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Everyday religion among pastoralists of High and  
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# "Life" and "freeing life" (*tshe thar*) among pastoralists of Kham: intersecting religion and environment

*Les concepts de « vie » et de « libération de la vie » (tshe thar) chez les pasteurs nomades du Kham : au croisement de la religion et de l'environnement*

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“Much of the mythological history of Tibet can be read in terms of the gradual taming of the environment and its forces...”  
Samuel 1993, p. 168.

- 1 This article seeks to examine the interface between religious practices and the physical environment for contemporary nomadic pastoralists of the Minyag (Mi nyag) area in Kham (Khams). It describes a religious practice, namely the ritual of freeing life (*tshe thar/lha g.yag*), and probes how members of the community understand the complex of practices and beliefs – religious, social and ecological – that make up life on the grasslands. Observations of the synergies between humans and nonhumans are underscored by a local account of life as comprising three parts : the soul (*la/bla*), the lifespan (*tshe/tshe*), and the vital principle (*drog/srog*)<sup>1</sup>. The relationships that encompass pastoralists, animals, deities, and mountains in a network of life propose an interconnected foundation of religion and environment among Minyag pastoralists. This article builds on this proposition by focusing on one contemporary religious practice among nomadic pastoralists of Minyag. The ritual practice of “freeing life” elaborates on not only human-animal relationships in this Tibetan area, but also how pastoralists approach the multiplicity of factors influencing their contemporary

situation, including petitions to increase wealth, edicts from local incarnate lamas, and growing abstinence from meat consumption.

- 2 The conceptual core of this paper is a contribution to the intersections of religion and environment. Anthropological studies in this area have taken two distinct approaches to the study of this relationship. On the one hand, religion is approached according to its functions in society, an approach that may be traced back to Durkheim's legacy to our understanding of religion as a social institution. When applied to polytheistic and folk religions, this approach emphasizes religion as a way to, among other things, regulate management of the environment. Thus, from as early as Cushing's writings on the Zuni, in which "religion served to integrate the community, tie it to its agricultural and hunting systems, and manage resources" (Anderson 2012, p. 14), studies have collectively sought to elucidate how religious practices and beliefs guide the ecological actions of indigenous groups. Emphasis is placed on examining the function of religion as conservation, including the role of sacred mountains in the conservation of Tibetan reserves (Shen *et al.* 2012), the intersections between worship of the Ninth Dragon God in north China and disputes over water supply (Hu 2011) and the role of environmental monks in protecting the natural environment (Darling 2007).
- 3 On the other hand, literature has also looked at "the role played by the eco-system in the development of a religious system" (Benavides 2008, p. 548). These works are primarily concerned with religion as the subject of study and examine the effects of material conditions, such as the natural environment, on the religious configurations and practices of various groups around the world. Thus, Hultkrantz (1956, 1966) described how the environment impacted the religious configurations of the Wind River Shoshoni people and in one of his statements of this relationship, he wrote, "religions make use of the environment and adapt themselves to it. This is exactly what ecology of religion is about : the study of environmental integration of a religion and its implications" (1979, p. 221). Notwithstanding, both approaches within the literature has tended both to delineate between "mental" and "material" and to understand religion and environment as homonyms of the "mental" and "material" respectively (Anderson 2012).
- 4 Within the literature in Tibetan Studies, some general illustrations of Tibetan societies support the idea of complex intersections between religion and environment, and hence the increased integration of "mental" and "material" forms. Tucci's exposition of how the Tibetan cosmo-religious world is peopled with living beings, such as "worldly gods" (*jigtenpa*/*jig rten pa lha*), with whom humans interact in individual ways, is just one of many such iterations found also in other works (Bellezza 2011, Huber 2005, Karmay 1998, 2003, Millard 2005, Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, Samuel 1993). Hence, Tucci writes that "the Tibetan is free to respond to the *invisible* [emphasis added], but nevertheless unquestionable, presence of the [numinous] power in his own individual way" (1980, p. 165). Living beings are therefore not always predicated on materiality. Beings other than humans, such as *jigtenpa*, are not necessarily visible and material in measurable terms; nonetheless, Tibetans interact with them according to similar principles as they would with humans. The presence of mountain and territorial deities (*yul lha*, *gzhi bdag*) and water spirits (*klu*) further reveal configurations that intermingle "religion" and "environment"<sup>2</sup>.
- 5 In the process of discussing original ethnographic material on human-nonhuman relationships and the notion of life among Tibetan nomadic pastoralists, this article

pursues these questions: in what specific ways do Tibetan pastoralists of this community engage with nonhumans? How are these engagements informed by a local understanding of life and consciousness? How does this perspective contribute to larger discussions of human-nonhuman relationships and, subsequently, to intersections between religion and environment?

## The practice of freeing life

- 6 In summer, sisters Palmo and Drolma<sup>3</sup> wake up at five every morning to the grunts of the female yaks (*drimo*/*'bri mo*) calling for their calves. Their one-year olds (*we'u/be'u*) have been tied up inside the black tent (*sbra*) that is made of panels of tightly woven yak hair. Their bleating calls demonstrate how hungry they have become after a night's separation from their mothers. Palmo usually dresses first and then lights the yak dung fire to reheat the previous night's milk tea. "Drolma, Drolma, get up", she says quietly so as not to rouse her three sleeping daughters, aged six months to three years. Drolma stirs from under her robes and felt blankets; when she rises, she is careful to not disturb Sonam, Palmo's six-year old son who sleeps next to her every night. Yak dung smoke fills the black tent and the tea is barely warm before the two women drink what's left in the kettle, cover their faces with striped polyester scarves, and walk silently to the tied calves, releasing – in approximately the same order everyday – the calf of the first mother to be milked, and the next and so on.
- 7 The *drimo* are already waiting outside the black tent. As the first calf eagerly rushes to its mother, Palmo places her wooden milking bucket on the grass and automatically reaches into the small felt purse hanging from her belt. She extends her index and third fingers, covered in salt, to Karima, the *drimo*, which immediately licks her fingers. Palmo looks into the distance, surveying the mist still hanging low in the grasslands. She allows Karima to lick her fingers and the calf to suckle on its mother for a few moments, before pulling the calf and tying it to a short movable pole some distance away. She ties Karima's two front legs, kneels her right knee by the animal's right hind leg, and proceeds to deftly milk. "*Om maṇi padme hum, Om maṇi padme hum, Om maṇi padme hum*", she chants repeatedly in a low hum as the light sound of rhythmic squeezing is syncopated with the deeper sound of milk hitting the wooden bucket. Karima's four teats are alternately milked in varying pairs by Palmo's quick hands. Drolma soon joins her outside the black tent, mirroring her sister's movements. "Norema, ay Norema", she calls soothingly to the *drimo* in an effort to settle it from looking back to its right hind leg for more salt. Soon, their rhythmic motions find a harmony that is eventually broken when Palmo finishes milking Karima, and unties first its front legs and then its calf. As the mother and calf slowly walk off, Palmo goes back to the tent to release the next calf. In the lush summer months, the sisters take around three hours to milk more than thirty lactating *drimo*.
- 8 The sleeping children will have woken by the time the last round of milk is emptied from the wooden buckets into the large boiling pot. If Palmo's husband had slept in the black tent the night before, he would have since left to either cut grass from the household's fenced winter pasture, collect medicinal plants and fungi from the surrounding mountains, or ride to the nearest town for household business. Because she is younger and has a beautiful piercing whistle that the animals respond well to, Palmo usually leads them away to graze for the day. She walks behind them with her

*wordo* ('ur rdo) loosely in hand. The *wordo* is a long slingshot, cut and woven from coarse yak hair. It can be used to crack the air so that the animals keep moving, or to sling small stones towards the animals' rumps when they stop. Drolma lights the yak dung fire again. While waiting for the kettle to boil, she clears the immediate area around the black tent of fresh yak dung.

- 9 Yaks are the lifeline of Tibetan nomadic pastoralists, particularly in this place where sheep are no longer herded and caterpillar fungus<sup>4</sup> insufficient for everyone to completely abandon their traditional way of life. Yak (*g.yag*) is the Tibetan word for the male animal, *dri* or *drimo* for the female, but Tibetan pastoralists usually refer to these animals collectively as *nor* (*nor*), or wealth. The reason is clear : the animals provide the basis for life on the grasslands, through their milk from which yoghurt, butter and cheese are made, their dung from which fuel for burning comes, their hair and fur from which the tent, slingshots, and ropes are woven, and eventually their meat, which is eaten, and skin, which is used to make bags and rugs. Excess of any of these is sold or traded for the staple grain (*tsampa/rtsam pa*) and for cash.
- 10 Because pastoralists are so reliant on yaks for their physical sustenance, the "release" of these animals from the herd as offering (*mchod*) or as gift (*sbyin*) to deities is an important ritual act that augments the wellbeing of the household and the fortunes of the overall herd. Freeing life (*tshe thar*) refers to the practice of liberating animals and occurs throughout Buddhist Asia (Holler 2002, p. 207). According to Holler, *tshe thar* refers both to the overall category of animal liberation that, nonetheless, involves different practices and motivations and to the specific practice of releasing one's domestic animal intended for slaughter in order to gain merit (2002, p. 218). In its specific definition, *tshe thar* differs from *drog lud* (*srog glud*, var. *bslu*, *slu*), which involves purchasing or saving an animal that is not one's own in order to free it from intended slaughter and so to gain merit. This specific definition emphasizes the practices of "ransom" (*glud*).

Table 1. An outline of Holler's presentation of *tshe thar*<sup>5</sup>

Tibetan term	General definition	General purpose(s)
Superconcept <i>tshe thar</i>	Ritual freeing of animals, or "life".	To act out of compassion; to gain merit; to substitute for animal sacrifice ( <i>dmarmchod</i> ); to enhance rebirth; to avert disease; to propitiate long life; to please a certain god.
Subconcept <i>srog glud</i> (var. <i>srog bslu</i> , <i>srog slu</i> )	Animals, not one's own, saved from slaughter and freed.	To act out of compassion; to gain merit.
Subconcept <i>lha zog</i> , or <i>lha yag</i>	Animals belonging to pastoralists and dedicated to certain gods and therefore freed from domesticating practices.	To please a certain god; to avert disease; to enhance wealth and prosperity; to propitiate long life.
Subconcept <i>tshe thar</i>	Animals belonging to pastoralists, destined for slaughter and freed.	To act out of compassion; to gain merit.

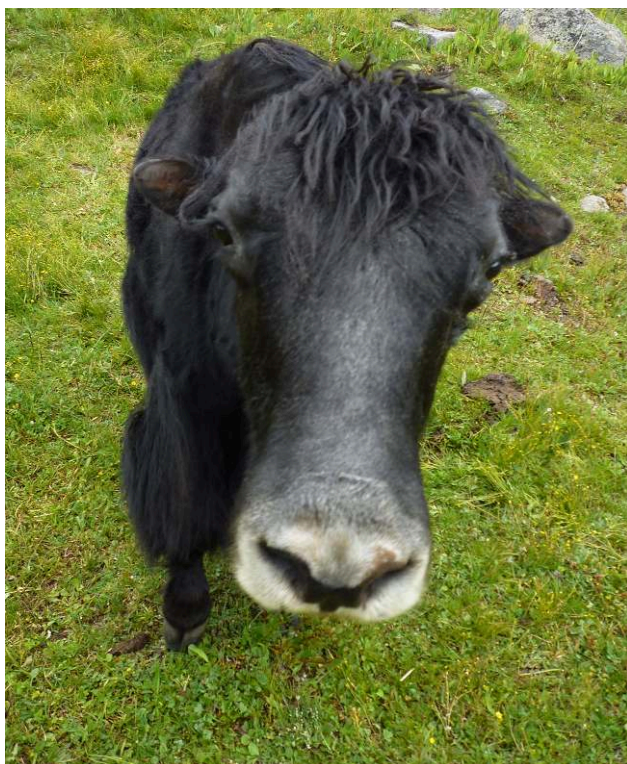
- 11 Pastoralists in Minyag refer to the release of yaks, for the animals are always male, from the herd as god-yaks (*lha yag/lha g.yag*). In local terms, the act is also *tshe thar*, which accords with Holler's use of the superconcept of the ritual freeing of life. In Minyag, *lha yag* is performed primarily to increase the wealth of the household

although other considerations, such as acting compassionately and gaining merit may also be included<sup>6</sup>. *Lha yag* also refers to the strongest yak or most useful yak in a herd. This meaning can be traced back to the stories of Ling Gesar<sup>7</sup>, where *lha yag* refers to heroes, and even to tigers. In this area, the ritual practice of *lha yag* refers to the "release" of one's own domestic animal, whether or not intended for slaughter, and where the animal remains with the herd. Nonetheless, there are several injunctions to their treatment. 1) The animals are neither tied nor tagged in order to distinguish them from the rest of the herd, which are tagged. 2) They are free to graze, although all usually stay with the herd. When they remain with the herd, they are not themselves herded, by whistling at or striking with a stone. 3) Their hair and fur cannot be cut. 4) They cannot be used to carry loads. And finally 5) they can never be killed, although their carcass may be used once they have died.

- 12 While the number of *lha yag* in a household is usually associated with the wealth of a household (see also *tshe yag* in Thargyal 2007, p. 75), such that the wealthier the household, the greater the number of *lha yag*, another factor has come to play an important role in recent times. In 2012, Khenpo Dorje Tashi (Mkhan po Rdo rje bkra shis, b. 1963), the local incarnate lama, started to urge pastoralists to increase the number of *lha yag* in the community. Around this time, also, there was a marked increase in the numbers of children who enrolled in Dorje Tashi's primary-level boarding school (Tan 2010), which then numbered approximately one thousand children from nomadic and agricultural communities in Minyag. In response to petitions from the families of these children, Dorje Tashi started to advise some, although not all, of these families to refrain from serving meat to their children prior to entering the boarding school. As a result, the families themselves ate less meat because, in the black tents of nomadic pastoralists, food preparation is done all together rather than separately for meat-eating and nonmeat-eating members. The direct extent to which this edict from Dorje Tashi was instigated by the teachings of Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro (Mkhan po Tshul khriims blo gros ; see Gaerrang, this issue) is evident from a clear association between the religious leaders (see Wangmo and Schneider, this issue), who are from the same Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. As a result of both Dorje Tashi's urgings and decisions made by individual households, the general number and percentage of *lha yag* in this community have increased by more than 10 percent over the last few years compared with seven years previously.
- 13 In one household, fourteen animals of a herd of almost one hundred had been liberated, six alone in the previous year following Dorje Tashi's advice. With approximately 15 percent of the herd as *lha yag*, this percentage is slightly higher than most other households in the community<sup>8</sup>. Of these fourteen, six<sup>9</sup> were given names by different members of the household and, out of these six, one was given a name by a lama ; it was then presented as *lha yag* to the "wealth god" (*nor lha*).



Photo 1. *Ayima lha yag*



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- 14 On the day of the ritual, Shanba Lama arrived at the black tent of the household. He was greeted warmly and offered bowls of milk tea (*tsampa*) and fresh yoghurt. After finishing, he placed juniper branches (*shug pa*) on the hot hearth rocks. Then he walked with the head of the household towards the animals. Six animals, those who were to figure in the ritual, had been tied up so that they could not follow the rest of the herd as they were led out to graze. Shanba Lama walked among the animals while chanting under his breath. In the meantime, a small metal urn filled with smoking juniper branches was carried out. This was the basis of the smoke-offering (*bsang*). Shanba Lama chanted and the six animals became *lha yag* of the household's herd. Eventually, Shanba Lama pointed to a black-and-white two-year old (*yaru*), with no horns. This animal was separated from the remaining five and led aside. The head of the household cut some tufts of hair from the animal's head and chest and gave it to Shanba Lama to mix with juniper leaves. Shanba Lama then placed this mixture on the smoking juniper branches while chanting :

Dzambhala is beautiful  
Preciously adorned with jewels, spread with a golden hue  
Gift-bestowing right hand with fruit  
Left hand holding a mongoose [from which comes] precious treasure  
Padma Dawa seated half-lotus on a rug  
The moon stays at his heart owing to tantric turns  
I pay homage to the entity known as The Three Jewels  
I pay homage to the entity known as Dzambhala  
I pay homage to the entity known as father of the great commanders of the *yakṣas*  
(*Vaiśravaṇa*)  
And homage to Dzambhala, the lord of water and the exalted god of wealth

Precious Dzambhala is the one who controls precious treasure and wealth  
 You are the Lord of many gods and malevolent demons who control the treasurers  
 Precious Dzambhala protects the wealth and guards the northern quarter  
 I salute and praise the making of your supreme attainment.

- 15 Shanba Lama named the animal Ayima and presented it specifically to Dzambhala, one of the three main aspects of the god of wealth<sup>10</sup>.
- 16 In performing the ritual practice of *lha yag*, the household was seeking to augment the well-being of its animals and, by extension, its wealth. The ritual was a liberation for the animals from the domesticating practices of the pastoralists because, as *lha yag*, they could not be treated and used in the same ways as others in the herd. Moreover, the household itself had a young boy who would eventually : 1) enroll in Dorje Tashi's boarding school, or 2) join Dorje Tashi's retinue of server-monks and disciples, or 3) enter the local monastery. Whatever his future path, the boy had been forbidden to eat meat since he was a baby and, subsequently, meat consumption of the household had declined considerably in the past seven years. This combination of factors, namely the household's decision to undertake the ritual practice to increase its wealth, a response to a direct edict from a local incarnate lama, and a general decline in meat-consumption in the household as an indirect result of advice from the lama, contributed to the high percentage of *lha yag* in this household. The ritual practice arose from these pragmatic reasons and, overall, the reasons agree with Holler's account of god-animals (*lha zog*) (2002, pp. 208, 218).
- 17 Nevertheless, I suggest that the request made of Shanba Lama to perform a specific chant to Dzambhala reveals an additional aspect to the ritual practice. The presentation of one animal, Ayima, to the deity of wealth was based on a prosperity prayer (*g.yang skyabs*) that accompanied the ritual practice of freeing life and begs the question of what else was going on. To further probe the import of the practice, it is important to know how local pastoralists regard the concept of "life" – and therefore what *else* underscores this particular example of freeing life.

## A local understanding of the concept of "life"

- 18 In a general classification of entities of the physical environment in this area of Minyag, the following vernacular categories distinguish broad classes of living beings. *Ritag* (*ri dwags*) refers to beings of the mountains and includes wild animals, such as musk deer (*gla ba*) and bears (*dom*), which live at distance from people<sup>11</sup>. Included in this category, also, are the "winged ones" (*dab chags*), such as birds (*bya*). Butterflies (*phye ma leb*) are winged ones, but they are considered insects (*'bu*), which are not *ritag*. As a kind of general opposing category, the *goshugs* (*sgo phyugs*) are beings that may be glossed as domesticated animals. This describes those animals that are dependent on humans to live, such as dogs, yaks and *drimo*, horses, goats, and sheep. These animals are also termed *nor*, or wealth, although often *nor* is used primarily to refer to yaks and *drimo*.
- 19 Notwithstanding these broad categories of distinction among living beings, there is one commonality shared by all animals, usually referred to as either *drogchag* (*srog chags*) or *semcan* (*sems can*). They are living beings that have three components of life : *tshe*, *drog* and *la*<sup>12</sup>. *Tshe* refers to the actual duration of a life from the moment life begins to its end in death. Its duration is already predetermined by karma. *Drog* refers to the vital principle of life and its loss means the absence of life, which is death. *La* refers to the



soul<sup>13</sup>. The *la* is thought to be "hooked" to the principle of consciousness (*rnam pas shes pas*, *rnam shes*), which underscores the successive train of existence according to karma. Importantly, the removal of *la* does not result in death, but rather in a kind of dumbness, as if one were in a coma. Other living things, such as trees, flowers, grasses and mushrooms, are thought to have *tshe* and *drog* because they have life, namely the ability to begin a process where life starts and ends, as well as to mark the possession of life and its loss. These specific living things, nevertheless, are not thought to have *la*.

- 20 In the ritual practice of *tshe thar* defined as the release of one's animals intended for slaughter, what is "released" is properly the *tshe*, namely the duration of a life that was presumably shortened or bound by the intention to slaughter. Acts of freeing life performed within this specific definition of *tshe thar* are clearly linked to the attainment of merit. In the general definition of *tshe thar*, which includes *lha yag*, the freeing or liberation of life does not only apply to animals intended for slaughter but also more generally to liberation from the practicalities of domestication. Particularly with regard to the ethnographic material presented in this paper around the ritual practice of *lha yag*, the link to attainment of merit is even less clear and, as discussed in the previous subsection, other factors may influence the household's decision to participate in the practice of freeing life as generally defined. Holler suggests that, when one considers the inclusion of animals such as horses and dogs, which would not have been slaughtered anyway, the purpose of *lha zog* becomes clarified. It is performed not as much to attain merit than to "please a god" wherein "[the god] is beseeched to accept the gift, to be pleased by it, and to grant boons and protection" (2002, p. 217). As a result, a seemingly simple question emerges, namely why is it that trees and flowers, which have "life" (*tshe*) are not "released" and gifted to the god? What is it about animals, such as yaks, sheep, horses and even fish, which make them ritual objects in this particular practice? I suggest that part of the answer revolves around the *la*.
- 21 As described, *la* has been translated mainly as soul, but also as "subtle life essence" in part to distance the concept from the Western religious overtones of the word "soul" (Gerke 2007, p. 195). It is a principle that is found not only in Tibet but also across the Himalayas (Hardman 2000, Mumford 1989) and in Indochina (Tambiah 1985). Gerke (2007, pp. 196-197) notes that, across the Himalayas, there is not one overarching definition of *la*. Among the Yolmowa and the Tamang in Nepal, even the number of *la* assigned to each person differs, ranging from one to nine. Among Tibetans, there is usually only one. The point is that, in addition to *tshe* and *drog*, all humans have *la*. Worldly deities and not-humans (*mi ma yin*) have *la* and all animals, including domesticated animals, animals of the mountains, animals with hooves and hands, animals that eat meat or do not eat meat, also have *la*. Thus, in this understanding, the *la* is necessarily intertwined with the principle of consciousness; *one does not exist without the other*.
- 22 The *la* has a definite shape (*gzugs*) and, because of this, is sometimes referred to as the *la* body (Tucci 1980, p. 192; Arya & Beguin 2007). Both Tucci and Arya note that the *la* is a kind of living double of the individual, or a copy of the physical body that is located between the physical body and mind, a point reiterated by Gerke (2007). Thus, "to gain control of it is to gain control over the person to whom it belongs" (Tucci 1980, p. 192). The *la*, as the body-copy and the bridge between the physical body and mind, has been investigated most fully in Tibetan medical practice. Therefore, in contemporary Tibetan medicine, the quality and strength of the pulse point (*bla rtsa*) is diagnosed to

make predictions of one's lifespan and fortune (*bla gnas*) as mentioned in Millard (2005)<sup>14</sup>. Because the *la* is associated with a person's health and wellbeing, there are many ritual practices associated with the *la*, such as calling it back to the physical body (*bla khug*), ransoming the *la* (*bla bsu*), and prolonging one's own life (*srog bsu*)<sup>15</sup>. In classical Tibetan medicine, the *la* is mobile even though confined to thirty specific locations in the body (Gerke 2007, p. 204).

- 23 The mobility of the *la* and its ability to be taken or stolen and stored in different places, such as trees, rocks and precious stones, highlight the fact that it can also exist as a collective, or macrocosmic form. This is particularly the case of certain mountains, *la ri* (*bla ri*) and certain lakes, *la mtsho* (*bla mtsho*), which have a *la* that binds together communities (Stein 1972, pp. 226-228, Karmay 1998). In some cases, a community or kingdom, such as Zhangzhung, may have different manifestations of its *la* form. Tucci notes that Mount Kailash is the *la* mountain (*bla ri*) of Zhangzhung (1980, p. 193) and Bellezza (2011, p. 14) writes that Targo is its *la* rock formation (*bla brag*).
- 24 While the particular community in Minyag did not then have a collective *la* in the shape of a mountain or lake, the nomadic pastoralists talked at length about the interpersonal relationships that one propitiated with a particular kind of worldly deity, known as territorial deities (*gzhi bdag*)<sup>16</sup>. These human-nonhuman relationships included relations of nurture, protection or anger and, in this way, were symmetrical to human-human relationships. Importantly, they were made possible both by the consciousness and by the *la*. The way it was explained is that the *la* is hooked onto consciousness. So, any entities that had consciousness also possessed *la*. The *la* facilitated communication between entities. Recall that, if the *la* leaves a body, the entity does not die but rather becomes mute and dumb. The *la*, therefore, augments not just any kind of relationship – after all, one could love flowers but they could not love you back – but relationships that were meaningful and reciprocal<sup>17</sup>.
- 25 Ritual acts, such as paying for use of a certain mountain, support meaningful and reciprocal relationships between a nomad man and a particular territorial deity. The nomad man pays back for use of resources, such as caterpillar fungus, juniper branches, or herbal plants, by performing a smoke-purification ritual. The territorial deity accepts the offering and allows the nomad man to continue collecting resources while also favoring the particular person with power or fortune. In places influenced by Buddhism, the smoke-offering functions in the same way as the sacrifice a man would make to a territorial deity before hunting in the territory. Based on this perspective, the smoke-offering – now regarded as a white offering (*dkar mchod*) – bears elements (albeit reversed) of a Bön ritual, namely animal or red sacrifice (*dmar mchod*)<sup>18</sup>. Similarly, the specific ritual of *lha yag* can be interpreted as a ritual practice that augments relationships between a nomadic household and territorial deity, particularly as it is refracted through the prosperity chant. Moreover, this relationship is possible not only because both the practitioner and deity has consciousness but also because each has *la*.
- 26 Animals, too, have *la*<sup>19</sup>. In this instance, humans act compassionately towards these entities because, having *la*, they also have consciousness. As mentioned, trees, flowers, grasses and mushrooms do not have *la*, and this is because they do not have the principle of consciousness. This point is emphasised by Khenpo Sodargye (Mkhan po Bso dar rgyas) in a book on whether plants have "life" to which his answer is in the negative<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, the *la* can be associated with health and the propitiation of long

life, so that these aspects, which contribute to the fortune of the herd and the wealth of the household, are indirectly accounted for by a focus on the *la* element in the *lha yag* ritual. My suggestion is that the pragmatic value that yaks afford for everyday life and the wealth that they signify already includes and implicates the *la*. Therefore, yaks are valuable on multiple levels and because of this, they are ideal entities to be offered to a territorial deity, in the ritual of *lha yag* and in the prosperity ritual because the exchange is symmetrical and of equal value.

- 27 The ritual of "freeing life" forges a good relationship with a deity (Holler 2002, Karmay 1998). In the particular example of *lha yag* Ayima, notwithstanding the complex of contributing reasons examined in the previous subsection, it appears that the animal's complete life and consciousness, comprising *tshe*, *drog* and *la*, was offered to the deity, Dzambhala. This emphasises not just the good relationship between human and deity that could be gained from this ritual act, but also highlights the value of "life" itself. The *la*, which accompanies consciousness, is an important component in this relationship because it supports a direct relational "value" that includes and goes beyond that framed by the rubric of logic – whether as accumulation of merit, increase in wealth, obedience to edict, or purification and therefore of anticipated reward.

## Conclusion

- 28 How might we understand the preceding insights on *la* and *tshe thar/lha yag* in light of the larger literature on religion and environment? Notwithstanding the fact that the ritual practice of "freeing life" is performed in other communities where connections to religion are equally clear, such as in Buddhist Southeast Asia, this ritual practice is also performed in communities where connections to religion are far less clear, such as in the Siberian Tuva (Stépanoff 2011). Therefore, it is advisable to be cautious on how far to argue that the ritual practice of freeing life *in itself* demonstrates an indissoluble intersection between religious teachings and environmental practices. A similar caution is advisable with respect to the *la* because, notwithstanding its importance in the ritual practice of *lha yag* and its augmentation to the value of life in the ritual offering, Minyag pastoralists did not clearly articulate the interactions between a microcosmic *la* that is hooked on to consciousness and a macrocosmic *la* that exists in collective form. Certain conclusions about the intersections between religion and environment are, then, forestalled when centered around the *la*, in the way that they have not been in discussions on Buddhism and the environment when centered around the *dharma* (Badiner 1990, Batchelor & Brown 1992, Habito 2007, Harris 1996, Holder 2007).
- 29 In analyzing how data around the ritual practice of freeing life and a local understanding of "life" from a community of nomadic pastoralists in Minyag contribute to an understanding of the intersections between religion and environment, one aspect has become clear. This is the increased blurriness between distinctions of the "mental" and "material" as outlined by Anderson (2012). To emphasize this conceptual interdependency, this article has responded to two narratives. The first is that, in studies on the environment, an overriding emphasis on materiality leaves no room for the existence of entities that are ineffable, immaterial and physically undemonstrable according to certain measures of scientific evidence. Nonetheless, the ethnographic data presented in this article demonstrates that Minyag pastoralists are

less concerned with material "evidence" with regard to their relationships with nonhumans, such as *jigtenpa*. The second is that the study of religion often pursues religion as an activity demarcated from other activities of everyday life. By pointing to the material aspect of rituals, and its interconnections with territorial deities and animals, this article has highlighted what, in the words of other scholars of Tibetan cultural areas, is "so deeply woven into the fabric of daily Tibetan life that it is difficult to single out a part of the tapestry that is purely 'religious' or one that is only 'secular' " (Powers 2007, p. 25). In further developments of this interdependency, further attention should be given to how local communities distinguish between and articulate mental and material forms, whether by exclusive categories or according to degrees, or intensities, of continuity (Tan 2014, p. 315).

- 30 This article has shown that Tibetan nomadic pastoralists try to propitiate relationships with entities that are not merely defined in materialist terms but that exist as real and described entities. Dzambhala, together with a host of local worldly deities in this place exist as subjects which one may establish a relationship with. They come to existence in the *forming* of a relationship, and in this way, they exist outside of a substantialist dichotomy. Furthermore, among this community of nomadic pastoralists, a local understanding of life is present. A local understanding of life emphasizes the *la*. *La* attached to the principle of consciousness allows for an interpretation of expanded consciousness that can properly belong not only to humans but also to animals and worldly deities. Extending the blurred region where religion and environment intersect suggests that practices normally understood as either environmental or religious might be better approached as already integrated, particularly when they are embedded in everyday routines and articulations.
- 31 The integration of environment and religion is not a new thesis even within studies of Tibetan cultural areas. Precedents may be found, for example, when Samuel (2007, p. 221) refers to subterranean water spirits (*klu*) and how Tibetans act towards certain water sources. Samuel, following Nagarajan's lead, refers to this as "embedded ecology": "where notions of cultural, aesthetic and religious conceptions orient perceptions of natural space" (Nagarajan 1998, p. 270). The idea that "ecological notions, beliefs and practices are embedded in cultural forms, particularly in religious and aesthetic practices and institutions" (*ibid*, p. 280) finds much purchase in an ethnographic analysis of already integrated religious and environmental practices in Minyag.

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## NOTES

1. Transliteration in this article follows the local vernacular, then the Wylie transliteration is provided. The word *srog* is usually pronounced *sog* in agricultural areas.
2. For more on this particular point, refer to Tan 2014.
3. Pseudonyms.
4. Caterpillar fungus is a particular larval-fungal hybrid (*Ophiocordyceps sinensis*) that only grows at a certain altitude of the Tibetan plateau. In its dried form, it sells for more than USD 31 000 per kilogram and is presently the main cash income for Tibetan nomadic pastoralists who are the primary gatherers of the product. See also Emilia Sulek's article in this volume.
5. Holler 2002, pp. 218-219. The terms (in the table) are not mutually exclusive and the purposes are not exhaustive.



6. See Holler (2002, pp. 218-219) for discussion about the wider motivations behind the practice according to 1) sutra-style, which prioritises the merit-accumulating aspect (*mchod*), or 2) tantra-style, which prioritizes the gift-exchange aspect (*sbyin*).
7. Known collectively as the Epic of King Gesar.
8. Compared also with Holler's observation that in some nomadic areas, approximately eight to ten percent of the herd is released (2002, p. 222).
9. Not the same as the six released in 2012.
10. These three aspects are : *Vaiśravaṇa* (*rnam thos sras*), Kubera, Dzambhala (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1996, pp. 68-74). In addition, there are eight minor gods of wealth (*nor lha brgyad*), which are : 1) *chu lha*, 2) *brtan pa*, 3) *zla ba*, 4) *'dzin byed*, 5) *rlung*, 6) *me*, 7) *nam langs*, and 8) *'od byed bcas so*. Nor brang o rgyan 2008, p. 599.
11. In common categories, *ritag* refers to wild animals that eat grass; *gcan gzan* refers to wild animals that eat meat.
12. This differs slightly from the triad mentioned by Karmay with respect to *bla* (1998, pp. 311-312). Karmay mentions the *bla*, respiratory breath (*dbugs*) and vital principle (*srog*), and that the *dbugs* is associated with *tshe* (1998, p. 314).
13. Samuel (1993) refers to *bla* as spirit-essence.
14. Millard (2005, pp. 13-14) also notes that, according to one interpretation known as the "lifespan channels" in Tibetan medicine, there are two kinds of *la*. The first is the life force in the body that is connected to the lunar cycle and the second is related to illnesses and rituals of healing and is linked integrally to consciousness.
15. See also Tucci (1980) and Arya & Beguin (2007) for more details on *la* rituals.
16. In this area of Minyag, there was not another kind of territorial deity, known as *yul lha* (*yul lha*), which has been written about for the Amdo region.
17. By focusing on the *la*, this article highlights the inter-personal relationships between humans and deities, as described by Minyag pastoralists. It does not elaborate on another concept of co-dependence, namely *tendrel* (*rten 'brel*).
18. See Diemberger & Hazod (1997).
19. Here, because the *la* is hooked onto consciousness, the beings that possess *la* are also those that occupy the six realms of worldly existence.
20. For the purpose of this article, it is important to be clear that the distinction between entities that have *la* and those who do not is a vernacular categorization rather than a conceptual dichotomy.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article examines the interface between religious practices and the physical environment for contemporary pastoralists of the Minyag area in Kham. It details how Kham pastoralists practice their religious beliefs by incorporating entities of their physical environment, such as yaks, in ways that complicate a singular dichotomy between spiritual and physical. Explicating a vernacular understanding of "life", this article proposes that everyday religious practices normally categorized into a distinct concept of "religion" is, for pastoralists of Kham, best understood as integrally connected with other domains of their world.

Cet article examine l'interface entre les pratiques religieuses et l'environnement physique chez les pasteurs nomades contemporains dans la région du Kham Minyag. Il détaille comment les pasteurs nomades du Kham pratiquent leurs croyances religieuses en incorporant des entités de leur environnement physique, telles que les yaks, de façon à compliquer la dichotomie particulière entre le spirituel et le physique. Explicitant la compréhension vernaculaire de « vie », cet article propose que les pratiques religieuses quotidiennes, normalement classées en concept distinct de « religion » sont, pour les pasteurs nomades du Kham, mieux comprises comme intégralement liées à d'autres domaines de leur monde.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Tibet, Kham, nomade, vie

**Keywords:** Tibet, Kham, nomad, life

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