Notions of Lha among the Brogpa of Ladakh

La conception du Lha chez les Drogpa du Ladakh

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Introduction

1. The term *lha* denotes a wide range of deities belonging to a religious stratum, referred to as folk religion by some authors (Tucci 1980; Samuel 1993), elements of which are still preserved in various parts of the Tibetan cultural area. They are conceptualised as inhabiting the mountains or the celestial sphere (Tucci 1949: 720–721) *stang-lha* or *lha-yul*, which refers to the uppermost realm of a three-fold universe – a cosmological notion that is widespread in Ladakh. Below this domain is the human realm *barsam* and beneath it is *yoglu*, the world of the water deities *klu* (Mills 2013: 151). In practice, however, the boundaries between these three universal spheres are interwoven, outlining a conceptualisation of a shared and contested world where the human and the divine overlap. It is at these points of intersection that *lha* reveal themselves, removed from their celestial dwellings or, as noted by Sophie Day (1989: 58), ‘domesticated...found at the summits of human habitations. There are gods of castles, gods of monasteries, gods of the village, gods of the village section, gods of the household’.

2. With the arrival of Buddhism, many *lha* were assimilated to defenders of religion (*chos-skyong*). Tucci (1980: 163) notes that this process was facilitated by the ‘remarkable analogies between the local traditions and the world of Tantrism’, both of which were ‘governed by a similar psychological atmosphere’.

3. Within the Tibetan pantheon, the *lha* are grouped into two major branches. The first is comprised of the *’jig rten las ‘das pa’i srung ma* or deities who have passed beyond the six spheres of existence and the second is referred to as *’jig rten pa’i srung ma* or *’jig rten ma ‘das pa’i srung ma* and encompasses worldly deities who remain within the sphere,
inhabited by animated beings (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996: 3–4). In addition, numerous subclasses refer to the various guardian functions ascribed to them (ibid). However, these categories often come across as too static or removed from the vernacular beliefs in the Himalayan region. This discrepancy has been observed by Tucci, who notes that proposed classifications fail to cover ‘the great variety of spirits, ghosts, demons, gods in which Tibetans believed. The character of these beings was in many cases so vague that it was very difficult to establish a demarcation between them’ (Tucci 1949: 727). This applies just as well to the Brogpa of Ladakh, which the present article explores. In the local context, lha seems to encompass a very diverse realm of divinities which may be attributed to the different cultural influences fused together in Brogpa’s religious practices. Members of the community use the term lha indiscriminately to refer to their local brog-lha, benefactors of the community, deities, remnants of their Indo-Aryan pantheon, the powerful chos-skyong such as Mahakala Gyapo (Mahākāla Rgyal-po), reflecting their affiliation with Buddhism, and to the ‘Muslim’ deity Tarinta.

4 In the context of the rapid social, economic and cultural changes in the region due to geopolitical factors and modernisation, many notions of the divine are either changing or disappearing, rendering the need for documentation of them in different oral traditions even more urgent. Reports of them could serve as an important basis for tracing the changing notions of divinities in contemporary contexts. Research on mountain deities from the perspective of the local people potentially sheds light on how daily interactions with the divine help communities adapt to and negotiate the challenges of the present. In this regard, it is important that a growing number of local researchers cover this area (see Bhutia 2021; Tashi 2023).

5 This paper aims to provide insight into Brogpa’s conceptual understanding of the term lha. In this regard, I outline and analyse some fundamental conceptualisations found in local mythology, religious practices and life experiences of members of the community, and expressed by the particular qualities or attributes Brogpa lha are associated with. The main conceptualisations discussed here are: lha dancing, lha being white, lha flying, lha as ambivalent and lha migrating. To situate them in the social and cultural life of the community, a brief introduction outlines the central notions of ritual purity and pollution and religious and cultural specialists whose practice is closely related to the divine realm. The names of separate divinities, referred to as lha, are enumerated and their relevance to particular subcategories is determined by the activity and frequency of their worship.

6 One of the questions this paper aims to address is whether the examined conceptualisations of lha are to be viewed as elements of the notion of lha as a divine class of the so-called folk religion of the Tibetan cultural area or whether they allude to divinities belonging to another religious stratum, still termed lha but referring to Brogpa’s Indo-Aryan heritage. The paper is based on data gathered during periods of fieldwork conducted in their villages between 2010 and 2017.

7 Brogpa is a Dardic-speaking ethnonlinguistic community with a population of around 3,000 inhabiting three villages, namely Dah, Garkon and Darchicks, in the northern part of the Indus Valley, near the Line of Control with Pakistan. Due to various factors, such as their relatively late and gradual conversion to Buddhism and certain religious notions and social practices, they have managed to preserve, to a varying extent, pre-Buddhist cultural specificities, some of which can be linked to the folk religion, widespread in the region, while others can be viewed as indigenous to the community,
sharing traits with other ethnic groups in Gilgit-Baltistan, such as the Hunzakut and the Kalasha (Vohra 1989: 69–76). Central to this religious cohesion is the divine class *lha* and the specific conceptual understanding of it among the Brogpa, which will be examined in this paper.

**Religious specialists related to *lha***

I will briefly discuss several types of ritual and cultural specialists whose functions are related to the divine sphere. The first and most important one is the *lha-bdag* (lit ‘master of the gods’). He is a priestly functionary who performs various rituals for the deities and maintains their shrines, referred to using the Brogskad word *dyuha* (lit ‘god’s place’) (see figs 1 and 2). He descends from family lines called *lha-bdag-pa* in which the vocation is passed down from father to son. A central function of the Brogpa *lha-bdag* is to invite the *lha* and to lead them to the village festive ground *changra* to join in people’s festivities. This role is of utmost significance during celebrations such as *Bonona* (Brogskad, ‘the great harvest festival’) and *Lo-gsar*. Prior to these, he has to observe ritual purity or *shichu*, a notion that will be discussed presently, by withdrawing to the *dyuha* for a certain period of time and abstaining from various foods and activities. On these occasions, the *lha-bdag* is referred to as *lha*.

Fig 1: Gangsonam Gangyaldepa, *lha-bdag* of Dah, at Shringmo Lhamo’s *dyuha*.

![Photograph by Aleksandar Bogdanov.](image-url)
While there is data on similar types of practitioners elsewhere in Ladakh, who officiate during the cult of the village deity, the specific functions of the Brogpa lha-bdag raise the question as to whether this is a well-preserved priestly role that was once common throughout Ladakh or whether it is a local specificity for which a Tibetan term was subsequently adopted. Nowadays, with the growing Buddhist influence and the sociocultural changes within the community, the social and religious significance of the lha-bdag is declining. Practitioners rarely observe all ritual prescriptions during celebrations and the transmission of knowledge related to the position is affected by the lack of interest among the younger generation.

Other key figures associated with lha are the deity mediums lha-pa and lha-mo. Similar to lha-bdag in their ritual practice, they summon the deities to the human realm within a well-established ritual space. During seances, through a series of ritual acts, the individual’s consciousness is believed to be temporarily put on hold to facilitate the embodiment of lha and to enable them to communicate with people and to assist them in their earthly problems. As a result, practitioners play no active role in the communication between people and deities and have no recollection of the events that take place. In this respect, their practice differs from that of the lha-bdag who remains conscious during his activities and interactions with the divinities.

A discerning trait of the local practice of deity embodiment is the strong influence of Brogpa notions of purity and pollution through which illness and healing are conceptualised. Like the lha-bdag, in ritual contexts and everyday life, lha-pa and lha-mo are sometimes referred to as lha. They also have to observe ritual purity by avoiding...
foods and activities that can defile them and hence cause harm to the deities they embody.

Another figure within the community related to lha is the chief singer bro-mgo-pa (lit 'leader of the dance'). As a keeper of the oral lore and customs of the community, he is ascribed an important role during all celebrations, especially during Bonona when he leads a performance of a corpus of epic songs, which also contain hymns to various divinities that belong to a distinct pantheon (see fig 3). Like the lha-bdag, the position of bro-mgo-pa is passed down through the paternal line. It requires training which begins at an early age and involves spending between four and five months each year memorising the songs and learning to play the two types of drums and the surna (Vohra 1989: 61). At a later stage, depending on their preferences, the boys become either singers or musicians. The female lead singer of each village is called bro-mgo-ma, but she is not associated with the religious domain. Related to the sphere of ritual music are the musicians, referred to as gdangs-gdangs-pa. Their tunes accompany the performance of both sacred and festive songs. During religious celebrations, they play a tune called lha-rnga, conceptualised as a form of offering to the deities. Like the bro-mgo-pa, they are charged with important ritual duties related to the deities during Bonona.

The conceptual dichotomy shichu-chuṭu

The local cult of lha is structured around two key concepts, namely shichu and chuṭu. They have opposing semantics, which is difficult to translate into English. When
prompted to explain their meaning in another language, the most consistent response offered by informants is through the Hindi/Urdu words sāf (lit ‘clean’) and gandā (lit ‘dirty’). Based on this and following Rohit Vohra’s translation (Vohra 1989: 52), shichu can be roughly rendered as ‘purity’, ‘cleanliness’ and chuṭu as ‘impurity’ and ‘pollution’. When referring to qualities or conditions, they can be translated accordingly as adjectives: ‘pure’, ‘clean’, ‘impure’ and ‘polluted’.⁵

14 Shichu is primarily identified with lha and is seen as its inherent characteristic. It also applies to certain animals, objects and places intimately connected with them and belonging to the domain of the sacred, such as high-altitude areas believed to be inhabited by lha, the shrines dyuha, juniper trees, goats and ibexes. As a quality, shichu is also transferrable from things considered innately pure to things that have become polluted – juniper smoke imbues people, places and objects with purity, while water and goat’s milk restore purity through ritual oblations etc.

15 Shichu is a highly desirable state associated with order, balance, well-being and prosperity. When applied to people, rather than being an inherent quality, it is a changeable state that has to be maintained through individual and collective efforts. In Brogpa’s social structure, shichu relates to the lineages among which the priestly functionaries lha-bdag are elected. As their function requires them to come into close contact with lha, they must observe shichu at all times and most strictly during religious celebrations. The same is expected of the ritual specialists lha-pa and lha-mo, who embody lha during their seances. Purity also varies according to gender, as women are regarded as less pure than men until they reach old age, when they are considered equal (ibid, 53). In the past, outsiders were viewed as chuṭu because they did not follow the local social and religious prescriptions.

16 Analogous to shichu, chuṭu can function as an inherent characteristic. Unlike shichu, however, what is considered innately impure, such as cows, chickens and their products, cigarettes, transitional states such as birth, death and menstruation, cannot be purified through ritual action. Its conceptual domain also encompasses spatial areas identified as being farthest from lha or most undesirable to them, such as lowlands, the ground, the floor, graveyards etc. Due to their impure nature, objects, states and areas, identified as chuṭu, are linked to various prescriptions which must be observed to avoid the spread of pollution within the community.

17 Chuṭu is highly undesirable and associated with illness, misfortune, crisis and disorder. As a transitional state, it can affect virtually anything – places, objects, people and deities. It is often the result of the improper actions of people who, neglecting social and ritual prescriptions, find themselves in direct contact with or proximity to impurity. As the human and the divine realms often overlap, its occurrence can ultimately affect the deities, threatening their purity and provoking their anger and retribution. Reversing its harmful effects requires establishing a distance from the object of pollution and performing cleansing rituals generally prescribed by the deity mediums lha-pa and lha-mo.

18 The notions of shichu and chuṭu are intimately linked to a central element of Brogpa’s religious pantheon, namely the sa-bdag (lit ‘master of the soil’). A household deity represented by a stone placed behind the hearth, the sa-bdag, is a focal point around which the spatial arrangement of the home as well as the social hierarchies within it
are structured. However, as this goes beyond the scope of the present study, it will not be examined further.

**Lha of Brogpa**

The deities worshipped by the Brogpa are perceived as being distinct from all the others in Ladakh. This is based on two conceptualisations of them, namely as *brog-lha* or *lha* ‘indigenous’ to the community and as *shichu* which encompasses all deities worshipped in the villages, regardless of their origin. Their ‘Brogpaness’ is often emphasised in the *lha-pa*’s and *lha-mo*’s accounts of the ‘diagnoses’ of their calling, according to which the *lha* possessing them are identified by a religious authority. These notions are illustrated in the quotations below:

Shringmo Lhamo (Shring-mo Lha-mo), Basandar Lhachen (Basandar Lha-chen), Serlha Gyapo (Gser-lha Rgyal-po)! These are the *lha* we worshipped...Our *lha* and the Ladakhi [*lha*] are different... (Tsewang Lundup Doropa, Darchicks)

*Lha* are of many kinds in all valleys of Ladakh. They do not come here – we have our own *lha*. *Lha* of Dah – Shringmo Lhamo, Serlha Gyapo. Serlha Gyapo is in Dundur Bar. We sacrifice a kid for him. To Shringmo Lhamo we make offerings in Dah. (Tsankan Tsering Lagzhagpa, Baldez hamlet of Dah)

When I went the first time, the *lha-mo* asked me: ‘Which *lha* are you?’ When she asked this, [the *lha*] initially replied: ‘I’m Shringmo Lhamo, *lha* of Brogpa’. (Tashi Lhamo Onpopa, Garkon)

When I went to Sabu Lhamo, I explained exactly what was happening to me. She told me: ‘...A *brog-lha* has come [to you]’. (Tashi Punstogs Aliskitpa, Garkon)

The distinction of local *lha* as *shichu* relates to the quality of the human environment in which the necessary social and religious prescriptions are observed. Even though *lha* are perceived as innately pure, they can still be susceptible to ritual pollution through people’s improper actions. Hence, there is a correlation between the purity of the community and that of its deities - *lha* can become *chuṭu* from keeping cows or chickens in the village, from offering cow milk or butter to them, from someone in a state of *chuṭu* approaching the *dyuha* etc. As outsiders do not observe Brogpa’s prohibitions, they are traditionally viewed as *chuṭu*, and this quality is also transferable to the *lha* they worship as they are likely to receive impure offerings. The relationship the local *lha* maintain with the territories they inhabit further affirms their distinctiveness to the Ladakhi *lha* who, as Tsankan Tsering Lagzhagpa says, ‘simply do not come here’. Behind this seemingly consolidated understanding of the Brogpa *lha*, there is a combination of diverse and sometimes conflicting elements that belong to different religious strata and therefore require a separate analysis.

Against this backdrop, Vohra classes the *lha* of Brogpa into two groups (Vohra 1989: 77, 106): the *Bonona* Pantheon, comprised of deities praised in the sacred songs of *Bonona*, and the Live Pantheon, which is introduced for ‘analytical purposes’ and includes *lha*, part of daily worship. It is worth noting, however, that some of the *lha* included in the Live Pantheon are no more part of everyday worship than those of the *Bonona* tradition, as they are worshipped solely on specific religious occasions. Furthermore, even during Vohra’s fieldwork in the 1980’s, Brogpa’s knowledge of certain *lha* was rather vague. As he notes, some of the deities in this category ‘remain mere names to us and nothing more is known about them’ (ibid, 106).
The Bonona pantheon is also problematic as some of the deities it includes are worshipped during other religious celebrations. One example is Mande for whom a song is performed during the agricultural festival Sgunla (ibid, 112). According to the bro-mgo-pa of Garkon, Dumen, another Bonona deity, is worshipped during the agricultural celebration Bi. In this context, these categories cannot be precise or exhaustive and only serve for analytical purposes.

In this paper, I have chosen to adopt Vohra’s category of a Bonona pantheon because the songs for the celebration are the only systematised oral record of Brogpa’s older pre-Buddhist Indo-Aryan divinities, and Bonona is the only occasion on which all of them are worshipped. Instead of a Live Pantheon, however, I distinguish between actively worshipped and embodied lha, because some of the deities embodied by lha-pa and lha-mo are not objects of worship outside of the seances. It is also worth noting that these categories shift and change over time. Some of the actively worshipped lha, such as Shringmo Lhamo and Basandar, are also embodied and some of the lha embodied in the past originated from the Bonona tradition.

The third category I would like to propose is that of the nameless lha. It encompasses types of deities devoid of personal traits, names, places of worship or specific genealogies and conceived of as a homogenous group. Some of their characteristics might suggest that they were included in the conceptual domain of lha at a later stage. They share certain similarities with the mountain deities of ethnic groups such as the Hunzakut and the Kalasha, referred to by the cover term pari, and are conceptualised as anthropomorphic beings inhabiting high-mountain areas. Like the nameless lha of Brogpa, pari are generally associated with goats, ibexes and markhors and in the oral lore they often cross the paths of shepherds or hunters (Hussam-ul-Mulk 1974: 96–98; Sidky 1994; Nicolaus 2015: 212–17). In his comparative study, Claus Peter Zoller (Bhatt et al 2014) outlines various characteristic features of these divinities between the central Himalayas, Nuristan and ‘Dardistan’, pointing to a shared cultural space between the central and western Himalayas and the Hindu Kush and Karakoram (ibid, 115–21). The connection between the pari and Brogpa’s nameless lha will be an object of another study.

**Actively worshipped lha**

The deities comprising this category not only have shrines where they receive offerings and animal sacrifices on religious occasions but are also part of the community’s daily worship. Among them are Shringmo Lhamo, considered to be a protectress of Brogpa, Serlha Gyapo whose duvha is located over a stream, known as Dundur Bar, and Gangsi Lhamo (Gangs-si Lha-mo), who is associated with irrigation and is worshipped in spring when the lha-bdag first opens the irrigation canals in the village. Regarded as brog-lha or Brogpa deities, they are addressed during the performance of mchod before every meal using a conventional formula which also addresses the water deities, klu, the household deity sa-bdag, the gzhi-bdag (lit ‘master of the land’) etc. Let us focus here on Shringmo Lhamo, the most widely worshipped Brogpa deity, whose significance is linked to the conceptual dichotomy shichu-chuṭu, around which the religious and social spheres are traditionally structured.
Shaw (1878: 29–30) gives the earliest account of the cult of Shringmo Lhamo in Dah. According to his informants, the deity came with a priestly lineage lha-bdag-pa during Brogpa’s migration from Gilgit. He also describes a ritual of replacing the old juniper branches at her shrine, which is performed by the lha-bdag during the celebration of Bonona. Jettmar reports that upon the birth of a child, women would offer fruit and flowers at Shringmo Lhamo’s dyuha (Vohra 1989:111). As Vohra notes, this information contradicts numerous accounts by informants about the ban on laypeople, especially women, approaching Shringmo Lhamo’s dyuha due to the risk of chuṭu. The deity received frequent animal sacrifices in the past but, with the growing Buddhist influence, this practice is no longer common. According to Vohra (ibid), Shringmo Lhamo is seen as an old woman residing in a place called Urchangs, depicted as a ‘meander drawing’ made in the house during Lo-gsar.

Though unclear, the etymology of the deity’s name might be of Indo-Aryan origin – šiŋ (Katarkalā, Brogskad), šiŋo (Shina) from śṛṅga (OIA), meaning ‘horn’ (Sharma 1998: 20). If so, Shringmo Lhamo, like Dumen, could be linked to an early cult centred around the ibex. Authors such as Jettmar (1961: 87) and Petech (1977: 164) have put forward the existence of this cult based on the religious significance of the animal as well as on the numerous petroglyphs found throughout Ladakh and northern Pakistan. Among the Brogpa, traces of ibex worship could be found in the notion of goats as shichu, as well as in their central role in religious rituals. They are the preferred sacrificial animals; their butter is offered to the deities as food (mchod) and their milk is used to remove pollution from the human body through purifying oblations performed by the deity mediums lha-pa and lha-mo.⁴

Jettmar associates the prohibitions surrounding the cow with Shringmo Lhamo (Jettmar 1988: 75). He suggests they were introduced by a second wave of migrations from Gilgit and Brushal since there is no earlier mention of them in the Bonona tradition. A parallel could once again be drawn between Shringmo Lhamo and the above-mentioned pari of other culturally related groups. The Hunzakut, for example, believe that the rachiye are fond of the ibex with an intensity ‘only matched by their contempt and disgust for the cow and bovine products’ (Nicolaus 2015: 215). They are embodied by the deity mediums daiyal and daiyali who rigorously observe the prohibitions regarding cows. As the Hunzakut associate cows with ritual pollution, it is believed that nothing angers the rachiye more than a polluted daiyal.

Similar notions also exist among the Kalasha. In the past, cows were traditionally considered impure and until the 19th century their products were avoided (Parkes 1987: 647). Nowadays, the prohibitions concerning them are mainly observed by the deity mediums dehar, who are believed to come into direct contact with fairies. Parkes notes that even though the prohibitions have been relaxed among the Kalasha, small quantities of cow’s milk are consumed today (mainly by women) and no dairy products are produced from it, unlike the food habits of many cattle-breeding Nuristani neighbours.

Shringmo Lhamo’s dyuha in Dah village is located at the foot of a high cliff and is decorated with ibex and goat horns and juniper branches. The only person allowed to approach it is the lha-bdag who replaces the juniper branches and offers animal sacrifices to the deity on special occasions.
Embodied lha

This group comprises the lha of the deity mediums lha-pa and lha-mo. During their seances, the latter can host multiple divinities, though only one is considered a tutelary deity and is associated with the onset of the shamanic vocation. Some embodied deities are brog-lha and, during seances, they address their clients in the local Shina dialect. Other lha, especially those from other villages or from Tibet, may speak another language that requires translation by an assistant.

One example of a brog-lha is a deity called Basandar. Vohra describes it as being worshipped in all villages in the community and notes that in Dah it is venerated in its female form called Basandar Lhamo (Vohra 1989: 113). However, after conversing with informants, it was not possible for me to confirm that it is worshipped there, either in its male or female form. Basandar is currently only venerated in Darchicks where it is embodied by lha-pa Tsewang Lundup Doropa (see fig 4). According to him, the deity accompanied the Brogpa during their migration from Gilgit.

Fig 4: Tsewang Lundup Doropa, embodying Basandar during a seance.

Photograph by Aleksandar Bogdanov.

Two embodied deities, namely Paldan Lhamo (Dpal-ldan Lha-mo) and Mahakala Gyapo, are of Tibetan origin. Paldan Lhamo, the protectress of Tibet, is one of the deities of Michungpa lha-mo in Dah. The second, Mahakala Gyapo, is regarded as a wrathful emanation of Avalokiteśvara (Tib Pyan-ras-gzigs). Very little is known about him among the Brogpa. The deity is currently embodied by Stanzin Dorje Amchipa in Garkon (see fig 5). It is considered to be very strong (thang-po) and efficient, it speaks Tibetan and is referred to as a spun-lha or ‘kindred’ lha of the Dalai Lama.
And lastly, another foreign deity that appears during seances is Tarinta. She is embodied by Michungpa lha-mo and is described as a Muslim lha who migrated from Chiktan village during the Kargil war. Tarinta is said to communicate in a 'Muslim language', perhaps Balti. She is known to perform 'jibs, a technique used to remove pollution or illness from the human body (see fig 6). This may not be coincidental and could reflect a cohesion of ideas, namely the notion that in neighbouring Muslim villages illness is often caused by magic (Urdu, jādu). As Doropa lha-pa explains, with the progression of the illness, jādu can manifest itself physically in the form of an animal (such as birds and bees), and healing requires its extraction from the client’s body. This notion partially corresponds to the Brogpa belief that healing requires the removal of pollution that accumulates in the body on breaking a prohibition related to the shichu-chuṭu dichotomy. In this regard, a technique characteristic of lha-pa and lha-mo practice is performed to treat conditions perceived as specific to Muslim communities. Tarinta is an example of the different religious influences at play in Brogpa villages, as well as the adaptability of lha-pa and lha-mo practice.
Bonona pantheon

The Bonona pantheon refers to the deities praised in the hymnal of Bonona, a triennial autumn festival traditionally held just before the millet harvest (see fig 7). A long time ago it used to be celebrated every year above the nallah of Dah and Garkon – the place where the Brogpa lived when they first settled. The festival was eventually brought down to the villages and began to be held on a rotational basis, one year in Dah, one year in Garkon and one year in Ganoks, as the deities could not simultaneously be in more than one place.
At present, as reported by Vohra (1989: 63), the date of the celebration is set according to the moon cycle, ideally two or three days prior to the full moon, ensuring a sufficient amount of light on the festive ground changra. Lasting five days, it is the largest and the most important celebration in Dah and Garkon. In the past, flowers from the icy summits played an essential role during the festivities. They were brought to the village and used by men and women to decorate their hats in honour of the deities. This tradition is still alive, even though nowadays the flowers are gradually being replaced by plastic ones.

The celebration turns to the Brogpa’s past, reviving the collective memory of their migration from Gilgit and the challenges they faced along the way, and celebrating the abundance of the second harvest. During the festival, the whole village is ritually purified and prepared for the temporal reunion of the people and the lha, who descend from their realm to celebrate and dance with the community, thereby alluding to the mythological past. In this regard, the Bonona festival is a time for reaffirming and strengthening not only ties within the family, the village and the community but also with the divine.

The festival revolves around a corpus of songs known as the Bonona hymns (Vohra 1989: 77) or the Eighteen songs (Lu athrunghsh) (Francke 1899: 93). A central theme here is the migration of the community from Gilgit to its present-day territories. The singing of the hymns recalls Brogpa’s past, reaffirming an aspect of its ethnic identity, namely ‘Gilgitpa’.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the songs attracted the attention of Francke (1899, 1905), who managed to record fourteen of them, describing them as ‘the last remnants of Dard mythology and particularly their cosmology’ (Francke 1905: 93). Later, in the 1980s, Vohra recorded sixteen Bonona songs. However, none of the available recordings have undergone a precise philological translation and therefore an
extensive analysis of their content has not yet been possible. In spite of this, the rough translations offer a glimpse into an Indo-Aryan pantheon of deities, religious rites, migrational routes etc. Today, their language is mostly unintelligible to people except for the bro-mgo-pa who have memorised their meaning through oral transmission from previous generations.

The Bonona songs are sacred and their performance in unrelated contexts is banned, except for during rehearsals which take place before the harvest celebration, Bi, in March (see fig 8). During this time, the barley beer, chang, is collected from each household and men gather to sing the lyrics of the songs over several days to refresh their memory.

Fig 8: Tsewang Norbu Numpelpa, informant from Dah.

The number of songs in the entire hymnal varies from one village to another, with 21 songs in Dah and 18 in Garkon. They reflect elements of a linguistic, cultural and religious stratum, which Vohra relates to an ethnic group called Minaro. There is, however, insufficient data on the linguistic specificities of the songs and of the language spoken by Minaro to support this. As the languages evolve, the one preserved in the songs may merely be an older dialect that has become largely unintelligible to people over time. Further linguistic research into the songs could help determine their relationship with Brogskador other Dardic languages or regional dialects.

One of the central deities included in the Bonona songs is Mande. Its song is the first to be performed and the only one to be repeated on each of the five days of Bonona, thus emphasising its importance. Based on Morgenstierne’s analysis, Vohra suggests a link between Mande and other divinities that are central to various ‘Kafir pantheons’, as well as a possible etymology of the name from the Sanskrit Mahā(n)deva (Vohra 1989: 37).
After conversing with the bro-mgo-pa of Dah, he states that Mande is a household (Brog gotar) name. However, he provides no further information regarding this or the lyrics. It remains to be confirmed whether the local deity, Mande, is related to a particular lineage that performed specific ritual functions in the past. The bro-mgo-pa’s explanation could also be related to the Brogpa’s growing unfamiliarity with the language in the songs, which could have given rise to new interpretations. Whatever the case, Mande’s mythology and role in the Bonona pantheon are still obscure and require further research.

Another deity of particular importance in the Bonona tradition is Dumen. There are two songs devoted to him, one of which was documented by Vohra (1989: 145–6) and another by my colleague Aleksandar Bogdanov and myself. They portray Dumen as descending as an ibex or as mounted on one, which might allude to the aforementioned ibex cult. At the time of Vohra’s fieldwork, the deity appeared in the seances of a local lha-pa. Along with Dumen, the second Bonona deity reportedly embodied around that time, was Lei Nakrin. Vohra suggests that the songs of both deities contain elements alluding to a shamanic seance.

The third lha from the Bonona tradition to be discussed briefly here is Shali Somen. We documented its song during our field research in 2013, which coincided with the celebration of Bonona in Garkon. According to informants, in the past Shali Somen was widely venerated and summoned during the ritual ploughing of the fields during the harvest festival, Bi. The translation of the song links Shali Somen to meteorological phenomena, such as rain, thunder and lightning.

Concepts of lha

In 2017, on the evening of Bonona in Dah, some of the celebrants approached my colleague to see the photographs he had taken. Somebody promptly noticed an image of lha – the light on the trunk of the big walnut tree that grows on the ritual ground (changra) was refracted in a way that formed the contours of an apparently otherworldly face. Eventually, others grew curious about seeing ‘the picture of lha’ and the image became known even in the neighbouring village, Garkon. A couple of days later, after the photograph had passed through many hands, the initial excitement was gradually replaced by a rationalisation of the photographic effect and by more pragmatic explanations. It attested, however, to the potency of cultural symbols constituting the Brogpa notion of lha – during Bonona, the deities are believed to be sitting on the branches of the walnut tree, the tree itself being a central cosmogonic symbol for the community. From this perspective, the image may have provoked a fusion of these two concepts into one mental image.

Glimpses of the invisible, such as this, reflect the dynamic and lively relationship between the human and the divine. They are viewed as uncanny events or encounters that unfold at the margins of the mundane: at religious celebrations, during the initiatory illness of lha-pa and lha-mo or their seances, in times spent in high-mountain areas, in dreams etc. Hereafter are several conceptualisations of lha that resurface persistently in testimonies of village laypeople, religious and ritual specialists, and in some elements of Brogpa religious practice and oral lore (see fig 9).
Lha dancing

The predilection for dance is a salient notion in the conceptual domain of lha. It emerges in one of Brogpa’s cosmological myths, namely in the myth of primordial times when lha and people lived together. It describes a past when people and deities coexisted in an endless celebration until a human transgression disrupted this state and caused their separation. Based on the version documented by Vohra, this event resulted from humans succumbing to sexual pleasure through the intrigue of an old woman, possibly a deity (Vohra 1989: 37–41). Another version was recorded during our fieldwork in Dah, in the account by Tsewang Norbu Numphelpa. Below is an excerpt of his narration:

In times past, lha and people were together. They danced incessantly. They danced, and lha and people never separated. There was a good man. He went down and asked an old woman, ‘What can be done, grandmother? Lha and people never even separate.’

‘Oh, son, lha are very shy and one kiss will drive them away. They are very shy. Do as I said, go!’

‘All right’, said he and went back up.

As he went up, he kissed lha during the dance. When he kissed [it], all lha dispersed. They were embarrassed and this is why people and lha separated. (see fig 10)
While both versions allude to a transgressive act of sexual nature, the first describes the separation as an unwanted event, while the second presents it as the desired outcome. It remains unclear as to whom the old woman was, but the version from Dah village suggests that she belonged to an area, located ‘down’, i.e., lower land, removed from the upper realms where the unity of people and deities took place.

In the version recorded in Dah, the communal celebration becomes an obstacle to human activity, prompting a need for an interruption. In this context, the myth could be interpreted as revealing a primordial stage of existence which precedes the cosmogonic process and the transgression itself as a cosmogonic act that structures the universe into a world of deities (lha-yul) and a world of people (mi-yul), and which enables human activity (see Vohra 1989: 40).

The deities in the myth could be referred to as the above-mentioned category of nameless lha, which typically appear in a collective form. They are presented as being fond of dance and ‘very shy’ – qualities absent from the conceptualisation of Brogpa’s individual lha, which are perceived as vengeful towards human transgressions. Another distinction is their involvement in human activity. While the individual lha can interact with people on specific occasions, they do not partake in village activities alongside them. By contrast, the myth of primordial time presents nameless lha as being involved in human festivities. In this respect, they resemble the so-called pari or suchi of Kalasha, who are also believed to engage in different types of human behaviour (Kalash 2021: 107). Both the Kalasha and the Brogpa share the notion of a primordial time when deities and people lived together in harmony (Vohra 1989: 38–41). However, while in Kalasha oral lore, pari or suchi occasionally fall in love with people and have children with them, there are no such accounts among the Brogpa where, as seen in the myth, sexual relations between deities and people are presented as transgressive.
The coexistence of *lha* and people and their endless dance are central themes in the structure of the *Bonona* celebration. A key role in their ritual recreation is played by the *lha-bdag* who, as mentioned earlier, spends several days in abstinence and seclusion near the *dyuha*. This period ends on the first day of *Bonona* when a procession of the *gdangs-gdangs-pa* musicians led by the singer *bro-mgo-pa* heads towards the shrine to invite him and the *lha* to the village. There they play *lha-rnga*, ritual music which serves both as an offering and a means of attracting the deities.

![Fig 11: Celebration of *Bonona* in Garkon, 2011.](image)

Photograph by Aleksandar Bogdanov.

According to local beliefs, after being brought to the village, the *lha* sit on the walnut tree, overseeing the festive ground, *changra* (see fig 11). They weigh down its branches and in lowering them, reveal their presence to people. Hereafter are several quotations by informants from Dah and Garkon, describing this moment:

...the whole walnut tree would tremble like this. When *lha* sat [on its branches], it would shake. (Tsewang Betepa, Garkon)

After that, when they played *lha-rnga*, everybody went [to the festive ground *changra*] and [lha] perched on the walnut tree over there. They would sit on the walnut tree and look from there. (Tsering Norbu (Khancho), Dah)

I've seen [lha], they were seven...They perched on the walnut tree. The branch bent down just like that! Just like that, the branch bent down! As soon as they played *lha-rnga*, [lha] sat there and remained on the walnut tree until the very end. (Palmo Diskit, Dah)

On the *changra*, there was a walnut tree. On the walnut tree *lha* would sit. Its branches were very big, and *lha* would perch on them. When we didn't celebrate *Bonona*, even if we stretched up, our hand would not reach the branches. During *Bonona*, however, when *lha* used to sit on the branches, they would [bend down and] touch the flower [adorning the hat], called kalimal.13 (Wangyal Betepa, Garkon)

Every night, *Bonona* concludes with a dance called *Bruskor*, performed to separate the *lha* and people so that the latter can have a break and return home for the night. The
men and women on the changra form two separate rows which move close to each other, creating the possibility for playful interactions. Their closeness is believed to embarrass the deities, making them climb back onto the branches of the walnut tree. The ritual can be viewed as a re-enactment of the mythological separation of lha and people, which is accomplished through a transgressive act that shames the deities and drives them away.

In the past, a similar ritual was performed during Bonona in which men and women shared kisses to detach themselves from lha. This probably accompanied the Bruskor dance but the data is insufficient to determine the stage at which the ritual took place. The practice of kissing came to an end around the 1920s under outside pressure. This was seen as problematic by some members of the community because the separation of lha and people has to be ensured at the end of Bonona. Here is how Tsankan Tsering Lagzhagpa from Baldez (see fig 12) recalls this past tradition:

We kissed – girls would line up on one side, boys on the other. We would jump on each other. Now, when outsiders started to come...now, this ended because we considered it shameful...it ended, but at least we should've kept a couple [of kisses]. Or else lha and people would always remain together, would not separate. Lha and people were inseparable. After the kiss, lha would separate and return to their place, and people would separate and remain here.

Fig 12: Tsankan Tsering Lagzhagpa from Baldez.

Photograph by Aleksandar Bogdanov.

In Bonona, as in the myth, the lha’s dance appears to be of an ambivalent nature — it alludes to a pre-cosmogonic state, the ritual re-enactment of which is both desired and viewed as a threat. Here the walnut tree assumes the function of a medium through which the deities move upwards and downwards, demarcating the boundaries of lha-yul and mi-yul, which is characteristic of Brogpa pre-Buddhist cosmology.

Traditionally, during the five days of the celebration, when people returned home to rest, the bro-mgo-pa and the musicians remained with the lha on the changra. Today,
this practice has died out and they only go there before dawn. At dawn, they play lha-
nga for the deities. During this, women are not allowed near the festive ground. The
ban is lifted only after sunrise when the women come to perform a dance and bring
offerings of bread rolls, called dkar-'byor, to the lha. This practice can be viewed as
another reference to the mythological past – someone must always remain on the
festive ground so that the deities are never fully separated from people during the
celebration.

57 The notion of lha’s dance and, in particular, of its magical nature appears again in the
story of the old Chunyupa, part of the oral tradition of Dah and of family lore of the
Chunyupa household. Below is a version of the story, narrated in 2017 by Tsewang
Norbu Numphelpa:

There was an old man from the house of Chunyupa. Chunyupa’s old man lost a yak.
He went searching for it...he reached the ravine of Churu. As he reached there, he
found lha dancing...he leaned on his stick and gazed at the dance of lha. As he gazed
and gazed at the dance, lha danced nine times.

As they danced nine times, the old man said to himself, ‘I’m so late’, and began to
leave. As he decided to leave, he arrived [at the village]...as he went down, he
returned home. No one recognised him. When they didn’t recognise him, they
asked, ‘Who are you? Where are you from?’

‘I am Chunyupa’, he said. And...people replied to him, ‘You are not one of ours!’ ‘I
am!’ he replied and everyone else told him, ‘How can you be one of ours?’

‘I am that Chunyupa!’ he said. He showed them their lands: ‘This [land] is ours, this
[land] is ours, this [land] is ours’. As he showed the lands one by one, they
understood that it was him. And as they understood, to this day it’s remembered
how the old man of Chunyupa got lost.

58 In keeping with the myth of primordial times, the story presents the lha’s dance as both
pleasurable and precarious, hindering human activity. Mesmerised by it, the old man
forgets his task and ends up being late. As in the pre-cosmogonic state alluded to in the
myth, the dance witnessed by Chunyupa unfolds in a timeless space – many years pass
in the human world and not a day in the divine realm in which he is entangled.

59 Chunyupa’s encounter takes place on a high-altitude pasture, which is associated with a
higher degree of shichu and consequently with the divine. As Vohra notes, shepherds
who come down from the pastureland are seen as imbued with purity in the same way
that approaching the shrines of the deities enhances the purity of the one who goes
there (Vohra 1989: 53). Here, parallels can be drawn with the pari who are believed to
inhabit remote areas far from human habitations, such as mountain peaks, high-
altitude pastureland and meadows. Among the Hunzakut, shepherds, who spend their
summers in high alpine pastures, can feel their presence most keenly. Sidky (1994: 73)
notes that on numerous occasions they would casually mention hearing pari voices and
their ‘eerie unhuman music’ while tending to the flocks.

Lha being white

60 The colour white is a central element of the conceptual domain of the Brogpa lha. This
is evident in the descriptions of their appearance as well as in particular elements of
the local ritual practice (see Robova 2023). The metonymic function of whiteness in
relation to this divine class is generally observed in the Tibetan cultural area.14 The
following citations are from three informants from Dah village who recall their encounters with lha:

I have seen lha. Seven lha came. They were white. They were seven, and first they went that way [towards the shrine above the village]. And there, on the rock, they stood in a row. (Tsering Norbu (Khancho), Dah)

When I was young, I saw a lha, just like that, passing me by... It was a white man. (Tsewang Norbu Numphelpa, Dah)

[lha] looked like an old white woman. She had white hair, white clothes. She wouldn't say anything. She would just carry me with her. She would take me with her, nothing else. (Tsering Dolkar Michungpa, Sanid)

As reflected in the above citations, the white appearance of lha is characteristic of their anthropomorphic form. Their appearance as old men and women could be related to the notion of shichu, as the Brogpa believe that greater purity is acquired through age (Vohra 1989: 54). A correlation between old age and the divine realm could be seen in the figure of the elderly woman whose advice or intrigue led to the separation of lha and people. Vohra suggests that she could have been a deity (Vohra 1989: 38, 42), although the myth does not provide further details about her identity.

Among the deities from the Live Pantheon, Vohra mentions Shaitan Sarpato Dado, a supernatural figure described as ‘an old man with a long flowing white beard who only appears during the night’ (Vohra 1989: 119), which corresponds to the descriptions of lha given by informants. Jettmar reports a common belief concerning the same figure in Punyal, an area of Gilgit (ibid).

The relationship between lha and the colour white is reflected in various ritual activities. For religious celebrations like Bonona and Lo-gsar, the kid chosen for a sacrificial offering at the dyuha is always white. The offering of white substances to lha is also mentioned in some of the Bonona songs. The colour is also of symbolic significance in the garments worn by the community. Traditionally made of white sheep’s or goat’s wool, they are perceived as a symbol of Brogpa’s mythological coexistence with lha. The following passage from an interview with a musician from Garkon village reflects this notion: ‘And so, the people in the village would wear white clothes. In all three Brogpa villages, because of the coexistence with lha and klu, black [clothes] did not suit us. We only wore white’ (Murup Phyolopa, Garkon).

At present, the colour white figures only in women’s traditional clothing worn mainly during the community’s religious festivals. Men’s attire, again worn on special occasions, is now made of a ready-made dark-red or black woollen fabric. White for men’s clothing is reserved exclusively for the ritual costume of the lha-bdag. It consists of a long robe and a tall pointed hat, both made of white wool. Gangsonam Gangyaldepa, lha-bdag of Dah, says that the costume is kept in a special bag and stored in a clean place to avoid chuṭu. According to some elderly informants, in the past the same or a similar costume was worn by the lha-pa who, on religious occasions, would embody lha and make divinations. The similarities in the costume of the lha-bdag and that of the deity mediums signify their relationship with the divine and could allude to analogies in their past functions.
Lha flying

The notion that lha fly is attested to in several accounts of encounters with the deities. One example of this is the story of Stanzin Dorje Amchipa, a lha-pa from Garkon. The interactions with lha he recounts took place during his initiatory period of illness when a person is believed to be especially susceptible to lha.

While I was making the puja, the deity would come and carry me away somewhere. I would turn up somewhere in the mountains or the villages. But actually, I cannot say if I really reached those places. I don’t know how, but I didn’t walk on the ground – [the deity] would carry me above it for about 20 seconds, just like that. I had many such troubles...

[lha] would pass through everything. I don’t know how it would carry me away...
Like the wind, but it wouldn’t carry me too high up, nor too low. Together with him – he was leading the way, and I was following him.

Tashi Anskit Bangbainpa, a lha-mo from the same village, gives similar accounts. During her initiatory illness, she reports frequent experiences of flying in her dreams. Even though the presence of the deity is not explicitly stated, she describes this experience as representative of the initiatory period of illness, characterised by spontaneous possessions by lha. The notion that lha fly also appears in the accounts of laypeople who describe the deities as flying or soaring through the air. Below is a quotation from Tsewang Norbu Numphelpa from Dah village, recounting his experience:

[lha] went upwards. I was startled in my sleep and saw something white passing by just like that. I was asleep in the area of Tsilgya, on the roof of Gangyaldepa’s house. As I rose, I saw it soar upwards.

Several elements of the story can be related to the conceptual domain of shichu. The encounter happened in an area called Tsilgya which, as the name suggests, is associated with tsilgi or juniper trees. As previously mentioned, the plant is perceived as being imbued with purity and is used extensively in rituals related to lha. Numphelpa stood on the roof of a house that belongs to Gangyaldepa, a lha-bdag-pa family among which the priestly functionary lha-bdag is elected and which, as mentioned earlier, is associated with a higher degree of shichu. The roof itself and the lha’s upward movement or flight could be related to the notion that ritual purity is an attribute of heights (Vohra 1989: 52). The notion that lha fly also corresponds to the view of lha as celestial beings related to heavenly phenomena.

Lha being ambivalent

In the harsh climatic and geographic conditions of Ladakh, nearly all events in life can be attributed to the ambivalent forces inhabiting the landscape. In this context, as Pirie notes, even protective lha are perceived as troublesome creatures, liable to cause harm (Pirie 2007: 103). For the Brogpa, lha are conceptualised as powerful ambivalent forces whose relationship with people relies on delicate reciprocal dependencies. As Dollfus says, ‘how the gods act depends on people’s behaviour towards them’ (Dollfus 1999: 98). In this regard, lha’s beneficial potential is activated and maintained through practising shichu and offering regular animal sacrifices. When propitiated, the deities are described as providers of health and longevity, abundant crops and water, fertile flocks etc. This notion is reflected in the following citations:

Lha comes to benefit people, to benefit animals. (Konchog Bangbaynpa, Garkon)
Very strong she was, [our Shringmo] Lhamo. She protected all people in our village.
(Tsewang Norbu Numpelpa, Dah)

Brogpa lha are strong (thang-po) and everything. If there is no water, if there is no snow, lha can bring all of these [things]. If you have no children, it can provide...
(Tsewang Lundup Doropa, Darchicks)

After preparing roti and adding apricot oil, we make mchod [for lha]. ‘Lhachen Khen, protect us! May lha keep us safe, may klu keep us safe! Protect all children! Old and young, protect everyone!’ [we used to say]. Shringmo Lhamo was regarded with reverence, great reverence. (Tashi Dolma Sambapa, Dah)

The notion of lha as being benevolent is reinforced during the seances of lha-pa and lha-mo where interactions with the divine are experienced as being beneficial and healing, inspiring confidence and a sense of security on individual and collective levels. In this context, lha, like Shringmo Lhamo, Mahakala Gyapo, Serlha Gyapo and Paldan Lhamo, are described as ‘strong’ or thang-po, a quality that correlates to their efficiency at alleviating suffering. This quality is also attributed to the specialists who embody them, which attests to a semantic overlap between the deities and their ‘hosts’. This perception of lha’s benevolence can further extend to situations outside the ritual context of the seance. One example of this is the following fragment of an interview with Tashi Dolma Sambapa from Dah village:

Shringmo Lhamo appears in my dreams – I make prostration (phyag-'tshal) before her! When I see her in my dreams, I feel better...lha would come near my bed, saying she was Shringmo Lhamo. Who knows whether I saw her awake or asleep? When I woke up, she was gone...whenever I saw lha, my heart would fill with joy. Here and here (she points to her chest and head), all of this would feel light.

Similar to the previously mentioned sighting of lha, described by Numpelpa, Sambapa’s interaction with the deities unfolds in a dream-like state, far removed from the sphere of the mundane and the conventional perception of reality. The experience of Shringmo Lhamo’s presence as comforting corresponds to the physical and psychological relief associated with the seance.

In contrast to their benevolence, lha’s malevolent potential is activated by the improper actions of people, that is disregarding social and religious prescriptions related to the conceptual dichotomy shichu-chuṭu and providing insufficient food offerings. They are believed to provoke lha’s anger, causing illness and misfortune on individual and collective scales. These attitudes are reflected in the following citations:

Nevertheless, we have to follow the traditions of our fathers and ancestors at least a little bit. Lha and klu have to eat; otherwise, there will be scarcity. (Tsankan Tsering Lagzhagpa, Baldez)

People nowadays [suffer from illness because they] don’t worship lha. In their quest for money, they don’t worship lha as much today. They used to make a lot more offerings. (Tsering Dolkar Michungpa, Sanid)

Now I will explain why the Brogpa are sick. In the old days, people didn’t get sick. Why did these diseases come? The Brogpa did not listen to the injunctions of the lha, did not listen to the injunctions of the lamas. That’s why it happened. They became like the Indians from the lowlands. They became like the foreigners. And they dress like foreigners – with jeans, pants etc. (Tsewang Lundup Doropa, Darchicks)

The above statements reflect the idea that harm could arise not only from the disrupted reciprocity between the human and the divine spheres but also from the perception of the loss of cultural identity, traditional values and moral principles, alluded to in the reproach of disregarding the injunctions of the deities and the
Buddhist clergy. Two of the statements belong to embodiment specialists and echo the appeals made by the deities they embody during seances. Against the backdrop of rapid cultural change, their lha have acquired the role of preachers who appeal for the Brogpa’s return to the social and religious ways of the past.

Lha migrating

Though not a marked trait of lha, the deities in Brogpa oral lore are often represented as migrating. As previously mentioned, Shringmo Lhamo and Basandar are said to have stayed with the community during its migration from Gilgit, which correlates to their status as ‘lha of Brogpa’ (brog-lha). According to the locals, the ‘Muslim lha’ Tarinta, embodied by Michungpa lha-mo in Baldez, fled to the Sanid hamlet of Dah from the Muslim village Chiktan during the Kargil War.

The effect of political and religious environments on the migration of lha is also reflected in the number of Tibetan deities who have fled their place of origin to the more hospitable environment of Ladakh. This tendency has been noted by Frank Kressing (2003), who explored the increasing popularity of lha-pa and lha-mo in the region. His informants attribute the growing number of Tibetan lha, embodied by local practitioners, to their inability to partake in seances in their homeland (ibid, 13). Among the Brogpa, examples of Tibetan lha are Palden Lhamo and Mahakala Gyapo who are believed to have come to the community’s villages from Tibet.

The mobility of lha within Brogpa villages is reflected in the triennial celebration Bonona which, as already mentioned, was traditionally held consecutively one year in Dah, one in Garkon and one in Ganoks. The explanation for this is that lha cannot be present simultaneously in more than one location and this rotation gives them enough time to travel to the village where the festivities are held.

Conclusions

The divine class of lha among the Brogpa is not univocal. Its exploration reflects remnants of distinct religious and cultural strata that had a role in shaping and influencing the conceptual understanding of this notion. Here the term lha reflects the dynamics between folk religion that spread throughout the Tibetan cultural area, the community’s own religious traditions brought from the area of Gilgit-Baltistan and the growing influence of Buddhism. In this context, I offer a more holistic description of the Brogpa lha.

From the perspective of two central notions, namely shichu and chuṭu, and key religious and ritual specialists, I distinguish between four different divine subcategories: actively worshipped lha, embodied lha, Bonona lha and nameless lha. The latter represents a central motif in the community’s cosmology and in the structure of the Bonona celebration. Conceptualised as an indivisible totality, these lha share traits with the so-called ‘fairies’ or pari, as they are conceptualised and worshipped among other culturally related groups such as the Hunzakut and the Kalasha. They are consistently conceptualised as being fond of dancing, which is reflected in Brogpa oral lore and ritual practice.
Alongside these classifications, I trace several notable conceptualisations of the local lha: as dancing, white, flying, ambivalent and migrating. In the various accounts, we see how the above-mentioned subcategories often intersect in different ways, eg both nameless lha and embodied lha are perceived as being able to fly, white and ambivalent, both Tibetan/Ladakhi and 'Brogpa’ deities migrate etc.

The problem of defining the variety of divine classes in the folk religion of the Himalayan region, as Pommaret notes, is all the more complex today in the context of the recent extensive fieldwork conducted there, which has shown ‘significant variations from region to region among deities referred to by the same generic term’ (Pommaret 1996: 40). In this regard, deconstructing the notion of lha within the community sheds light on the different religious influences that shape it, ultimately revealing its function as a loanword or an umbrella term encompassing various divinities belonging to separate religious strata. This also accounts for certain local conceptualisations of them that differ from the ones found elsewhere in the region.

A clear point of intersection between the different notions of lha is the conceptual dichotomy shichu-chuṭu which governs many of the community’s cultural practices. Brogpa lha, regardless of their origin, are perceived as possessing the quality shichu and are attracted to various things that fall into its conceptual domain, such as ibexes, goats and their products, juniper, mountain springs, high-altitude areas etc. Consequently, lha are displeased with any interaction with chuṭu, the threat of which traditionally penetrates and regulates nearly every aspect of the social and religious spheres.

In this context, a central role is played by the ritual specialist lha-bdag. On behalf of the entire community, he not only attends to the individual lha during important celebrations throughout the year but also engages in ritual activity with the nameless lha who have no distinct place of worship. An interesting example in this regard is the dyuha of Shringmo Lhamo in Dah and Garkon. During Bonona, it is precisely at this sacred place that the lha-bdag observes shichu and subsequently attracts and leads to the village changra not Shringmo Lhamo, but the nameless lha in their multitude so that they can reunite with people and join them in their festivities.

Here a link can be established between the Brogpa cult of Shringmo Lhamo and the nameless lha, and the cult of deities broadly grouped into the pari category, as exists in Gilgit-Baltistan and other culturally related areas. Many of them reflect the religious significance of the ibex and the prohibitions surrounding polluting animals such as cows and chickens. However, the connection between them requires further research.

Reconstructing Brogpa 'Indo-Aryan' religious traditions prior to their arrival from Gilgit to their present-day territories and prior to the strong influence of the local folk religion and Buddhism poses many difficulties due to the little knowledge that remains in the community’s collective memory. A more potent source of information is the songs of Bonona which provide a rather detailed account of Brogpa’s migrational route, even though the meaning of their lyrics is understood, to a varying extent, only by a handful of people. In this regard, a future comparative analysis between Brogpa religious notions and their counterparts in fairy cults in the region might give valuable insights into this problem.
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NOTES

1. 'Brogpa' is an exonym given to the community by its Ladakhi neighbours. It is problematic as it refers to unrelated ethnic groups such as the Brogpa in Bhutan. In the local context, it also carries a pejorative connotation of ‘wild’ and ‘uncultured'. However, its adoption by the community motivates my decision to apply it here. In academic literature, the community is also referred to as Buddhist Dards (Vohra 1989); however, the designation ‘Buddhist’ is problematic when distinguishing its population from other ethnically related groups in the region. Nowadays, the derogatory sense of the term Brogpa prompts the community to embrace new identity labels such as ‘Aryan’ that is affirmed by the tourist industry.

2. The Brogpa language is a dialect of Shina (S), designated by the Ladakhi/Tibetan term Brogskad. This linguonym, however, is largely unused by the community itself,
which refers to its language as *asi spera* (lit ‘our tongue’), in contrast to other locally used vernaculars such as Ladakhi and nowadays Hindi and Urdu.

3. Brogpa religious terminology is often Ladakhi/Tibetan, reflecting the Ladakhi cultural and linguistic influence on the community. It is worth noting, however, that some of these terms can also function as loanwords to refer to specific local concepts. One example is the term *lha* itself which, as exemplified in the present paper, often covers deities from other indigenous religious strata, which differ in various aspects from Ladakhi and Tibetan *lha*. Another such term is *sa-bdag* which, although found in other areas of Ladakh and Tibet, refers here to a distinctively unique Brogpa concept – its material representation is a stone placed behind the hearth and is linked to ancestor worship.


5. An etymological link can be established between *shichu* and the Old Indo-Aryan (OIA) *sucya* ‘to be purified’, which has come to mean ‘pure’ in languages from Nuristan to Bangan, referring to honey or to the blood of wild goats, which is offered to the mountain deities known as *pari* (Bhatt et al 2014: 83). Parallels between *chatu* in Brogskad and words with similar connotations in other Indo-Aryan languages can be drawn, eg the Prakrit *chutta*-*, the Sindhi *chuto* ‘defiled’ (Turner 1966: 278), although tracing the etymological parallels requires a more detailed linguistic approach and expertise by specialists in the field of Indo-Aryan languages and dialects in the region.

6. Throughout the paper all informants are mentioned by their real names with their explicit consent.

7. During Vohra’s fieldwork, two *Bonona* deities, namely Dumen and Lei Nakrin, were embodied by a local *lha-pa* (Vohra 1989: 93).

8. For more on the religious and ritual significance of the ibex in Ladakh, see Dollfus 1998.

9. According to a legend, he took the form of a raven to protect the infant First Dalai Lama (Norman 2020: 343).

10. According to Vohra and Jettmar, Minaro were the first inhabitants of Brogpa villages (Vohra 1989: 30). Today, many elderly informants claim that Brogpa are Minaro, and Vohra himself notes that they consider themselves to be of the same ethnic stock (Vohra 1983: 69).

11. Becoming *lha-pa* and *lha-mo* is preceded by an initiatory illness, accompanied by a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms, as well as by episodes of uncontrolled possessions, and frequent visions and interactions with *lha*.

12. All quotations in the text are excerpts from interviews that were videorecorded in Brogskad by A Bogdanov and P Robova, then translated through Hindi/Urdu into English with the help of a local informant, Tsetan Stanzin Numpelpa. For the translation, a more direct approach has been used to try to adhere to the specific structure of the source language and to the style of the speakers.

13. A variety of Ocimum Basilicum whose flowers are used for decorating the hat, part of men’s and women’s traditional attire.


15. For more on the arrangement of space and the notion of purity in Ladakh, see Mills 2013: 50–4.
ABSTRACTS

This paper explores the different conceptual meanings and connotations of the term lha among an ethnolinguistic community called Brogpa in Ladakh, India, which provides a focused religious context. It addresses the notion of lha in light of Brogpa’s cosmology, religious celebrations, local deity embodiment practice, and, last but not least, personal accounts of experiences of the divine. A key aspect outlined in this study is the possible link between local lha and the cult of pari among neighbouring culturally or linguistically related groups in the region of Gilgit-Baltistan.

INDEX

Keywords: Brogpa, Buddhist Dards, Bonona, folk religion, lha, shichu, chuṭu, lha-bdag, pari

Mots-clés: Brogpa, Dards bouddhistes, Bonona, religion populaire, lha, shichu, chuṭu, lha-bdag, pari

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