly from Tibet (for example, *tshe-ring tshe-lnga*; the “five sisters of long life”) consider them to be very important and powerful.

Reference to the changing times, foreign influences, and modernity

According to the *lha-pas* and *lha-mos* questioned, the reason for the increase in oracles is the changing times. Respondents held that things are getting worse, and that the “end of the world” and the “end of our times” has arrived.²⁵ Ladakh has been very affected recently by such factors as competition, unrest, greed, jealousy, tension, mischief, and lack of harmony among the people.

Furthermore, according to the testimonies, the increase in oracles is related to the growing foreign influences in Ladakh. Presently people are greatly affected by the modern world and suffer from many diseases. There is also an increasing number of illnesses among animals.²⁶ In former times, less people had to be treated and they lived even longer than today. However, these days they are dying at an earlier age because they are not happy. The clients’ sufferings have become more severe, and there is a larger variety of complaints due to modernization. The physical and mental problems of clients are being caused not only by changing food and clothing habits, but also greed. Many illnesses occur because people no longer dress in a traditional way and they have changed their lifestyle habits. Previously unknown foodstuffs are brought to Ladakh from the Indian lowlands: “In the market, for example, you can see and taste many new foods, and people want to try them. Formerly, everything was manufactured at home, by the people themselves.”

Nowadays, there are more plastic objects, iron nails, and other objects which are swallowed by animals and even small children. Formerly, there were no doctors, yet while there are many of them today, their numbers still seem insufficient. Consequently, an increasing number of new and previously unknown illnesses call for more oracles to deal with them (compare KUHN 1988, 78).²⁷ In the future, possession by *lhas* will increase even more because it will be necessary to cure illnesses that are caused by *klu* ([*lu*]

(earth and water spirits, for example of springs)²⁸ and cannot be diagnosed or treated by Western-style doctors. The increasing number of oracles attracts a growing number of clients in the same way as the establishment of a new hospital attracts an increasing number of patients.

References to changes in the minds of the people

According to the testimonies, there is a general change in the minds of the people. For example, in the modern world people are, "...constantly running after the money." There are more problems than in former times, and people do not even care for their relatives. In ancient times people were "good in their hearts," they were happy with the things they had, and they had more time than people today. Although living conditions have improved in the last decades and life has become a lot easier,²⁹ people are not as happy as they were before. Rather, there is tension because they are dissatisfied with life and always desire more. *Lhas* are more abundant in Ladakh than before because the people are not living in peace and harmony with each other. Instead, they try to harm each other, and black magic is widespread. One narrative particularly stressed the dramatic increase in witchcraft:

The *lhas* always try to advise people and to lead them to a peaceful life, but the people live in a competitive way and harm each other by using poison [*tug*]. Formerly, if ten people went to see a *lha-mo*, she only had to extract poison from one of them. Today, if fifty people come for a consultation, they all suffer from *tug*.

The number of patients and the list of complaints are growing because the people have lost their confidence in the Buddha. This is why previously unknown illnesses, such as cancer, are occurring. People no longer have time to respect the *lhas*—this also applies to Hindus and Muslims. Therefore, the *lhas* become angry and sometimes even send their assistants to possess the people. Generally, the increase of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* is not a good sign for the state of the world since the *da-ma-ru* is only used in bad times. Shortly before the Chinese occupation of Tibet, an increase in oracles occurred there, and now the same thing is happening in Ladakh.³⁰ The shamanic call even affects Muslims, who are first possessed by Buddhist *lhas*³¹ and must then go to a Buddhist *rinpoche* to seek advice and receive further instructions.

References to local peculiarities

According to one explanation referring to the peculiarities of a specific local area, the increase in the number of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* in Khardong village

(Nubra Valley) occurred because the *yul-rtsa* ([*yultsa*], hereditary village oracle) had left the village to attend a government job. As a result, the protective deity of the village (*yul-lha*) had become dissatisfied and started to possess the people of Khardong.³²

References to neglect of duties by lha-mos and lha-pas

One explanation for the proliferation of shamans is that many *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* among the younger generation of apprentices tend to neglect their duties. Generally, *lha-pas* and *lha-mos* are obliged to lead a very simple life, yet this is a rule that younger shamans do not always obey. Furthermore, not all *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* that have recently appeared actually work for the benefit of all sentient beings. These factors cause dissatisfaction among the *lhas* leading them to possess an increasing number of young people. It is necessary to develop *bhodi* mind to be an authentic oracle, and it is very easy to distinguish between qualified and non-qualified *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*. The latter ones are those who do not fulfill their ritual obligations (for example, prayers and pilgrimage).

Testimonies referring exclusively to the increase in clients and their religious affiliations

Several oracles claimed that because they had special healing abilities, an increasing number of clients would come to see them. Furthermore, they claimed that they had saved the lives of numerous people by sucking out needles and other disease-causing objects, such as kidney stones. According to one *lha-pa* in the Nubra Valley, modern doctors are often unqualified and have only limited skills in the diagnosis of disturbances in the interior body—an ability which would be nothing special for oracles.³³ Another *lha-mo* in Choglamsar village claimed that people had revealed that she had brought them back “from the mouth of death.” In another narrative, a person claimed that many people who lived outside Ladakh would come to believe more in the power of oracles, irrespective of their religion and lifestyle, than the Ladakhis themselves. If people were ill, they would not care about religious differences any more.

Generally, *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* are consulted by Muslims as well. One particular *lha-mo* in Sabu village is even sought after by Muslims from Kargil. Her explanation for this was that people from Kargil had simply found out that she was the best *lha-mo*. In Kargil district, qualified doctors and *am-chis* would not be available, and the local healers would often exacerbate their patients’ suffering instead of curing them. Therefore, because of her reputation as a good *lha-mo*, these people would come to her for treatment.

According to KUHN (1988, 94), in the middle of the 1980s the clients of oracles consisted of seventy percent Buddhists, twenty percent Muslims, and ten percent people of other religious denominations (Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and so on). The table below refers to a healing session which included clients from a number of religions that I witnessed in 1999. Altogether, thirty clients were present (twenty Buddhists, six Muslims, four Indians [Hindus]), and were distributed among sex and ethnicity as follows:

TABLE 1: Distribution of clients according to sex and religion during an oracle's healing session

	Male	Female
Three Indians, one with a child		4
Two Muslim couples, one with a daughter	2	3
One single Muslim	1	
One Buddhist couple from Leh	1	1
Nine Buddhist women		9
Nine Buddhist men	9	
Sum	13	17

TESTIMONIES AND STATEMENTS BY COMMON LADAKHI PEOPLE

Not surprisingly, the Ladakhi people generally recognize this increase in oracles as well.³⁴ The increase is not necessarily cherished or welcomed by all of them, since many are either very skeptical about the healing and divination abilities of oracles, or they reject the phenomenon of shamanism altogether.³⁵ It is also not surprising that the overall rejection of the oracles' practices is especially widespread among the Buddhist clergy. Others, mostly lay people, recognize that there are great differences between qualified and unqualified oracles, and they acknowledge the special abilities of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*, such as their skill in sucking out needles from the bodies of humans and animals. Monks in particular stress that one should not take refuge in *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* or worship them because they are bound to a samsaric existence and are therefore not superior, but rather inferior to humans.³⁶ As one monk in Spituk monastery told me, "One should be aware of the fact that rebirth as a human being is a very precious thing." He held that the power of the

lhas is only of a temporary nature and can be used in a very beneficial way for the population, adding that *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* are comparable to doctors because of their curing and divination abilities.

One government officer stated explicitly that there has been a proliferation of *lha-pas* and *lha-mos* over the last ten years. He attributed this phenomenon to the changes in living conditions, food habits, and the increase of diseases. Most Ladakhis who are not oracles themselves give very much the same explanations as the shamans for the increase in *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*, and stress the fact that there is growing greed and mistrust among the Ladakhi population. Another explanation that is consistent with the statements given by shamans and is frequently found in the narratives of “lay people” holds that the number of oracles in Ladakh have increased because the *lhas* can no longer possess people in Tibet.

Many people think that *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* are unable to control their minds, and they claim that this is the reason for their vocation. According to the monk in Spituk monastery, the reason why there is a proliferation of oracles is because many people are “psychologically down” and mentally distressed in the current age. This view was shared by an *am-chi* who attributed the proliferation of shamans to growing emotional disturbances and mental disruption within the Ladakhi population, and even called it an “epidemic.” In another narrative, the definite increase in the number of shamanic vocations was attributed to the fact that people today possess less *rlung-rta* or *spar-ka*³⁷ than in former times, indicating that their degree of mental strength has decreased. When their *rlung-rta* is “low,” people are more likely to be possessed by *lhas*. One narrative claimed that general neglect of the spirits was the reason for the increase in oracles:

In former times, *lhas* and also *btsan* [*tsan*]³⁸ were very much respected by the Ladakhi population. Due to improved educational facilities and Western influences, the necessary respect to the spirits has been neglected. Therefore, the spirits³⁹ need to possess people who are mentally unstable.

In some narratives the increase in oracles is related to monetary issues.⁴⁰ A further motivation cited for someone to (voluntarily!) become a *lha-mo* or *lha-pa* was the prestige gained by the position.⁴¹ In the narratives of the sample, numerous references were made to fake shamans and would-be oracles. For example, it was mentioned that one day, a *rinpoche* from Phyang monastery gathered all *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* from Leh and its vicinity and tried to separate the fake oracles from the qualified and authentic ones.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

A few different hypotheses concerning the increase in shamans shall be presented from an etic perspective. These hypotheses derive from the wider context of the research project "Alien influences in Buddhist Ladakh," in which the questions pertaining to the proliferation of shamans constituted just one of several topics.

The general idea behind the project was that Ladakh provides an exceptionally telling example of a culture and society which is subject to strong outside influences, namely (1) the Indian Army and administration, (2) the Jammu and Kashmir state of which Ladakh is a part, and (3) the Western world—mainly in the form of tourism. The hypothesis behind the investigation presented in this paper was that the increase in shamanism is caused by increased pressure generated by these foreign influences, and that the healing and oracle ceremonies of the traditional folk religion provide a coping mechanism to deal with the rapid changes which occurred in Ladakh during the last decades. The key question in this context is whether there is any detectable connection between the alien influences described above and the obvious increase in the number of oracles.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The following assumptions form the preliminary results and conclusions pertaining to this question:

1. The increase in people receiving the shamanic vocation is caused by growing psychic instability and mental disruption within the population of Ladakh;
2. Together with the growing psychic instability among the average population, the number of persons seeking advice, cures, and mental support from oracles is, of course, also increasing.

Adding to further discussion of these hypotheses, some narratives concerning the perception of foreign influences by different parts of the Ladakhi population shall be presented, focusing on tourism as the main component of Western influence. In this context it has to be stressed that alienation in Ladakh is not always perceived as a burden. Instead, general attitudes towards foreign, especially Western, influences proved to be ambivalent.

As one monk stated, tourism has both positive and negative consequences. The advantages are; many young people get jobs in the tourism industry; their education may be sponsored by tourists; there is material improvement of living conditions; and there is increased cash flow. Tourism contributes to the maintenance and protection of traditional culture and allows for the restoration of ancient monuments such as monasteries. As a *lha-pa* from Nubra Valley indicated, tourism can not be perceived solely as a

danger for Ladakhi culture. Instead, he thought that the behavior of Western outsiders provided a positive example for Ladakhis, and that tourism fosters the Ladakhis' awareness of the value of their own culture—a view shared by many Ladakhis in the sample.⁴²

On the other hand, many narratives clearly indicate that modernization in Ladakh is perceived as a burden. As a monk from Likir *gonpa* said,

... money is not everything. People's peace of mind is disturbed with the changing times... people become selfish and only think about their own benefit. When I think back to my childhood, I remember that people were very good, but this attitude is vanishing day by day.

The same monk said that many young Ladakhis try to imitate tourists and “follow their path” because they had received only poor education. Instead of being interested in their own traditions and in monastic education, they attempt to learn English and gain Western-style schooling. As another narrative indicates, the combination of all the foreign influences is simply too overwhelming for the population:

The bad thing about tourism is not that some Westerners misbehave and are not properly dressed when going to monasteries. It is the selling of the land—even the *ma-zhing* fields which traditionally remained as the property of families are sold off nowadays. The whole region of Ladakh will depend only on tourism in the future. Also Indian army soldiers often act very arrogantly. For example, when a truck has broken down and is blocking the road, nobody from the army helps—instead they blame the truck driver for the accident and suggest that the truck is pulled from the road.

Within the context of the proliferation of shamans and foreign influences in Ladakh, individual factors that lead to the vocation and initiation of an increasing number of oracles, especially *lha-mos*, needs to be considered. Being an oracle enhances a person's prestige: The fact that the majority of newly-initiated oracles are women leads to the assumption that becoming a *lha-mo* serves as a compensation for the inferior role women have also in Ladakhi society. It is usually claimed, however, that women in the Tibetan cultural area enjoy a higher social position than women in most other Asian cultures and societies. Thus, becoming a *lha-mo* or *lha-pa* might also serve as a means of releasing psychic pressure and stress. In a state of shamanic trance, a *lha-mo* can leave the realms of her everyday social role, it is possible for her to speak the truth, and she can transgress the strict barriers of

formality and politeness which prevail in Ladakhi society. Becoming a *lha-mo* enhances the social status of a woman and enables her to discipline people and subjugate those who are superior to her in everyday life to an inferior position.

The growing number of *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* might be conceived as an indicator of social disruptions, psychic stress, and mental imbalance which is increasingly prevalent among the Ladakhi population. It is certainly not too far-fetched to consider the increase in “shamanic activity” to be a coping strategy in times of general cultural and social disruption. In this way, a formerly marginal religious or spiritual practice seems to be turning into a mass phenomenon. With the proliferation of oracles, a specific form of healing—one that might eventually lead to increased competition with the traditional *am-chi* system as well as with other religiously bound healing specialists like monks, *ong-pos*, and Muslim sheikhs—is spreading. Eventually, this folk healing system might perhaps even challenge the dominant role of Tibetan Buddhism (and Islam alike) in Ladakh. Compared with oracle healers, the traditional *am-chi* system is certainly in decline (KUHN 1988). The reason for this might be that the *am-chi* system had to face far stronger competition from the Western medical system than *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*. In its present socio-psychological state caused by the burden of alienation, the Ladakhi population is increasingly accepting the techniques of diagnosis and therapy of oracles. This is indicated by the growing number of clients attending oracles’ healing sessions, despite the fact that some narratives contained very contradictory statements.

NOTES

1. See, for example, BRAUEN (1980), DAY (1989, 1990), FRANK (1983), KALWEIT (1987), KAPLANIAN (1984; 1985), KAPLANIAN, RAAB, and RABOUAN (1992), KUHN (1988), SCHENK (1993, 1994), and YAMADA (1993, 1996) among others.

2. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the *Volkswagen Foundation* for generously funding this research project, which was conducted under the supervision of Prof. Ina Rösing, head of the Department of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Ulm, Germany. I am also very much indebted to all Ladakhi collaborators in this research project, especially Sonam Wangchok Khardongpa, Ngawang Namgyal “Sundar” Wanlapa, Gelong Thinley Gyurmed Staknapa, and the deceased Lobzang Rinchen “Tsultrim” Kubetpa for assistance in field research and their wonderful transcription work. Furthermore, I would like to thank my colleagues Heinz Räther, Thierry Dodin, Karin André, and Frank Seeliger for their kind cooperation and valuable advice, as well as numerous people from all over Ladakh for their hospitality and their willingness to share stories about their lives with me.

3. Several *lha-mos* in the sample had previous experiences with Western as well as Indian researchers. In one healing session I witnessed there were almost as many researchers and Ladakhi translators present as there were clients.

4. The common name Ladakh is derived from Urdu (NORMANN 1994, 17). Ladakhi and Tibetan terms are transcribed according to WYLIE (1959). Cases where the pronunciation differs substantially to the transliteration are indicated in brackets; e.g. *rigs-lnga* [*ringa*]; *sprul-ku* [*tułku*] etc.

5. The differences between Ladakhi and Tibetan were clearly demonstrated during the visit of the Dalai Lama, in Choglamsar near Leh in May 1999 where an interpreter was needed to translate his teachings for the Ladakhi audience.

6. By 1988, about 25,000 tourists had visited Ladakh (8,608 from lowland India and 16,256 from abroad; EMMER 1996, 41; SOOD 2000, 118). After that, there was a decline in the number of tourists due to Muslim-Buddhist conflicts in Ladakh, with only 14,401 foreign visitors in 1993 (among them 2,000 Indians; SOOD 1996, 119). In 1998, 21,996 people visited Ladakh (about 7,000 Indians and 15,000 people from abroad; SOOD 2000, 118).

7. In an interview in 1999, the *imam* of the *jama masjid* (Friday mosque) in Leh estimated the number of Muslims in Leh District at 20,000.

8. Within the scope of this research, shamanism is understood as a *terminus technicus* in the sense of SCHLESIER (1985): an assembly of spiritual practices which is widespread in northern and central Asia as well as in aboriginal America and is based on common conceptions about the nature of the universe and the position of humans within it. Contrary to shamanic practices in Siberia, the Ladakhi oracle does not travel to the upperworld or the underworld. Instead, beings from the non-human realms enter the body of the *lha-pa* or *lha-mo*. Thus, this kind of shamanism should be understood to be “possession shamanism,” in contrast to the “travelling” or “flying” shamans of Siberia (JOHANSEN 1999, 41–42). For a definition of shamanism in general, see also KRESSING, HÖRMANN, and SAURIEN (1995, 7–12); for a discussion of shamanism in the Tibetan cultural context see BERGLIE (1978), STEIN (1993), and TUCCI (1988).

9. An *am-chi* is a practitioner of traditional Tibetan medicine. *Am-chi* is a Mongol derived loanword (personal communications: Prof. Dr. Dawa Norbu, October 1999; Chandraal Erdenetsetseg-Storr, January 2000) used throughout the Tibetan cultural area. Although *am-chis*, like their Western counterparts, specialize in the treatment of physical illnesses, the etiology of illnesses and actual treatment of diseases are entirely different. For an account of traditional Tibetan medicine (*gyu-zhi*) in the Ladakhi context see KUHN (1988); in the case of Tibet in exile, see ASSHAUER (1993) and CLIFFORD (1984).

10. A *dzo* is a yak-cattle crossbreed, *dri-mo* is a female yak.

11. There are numerous other terms for black magic in Ladakhi. These include: *gnod-pa*—supernatural harm caused by jealousy or malicious talk (DAY 1989); also disturbance, accidents, undesired incidents (SCHENK 1994, 231); *gdon* [*don*]—disturbance (SCHENK 1994, 225); *skyon* or *shkyen* [*jön*]—misfortune caused by spirits (DAY 1989); also harm, mistake, malfunctioning (SCHENK 1994, 225); *gyak*—obstacles, trouble; *mi-k-ha*: malicious talk or gossip (DAY 1989; SCHENK 1994, 230); *mi-phog-byes* [*miphog-ches*]—supernatural harm, or harm caused by the “evil eye” (DAY 1989, 308–21; KUHN 1988, 10, 24, and 177; SCHENK 1994, 230). Terms for witches are ‘*bag-mo* [*bamo*] (female) (SCHENK 1994, 223; DAY 1989, 331 and 335) and ‘*bag-po* (male), *tri-mo*, and *gong-mo* (DAY 1989). A term for witchcraft possession is *gong-mo zhug-byes* (DAY 1989, 331 and 335; KUHN 1988). In colloquial usage, the word “poison” is often used by English-speaking Ladakhis to refer to witchcraft and black magic.

12. This was indicated in one narrative by the fact that oracles never reveal the identity of a thief or another offender in public. In another narrative it was held that although the task of the oracles is to help all humans and sentient beings, not all oracles fulfill this duty.

13. Ladakhi: *zhug-byes* [*zhugces*] (DAY 1989, 10; SCHENK 1994, 225); literally “to sit; to

stay, reside, dwell" (HAMID 1998, 233).

14. According to KUIHN (1988, 94), oracles can be possessed by up to fifty-five deities.

15. This is the same type worn by monks (*ge-longs*) and lamas in tantric rituals.

16. Also called *dril-bu* [*tibu*] (SCHENK 1994, 235; KALWEIT 1987).

17. Compare SCHENK (1994, 173–74). For a thorough discussion of this phenomenon and the question of the authenticity of shamans' amnesia see RÖSING (1999a), in which the amnesia of Ladakhi shamans is described as professional ideology (p. 22) and an artifact of Western research (p. 23). All *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* I spoke to claimed complete amnesia. Amnesia concerning events that happened during a trance is not a general shamanic feature, but occurs only in roughly fourteen percent of the shamanic cultures in Siberia, central Asia, and aboriginal America (KRESSING 1997; PETERS and PRICE-WILLIAMS 1980).

18. DAY (1989, 230–35); KUIHN (1988, 70); see SCHENK (1994, 22–87) for an extensive account.

19. One oracle even revealed that the Dalai Lama himself ordered her to go on a pilgrimage before the *lha* and *rde* could be distinguished and separated.

20. Within the sample, I encountered up to four different instructors for one *lha-mo*.

21. The *lha-mo* of Sabu, for example, said in May 1999 that she had ten pupils (including males and females). One *lha-mo* in Choglamsar had thirteen pupils.

22. Although the history of Buddhism in present-day Ladakh dates back to the second century CE (JINA 1996, 9), it was only in the ninth century that the Tibetan form of Buddhism was introduced to Ladakh from the east, together with the immigration of people of Tibetan stock who later constituted the Ladakhi population by intermingling with the native Dards (KAUL and KAUL 1992, 39–41; SCHENK 1994, 9).

23. On only one occasion I was confronted with the slightly contradictory claim that because there are large numbers of *lha-thos* (sacred shrines) that exist today, there were many oracles in former times. According to the informant, the oracles had vanished in the interim period, but now they are re-emerging.

24. According to DAY (1989, 268), the oracles themselves cite the following reasons for the increase in *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*: "the development of Leh and increasing amounts of cash which may encourage oracles to pursue their practice, the influx of goods as well as people, generally the worsening state of the world; the fact that gods come as refugees from the Chinese, [and]...the growing importance of immigrant Hindu and Buddhist ritual specialists."

25. This expression refers to the fact that after the era of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni has ended, a new era of the future Buddha Maitreya will come (DAY 1989, 268).

26. All shamans in the sample were initially hesitant to offer any precise information regarding the complaints and illnesses of their clients. They claimed to know nothing about these matters, and held that they could neither remember what happened during the trances nor how they cured the patients because of amnesia. Nevertheless, as the conversations progressed, invariably the *lha-mos* and *lha-pas* revealed certain details concerning their clients, referring to information they had presumably acquired when talking to their patients after the trances.

27. One *lha-mo* even claimed to receive clients from a small clinic in Diskit, Nubra Valley.

28. Spirits of the subterranean realms (*nagas*, SCHENK 1994, 229). This narrative is indicative of the increased offenses of the *klu*, caused either by the Ladakhi population in general, or by the changes brought about in Ladakh. Concerning the consequences of such offenses, see RÖSING (1999b, 132–33).

29. The oracle added to this, "...for example, there are schools and hospitals everywhere."

30. Also in this narrative, the increase in oracles was seen as an indication of the impending end of the world: For example, the end of the teachings of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

31. Referring to deities of the Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Tibetan pantheon.

32. In Ladakhi, *yul* means “village, place, valley” as well as “country” (HAMID 1998, 250; NORBERG-HODGE AND THUPSTAN PALDEN 1991, 168; NORMAN 1994, 20), for *yul-lha* see SCHIENK (1994, 236). There are ten or eleven *lha-pas* and *lha-mos* altogether practicing in the tiny village of Khardong, which is very close to the mountain pass (Khardong-la) named after it.

33. The same *lha-pa* collaborated with two *am-chis* in his native village.

34. Only a few contradictory statements concerning this topic occur in my field notes. For example, a young man working in a pharmacy told me that a proliferation of oracles would be simply impossible because as the ability to become a *lha-pa* or *lha-mo* is inherited, only a limited number of oracles can exist.

35. For example, according to the narrative of a twenty-five-year old “educated” Ladakhi studying at Delhi University, the longer he associated closely with oracles, the more he started to doubt that they possessed special power and abilities. For instance, one *lha-mo* revealed information concerning letters she had received from Westerners to him during a trance. The information was the same as that which her *lus-gyar* had previously presented to him. He also noticed that another *lha-mo* in her diagnosis had used exactly the same information he himself had given her three days before the healing session took place.

36. In a conversation with me, a well known ‘*ong-po*’ (astrologer) called them “bodiless sky persons.”

37. Both terms refer to spiritual energy: *rlung-rta* ([*lung(s)ta*]) literally means “wind-horse” and also denotes prayer flags and a ceremony to enlarge a person’s spiritual energy. According to SCHIENK (1994, 229) it is a, “...psychological-spiritual term denoting power and luck in combination with karma.” *Spar-kha* [(s)parkha] is, “...mostly translated as ‘spiritual power’ or ‘strength of will’” (RÖSING 1999b, 132) and is associated with different degrees of strength and power—a person’s *spar-kha* can be high or low. Only people with low *spar-kha* can be possessed by *lhas* (RÖSING 1999b, 132-33).

38. *Bsan* are spirits of the middle world (RÖSING 1999b, 132; SCHIENK 1994, 236).

39. The spirits include *lha*, *bsan*, and *klu* in this narrative.

40. In 1999/2000, the clients usually paid between twenty to fifty Indian rupees (equivalent to half a dollar or one dollar) for treatment. So, the increase in patients also provides an increasing source of income for the oracles. On the other hand, according to all accessible sources, none of the oracles are able to sustain his or herself completely from the income generated by acting as a *lha-pa* or *lha-mo*.

41. Monks and lamas who also employ techniques of spiritual healing to a certain degree (KUHIN 1988) presumably feel that their authority is being threatened by the increase in oracles. The same applies to *am-chis*. In this context attention has to be paid to the fact that oracles constitute only one of several options regarding available sources of health care in Ladakh where there is an extraordinary variety of healing institutions and health care specialists (for both physical and mental needs) (KUHIN 1988). Specifically, these are:

1. The traditional doctors of Tibetan medicine (*am-chis*)
2. Buddhist monks, lamas and *rinpoches* who engage in the treatment of patients on a physical as well as spiritual level. To a certain degree, the function of lama and *am-chi* might be combined in the institution of the monk-*am-chi* (KUHIN 1988)
3. Astrologers (*ong-pos*) practicing divination (*mo-rtsig*, KUHIN 1988)
4. Oracles: *lha-mos* and *lha-pas*
5. Muslim spiritual healers: sheikhs

6. Institutions of Western, allopathic medicine; different clinics and the military hospital in Leh
7. Practitioners of Hindu-based Ayurvedic medicine

Referring to this list, it is quite obvious that these healing institutions are linked to specific religions and forms of spirituality (for similar instances in the central Andes, see KRESSING 1995). Except for numbers 6 and 7, which have been introduced from the West or the South Asian lowlands, all these medical systems are based on specific local traditions that have prevailed in Ladakh for centuries.

42. Compare with KUHN (1988, 34) who claims that research by foreign scientists and tourism contributed to a revival and increased awareness of traditional values.

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