

**IDEAS OF MERIT (*BSOD-NAMS*), VIRTUE (*DGE-BA*),
BLESSING (*BYIN-RLABS*) AND MATERIAL PROSPERITY
(*RTEN-'BREL*) IN HIGHLAND NEPAL**

G. E. CLARKE

YOLMO, or Helambu as it is known in Nepal, is a culturally Tibetan area on the southern slopes of the northern central Himalaya where the dominant form of Buddhism is not monastic. Here, as perhaps elsewhere in areas of Tibetan culture where the religious orders stress achievement rather than the taking of moral vows or precepts, religious ritual is performed by figures other than monks. In Tibet as a whole there were both wandering ascetics (*grub-thob*) and 'married priests' or 'priestly householders' (*ser-khyim*), who acted as religious specialists and also as objects of veneration, that is, as individuals to whom acts of help and offering could openly be made and recognized as virtuous (Aziz 1978; Jäschke 1881; Tucci 1956: 52 and 1980: 25, 111; Nakane 1966: 226). In general, the villager did not distinguish between them according to whether they were or were not monks: in a sense all were *bla-ma*, quite literally 'higher ones', who would receive offerings and bestow blessings.

In Yolmo as a whole and in Tarkhyeghyang village in particular the male villagers themselves act as 'priestly householders' as well as laymen. In this article I want to describe some ethnographically important religious concepts,

The fieldwork on which this article is based was carried out over a period of eighteen months between 1974 and 1977 as part of my research for a doctoral thesis at the University of Oxford. Where they exist, literary Tibetan equivalents for local terms have been given in parentheses on first occurrence. In most cases they are very similar.

namely those I gloss as merit, virtue, blessing and material prosperity, as they exist in the popular thought of such a Helambu community known, quite literally, as 'the Lama people'.¹ I begin with a brief account of the community's relations with monks, who, by and large, are recent settlers in the area.

1. *Local Relations between Villagers and Monks*

In Helambu, monks do not enter the village temple, nor do they participate in village services. One reason for this is that the villagers would place them within their own hierarchy (probably opposite the head lama on the inside, where visiting head lamas are sat) rather than above it where, in terms of doctrinal status, they think they should be placed.

In Tarkhyeghyang village this social separation is illustrated by the general relations between the diviner (*mo-pa*), that is, a Kagyü monk who lives above the village, and the villagers. Neither he nor the other two monks of his retreat take part in village services, nor do they enter the village. His is a poor retreat; he is dependent on one village for his material support, which he admitted compromises him in his relations with the villagers. He put it the following way:

I don't tell them that they have to become monks, as I don't have enough food to feed them; but I don't tell them that they mustn't become monks, as this would be a sin: I just tell them to carry out good religious ceremonies for life. If I scold them then they become annoyed with me, and might call me a prick; but if I praise them they are happy with me.

People come to see him when they are sick, whereupon he carries out a Tara divination and then tells them what ceremonies they have to do to recover, or gives them a piece of consecrated (*byin-rlabs*) butter or water to place on a wound. Although he receives offerings for life-consecration (*tshe-dbang*) ceremonies, usually he does not carry out the rituals: instead he instructs his client to have them carried out by the village priests. In addition, people come to him to ask for the name of a baby if they are afraid that the child might die, such as when a woman has previously had a child who died at an early age. He selects a name (again using a Tara divination) and has his client carry out a ritual for life-consecration.²

1. I refer to those who are Lama people (by descent) with a capital letter and to priests and officiants as 'lamas'. Of course, many are both at once.

2. Proper names which belong to low castes are selected in these circumstances, as it is thought that this will confuse the evil spirit (*gdon*) responsible for the repetitive misfortune (*sri*) of the family. This explains why boys can have names such as Kami, which means blacksmith.

Villagers also consult him when they are thinking of departing to India to trade and ask his advice on whether they should go that year or not, and which is the right season to depart. Again he makes a Tara divination, and on this and the strength of his personal knowledge of the people he gives advice. He also acts for the community as a whole. When an old man who lived alone did not return to the village after having wandered off two days previously he carried out a divination, on request, to see where the body would be found.

In return for his services of divination, his teaching some village boys to read and his instructing some lay priests in meditation exercises, the villagers give him material support. They pay him for immediate services with rice and cash and have made minor endowments of land to his retreat, the crops from which they deliver each year. On the villagers' part, this is both a form of payment and an act of 'virtue' (*dge-ba*) for the donor and for the person in whose name it is given.

One way of solving problems of conflict between monastic and village status is by avoidance; but there is also another, which is to elevate artificially the rank of the person referred to. The diviner above Tarkhyeghyang village is casually referred to as a *rinpoce* (*rin-po-che*), the title of a high reincarnate lama, although most of the village priests know very well that he is a refugee monk from the Kyirong area lacking this elevated status. By giving the monastic religious specialists the fictionally elevated status of a high reincarnate lama and having to visit him rather than having him enter the village, they can maintain their own hierarchy. Only those monks or lamas with secularly powerful positions and wealth, such as the Cisu Kushiok or Djun Djom Rinpoce from Kathmandu, or a totally unknown figure who can be fictionally elevated to such a level, can be placed above this conundrum. For example, when these two figures enter the village they arrive not as moneyless mendicants on foot, but by a helicopter of the King of Nepal's Flight, with entourage: the villagers compete to give them hospitality. They have both been in the village temple, where they sat at the head of the lines, above all the village priesthood. By giving hospitality to those who are their obvious superiors they elevate and legitimate their own status, and a person who combines wealth and power with religious authority is the epitome of such a figure.

2. *The Married Priesthood and the Local Order*

In Yolmo, as one might expect with a married priesthood, the main religious orders are Nyingma, Kagyü or Karma, namely those that do not stress monastic vows to the exclusion of other directions of achievement. These village priests far outnumber the monks of Bakan and the hermits of the region taken together and are the most powerful group in the region. They are the representatives of the

State, and the major landholders and traders in the region, their authority being not only political and economic but also religious. I have shown elsewhere that their original land endowments were made by Nepalese kings for their own merit and the well-being of the State, and that the form of their land tenure was indissolubly linked to the carrying out of these general religious practices (Clarke 1980a, 1980b, 1980c, 1983). Within the village, these priests conduct nearly all aspects of life-cycle and collective calendrical religious practices and leave only the diagnosis of misfortune in the hands of outsiders such as monks.

Monks are used only for exceptional ritual services by the villagers and not for normal life-cycle or annual village-cycle ceremonies. A public reason why monks do not participate in village ritual is that 'their gods are different', that is, that they and the villagers have not been initiated into the same texts. But this cannot be true for the hermit monks who live above the village of Tarkhyeghyang because it is they who give the villagers texts for meditation, nor can it be generally true for the students of other hermit monks.

Monks only rarely enter the village. One of the few such occasions of this that I witnessed in over a year in Tarkhyeghyang was when a Gelug hermit monk had advised an ex-student to carry out a 'ransom' ritual (*glud-gtor*) for a personal emotional problem. This was not carried out by village priests, partly because his teacher did not think highly of village ritual, partly because his pupil now had a high position and prestige amongst the village priesthood and did not wish to conduct this affair in public, and partly because few of the village priesthood were initiated into this particular ritual. The monk carried out the ritual for a whole day in his former student's house aided by local (i.e. village) novices from Bakan monastery who were at the time resident in the village.³ At no time did he mix with villagers, and rather than stay overnight, he made his exit from the village by a side-path one hour before nightfall.

Attitudes to individual monks who pass through the village are ambivalent. From the viewpoint of the moral code, the status of monk is superior to that of a householder. Hence a monk should sit above householders in their homes, be served food before them while sitting by their household altar and, if he was to enter the temple, sit above their head priest. This is the high position that a member of the founding lineage would normally occupy in the temple or while visiting another villager's house. No lama of the village's founding lineage nor any person whose status was higher than that of the head of the household concerned would visit such a house while a monk was present: they are avoided. Yet as monks they have neither land nor money, nor do they show the same

3. At the present day, village youths are taught to read by local monks, who also give religious instruction to villagers, and boys may be sent outside the area to large monasteries for their training. Hence the balance between a married priesthood and the monastery may be shifting in favour of the latter. It is noteworthy that Tille Dunjom, the eighteenth-century Head Lama of Tarkhyeghyang who achieved some status outside the region, received his first instruction in reading from his mother at the age of seven (Clarke 1983).

concern for the size and quantities of offerings that marks village religious practice. This suggests a reason why itinerant monks are, at one level, regarded by villagers as their inferiors. As I will describe presently, wealth, material success and power are in local thought associated with high religious status: a hermit monk's presence contradicts this association.

The lamas' religious practices show a concern both with merit and esoteric ritual, and their statuses display a complex elaboration of the roles of donor (*sbyin-bdag*) and lama, that is of priest and client. They have become institutionalized at a level of local belief, competence and practice that has as its parallel and context the local social hierarchy. By and large, they are not religious virtuosi but lay priests, 'world embracers' rather than 'world renouncers'.

The term 'lama' is used in varying ways. At its widest, in Helambu as a whole, it refers to any member of a Lama village, and in this sense is a status category of wealthy landowners and traders who live in villages with temples towards the ridges and who carry out Buddhist ritual. Within the community of the Lama villages alone, although it does have the connotation of 'priest', it is usually used as a respectful title for any important man, quite independently of whether he does, or can, perform a priestly role. For example, many illiterate Tarkhyeghyang men arrogate the title of lama when visiting other Lama villages and will be sat at the head of these local village hierarchies. This is as much a reflection of their wealth and prestige in the area as a statement of their competence in ritual. It is the connotation of *bla-ma* as 'higher-one' which is foremost here rather than the sense of 'priest' or 'ecclesiastic' which the term also has, here as in Tibet (Jäschke 1881: 383; Clarke 1985). And locally these two ideas of wealth and religious prestige are linked together as a single attribute of the Lama people.

Although the term 'lama' does have the sense of priest, within the village itself it is used mainly to refer to members of the Lama lineage as distinct from other priests.⁴ The term *chö-wa* is normally used to refer to a person as a priest. This is the Tibetan term *chos-pa*, 'a religious man, a divine, a monk', and its root is the Tibetan literary translation of the Sanskrit *dharma*. It has a local sense of the 'proper order' and of 'moral doctrine', custom, religion and Buddhism (Jäschke 1881) in popular thought in Helambu as in Tibet. The word *chö-wa* can have a wider reference and is used occasionally of a person who is not capable of acting as a priest in the temple, but who spends most of his time carrying out overtly virtuous acts, such as making offerings, circumambulating the temple, and turning prayer-wheels. These people are normally old and respected but illiterate villagers.

According both to hermit monks within Helambu and to those who have studied with them and later become village priests, in order to become a *chö-wa* in the sense of a priest who can carry out religious ceremonies correctly it is

4. There is no contradiction here, as all male members of the founding Lama lineage are considered to be priests automatically by virtue of filiation (the way they are members of a descent group) in the male line.

necessary to stay as the student of a competent teacher for at least four years. In Tarkhyeghyang, some of the higher priests have carried out such training and have either been students of hermit monks or were themselves monks who later renounced their vows to become laymen. According to one such hermit teacher, although many of the male villagers have acquired the skill of reading and come to him to request new texts to study for meditation, very few, if any, can carry out the meditative practices properly. His view of villagers in general is that they are all laymen, with their minds set on good food, fine clothes, a large house, plenty of children and enjoyment of life, all of which are desires largely incompatible with conducting proper religious ritual. Moreover, he pointed out that many of the ceremonies they use are concerned with furthering these worldly aims rather than with 'liberation'. In short, his view is that they are anything but 'world renouncers'.

The term for layman, *'jig-rten-pa*, itself has the sense of worldly, and the monk here referred to the *'jigs-rten-pa chos-brgyad*, the 'eight worldly objects' - namely, gain and loss; fame and ill-fame; slander and praise; happiness and misery (Das 1902: 455) - as characterizing many of them. His contrast was with *chos-pa*, in the sense of someone committed to *chö* as Buddhist doctrine, not to the public status of village priest.

To act as a village priest the minimal qualification is to be able to read from a Tibetan printed text, that is from the type of book used in the temple. This skill presumes neither the ability to compose nor to copy Tibetan block script, nor even a comprehension of the work: it is a form of semi-literacy analogous to the chanting of a Latin mass in a Catholic church and relies as much if not more on rote memory that is keyed off by words in the text (an exercise of recall as well as recognition), as it does on the ability to read from a new text. At the lowest level of competence a person learns a specific text. Before a festival for which it is required he will sit at home to practise reading it. This is all the knowledge that is needed to sit in the temple in the line of village priests.

At the same time, a number of the senior priests have a far higher level of literacy, and among the priesthood of Tarkhyeghyang there are people of great sophistication. A number have familiarity with Nepalese, Hindi and Lhasa Tibetan, as well as with their own Tibeto-Burman dialect of Kagate. Many of these people have, in their youth or middle age, travelled and traded outside Nepal, lived in India and Tibet, and travelled as far afield as Burma. Some have had religious training in major centres of Tibetan Buddhist religious orders.

On their return to the village they all take their place in the local religious hierarchy. This raises the question of whether it is in any sense correct to talk of common local conceptions. It would be naive to suppose that all village priests shared the same collective ideas. It would be even more mistaken to suppose that village priests' conceptions were the same as those of local pastoralists who cannot read, speak only their own language and Nepalese, and have not travelled outside Helambu.

For example, when Djun Djom Rinpoce gave a Vajrayāna initiation to the entire village on the inauguration of the newly constructed village temple in 1971, what the mass of villagers of Tarkhyeghyang received in their own eyes was not an interpretation of the ordination, nor an initiation into the symbolism of the patron deities of a particular ceremony or text, but a blessing which was important because of the status of the person giving it. All may agree that the ceremony was for *wang* (*dbang*). On the term itself there is a general public consensus: but whereas for the knowledgeable, *wang* is 'authority', 'permission' or 'empowerment' (Beyer 1973: 402), for the villager it is a blessing. It is more important than, but of the same type as that blessing contained in the ball of barley given to each congregant on the last main day of the festival of Nara (*na-rag*, literally 'hell') by the village head lama, which is also called *wang* (Clarke 1990). And this Nara *wang* is a blessing of the same type but more important than that given by the head lama by the touch of his hand, bell, *vajra* or book on the bowed head of a congregant on a normal day when meeting him in the village square. Thus, though all would agree that they were receiving *wang*, conceptions of what this means vary considerably.

Some of the village priests are well aware of the divergence between doctrinal Buddhism and the local order, and to the extent that they participate in the public practice of religion their position is a conscious compromise. All of these people, from the head lama to the illiterate pastoralist, form a single community and participate together in village ceremonies in the temple: they come together in a single social order. Here it is the public exhibition and statement of status and concept, such as is indicated in the temple, the village square and houses and in other everyday contexts of word and deed, that is, the external and common forms of practice, that link the community together, rather than any single individual's varying interpretations: by village conceptions, I am referring to this public level alone.

At this lowest common level in the village, the voicing of Tibetan syllables or Sanskrit mantra has an intrinsically sacred nature—it is the key to ritual control over fortunes in this and other worlds. The word is itself sacred. Books must not be placed on the floor but stored above in special shelves, and the touch of a book on the head is itself beneficial. One cannot sit on chests that contain books, and when a book is so worn that it can no longer be used, it cannot just be thrown away but must be buried in a sacred site. The exercise of learning the Tibetan alphabet, chanting the sounds of the combinations of letters, whose name and sequence is learned by rote, is itself a form of religious activity analogous to but at a lower level than the practising of a text in the home. Tibetan characters, whether inscribed on paper and made manifest by the turning of a prayer-wheel, or on a prayer-flag and made manifest by the action of the wind, or on the paddles of a wheel turned by water, or just read from a book, are always sacred. And the priest who can select a suitable text and manifest it through reading has the power of control over this sacred order: hence the significance of reading as a public sign of religious competence. No such reverent attitude attaches to literacy in Nepalese,

which in the village is regarded as a useful skill, but one independent of the religious order and status.

3. *The Local Conception of Order and the Cosmos*

For the villager, all religious action is *chö*. As I noted above, the term *chos* is often translated into English as 'religion' or 'religious work', with a particular sense of 'Buddhist doctrine' (Skt. *dharma*), although it has the same sense of 'custom'. At least in Helambu, if not in Tibet as a whole, it has the wider sense of 'customary way' or 'order'. Here the idea of the Buddhist order as the 'proper order' is usually implicit: for the villager, all customs associated with Tibetan Buddhist culture as they exist are *chö*. It has a sense of 'morality' or 'correctness', but it is not just the religious order in the sense that religion has today in the West: it is *the* proper order which stands behind all aspects of nature and culture, behind all possible worlds. If there is a landslide, if there is a storm, if one is sick, if a building collapses, if trade is bad, the answer is always *chö*. In village as in doctrinal conceptions, everything ultimately is explainable by *chö*, and there is no division into separate areas of technical knowledge as exists in Western thought. Hence, in the social world as much as any other, the differences of position between Lama and Tamang, between landlord and tenant, between the wealthy and the poor are as much expressions of *chö* in the sense of the 'order of things' as is anything else.

This local conception of *chö* embodies both a cosmology and an idea of correct or proper action that for the large part explains the position of the individual in this order. The cosmos is ordered vertically, consisting of layered worlds, with a descending hierarchy from the upper to the lower levels. From the viewpoint of the individual there are levels that are 'up' or above him, other levels that are 'down' or below him, and his own level. This is the basis of a three-way division in the manner of 'heaven, earth and hell', here referred to as the 'land of the gods' (*lha-yul*), the 'land of men' (*mi-yul*) and 'hell' (*nyel-wa*).⁵

The idea of a layered cosmos is reported as being quite common at the popular level in Tibetan culture (Stein 1972: 211). I do not intend to discuss this further, other than to point out that the general expression in Tibetan for 'all possible worlds' is '*jig-rten-gsum*, literally the 'three materially based worlds' which has the sense of heaven, earth and hell (Jäschke 1881).

5. I believe that in literary Tibetan *mi-chos* can be contrasted with *lha-chos* as the 'order of men' versus the 'order of the gods'. This division between heaven and hell corresponds, in a general sense, to that between gods (*lha*) and evil spirits ('*dre*'). In Helambu the general term for evil spirits is not '*dre*' but the conjunction *gdon bgegs bar-chad*.

Though the latter does adorn the temple portico in the usual corner, it is this former layered conception rather than the Buddhist 'wheel of existence' (*srid pa'i 'khor-lo*) with its six domains which is the village conception of the cosmos. One sophisticated informant mapped the one on to the other in the following manner: the gods and the demi-gods form the gods; the men and animals form this world; and the hells and the domain of the 'ghosts' form the underworld. Here the Buddhist idea of an escape from the 'wheel of existence', that is, of 'liberation' (*thar-pa*) as a radically different state, is altogether absent. The idea of such an opposition is, of course, implicit in the Buddhist interpretation of the root '*jig-rten*' in the term '*jig-rten gsum*' (see above).

Village ideas are not other-worldly in the doctrinal sense of 'liberation' as an appreciation of the lack of essence of material worlds: here liberation is not the negation of this world but the apotheosis of worldly desire, an idealized material heaven, an earthly paradise (*zhing-khams*), the land of the gods (*lha-yul*). The main sense in which people are 'other-worldly' is in that they pay attention to the afterlife and to a presumed reincarnation: here their actions are directed towards going 'up' rather than 'down', not to discovering a radically different conception of the order. Heaven and hell are the ideal poles of this vertical hierarchy of worlds, and any village ideas about 'liberation' conceive of it as the highest form of heaven. In so far as one can talk about general ideas on rebirth, these are directed towards the next immediate reincarnation, with the expectation and hope that one will be reborn in a similar locality with a slightly higher status.⁶

This vertical representation of the cosmos is the same scheme that applies to the social world and the natural order. 'Above' is towards the ridge and northwards, towards the snow-peaks and Buddhist temples of the Lamas where religious work is carried out; 'down' is towards the river and southwards, towards the land cultivated by Tamangs and trade. The natural, ethnic and economic divisions of the region are subsumed in this village conception of *chö* as a vertical hierarchy. The same set of ideas is carried through within the village itself, with up and down applied both to the relative statuses of men in their seating positions and to their positioning with respect to deities in home and temple. Rank and status in this world are contained in the same logical order as the relationships between different worlds.

This ideology, in which spiritual progress, social status and material wealth are analogous and interconnected areas, also provides the Lama people with a justification of the social order and the reasons behind fortune and misfortune. In their terms, as health and material success are the lot of those who live up the hill, so sickness and poverty are the lot of those who live below. A tenant farmer at the bottom of the hill may be well aware that the direct cause of his misfortune is economic and that he cannot make offerings at the temple because of his poverty.

6. Such general village notions do not apply in a simple or direct manner to all individuals, many of whom express a sceptical attitude to the usefulness of a discussion of reincarnation; yet at the same time, a large part of public ritual is directed to just this purpose.

From the viewpoint of the Lama community, the explanation is in terms of the people's karma, and the best way of improving their position is by acting according to Buddhist precepts and supporting the temples of their Lama landlords. Hence the hegemony of these Lama landlords has a religious legitimation, not only in the law of the state but also in the local ideology (see Clarke 1980, 1985).

4. *Merit as Virtue and Blessing*

The position of the individual villager is thought to depend on his 'accumulation of merit' (*bsod-nams-kyi tshogs*). 'Virtue' (*dge-ba*) results in an increase and sin or 'vice' (*sdig-pa*) in a decrease of this stockpile of merit.⁷ This is a karmic model of just returns according to the morality of intentions and actions, in which individual responsibility is stressed. The accumulation of merit is held to transcend any one lifetime: the direction of the individual's reincarnation depends on this store, and his present status can be justified by reference to actions in this as well as in previous lifetimes.

Although in reply to direct questions individuals stress the importance of the intention behind an action for gaining merit, at a public level actions, and moreover institutionalized actions, are of major importance for accumulating merit. In the monastic form of Buddhism in Tibet the main forms of virtuous action which result in this merit are keeping to the vows of the householder and veneration of the 'Buddha, Doctrine and Community'. A person gains merit by acting as the *jindah* (*sbyin-bdag*), the 'donor' who supports religious institutions by actions such as the construction of buildings, the copying of books, and the donation of land and other sources of income. In Helambu, the figure of the donor is formalized in the status of the *jiwa* (a contraction of the Tibetan term *sbyin-bdag*). He is responsible for managing the secular aspects of a ceremony and in return receives the primary merit of the ritual. As well as the merit implicit in the action of this support, he has the right to make offerings and receive blessings on his own behalf on that day.

As a donor, a person is a client of the priesthood, and the position of donor is rotated amongst all villagers in an elaborate manner so that all households which are full members of the village have the right to occupy the position of donor on certain annual festivals, and hence have institutionalized access to merit. In addition, the other village householders have both the right and the obligation to support the donor of each festival with gifts of crops. These are redistributed in the form of food to the community at the festival and also support member households with similar donations of crops at life-cycle ceremonies. Hence the

7. The terms *sonnam* (*bsod-nams*) and *dikpa* (*sdig-pa*) are often used loosely as the contraries for 'good' and 'bad'.

performance of one's duty as a village member is itself a virtuous act that results in the accumulation of merit.

Other practices that are a part of routine daily activities are also seen as producing merit. The house-father's recitation of a text and the house-mother's purification at the household altar in the morning are both virtuous acts. The morning and evening clockwise circumambulation of the temple, the turning of prayer-wheels and the recitation of simple liturgical formulae are similarly seen by non-literate members of the community as virtuous acts producing merit. And at an informal level all acts of generosity are virtuous.

All public ritual is at least in part associated with the accumulation of merit. This is transparently so with the major public ceremony that occurs after death, which itself is known as the *dge-ba*—the term that means virtue. At this time, when it is thought that the soul of the deceased is in an intermediary state prior to reincarnation, acts of generosity are carried out in the name of the deceased with the intention of increasing his stockpile of merit so that he has a good reincarnation. More generally, at every ceremony in which offerings of the small rice *torma* that in this as in other Tibetan areas of the Himalaya are known as *tso* (*tshogs*, literally 'accumulation') are made, the entire congregation receives merit. Then each donor who makes an offering gives 108 of these *torma*, which after they have been blessed at the end of the ceremony are redistributed to each of the member households of the village as a sign of merit.⁸ The ceremonies for *tashi* (*bkra-shis*) and *nowa* (*sngo-ba*) which are performed after the major temple ceremonies are also connected with merit. The former is a thanksgiving for merit and good fortune received in the past; the latter is thought to ensure that the merits produced by the ceremony are actually received by the person for whom they are intended, notwithstanding any mistakes that may have been made in the carrying out of the ritual.⁹

In one sense, merit is for the individual who performs the act of virtue himself, and at this level it is the state of mind of the actor while carrying out the action which is of importance. Both the sophisticated villager and the monk hold that the importance of such acts of virtue lies not in the automatic accumulation of merit but in directing thoughts to the afterlife and to religious doctrine which redirects and improves the mind. Here, routine and automatic acts of offering can have no virtue in themselves and are only of service to the individuals who carry out the action if accompanied by the correct intentions: these have to be other than the self-interested accumulation of a hypothetical merit. However, public ritual acts at a different level, whereby acts of offering and receiving are institutionalized and

8. There are 103 households in Tarkhyeghyang, though according to some villagers there should ideally be 108, a number which has general symbolic significance in Tibetan religion.

9. In Western Tibet *sngo-ba* is a blessing in the sense of a requital for a present, that is, a form of spiritual recompense or repayment (Jäschke 1881: 137).

formalized as obligations and duties: it emphasizes the social act rather than the intention and state of mind of the individual.

For the villager, merit is both for the individual carrying out the action and for others who are part of the community. In some cases the individual acts as the representative of the social unit or units of the village, such as the household or local lineage. For example, rituals carried out in the temple in the name of the founding lineage can be both for the lineage and for the village collectivity as a whole, as is the continual rotation of the paddles of the water-wheel at the edge of the village.

Merit is also acquired indirectly. At a formal level, all religious texts carry at their end the Mahāyāna dedication that any merits from the ceremony be for all living beings (*sems-can don-byed*). Moreover, the villager believes that the merit acquired by an offering in the temple can be redirected to a person other than the donor himself. As well as the 108 small rice-cones known as *iso*, there is a larger rice *torma* placed in the centre of the tray known as the *lumba iso*. The former are for those people who are alive, for *sonden wang* (*gson-pa*, 'to be alive, to save or preserve one's own life'); the latter are for people who are already dead, for *shinbu wang* (*gshin-po*, 'a ghost, the dead, anything that is dead' (Das 1902: 1314, 1248)). These *torma* are delivered to the *uje* (*dbu-je*), the lama's assistants, for placing in the temple on the morning of the day on which they must be offered. One rupee for each person for whom the 'merit' of the *lumba iso* is intended must be handed to one of the lama's assistants, who writes down the name of this person on the list for the day, which is read out at the time of the offering by the priests. At this popular level, the state of mind of the person for whom the merit is intended is obviously not of central importance to the ritual.

It is clear that the term merit is linked to the popular idea of blessing as much as it is to virtuous action. This connection between merit and blessing is of major social importance, as it takes responsibility for merit away from the actor and places it in the hands of the priest carrying out the ceremony.

In answer to a direct question, people will reply that whatever happens to them is according to their merit, or that a religious ceremony gives them merit. At this level, the doctrine of karmic returns according to accumulation of merit from past actions stands behind the village conception of the order. However, other ideas about the effectiveness and mode of action of ritual, besides merit in the sense of virtue, enter into everyday life. Indeed, with a notion of merit being produced only by the virtue of one's *own* actions, the idea of a priest performing services for a client, as is implicit in the village practice of Vajrayana ritual, would be difficult to comprehend. The contradiction between karma as a law of moral returns and ritual altering fortune has been noted for Buddhists elsewhere in Asia (Obeyesekere 1968: 22; Tambiah 1968: 42). This may appear as a contradiction. However, at the public level not only is there no observable contradiction but there is no simple distinction between the two: merit, as well as being the direct aim of the general support of religious institutions and of numerous actions of devotion, is an accompaniment to ritual actions which are intended to direct a person's

fortune, quite independently of any virtue implicit in the action of the donor or client himself.

Villagers' attention is directed to merit, in the sense of the afterlife and virtue (*dge-ba*), on certain occasions only. Apart from repetitive chanting of prayers and other such ritualized actions, these are times in the annual calendrical or life cycle when thoughts of the afterlife are to the fore: death and the annual festival of Nara are the prime examples of merit as a collective and public concern. Merit, in the sense of the accumulation of virtue, also comes to the fore as an explanation of events, or states of fortune, which are otherwise inexplicable. For example, when a pious and well-thought-of individual met with an unlucky accident which killed him within the day, a deficit of merit from previous lifetimes was put forward as a possible reason behind it.¹⁰ Similarly, merit accumulated from previous lifetimes is used to explain the material wealth of foreigners who do not practise Buddhism. However, merit in this sense is rarely invoked as an explanation for the minor particulars of this lifetime, such as success or failure in a trading venture, gambling, divorce, meat rotting rather than drying over a fire, a minor disease, and so on. Only when it concerns death or other major events, or a repetitive state of fortune without another direct or obvious reason, is merit in the sense of the accumulation of virtue invoked as the explanation.

I referred above to the way in which *wang* (*dbang*) is popularly conceived of as a blessing. By 'blessing' I mean both to protect or guard from evil and to confer well-being by some sacred act, which here is the customary religious service of a priest for his client. This can be distinguished from merit in the sense of the accumulation of virtue in that its value depends not so much on the virtuous action of the donor or client as on the effective ritual action of the priest. This sense of blessing is wider than the Tibetan term often translated as 'blessing', namely *chinlap* (*byin-rlabs*; Skt. *prasād*). In Helambu, this latter term is publicly used to refer only to certain kinds of blessing and is largely defined by contrast with another term that is also, in the wider sense, 'blessing', namely, *tendil* (*rtent-brel*; Skt. *pratiṭyasamutpāda*). Whereas the former is connected to health and a general well-being, the latter is specifically connected to good fortune and matters of direct material prosperity.¹¹ Both terms are associated with specific substances and ceremonies, and their meaning comes about in part from reference. The consecrated pills known as *wang*, that are handed out to the entire congregation on the last day of Nara, for many people actually *are* a form of *chinlap*; the dough of the broken-up bodies of the *torma* distributed after a ceremony is actually *chinlap*. The flour sprinkled over each member of the congregation on the last day of Nara, by the Markhu Gyamtso ('butter ocean') temple official is *tendil*, as is the

10. Other immediate explanations, such as witchcraft accusations against outsiders, may also be invoked on such occasions.

11. In its popular use *tendil* also has the sense of omen; in Helambu a monkey is the best omen, a deer or a wild cat the worst.

fried bread handed out to the entire assembly on two days of Nara. In a concrete sense the two types of blessing may be distinguished by the different benefits they bring: health (among other things) in the case of *chinlap*, wealth and good fortune in the case of *tendil*. The former is blessing and the latter is material prosperity. Generally, where there is *chinlap* there always is *tendil*, but one can receive *tendil* without *chinlap*.

On a large number of occasions, the principal concern is with blessing and this life rather than with merit in the sense of virtue for the afterlife. The point is not that there is a clear distinction in their terms between ceremonies for virtue (*dge-ba*) and ceremonies for blessings in the sense of *chinlap* and *tendil*. At the level of village concepts the local term for merit, *sonnam* (*bsod-nams*), has a sense both of an accumulation of merit attached to the individual, on which his fate in the afterlife depends, and of blessing in the sense of the beneficial effects of ritual action carried out by the priesthood. At the popular level, there is no clear separation between the two.

One sign of the importance of blessing in the wider sense is the number of occasions on which blessing rather than merit is the direct purpose of the ceremony. The *sang* (*bsangs*, purification) ceremony which forms part of the major clan ceremonies has material prosperity, that is, *tendil*, for the donor as its main concern, as does the equivalent village festival of *Da-lha pangto* (*dgra-lha pang-bstos*); the latter also contains a libation ceremony (*ser-bskyems*) for the material prosperity of each and every village household. Semi-formal gatherings, whether for activities such as gambling or for repairing the paths into the village after the monsoon, are always accompanied by a libation offering made by the donor who provides the refreshments. And the offerings and blessings at marriage, namely the butter anointed on the heads of the couple, the rice laid out in the pattern of a *vajra* and swastika on their seats, the cloths and money offered to them, and the cup of milk sipped by each in turn, are all signs of, or actions for, material prosperity for the union.¹²

The divination ceremony which the oracle above the village performs—to see if it will be advantageous to remain in the village or to leave and trade—is perceived by many simply as a blessing on the departure. Often, so too are the ‘merits’ received by the donors for the day of ceremony at Nara, when at the end of the day they enter the temple, sit facing the altar in the centre aisle, and in sequence receive and hold various objects from off the altar and then prostrate themselves. On many formal and informal occasions popular concern is directed not so much towards merit in the sense of virtue as towards what, in the general sense, are blessings.

12. Marriage is not a major life-cycle event in the same way as birth and death. This is because it is not concerned with a transition to another life, and so there is more emphasis on material prosperity.

This lack of popular differentiation between blessing and merit is typical of all the Lama villages in Helambu where I have pursued the question: public ritual inescapably links merit with blessing and control.

The penultimate folio of the Tibetan text HD2 (see Clarke 1980a), which has been dated tentatively to the beginning of the eighteenth century, suggests that this association has existed for at least 250 years. This document contains the names of individuals who are the donors of a ceremony, the amount of money or objects that they have given for it, and the name of the place or paradise where they wish to be reincarnated. In this case, where an offering and the action of a priest are thought to control one's future reincarnation, there is little left in the notion of merit as inherent virtue associated with either the intent behind an action or karma as just returns on conduct. Here, virtue is subordinate to the ritual action of a priest on behalf of a client.

This link between merit and blessing provides a clue to the motivation behind an important social fact. People prefer to make gifts to their superiors rather than to their inferiors or equals. For example, even the vows of the householder considered earlier are not simply instructions in precepts taken with an eye to merit by virtuously following them, but a blessing. And, as a blessing, they are more effective the higher the rank of the religious expert who confers them. In the village the people prefer to receive initiations from people of high rank, and here we also have a reason for the fictional elevation of the status of the diviner to that of a *rin-po-che*: the higher his status the greater the blessing they receive, quite independently of the nature of the services performed.

In popular thought, the more important the lama the more important the blessings he may bestow; also, the larger the offering made to him the greater the blessing received. Here, instead of a concentration on the nature of the ceremony and the intention behind the offering as a sign of spiritual status, this latter quality is externalized and made public in terms of social rank and quantity. Hence the emphasis on concrete signs of rank, such as seating position and precedence in offerings, and then in the numbers and types of fried breads that are redistributed to the congregation at Nara. Furthermore, compared to those for the same ceremonies in surrounding villages, the very size and complex elaboration of the main *torma* in the temple of Tarkhyeghyang (each of which on Nara requires four men to lift it into place) is a public sign of the importance of the village and the divinities associated with it.

It follows that one should give to the superior person, quite literally to the *bla-ma*. It is better to give to a Lama than to a Tamang, to a literate priest than an illiterate villager, to a lineage Lama than to a common priest, and amongst the lineage Lamas to the head lama. Above all, it is best to give to a high religious dignitary from outside the region. Hence there is an obvious justification for the support by Tarkhyeghyang village of the hermitages above the village: to do so is an expression of a hierarchy which places them high and so is, for the Lama villagers, a matter of enlightened self-interest.

In addition, these same ideas and actions maintain the asymmetries of the local social hierarchy: not only can the position of poor tenants down the hillside be justified by reference to their past lack of merit, but it follows that the way for them to acquire merit is to make offerings up the hillside to their superiors. And while for a landlord to make material gifts to his tenant is, in Buddhist doctrinal terms, an act of merit, in terms of this logic a gift in the other direction will give him more merit. Furthermore, from a Lama villager's viewpoint, his tenants' delivery of crops to him is not only a legal duty but an opportunity for the tenant to acquire merit by supporting a religious institution.

5. *Blessings, Virtue, and the Temple*

Whether it is viewed as an immediate blessing or as merit to be acquired by virtue, the distribution of goods is a spiritual as well as a material investment: both are aspects of *chö* and ultimately belong to the same domain. It follows that the intelligent use of his possessions is a matter of great concern to the householder, and he has to balance the needs of immediate consumption and direct economic exchange against an investment via offerings in the temple. He must necessarily make his minimum commitment to the temple as a village member, but offerings and religious work above and beyond this are a matter of choice. For example, if his wife dies he might have to decide whether merely to carry out the ritual for the forty-nine days after death (after which the person is presumed to have reincarnated), whether to make annual offerings for merit at Nara in the name of his wife, or whether to donate land to the temple or to a hermit monk so that the annual income from his land or money be used to create merit in the name of the deceased. Is land or money best given to the village temple, to a hermit monk or to Bakan monastery? Is it better to use money immediately in a donation, to finance the passage of another son through a monastery, or to erect a monument; or is it perhaps better to use the money directly in business ventures in India for a number of years in order to increase it, and then to return to the village to make the correct offerings?

One example is the practice of placing sons in large monasteries in the Kathmandu valley and Dharamsala outside the region, rather than at Bakan, where it is thought that they will receive a better religious training. Although to give such training is itself meritorious, a major reason for doing so is that when the father dies his descendants will be capable of, and see the reason for, making effective offerings for his next life. In other words, it is to help ensure that he goes 'up' rather than 'down'. Altruism or filial affection can be seen as enlightened self-interest.

A comment of Mauss's on India, quoted also by Tambiah (1968: 117) in the context of merit in Thailand, is fitting here:

The thing given brings return in this life and in the other. It may automatically bring the donor an equivalent return—it is not lost to him but reproductive.... Food given away means that food will return to the donor in this world; it also means food for him in the other world.... (Mauss 1954: 54)

Pure economic activity, even if apparently successful, is thought to lead to eventual misfortune unless it is accompanied by religious offerings. It is said that in the past in Helambu at large, and in a few locations still today, some people made offerings and pacts with non-Buddhist deities that enable them to gain great material wealth. The form of these offerings was supposed to be a human life at regular intervals: this was done by poisoning guests.¹³ Owing to the inherent lack of virtue in this action, the eventual outcome for such people would be reincarnation in a lower state. The logic of karma explains these people's success in long-term negative returns. To the anthropologist, such a remark appears as a form of witchcraft accusation against a seemingly successful person who does not subscribe to the community's values.¹⁴ Practical decisions have to take into account both the direct material benefits and the eventual karmic effect. And though any course of action that results in one being able to make offerings has some beneficial effect, the means have to fit with the ends. In one sense this belief in the necessity of a religious accompaniment to economic activity is self-definitional of village membership: it is the person who does not think in this manner who does not return from abroad to the village and who renounces his village membership.

Although the villager has a degree of choice, many of his actions and commitments for redistribution of his goods are defined by his membership of the village community. Minimally, he or his representative must act as a donor on certain occasions, and in return members of his household have the right to the services of the priesthood and temple. This means that every head of household who is a *khral-pa* (literally 'taxpayer', here 'citizen' or patrician) must be represented as a donor.¹⁵ The temple represents the priesthood as a collectivity, and exchanges between the households and the temple are an institutional embodiment of the exchanges between villager as priest and villager as client. The circulation of goods between households via the temple adds value to them in the form of merit and blessing in the community, and it is not out of place to gloss the

13. This idea was invoked in 1974 to explain the death of the abbot of Bakan on his return to Helambu, after he had stayed in a particular household. It was also used to explain the death of a Swiss person in 1975. It is clear that lack of merit could not be put forward to explain the death of the former.

14. This anthropologist has a vested interest in such a viewpoint. The occasion that gave rise to the information was a discussion in one household concerning his staying and eating in another while on his way to the village. It began with the comment of the female head of the household: 'You will eat in a house which might poison you but you won't touch my food.'

15. See ch. 8 of Clarke 1980c and Clarke 1990 for a full discussion of the history and organization of these statuses.

form of merit and blessing in the community, and it is not out of place to gloss the system as a whole as 'religious capitalism', or, if we wish to take account of the history of the institution, a religiously legitimated feudalism or theocracy.

In Western material terms, it is the possession of rights in land by non-cultivators that gives a temple-village control over the economic surplus of the region. This surplus is then used in ceremonies for purposes of prestige and non-productive symbolism and ritual, and these commodities are eventually consumed by the community. But from this local perspective, it is not that the possession of wealth allows them to carry out ritual but that the performance of the ritual allows them to accumulate wealth. Ceremonies in the temple are seen as part of the productive cycle.

This is illustrated by a discussion held between some of the higher priests of the temple and a villager who had recently returned after a long period in India. The latter suggested that they might cut down on the number of days of a ceremony, as the costs were high and he thought that the money could be used in a more productive way than in ritual and for villagers' direct consumption. It was pointed out to him that the wealth of the village depended on these festivals being carried out, and that if they did not the crops would fail, business ventures would be unsuccessful, and there would be sickness. It was thought that the best way to increase his wealth and that of the village as a whole was to increase, rather than decrease, the number and size of the festivals.

One villager went so far as to say that he would prefer to give all his money to the temple and then receive it back as a loan, rather than use it directly in trade. He thought that the blessing acquired in receiving money from the temple would increase the chance of success in business. This was so both directly and indirectly, in that he would be using blessed money and as a donor he would have the opportunity to acquire more blessings. To pursue the economic metaphor further, the extra cycle of exchange set up via the temple would represent 'added value' on the commodity.

This idea of both merit and material blessings being associated with the flow of goods and money through the village temple had a logical development in Tarkhyeghyang in the early 1940s, when Bakan monastery had just been built and the authoritative individuals responsible for its construction were still alive. A plan was put forward that all private property, all the land, houses, money and possessions owned by the villagers, would be donated to the temple. The temple administrators, namely the senior lamas, would have been responsible for the allocation of houses, food, clothing and even the careers and occupations of the villagers.

To speculate a little, Tarkhyeghyang might then have moved from a village as a 'co-operative', in which there was mutual aid for the gain of the individual, lineage, household or family, to a wider collective or communal form in which joint responsibility extended to the productive resources of the community as a whole. This would have been in keeping with an earlier, albeit temporary, form of organization of the village in this century in which all were 'citizens' (*khral-pa*),

as well as in keeping with both a socialist and a Mahāyāna Buddhist ethic. One sophisticated villager referred to the proposed system as 'communism'.

One immediate effect of such a system would have been the direct channelling of all rights in the village via the temple hierarchy: while citizens would have had some say, direction would only have been joint, but not equal. Control would then have derived, as before, from the collective embodied in the religious hierarchy, a theocracy controlled by those above, the lamas. In fact, none of this happened as there were a number of people with considerable resources who stood low in, or outside of, the temple hierarchy: they would have lost control of their assets and did not agree to the suggestion.

6. *Conclusion*

This essay began with a consideration of Buddhist doctrinal statuses in the context of the village hierarchy and showed the divergences between these two orders. Locally, these did not appear as distinct but were condensed into single statuses and concepts. The local ideology was not so much one of the 'world renouncer' as one of the 'world embracer', in which cosmological notions and the social order were together part of the same hierarchy of 'up' and 'down'. I showed how the local concept of merit referred not just to virtue but also to blessing, and how this combination provided a further reinforcement of the social hierarchy. I described how the public notion embraced both, and how at an institutional level the village system of exchange oriented around the temple could be termed 'religious capitalism'.

REFERENCES

- AZIZ, B. N. 1978. *Tibetan Frontier Families*, New Delhi: Vikas.
- BEYER, S. 1973. *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- CLARKE, G. E. 1980a. 'Lama and Tamang in Yolmo', in M. Aris and A.S. Suu Kyi (eds.), *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson*, (Proceedings of the International Seminar on Tibetan Studies, Oxford 1979), Warminster: Aris and Phillips.

- CLARKE, G. E. 1980b. 'A Helambu History', *Journal of Nepal Research Centre*, Vol. IV, pp. 1-38.
- ... 1980c. The Temple and Kinship among a Buddhist People of the Himalaya, University of Oxford: D.Phil. thesis.
- ... 1983. 'The Great and Little Traditions in Yolmo, Nepal', in E. Steinkellner and H. Tauscher (eds.), *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History and Culture*, Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien.
- ... 1985. 'Equality and Hierarchy among a Buddhist People of Nepal', in R. H. Barnes, D. de Coppet and R. J. Parkin (eds.), *Contexts and Levels: Anthropological Essays on Hierarchy* (JASO Occasional Papers, no. 4), Oxford: JASO.
- ... 1990 (in press). 'Nara (*na-rag*) in Yolmo: A Social History of Hell in Helambu', in M. T. Much (ed.), *Festschrift für Geza Uray*, Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien.
- DAS, S. C. 1902. *A Tibetan-English Dictionary*, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat and Book Depot.
- JÄSCHKE, J. A. 1881. *A Tibetan English Dictionary*, London: Trübner.
- MAUSS, M. 1954. *The Gift* (transl. Ian Cunnison), London: Cohen & West.
- NAKANE, C. 1966. 'A Plural Society in Sikkim', in C. von Fürer-Haimendorf (ed.), *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon*, Bombay: Asian Publishing House.
- OBEYESEKERE, G. 1968. 'Theodicy, Sin and Salvation in a Sociology of Buddhism', in E. Leach (ed.), *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STEIN, R. A. 1972. *Tibetan Civilization* (transl. John Driver), London: Faber & Faber.
- TAMBIAH, S. J. 1968. 'The Ideology of Merit and the Social Correlates of Buddhism in a Thai Village', in E. Leach (ed.), *Dialectic in Practical Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- TUCCI, G. 1956. *To Lhasa and Beyond*, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato.
- ... 1980. *The Religions of Tibet* (transl. G. Samuel), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.