

# CHARTING THE SHUGDEN INTERDICTION IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYA\*

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## INTRODUCTION

ON March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1996, His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, head of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, performed a tantric empowerment ceremony to the Tibetan protector deity Tamdrin<sup>1</sup> at Dharamsala, North India. Prior to commencing with the empowerment, the Dalai Lama declared that anyone in the audience who was a worshipper of the powerful Tibetan protector deity Dorje Shugden<sup>2</sup> should leave, because the deity was opposed to the cause of Tibet, existed in conflict with the Tibetan government's key protector deities Palden Lhamo<sup>3</sup> and Nechung,<sup>4</sup> and that to remain would be to harm the cause of Tibet and would shorten his own life as a religious teacher.<sup>5</sup>

The declaration marked the apex of a long dispute within the Tibetan exile community, one that had been growing for twenty years, but which had its antecedents in the very founding years of the government of the Dalai Lamas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (see below). During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, worship of the protector deity Dorje Shugden had grown in strength within the Gelug<sup>6</sup> order of Tibetan Buddhism (of which the Dalai Lama is a key member), but was seen by many as at odds with the original constitutional structure of the Tibetan government at Lhasa, and, in particular, its own structure of protector deities.<sup>7</sup> While the deity and some of its key followers – such as

\* This work could not have been written without the co-operation of a large number of individuals and institutions on all sides of the dispute that it discusses, and in particular the co-operation of those caught in the middle. Particular thanks go to the many officers of the DRI and Religion & Culture departments of the Tibetan Government-in-exile in Dharamsala, to the many monks and laity of Ladakh and Zangskar that saw fit to overcome their reservations and discuss this matter both openly and anonymously, and to the proprietors of the Dorje Shugden Devotees Religious and Charitable Society in New Delhi.

<sup>1</sup> *rta grin*; S. *Hayagrīva*.

<sup>3</sup> *dpal ldan lha mo*.

<sup>5</sup> Many Western observers of this issue find this last element of the Dalai Lama's declaration surprising, but it is far from heterodox or arbitrary in terms of Tibetan Buddhist understandings of the place of lamas, or spiritual guides. The general Mahāyāna Buddhist view of higher teachers such as the Dalai Lama is that, as manifestations of Buddhahood, they appear only as a consequence of people's good karma, and do so only to teach and guide other beings to liberation from samsara. As such, if people fail to take the advice of the spiritual guide, he simply withdraws his earthly presence. The present Dalai Lama had previously indicated that the matter of Shugden was decisive in this regard during the mid-1970s, when resistance to his reforms within the heart of the Tibetan Government-in-exile caused him to refuse their annual long-life offering, and to hint that there would not be a fifteenth Dalai Lama.

<sup>6</sup> *dge lugs*.

<sup>7</sup> Thus, the early twentieth century Gelug hierarch and key Shugden supporter Pabongka Rinpoche asserted: "Because the All Seeing Great Fifth practiced and developed all tenets of the old and new

<sup>2</sup> *rdo rje shugs ldan*.

<sup>4</sup> *gnas chung*.

Pabonkha Rinpoche<sup>8</sup> (1878-1941) and the Dalai Lama's own junior tutor, Trijang Rinpoche<sup>9</sup> (1900-1981) – were significant forces in Lhasa and later in exile, during the 1970s the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama himself came to view the deity as a sectarian influence at odds with his own *ri-mé*,<sup>10</sup> or 'non-sectarian', view of legitimate ceremonial governance.

The Dalai Lama's view of the matter was strongly couched in terms of the logic of Tibetan protector deities, or choekyong<sup>11</sup> (literally, 'protectors of the doctrine'), which had always maintained an integral role within the ceremonial structure of Tibetan governance. Protector deities were seen to defend the government, protect its cities and temples, safeguard its laws, and ride out across the skies before its armies. Far more than a matter of mere individual faith, they were the very glue of religious and constitutional affiliation.

Here, Dorje Shugden was evoked especially as a protector of the purity of the Gelug order and the monastic discipline of its founder Tsongkhapa. In this respect, the Dalai Lama viewed the power of Shugden as antithetical to the structure of choekyong set up by his predecessors, in particular the 'Great Fifth Dalai Lama', which incorporated protectors from not just the Gelug tradition (founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), but also the 'old' Buddhist schools that had brought Buddhism to Tibet in the seventh century: deities such as Palden Lhamo, Nechung, and Ts'angspa.<sup>12</sup> Shugden was also seen by the Dalai Lama as antipathetic to the key Gelug protector Choegyäl<sup>13</sup> (Yama, Lord of Death).

This complex cosmology of protectors represented for many Tibetans the very backcloth of religious devotion, and changing this was no easy matter: protector deities were seen as dangerous and volatile forces, especially one as traditionally wrathful and partial as Dorje Shugden. In response to this concern, the Dalai evoked protector against protector:

Lamas, geshe, religious students and laity need not fear that they will be harmed if they stop propitiating Dholgyäl.<sup>14</sup> Nothing will happen. I will face the challenge. As Gelugpas, recite the *migtsema*<sup>15</sup> prayer, it will be enough if you also recite the *Condensed Extensive Praise to Choegyäl*. No harm will befall you.<sup>16</sup>

Over the next two years following the 1996 declaration, the consequences – direct and indirect – of the Dalai Lama's interdiction would reverberate all

[schools], this great protector through the power of previous prayers produced a variety of extremely frightful appearances to the supreme Powerful King (the Fifth Dalai Lama) in order to protect and defend spotlessly Dzong-ka-ba's great tradition." (DREYFUS 1998, p. n. 43)

<sup>8</sup> *pa bong ka rin po che*.

<sup>10</sup> *ris med*.

<sup>12</sup> *tshangs pa dkar po*.

<sup>14</sup> *dol rgyäl*. An alternative name for Dorje Shugden commonly used amongst its opponents. For the history of this name, see Dreyfus 1998.

<sup>16</sup> From Tibetan Government-in-exile's "Points of the Kashag's Statement Concerning Dolgyäl". <http://www.tibet.com/dholgyal/dholgyal2.html><http://www.tibet.com/dholgyal/dholgyal2.html>, retrieved 10 November 2008.

<sup>9</sup> *khri byang rin po che*.

<sup>11</sup> *chos skyong*.

<sup>13</sup> *dam can chos rgyäl*.

<sup>15</sup> *dmigs brtse ma*.

round the world, as worshippers of Dorje Shugden smarted from the implications of the edict. Within a few months, some of the deity's more ardent adherents (particularly in Europe, where protests were headed by the Shugden Supporters' Community) publicly accused the Dalai Lama of suppressing religious freedom and perpetrating human rights abuses.<sup>17</sup> The story found its way onto the front page of newspapers in Europe, Asia and the Americas, where secular newspaper editors struggled to comprehend the arcane convolutions of Tibetan cosmology. Western academics generally interpreted the Dalai Lama's move as, variously, a struggle against religious sectarianism, an endeavour to modernise the Tibetan exiled polity,<sup>18</sup> and more broadly a natural consequence of the politicisation of Buddhist religiosity.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, in June 1998, Amnesty International – which had received a large quantity of complaints and petitions on the matter (again, largely – but not entirely – from European practitioners of Shugden worship) declared that none of the accusations laid against the Tibetan Government-in-exile constituted human rights abuses *per se*, and that “while recognising that spiritual debate can be contentious, Amnesty International cannot become involved in debate on spiritual issues”.<sup>20</sup> Over the next two years, the controversy died away as an object of real international attention, although it continues to rumble away within Tibetan communities and religious organisations across the world.

While the international dimensions of the Shugden controversy have been widely discussed,<sup>21</sup> its implications for Buddhist communities on the ground in Asia have been less well documented. This is particularly the case for Tibetan Buddhist communities (primarily in the Himalaya) that lie outside the Tibetan refugee population and therefore have an ambiguous relationship with the Tibetan Government-in-exile. We cannot assume that the social reality of the Shugden controversy in such communities shares even the broad features of the acrimonious and highly politicized dispute that occurred on the international stage.

Indeed, many religious communities that traditionally had some form of ritual relationship with Dorje Shugden have maintained a sustained silence, in many cases in deliberate contrast to their vociferous European counterparts. One such place is Ladakh in the Western Himalaya, where ceremonial dependence on the deity as a key monastic protector deity was almost universal within the dominant Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism until 1996, but

<sup>17</sup> See MILLS 2003a.

<sup>18</sup> In a Guardian interview on the Shugden controversy in 1996, the Bristol-based Buddhist specialist Paul Williams remarked: “The Dalai Lama is trying to modernise the Tibetans’ political vision and trying to undermine the factionalism. He has the dilemma of the liberal: do you tolerate the intolerant?” (BUNTING 1996).

<sup>19</sup> ARDLEY 2002, pp. 175-6.

<sup>20</sup> AI INDEX: ASA 17/14/98 JUNE 1998.

<sup>21</sup> MILLS 2003a, DREYFUS 1998, BUNTING 1996, KAY 2004, BROWN 1996.

has been almost entirely eradicated as a public institutional form in the subsequent decade. What follows constitutes an initial examination of the dynamics of this process of religious change.

#### SHUGDEN PRACTICE IN LADAKH PRIOR TO 1996

On the western periphery of the Tibetan Plateau, Ladakh is a mountainous region within the Indian State of Jammu & Kashmir, primarily divided into the high altitude Ladakh and Zangskar Valleys. Containing a mixed Muslim and Buddhist population, it long held strong relations with South Asia; and was ultimately annexed by forces from Jammu in the Dogra Wars of 1834-1842, to be inherited from that princely domain by independent India. Despite this, Buddhist Ladakh maintained long-running and intimate religious affiliations with Central Tibet and the Ganden P'odrang government of the Dalai Lamas until the Tibetan Uprising of 1959. The Ladakh and Zangskar Valleys boast monasteries from a variety of Tibet's religious schools: while royal patronage fell mainly upon the Drukpa Kagyu establishments the region remained numerically dominated by the institutions of the Gelug order, founded by the monk-scholar Je Tsongkhapa<sup>22</sup> in Lhasa in 1409. Monks and nuns from these many Gelug monasteries regularly journeyed to Tashilhunpo<sup>23</sup> monastery in Tsang province and Drepung Gomang<sup>24</sup> monastic college in Lhasa to make pilgrimage, receive education and, in some cases, carry back of the intellectual and ceremonial traditions of those great institutions to their home monasteries.

One such tradition shared by these Gelug institutions was the use of Dorje Shugden as a monastic protector. The precise history of this last process needs further research, and the following comments are tentative at best. Gelug use of Shugden as a monastic protector seems to have been universal within Ladakh and Zangskar in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This practice converged primarily around the monastic estates of the Ngari Rinpoche<sup>25</sup> incarnate lineage, centred at his regional seat at Rangdum monastery, where the ceremonial clothes of the deity's oracle were traditionally kept.

#### *The Ceremonial Status of Dorje Shugden in pre-1996 Ladakh*

Prior to the Dalai Lama's 1996 injunction, ceremonial practice regarding Dorje Shugden followed many of the standard features pertaining to a worldly protector deity. Monasteries would keep a consecrated statue of the deity either in their main prayer hall or protector shrine, and perform daily prayers to the deity along with the rank of other protector deities, both worldly and supra-worldly. Many of these monasteries employed the services of a promi-

<sup>22</sup> rje tsong ka pa, 1357-1419.

<sup>24</sup> 'bras spungs sgo mang.

<sup>23</sup> bkra shis lhun po.

<sup>25</sup> mnga' ris rin po che.

nent local oracle (*lha pa*) that was regularly possessed by the deity, which would issue prophecies and perform healing, often to large crowds of laity. Some (but not all) members of these monastic communities would also use Dorje Shugden as a *personal* protector deity, and receive initiation and training in this regard.

The deity has a complex (and somewhat variable) iconography, being seen to manifest itself in one of five forms: Duldzin Dorje Shugden (the principal form, taking the appearance of a monk riding a lion); Vairochana Shugden (a young man with an arrow and a noose, riding an elephant); Gyäpa'i Shugden<sup>26</sup> (holding a vase and jewel-holder, riding a yellow palamino – strongly associated with the protection of wealth); Padma Shugden (red body, holding a hook and noose, riding a blue turquoise dragon); and Karma Shugden (dark red body, holding a sword and the heart of his enemies, riding a garuda-bird).<sup>27</sup>

Even by his supporters, he was regarded as a particularly wrathful and partial deity, intent on the protection of the purity of the Gelug order. This was linked to the deity's perceived origins: that Dorje Shugden was the spirit of Dragpa Gyaltsen<sup>28</sup> (1619-1657), the deceased abbot of the Upper House of Drepung monastery in Lhasa. This figure has an important place in the constitutional history of the Gelug order: a regular debater against the Fifth Dalai Lama, he had criticized the ruler for mixing Gelug teachings and practices with those of the ancient Nyingma<sup>29</sup> lineages of Buddhism, and championed instead the cause of a more strictly delineated Gelug tradition. Eventually, however, politics caught up with him, and he was found dead in his quarters with prayer scarves pressed deep into his throat, either by suicide or murder. Tradition then records how Central Tibet and the Fifth Dalai Lama's government in particular were ravaged by a series of misfortunes, as a consequence of which they sought (in concert with Nyingma lamas) to exorcise this new supernatural power. The spirit, however, is said to have received greater supernatural aid to evade exorcism, causing the Gelug to realize its true identity and request its return as a protector deity.<sup>30</sup>

In this last respect, there is some degree of ambiguity: in Central and Eastern Tibet (and later in the refugee communities), this notion of purity was focused on the relationship between the teaching lineages of the Gelug and other traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, especially the Nyingma lineages. While this was certainly a prevalent idea amongst monks in Ladakh, they by and large emphasized the more traditional choekyong role as a protector of monastic discipline.

<sup>26</sup> *rgyas pa'i shugs ldan*.

<sup>27</sup> See NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ 1993, pp. 139-40 for variations on this iconography.

<sup>28</sup> *grags pa rgyal mtshan*.

<sup>29</sup> *rnying ma*.

<sup>30</sup> This was the version of the deity's history related to me by several Ladakhi monks, and it differs little from Nebesky-Wojkowitz' published account, see NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ 1993, p. 134-145. As Dreyfus notes, there is rather a convoluted history in the development of this narrative, DREYFUS 1998.

There also remains some degree of controversy, not only regarding the political status of the deity, but in particular over his cosmological status. The international arguments over the deity have been characterized by a particular presentation of his status as a 'supra-worldly deity' (*'jigs rten las 'das pa'i lha*), akin to a Buddha. Indeed, the Western-based New Kadampa Tradition assert the deity to be a supra-worldly form of the Buddha Manjuśri. By contrast, the Gelug monastic establishments of Ladakh generally regarded the deity as a worldly spirit (*'jigs rten pa'i lha*), yet to attain liberation from the wheel of samsaric suffering, that acted as a lower protector (*chos skyong srung ma*), inferior to established supra-worldly protectors such as Gonpo,<sup>31</sup> Palden Lhamo and Choegyal. The adoption of the deity as a worldly protector now placed him under the command of the Gelug Order's principal tutelary Buddha (*yi dam*) Yamantaka,<sup>32</sup> the Vanquisher of Death and a highly wrathful form of Manjuśri.

The distinction between worldly and supra-worldly status was an important one for Ladakhi monks, who treated the claim that Dorje Shugden could be a supra-worldly being with the status of a Buddha with a certain degree of disapproval. Specifically, they note that the British-based New Kadampa Tradition (that asserts supra-worldly status to the deity) also maintains an oracle who is regularly possessed by the deity. For the monks I spoke to, this constituted an outright contradiction: supra-worldly deities such as Buddhas never possess oracles; rather, they manifest as teachers such as incarnate lamas. Indeed, the use of Shugden as an oracular deity was precisely linked by monks in Ladakh to his worldly partiality (a quality strongly contrasted with the renunciatory equanimity of Buddhas), which allowed him to help with certain public decision-making procedures (such as choosing members for a local stupa renovation and maintenance society, which I witnessed in the mid-1990s). The idea that a Buddha would involve himself in such mundane processes was seen as both inappropriate and theoretically contradictory.<sup>33</sup>

These cosmological nuances are worth noting because they influenced the general sociology of Shugden worship in Ladakh. Institutional worship of the deity was largely an integral part of a wider monastic ceremonial practice regarding protector deities; it did not, I would argue, constitute a 'cult' of its own. In this respect, we might compare it with the Dorje Shugden Devotees Religious and Charitable Society that maintained a large temple and society in Majnukatila (New Delhi's 'Tibetan quarter') entirely devoted to the deity.

<sup>31</sup> *mgon po*; Mahākāla.

<sup>32</sup> While Yamantaka is the most commonly used name in Ladakh for this deity, he also goes by the Tibetan name *gshin rje gshed*. See MILLS 2003 regarding the practice of this and other Gelug deities in Ladakh.

<sup>33</sup> This issue is discussed at length in works such as Trijang Rinpoche's *Music Delighting the Ocean of Protectors*, in which he argues that, just as some Buddhas manifest a 'wrathful aspect', similarly do others (such as Yamantaka) show a 'worldly aspect' (in the form of Dorje Shugden) that is nonetheless indivisible from his enlightened nature.

In this latter establishment, for example, the main temple to the deity contains subsidiary photographs of all the lamas and incarnates that support the deity. While Ladakhi monks often visited this temple, the ceremonial emphasis that it maintained – one that placed a deity at the heart of the tradition, with lamas in ‘supporting roles’ – inverted the traditional logic that organized ritual practices in Ladakh’s Gelug monasteries, where ‘the gods are below the lama’ (*lha bla ma yog ga*).<sup>34</sup>

In each of these senses, care must be taken not to assume that Shugden worship in Ladakh represented a simple extension of diaspora divisions and history. While tensions over the deity’s practice were certainly recognized by Ladakhis in the years prior to the Dalai Lama’s 1996 interdiction, they were broadly regarded as a matter internal to the Tibetan refugee polity, that simply did not apply to the indigenous populations of Ladakh and Zangskar. Strongly asserting Ladakh’s history of links to, but political separation from, Tibet, many recognized the *religious authority* of the Dalai Lama but not his *political sovereignty* over the region, even in theory. While the politics of the Tibetan exiles clearly had an impact, they nonetheless concerned a separate sovereign domain. This was doubly the case regarding the Dalai Lama’s antipathy to Shugden, which (in their view, as in the Dalai Lama’s) primarily concerned the Tibetan cause and the constitution of the Ganden P’odrang government.<sup>35</sup>

Within this context, the Dalai Lama’s many statements against Shugden practice prior to 1996 were read by Ladakhis as specifically pertinent to those incorporated within the Tibetan cause, and therefore as not really applying to them. Even in the mid-1990s, practical support for the deity’s ceremonial presence in Ladakh’s monasteries seemed to combine relatively unself-consciously with a strong religious devotion to the Dalai Lama. In Lingshed monastery, for example, the annual two-week fasting ceremony<sup>36</sup> included both the daily evocation of Dorje Shugden as a monastic protector and the public veneration of the Dalai Lama as the monastery and village’s central *guru* during the Lama Chodpa<sup>37</sup> (‘offerings to the spiritual guide’) ceremony.

#### *The Modern Politicisation of Shugden Practice in Ladakh*

Above, I have argued that practices related to Dorje Shugden in Ladakh were markedly different from those that emerged during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Gelugpa institutions in Tibet and the refugee communities of India. In particular, the use of Dorje Shugden as a highly politicised marker of sectarian

<sup>34</sup> MILLS 2003.

<sup>35</sup> This kind of distinction between political sovereignty and religious influence is characteristic of non-modern state systems, which commonly contain multiple layers of articulation, see BURGHART 1996, GEERTZ 1980, SOUTHALL 1956, 1988, STEIN 1980.

<sup>36</sup> *skam tshogs*. See MILLS 2003, p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> *bla ma mchod pa*.

difference seemed far more muted, if not entirely lacking. Ironically, this can perhaps be related to the very numerical dominance of the Gelug order in Ladakh and Zangskar. Certainly, the region's political distance from the Ganden P'odrang, the hothouse of Lhasa and Eastern Tibetan politics and, indeed, the Nyingma-dominated *ri-mé* movement, meant that debates over the 'purity of Tsongkhapa's tradition' had far less opportunity to sharpen and politicise in the way they did in Tibet itself.

At the same time, however, there is clear evidence that Shugden practice in Ladakh was profoundly if indirectly influenced by these political debates in the decades immediately prior to the Dalai Lama's declaration. This largely took the form of the systematic augmentation of Shugden practices within Ladakhi monasteries, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, at Spituk (*dpe thub*) monastery near Leh – a Gelug establishment belonging to the Bakula Rinpoche incarnate lineage – a large red outdoor shrine (*lha mtho* – lit. 'god pile') dedicated to the deity was erected in 1989. Its original inscription (now effaced) read:

*Hrih!* All-victorious, concentrated power [of] Yamantaka! Through [your] perfect wrath, severely dispatch the great protector of the spacious doctrine, [that] collected power of the three realms, skilful Gyalchen Shugden! Powerful protective guardian, to you [we] give praise! Truthfully assess the distinctive yellow-hat crowned community! Please judge those that, in thought and deed, sully the twenty vows! In brief, take harsh action to sever wrongdoing!

Spituk, land of the heart of Buddhism, Jetsun Tsongkhapa's stainless [crown-holding]<sup>38</sup> sangha community [and] flourishing holder of the teachings, carry out works that captivate the attention of the three planes of cyclic existence!

Prayers established Tibetan year 2116, the 17<sup>th</sup> (60-year) cycle.

(There then follows a list of sponsors).

The erection of Spituk's Shugden shrine coincides with a growing number of visits to Ladakh and Zangskar by pro-Shugden figures from the refugee Gelug monasteries, such as the incarnate Dagon Rinpoche from Drepung Gomang monastery in South India, who travelled widely throughout the region in the early 1990s and was instrumental in building up support for monastic and lay engagement with the deity.

These events were in turn intimately linked to the emergence of a key oracle to the deity located in Ladakh. A layman from the Trans-Sengge-La region, employed at Leh by the Indian army,<sup>39</sup> the oracle was regularly possessed by both the five forms of Dorje Shugden, and his 'minister' (*blon po*) Khajé Marpo.<sup>40</sup> Monks from monasteries that took Shugden as their protector described being trained in recognizing each form of the deity by the

<sup>38</sup> The term here is *rings lutt ldan*, which is somewhat obscure to me.

<sup>39</sup> The following information is taken from an interview with the Shugden oracle in Leh in the summer of 1994.

<sup>40</sup> *kha che dmar po*.



colour and shape of the oracle's face during possession: by contrast, should on occasion the oracle's face turn black, I was told, they would know that it was a demon (*'dre*) and not Shugden that had possessed him.

The oracle's personal history of possession had begun when he was a young man. As is often the case with such histories, the possessions began with an initiatory illness, in which the young oracle became feverish and started muttering in a dialect with which his fellow Ladakhis were unfamiliar, a condition accompanied by serious leg pains and a deterioration in his eyesight. As is common for the biographical arc of this kind of shamanic practice, endeavours were made to bring an end to the initial possession illness, by consulting lamas and other oracles to drive the (at the time) unnamed spirit away. Only once the possessions proved resistant to exorcism was a serious attempt made to identify the spirit. It was Dagon Rinpoche that initially declared that the possessing spirit was the protector Dorje Shugden, thus initiating a long period of training for the new oracle.

As Day has argued elsewhere, the process of training an oracle is as much a process of progressively constituting and augmenting the possessing deity's authoritative presence in the oracle.<sup>41</sup> This involves two processes: (i) progressively exorcising the negative, 'demonic' elements of the possession, understood as lesser spirits that 'cling', remora-like to the central possession; and (ii) providing the purified central possession with the accoutrements of the deity – its names, history, divine attendants, and ritual implements. In the case of Shugden, this involved robes, a large and heavy crown, a sword and hook (for removing ritual impurities and driving poisons from people's bodies),<sup>42</sup> and a pair of boots.<sup>43</sup>

One of the defining features of many possession events is their physically traumatic nature: indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, they are understood within Ladakhi culture less as a dramatic change of personality or mental frame, than a profound somatic transformation.<sup>44</sup> As is reportedly common with Dorje Shugden oracles,<sup>45</sup> the possessions take a considerable toll on the health of the oracle, and traditionally oracles for this deity are said to die young. In interview, the oracle discussed this question in terms of bodily impurity: the deity's presence was so 'wrathful' (*drag po*) that it physically drove out impurities from the oracle's body as it came into possession, a process that caused great physical pain, especially in his legs; indeed, the oracle

<sup>41</sup> DAY 1989, 1991.

<sup>42</sup> These implements were described as implying the possessing deity's relative superiority: whilst most worldly gods are seen to remove poisons and impurities through their oracle literally sucking them out with his/her mouth, the Shugden *lha-pa's* sword and hook were said to expel simply by touch, with the physical manifestations of such impurities coming out later in the patient's urine and sweat.

<sup>43</sup> These boots were reportedly small enough only to fit on the feet of a small child, and that the (rather tall) oracle was able to wear them in comfort once in possession was taken as a sign of his authenticity.

<sup>44</sup> MILLS 2008.

<sup>45</sup> NEBESKY-WOJKOWICZ 1993.

claimed that he could sometimes foretell the coming of an important person to consult the deity by several days, simply by the onset of the pain as the deity began descending into him in anticipation.

As part of his training as an oracle, these effects were, he noted, mitigated by the strict observance of sexual abstinence, great care to avoid ritual pollution (*sgrib*), and the shift to a diet comprising only 'white' foods (in particular, avoiding 'black' foods such as onions, garlic, chilies and alcohol). At the same time, he was instructed to counter the decline in his eyesight by daily performance of short *migtsema* prayers to Tsongkhapa each day.<sup>46</sup>

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Combined, these new influences played out over a Ladakhi religious field in which support for the Dalai Lama and support for the deity were not – in a local sense – seen as necessarily as being at odds. Nor did they (in my own experience of the matter, anyway) seek to change that delicate balance of loyalties: rather than embarking upon the kind of disastrous vilification of the Dalai Lama that characterised post-1996 Shugden support in Europe (which would surely have alienated large sections of Ladakh's Buddhist population), figures such as Dagon Rinpoche sought primarily to embed and secure a *practical* ceremonial dependence on Shugden in Ladakh and Zangskar.

This precarious balance of loyalties, set up within ceremonial practice in Ladakh's Gelug monasteries, was almost certainly too delicate to last, but the events of 1996 overturned them completely, starting Ladakh's Gelug-affiliated establishments off on a long arc of religious change that would last the major part of a decade. Notionally, at least, this can be broken down into several periods, although even at the time of writing the issue remains to be resolved in all its manifestations.

#### 1996-7

The initial reaction to the Dalai Lama's 1996 statement amongst Ladakhis with links to Shugden was an almost frozen irresolution. Most were initially unwilling to initiate the kind of measures that would end ceremonial links to Shugden in Ladakh: the deity was regarded by many as a trusted worldly protector that had served Ladakhis well, and to whom many were bound by initiation, healing and prophecy. Of these three relations, the first was seen as particularly problematic, since a breach of the vows pertaining to tantric initiation into Shugden practice was seen as a very serious matter indeed, one which compromised one's sense of being a faithful Buddhist and was strongly believed to have karmic repercussions beyond this life. In certain respects

<sup>46</sup> We might note here the central, but somewhat polyvalent use, of this particular prayer regarding this deity. See the Dalai Lama's comments above.

also, people clearly feared the deity in *this* life: its capacities as a powerful and partial protector, to wreak vengeance and death on the enemies of the doctrine, were widely recognized and feared.

Secondly, as we saw above, many pointed out that the Dalai Lama's interdiction pertained specifically to the issue of the Tibetan cause, and in this regard saw it as a matter of 'Tibetan refugee politics'. Ladakhis universally emphatically rejected the idea that the region was part of Tibet, and therefore did not come under the political authority of the Tibetan Government-in-exile at Dharamsala. Tibetan Buddhism (unlike Roman Catholicism for example) contains no centralized vow of obedience, and the Dalai Lama's interdiction was not understood by Ladakhis as a universally binding prohibition.

However, the overwhelming view at this time was that, if the people of the region were forced to decide between their links to the Dalai Lama and their links to Dorje Shugden, there was little in it: one always chose the lama over the deity, especially when it was the Dalai Lama. This, however, was a decision that Ladakhis did not want to have to make. In this sense, particularly in the period between 1996-7, there was a strong hope by many that 'the ban would not come here'. A crucial part of this view was the wish not to attract attention on the matter, and I was requested by almost every person I met not to write on the matter until the issue had resolved itself.<sup>47</sup>

#### 1997-2000

If Ladakhis hoped – as many clearly did – that the matter would eventually 'blow over', they were to be sorely disappointed. Events outside Ladakh – both in India and on the international stage – between 1996 and 1998, were to render such equivocation impossible.

Firstly, it was becoming extremely clear that the Dalai Lama's 1996 pronouncement immediately questioned the growing links that Ladakhi monasteries were developing with the newly resurgent Tibetan refugee monasteries and Buddhist educational institutes. These refugee monasteries were profoundly divided by the interdiction, with the deity becoming the flash-point for already profound inter-college rivalries.<sup>48</sup> For many Ladakhis, the attraction of these external educational institutions was intimately linked to the growing religious stature of the Dalai Lama himself. While comfortable to retain their traditional links with those Tibetan refugee monasteries, (such as Drepung Gomang), that demonstrated support for Shugden, few Ladakhi monks of my acquaintance were willing to *restrict* their connections to these

<sup>47</sup> My initial monograph on Ladakh (MILLS 2003) was strongly affected by this injunction, and much of the above ethnographic material had to be removed. In my description of the protector rites of Lingshed monastery, for example, the dharma protector called Sangwa'i Zhin pa is actually a pseudonym for Dorje Shugden (pp. 37, 187, 199). Since the monastery has now finished the practice and destroyed the statue, this is no longer an issue.

<sup>48</sup> DREYFUS 2003.

institutions alone, and were extremely unhappy about any prospect of cutting off ceremonial ties to the Dalai Lama himself. Furthermore, when Lob-sang Gyatso, Director of the staunchly *ri-mé* Institute of Buddhist Dialectics in Dharamsala, was found brutally murdered in February 1997 alongside his two monastic attendants, suspicion was instantly cast upon supporters of the deity.<sup>49</sup> Indirectly, therefore, the growing tensions within the refugee monastic institutions were increasingly forcing the monks and nuns of Ladakh and Zangskar to decide one way or the other.

Ladakhi neutrality was also undermined in the international sphere, where a coalition of the Shugden Supporters Community (formed out of certain elements of the UK-based New Kadampa Tradition) and the Dorje Shugden Devotees Religious and Charitable Society in Majnukatila, New Delhi put forward strong and vocal resistance to the Dalai Lama's initiative, publicly accusing him of suppressing religious freedoms.<sup>50</sup> This made international news headlines, as visits by the Dalai Lama to Europe were picketed by SSC members. At the same time, the Peoples' Republic of China took advantage of this apparent tarnishing of the Dalai Lama's international image, introducing measures to support worship of the deity in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, as well as providing visa access to Tibetan refugees who would ascribe themselves as Shugden practitioners.

Combined, this meant that, by 2000, the continuation of Shugden practice became synonymous in public discourse in Asia with vilification of the Dalai Lama. While the delicate balance that the Gelug institutions of Ladakh had maintained between the veneration of the Dalai Lama and the practical use of Shugden as a protector could possibly have continued within the context of local monastic practices, it was impossible in the newly-formed context of wider Tibetan Buddhist relations and movements throughout South Asia: Gelug establishments had to decide between ecclesiastical isolation and vilification on the one hand, and giving up the deity on the other.

In response to this, many of Ladakh's Gelug institutions ended prayers to Shugden as part of their daily and festival liturgy. In terms of their relations with the deity, such a move counted as a minor sin of omission; a much more vexed question was the active removal of the shrines, statues and images of the deity that were scattered throughout the Gelug assembly halls and protector shrines of Ladakh.

2000-3

Faced with the prospect of choosing between the Dalai Lama and a worldly protector deity, few Gelug monks that I met evinced any hesitation on the

<sup>49</sup> To this day, this case remains unresolved in legal terms, and the Indian police have dropped the case for want of evidence and the absence of named suspects, whom it is widely believed fled to the Tibetan Autonomous Region.

<sup>50</sup> MILLS 2003a.

principle of the matter: worldly deities – even protectors – were theoretically merely ‘helpers’ (*rogs pa*) for the Buddhist Saṅgha, and ‘below’ one’s lama in ceremonial terms, especially if that lama were one’s ‘root guru’ (*rtsa ba’i bla ma*). In this sense, the response of the Gelug religious establishment in Ladakh was markedly different from those institutions linked to the European Shugden Supporters Community and the Delhi-based Dorje Shugden Devotees Religious and Charitable Society, which openly challenged the Dalai Lama’s authority over the matter.

Such nuances were, however, lost in the febrile atmosphere of the time: in centres such as Dharamsala, Ladakhi monks and nuns attempting to attend teachings by the Dalai Lama were directly barred if they came from known Shugden-affiliated monasteries. This combined with the active intervention of certain Gelug incarnates closely linked to the Dalai Lama – most particularly Bakula Rinpoche and Ngari Rinpoche, throneholders of almost all of Ladakh’s combined Gelug monasteries – to signal the effective end of the region’s official links to the deity.

Again, it is worth being clear. The very nature of the controversy surrounding Dorje Shugden makes it impossible to accurately assess the precise impact of the interdiction on religious practice in Ladakh: ceremonial dependence on the deity has passed from being a central part of the orthopraxy of Gelug monastic elite to being a sometime hidden form, camouflaged within lay households and behind the drapery of monastic temples. Indeed, many of the covert practices now pertaining to images of Shugden amongst Tibetan Buddhist communities outside Chinese-occupied Tibet mirror uncannily those used by many Tibetans to hide images of the Dalai Lama within it. However, the public ceremonial relationship between the Gelug monasteries of Ladakh and the protector deity Dorje Shugden seems to have ended by 2003, as did many of their overt links to the various pro-Shugden institutions within the Tibetan refugee communities. When I visited the Dorje Shugden temple in Majnukatila, New Delhi in the summer of 2003, for example, the proprietors complained bitterly that, while they were once a bustling crossroads for Gelug activity in Delhi (especially from Ladakh and Zangskar, which had a *vihara* quite close by), their halls were now effectively deserted.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF RELIGIOUS CHANGE

The gradual eradication of public monastic affiliation to Shugden occurred through two primary routes: firstly, through the active intervention of incarnates such as the present Ngari Rinpoche (younger brother of the Dalai Lama) and affiliated groups of monks from the refugee communities; and secondly, through action by groups of monks within effected Ladakhi monasteries. What follows derives from research carried out at Lingshed<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *gling snyed sku ’bum* – see MILLS 2003.

monastery in the Trans-Sengge-La region, and Spituk<sup>52</sup> and Likir<sup>53</sup> monasteries in the Ladakh Valley, all of which have ended their previously-established Shugden practice.

### *The Destruction of Presence*

In both cases, the primary focus of reform in the region was the destruction of shrines, statues and images of Dorje Shugden.<sup>54</sup> In the case of statues, this involved grinding them down in the nearest available river. In an ideal situation, such an event would occur with a certain degree of ceremony and fanfare: when discussing the dissolution of one of the Shugden statue at Likir, for example, I commented to one of the monks involved that the statue was rather large and asked whether a lorry of some kind had been used to transport it to the river. "Not at all!", my interlocutor replied, clearly indignant: "We sent him by taxi – first class!"

While the micro-politics of the situation did not always allow for such overt displays, great care and respect was needed to avoid the possible retribution of so wrathful a protector deity. In this respect, many that I interviewed discussed the importance of the Dalai Lama's own assurance that he would take upon himself any of the potential dangers (see above). In Lingshed, this reportedly led to suggestions that those initially moving the statue should hold a photograph of the Dalai Lama between themselves and the statue itself as protection.

This kind of caution was explicitly linked to the statues as objects of divine presence, not merely symbols of belief. In one monastery, careful precautions when removing an incumbent Shugden state came to an end when it was discovered that the statue was 'empty': that it was merely solid clay, and lacked the necessary mantras and ritual paraphernalia (*zungs*) at its heart to render it a fitting vehicle for the deity in the first place. The impact of this discovery on the morale of the monks involved was signal: the whole matter was treated somewhat perfunctorily, with the statue's wooden tiger mount being burnt in the monastic kitchen's stove: "Honestly, there wasn't enough wood there to boil a cup of tea", commented one of the monks involved dismissively.

More dramatic moves were, however, required elsewhere. In Spituk near Leh, monks recounted how the deity's presence had been systematically removed from the monastery by visiting monks from Dharamsala under the auspices of Bakula Rinpoche: the consecrated paintings of the deity in the main prayer hall were physically dug out with pickaxes and spades; and the

<sup>52</sup> *dpe thub*.

<sup>53</sup> *klu dkyil*.

<sup>54</sup> This had also happened in the refugee monasteries in India, but had been overshadowed by more controversial massed anti-Shugden signature campaigns that sought to identify and ostracize Shugden practitioners. To my knowledge, these latter moves were absent in Ladakh.

Dorje Shugden shrine on the hill above the monastery (see above) was re-consecrated to the Tibetan government protector, Chamsring.<sup>55</sup> This involved the effacement of the inscription to Shugden, the repainting of the shrine itself from red to white, and the placing of a 'footprint' stone (*rjes*) to 'subdue' the shrine to its new incumbent.<sup>56</sup> In the nearby protector temple, above the sacrist's seat, now hangs a picture (widely published since 1996) of the Dalai Lama flanked by his two principal governmental protector deities, Nechung and Palden Lhamo.

Replacing one protector with another was understood as retaining protection, while also evoking protection against the dangers associated with giving up a specific named protector in the first place. A crucial component of this process of replacement, therefore, is the identity of those protectors that either replace Shugden or are used to protect those renouncing Shugden – protectors such as Damchen Choegyal, Gonpo and Maxor Gyalmo<sup>57</sup> (a form of Palden Lhamo) – which are all Tibetan government protectors.

#### *Questions of Authority*

In spite of such direct interventions from outside Ladakh, the interdiction also proved something of a touchstone for issues concerning the status of Ladakh's *sangha*. Monastic assemblies seeking to end the practice of Shugden in their own monasteries often felt inadequate for the task at hand, seeking instead to invite the authority of prominent anti-Shugden Gelug incarnates, either to do the job themselves or to force the matter through their imminent arrival. This is not an uncharacteristic sentiment: as I have discussed in greater depth elsewhere,<sup>58</sup> Tibetan Buddhism has long tended to distinguish between two levels of religious authority: that of ordinary monks (no matter how experienced), who were authorized to perform *established* rites in a particular locale; and those members of the 'sublime sangha' (*phags pa'i dge 'dun pa* – the tantric yogins and incarnate lamas), who were empowered to *innovate* in religious terms, to found temples and bring local gods under the yoke of Buddhism.

Though integral to the practical hierarchies of Tibetan Buddhism, this is not a distinction characteristic of Buddhism as a canonical tradition: it is, to a certain extent, a 'view from below' – a statement of faith in the authority of incarnates, and studied humility by ordinary monks. In the application of

<sup>55</sup> *beg tse lcam sring* (S. *prana atma*).

<sup>56</sup> 'Footprint' stones are a common element of Tibetan Buddhist relations with the landscape and its deities, embodying the incarnate's 'pressing down' of chthonic forces (see MILLS 2003, pp. 278-9). There was some debate amongst the monks I asked as to whose imprint this was: some specified Bakula Rinpoche, the recently deceased throneholder of the monastery; others mentioned Ngari Rinpoche (although only hesitantly), then Padmasambhava. The rock itself was clearly carried there, leading to some debate over who brought the stone and who made the imprint.

<sup>57</sup> *dpal ldan dmag zor ma rgyal mo*. See NEBESKY-WOJKOWITZ 1993, pp. 24-31.

<sup>58</sup> MILLS 2003.

the Shugden interdiction, however, neither the Dalai Lama nor Ngari Rinpoche have apparently shown much sympathy for the notion that removing Shugden was the exclusive prerogative of visiting incarnates, and petitions to this effect have been rebuffed on several occasions with the retort that Shugden was merely a worldly deity, that such spirits were *beneath* the sangha, and that Shugden was precisely what monks were there for. Thus, when Ngari Rinpoche stayed at Likir in the early 2000s, he received a petition from the monks of Rangdum monastery in Zangskar, requesting that he visit in order that the Shugden statue might be removed; or at the very least, pen a letter specifically ordering the Rangdum sangha to remove the deity; reportedly, he chastised the petitioners, demanding whether they were or were not monks, and that if they knew it was right then it should be within their powers to do themselves, letter or no.<sup>59</sup> By 2001, this notion – that monks were somehow letting themselves down by fearing the deity’s wrath too much – had become a common theme in monastic discussions over the Shugden interdiction.

Many monks, moreover, dwelt lengthily on the problem of lay sponsorship: that the protector’s importance was more unambiguously supported by Ladakhi laity, who cared little for the problems that itinerant monks might face in seeking teachings in Dharamsala. This created unique micro-dynamics to the interdiction: some monasteries depended on distant lay sponsors little engaged with the precise dynamics of monastic protectors, allowing them to dispense with the deity’s statue with ease and in many cases without laity knowing for several years (protector statues often being carefully closeted away in the first place). Others were more intimately bound to their supporting laity: in one case, the actual geographical location of the monastery meant that any attempt to remove the statue to the nearby river necessitated travelling through the attached village; this issue so divided the monastic assembly that, after years of inviting the Dalai Lama to visit (and thus resolve the matter) and on one occasion even asking the police to remove the statue, a small cohort of monks that regularly travelled to Dharamsala met one night and signed an agreement, vowing to destroy the image, which they did (after presenting it with prayer scarves and apologies) in the middle of the night.

#### CONCLUSION

The Dalai Lama’s interdiction against Shugden has often been treated as a cipher for a wider cultural debate, a symbolic declaration against a wider sectarian tendency in the broader life of Tibetan society. This is true to a certain extent, but tends to obscure how much of this debate really was about gods

<sup>59</sup> This episode was related to me by some monks at Likir, and I have not been able to confirm this story with the Ngari estate in India. The Likir monks (and those at Lingshed) reported that that Rangdum monks subsequently dispatched the statue themselves.



and cosmology as things which stand very much for themselves, rather than being some Durkheimian shorthand for society. As Bruce Kapferer has commented about the category of the 'demonic' in Sinhalese Buddhist ritual, it does not translate into the merely social without losing much of its reality and doing clear violence to peoples' genuine understanding of their religious lives.<sup>60</sup> For the Dalai Lama himself, sectarianism clearly exists *as* the relationship between gods, lamas and lineages, not as some primeval human atavism: Shugden here is not seen as the *expression* of some generalized sectarian rivalry in Tibetan society, but its *cause*.<sup>61</sup>

By the same token, the impact of the Shugden interdiction on Ladakh was not a matter of *generalized* dogma or belief. While extensive measures were taken by the Tibetan Government-in-exile to persuade Tibetans in particular that worship of the deity was dangerous to the Tibetan cause, ultimately the matter was one of very specific loyalties and practical access to religious authority. The inmates of Ladakh's many Gelug monasteries were persuaded to extricate themselves from reliance on the protector deity primarily because of their stronger wish for concrete access to the teachings and ceremonial authority of the Dalai Lama himself. While this clearly derived from the sense that the Dalai Lama was higher in the cosmological and ceremonial hierarchy than a worldly protector deity, it also came from the fact that the Dalai Lama was a concrete historical person who gave particular teachings at particular times and places.<sup>62</sup>

Despite this, their decision has, I would argue, deeper implications, and may have important repercussions for the religious and political dynamics of Ladakh: that is, it marked a shift in the affiliations of the region's Gelug monasteries from being largely separate from the Tibetan Government-in-exile to being far more markedly under their ceremonial jurisdiction.

To understand this, we must appreciate that, whilst the loyalties that the Gelug affiliates of Ladakh felt towards the Dalai Lama was primarily religious rather than political, the dynamics of the debate itself (which eventually forced Ladakhis to decide between loyalty to the Tibetan leader and loyalty to a protector deity) drew them into the wider constitutional fold of the Tibetan Government-in-exile, a constitutional fold very explicitly delineated in terms of protector deities. In this sense, protector deities mark the volatile bound-

<sup>60</sup> KAPFERER 1991.

<sup>61</sup> Thus, for example, in his 2008 teachings in Nottingham, UK, the Dalai Lama described Pabonkha Rinpoche as starting out as a 'very good lama', but eventually becoming sectarian as a direct result of his worship of Shugden.

<sup>62</sup> This is another subtle, but important distinction between the Ladakhi view and that commonly expressed by Western supporters of Shugden, who often questioned how the Dalai Lama, who was after all a mere worldly ruler, could intervene in peoples' beliefs and practices pertaining to a deity. While this view has strong implications in terms of European understandings of human rights (see MILLS 2003a), it is arguably based on a Christian understanding of the distinction between divine and human realms which is simply not shared by most religious adherents within Tibetan Buddhism or, for that matter, Hinduism (see FULLER 1992: Ch.1).

ary between religious and state authority for Tibetans: they are used as guarantors to secure legal oaths,<sup>63</sup> and their powers are evoked as part of the combined ritual-military defence of Buddhist states.<sup>64</sup> The replacement of Shugden with the Tibetan governmental protector Chamsring (and indeed the widespread purchase of the portrait of the Dalai Lama flanked by Nechung and Palden Lhamo), suggest not merely a religious and ceremonial change on the part of Ladakh's Gelug monasteries, but a subtle constitutional one.

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<sup>63</sup> FRENCH 1995, pp. 132-134.

<sup>64</sup> SORENSEN 2003; SPERLING 2001.

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