Buddhism in Contemporary Tibet

Religious Revival and Cultural Identity

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A Pilgrimage of Rebirth Reborn

The 1992 Celebration of the Drigung Powa Chenmo

Matthew T. Kapstein

In August 1992 the pilgrimage and festival of religious teaching known as the Drigung Powa Chenmo was revived after a hiatus of thirty-six years. Like certain other important Tibetan religious and cultural celebrations, it was traditionally held only once in every twelve-year calendrical cycle, in this case during the sixth lunar month of each monkey year,[1] and so had been last convened in 1956. Its performance in 1968 was prohibited by the relentless assault on virtually all aspects of traditional Tibetan life that marked the Cultural Revolution, then at its height; while in 1980 the partial relaxation of restrictions on religious observance in China, and above all on the cultural traditions of China's ethnic minorities,[2] had not yet advanced sufficiently to permit the reinception of an event of this scale. In this chapter, based on both textual research and firsthand observation of the Drigung Powa Chenmo during its revival, I survey its history and development, the pilgrimage as I witnessed it in 1992, and its implications for our understanding of the role of pilgrimage in Tibetan religious life and in the formation of Tibetan identity, in the past and at present.

Pilgrimage (*gnas-skor*) has long figured prominently among the characteristic religious activities in which Tibetans almost universally participate. Many, for instance, regard it to be particularly important to visit the religious shrines of Lhasa, where pilgrims can make the rounds of the numerous important temples and monasteries in the vicinity of Tibet's ancient capital. Before 1959 they could perhaps even have attended a public blessing given by the Dalai Lama, and today his absence is vigorously recalled by the many pilgrims who arrive in what is now a predominantly Chinese city. The pilgrims who flock to Lhasa bring offerings for the temples and monks and also frequently engage in trade so as to finance their journeys. Thus, in addition to its more purely religious significance, pilgrimage has generally played an important role in Tibetan commerce, both cultural and

economic. In recent years the economic activity accompanying pilgrimage has to some extent resumed in Lhasa, though on a much smaller scale than in earlier generations and under greatly changed circumstances.[3]

The capital, however, was never the sole center of pilgrimage in Tibet. There was, in fact, a sort of national pilgrimage network, whose routes, extending throughout the length and breadth of geographic and cultural Tibet,[4] helped to maintain communications among even the most far-flung districts. The pilgrimage to the small valley of Terdrom[5] during the Drigung Powa Chenmo well exemplifies some pervasive themes relating to sacred places, emphasizing the symbolic significance of the landscape and of specific sacred objects to be found there, as well as legendary and historical associations with some of the great culture heroes of the Tibetan past. Configurations of stone, designs seen in the cliffs, and so forth, are described as the natural images and shrines of deities, or the tangible evidence of the great deeds of past masters. Uncanny occurrences, unusual features of climate and environment, are all also typically interpreted as being imbued with profound spiritual meaning.

Tibetan pilgrimage, then, as also pilgrimage in other cultural settings, involves much more than the mere physical journey to places deemed sacred.[6] Through religious teaching, ritual activity, and the attendant assimilation and replication of symbols, as well as through the formation of a rich network of social and economic relationships, pilgrimage has functioned in Tibet as an integral dimension of the construction of society and self, transforming the body, consciousness, and status of the pilgrim throughout the course of the journey. This certainly has been the case even if never brought to the level of deliberate reflection, though traditional Tibetan religious culture has in fact long been conscious of the transformative dimension of the pilgrimage experience, and so intentionally has sought to refine and thus to accentuate it.

THE LAND, THE LINEAGE, AND *PLANTING THE STALK*

The district of Drigung is located to the northeast of Lhasa. After reaching the town of Mendrogongkar, slightly less than one hundred kilometers from the capital, the main road swings toward the east, in the direction of the Kongpo district.[7] An unpaved track leads north, past the ancient temple of Katsel, and then, farther north, skirts a track leading to the almost equally old shrine at Uru Shei Lhakhang. These monuments, both severely damaged during the 1960s, recall the antiquity of Drigung and its connections with the Tibetan monarchy of the late first millennium. The first, associated with the very beginnings of Tibetan Buddhism in the seventh century, is said to be one of the temples founded by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo (617–49/50) to subjugate by geomantic means the great ogress who embodies the land of Tibet.[8] The second was the center of the estate granted to a famed monk who served as an imperial tutor at the beginning of the

ninth century.[9] Desperately poor today, the rocky fields and poor pastures of Drigung provide little indication that this was once one of Tibet's great fiefdoms.[10]

Despite the presence of religious monuments dating back to the dynastic period, Drigung's emergence as a major center of Tibetan Buddhism began only in the late twelfth century. It was then that Kyopa Jikten Gönpo (1143–1217) established his monastery at Drigung-thil, dramatically situated in the upper reaches of the valley. Jikten Gönpo, who originally came from far eastern Tibet, had journeyed to the central region when he was in his twenties to study with Phakmotrupa (1110–70), one of the preeminent masters of the Kagyü school, an order renowned for its proficiency in advanced and esoteric techniques of Buddhist tantric yoga.[11] He quickly established himself as the master's favorite and lineage successor, but after Phakmotrupa's death he chose not to accept the responsibilities that that role would have entailed, and instead fled to the Drigung valley with some close companions. There he was offered a small monastic community by a yogin also affiliated with the Kagyü order and soon thereafter founded Drigung-thil. He became known for his compassion, learning, and strict adherence to the monastic code and was reputed to be an incarnation of the renowned Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. His charisma was such that it was said 180,000 monks once gathered for his teaching, and even if we allow for considerable exaggeration here, the conclusion is unavoidable that Jikten Gönpo was both a gifted and an exceedingly successful Buddhist teacher. It is highly probable that even during his lifetime hermitages adhering to his tradition were founded as far away as the Kailash region, in the kingdom of Guge in far western Tibet. His writings included highly respected expositions of Buddhist philosophy and meditational practice but came to be regarded in some circles as doctrinally controversial.[12]

The order Jikten Gönpo established, known as the Drigung Kagyü, after the location of its foremost seat, has remained one of the most successful of the Kagyü subsects, with affiliated monasteries in many parts of the Tibetan world: Ladakh (India), Limi (northwestern Nepal), and Nangchen (Qinghai Province) are among the main centers of its activity, besides Drigung itself.[13] These widely separated communities have continued to maintain their loyalty to the main seat of the order at Drigung, which has preserved an unbroken hierarchical lineage. The highest-ranking Drigung hierarch currently lives in India, where the order has established monasteries and educational centers in the Tibetan refugee community.[14] Like several of the other Tibetan religious orders in exile, it has extended its teaching activity beyond the traditional range of Tibetan Buddhism and now has some representatives in other parts of the world, including the United States.

According to tradition, it was in a monkey year during the sixth of Tibet's sexagenary cycles, perhaps in 1308,[15] that the ninth in the hierarchical lineage of Drigung Monastery, Dorje Gyelpo (1284–1350, head of the lineage from 1314 until his death), is said to have "reopened" the pilgrimage sites of Terdrom, which lies in close proximity to Drigung-thil.[16] Terdrom was famed for its mineral hot springs and for its many caves and other landmarks that had been hallowed by the

eighth-century Indian tantric master Padmasambhava and his circle, above all his Tibetan consort Yeshe Tsogyel. In these places, it was said, the treasures—spiritual and material—that they had concealed for the benefit of the Tibetan people might be found. During the monkey month, the time when the birth of the master Padmasambhava is celebrated, Dorje Gyelpo ordered performances of the ritual dances associated with that teacher's favored deity, Vajrakīla (*Rdo-rje-phur-pa*).[17] In connection with this, he also began the custom of convening a regular public series of religious teachings, which were held every twelve years thereafter, though the location seems to have shifted from time to time, always remaining in the general vicinity of Drigung.[18]

Some two centuries later, the famous "treasure finder" (*gter-bton*) of Drigung, Rinchen Püntsok (1509–57), thoroughly reorganized these regular duodecennial observances that were followed in each monkey year. Rinchen Püntsok, a discoverer of the cached scriptural treasures, was a devoted adherent of the cult of Padmasambhava and as such promoted a syncretic form of tantric Buddhism.[19] This involved integrating elements of the traditional Kagyü teachings of Drigung Monastery together with the doctrines, rituals, and meditational practices of the Nyingma school, the ancient tradition of Tibetan Buddhism that was especially associated with Padmasambhava. Rinchen Püntsok also sometimes preferred to live as a contemplative hermit, outside the precincts of the large Drigung Monastery, and among his favored abodes was the upper part of the Terdrom valley, three hours trek beyond the hot springs, where, at an altitude of approximately 15,000 feet, he founded the hermitage of Drongur. Here he reconvened the cycles of public teaching, using these occasions to instruct those assembled in the treasure doctrines that he himself had recovered. Some of his discoveries had taken place in the high Kere Yangdzong Cave, the upper chamber of the large cavern known as the Great Assembly Hall (Tshogs-khang-chen-mo), situated in the peak looming above Drongur. The cave was reputed to have been Yeshe Tsogyel's favored place of meditation, and figures prominently in pilgrimage activity during the Drigung Powa Chenmo.[20]

The celebration appears to have been fixed in its modern form during the first half of the following century, when two famous Drigung hierarchs, the brothers Könchok Rinchen (1590–1654) and Rikdzin Chödrak (1595–1659), sought to renew and refine the combined Nyingma and Kagyü heritage of the Drigung succession.[21] They maintained Rinchen Püntsok's cycle of Nyingma instruction and are said to have augmented this by bestowing in addition such popular Kagyü rites as the empowerment of longevity according to the tradition of the yoginī Siddharajñī[22] and, as the culminating teaching to be conferred on the final full moon day, an especially treasured esoteric precept called *Planting the Stalk (Jag-zug-ma)*,[23] a means to achieve the safe passage of the consciousness principle from this life to the next at the moment of death. This final instruction of *powa*, literally "transference," henceforth would be the main attraction for the faithful, and so lent its name to this entire festival of pilgrimage and religious instruction. The event as a whole thus came to be known as the Drigung Powa Chenmo, "the great [conferral of the yoga of the] transference [of consciousness] at Drigung."

In general, the technique of powa, a special form of yogic exercise, is said to cause the consciousness of the dying individual to depart suddenly from the body through a forced opening at the crown of the skull and to travel immediately to a pure land, usually the Sukhāvatī realm of the Buddha Amitābha, in which enlightenment can then be swiftly attained. The technique is one that produces swift and unmistakable physical effects, as described here by a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, H. V. Guenther:

> When a competent Guru imparts this instruction to his disciple, the region of the fontanel opening becomes highly sensitive to touch and remains so for some time. Moreover, when after the instruction he touches this region with Kusa-grass, symbolically representing the opening of the passage to the ultimate, the distinct sensation of being pierced from top to bottom is created. Needless to say, this practice is not without its dangers and under no circumstances can it be performed when there is any deformation in the bones of the skull or in the spinal cord.[24]

Indeed, powa has consistently been a topic of fascination for Western writers on Tibetan esotericism and yoga. Alexandra David-Neel has dramatically described the practice in her works, as has W. Y. Evans-Wentz.[25] More pertinent, perhaps, in our present context are the observations of an anthropologist, Martin Brauen-Dolma, commenting on the recent popularization of a version of the powa practice among Tibetan refugees living in Switzerland:

> Amitābha's paradise has become the focus of a salvation-practice for lay persons, with attainment actively being pursued. . . . To this extent, at least, its goal resembles that of a millenial movement. Secondary manifestations of this ritual are also reminiscent of characteristics of millenial movements: some participants in this rite—most are women—fall into trance-like states which are accompanied by rhythmic hyperventilation, moaning, whimpering, or loud sobbing, and less often by movements of the arms. For anyone accustomed to the quiet atmosphere of Buddhist meditation these seances are alien and extraordinary. The fact that this cult gains importance during the critical time of exile leads me to see yet another connection to the movements referred to by some authors as "crisis cults."[26]

However, the manifestations described here are by no means peculiarly characteristic of the community in exile. A recently published account in Tibetan of the traditional performance of the Drigung Powa Chenmo offers the following remarks on its performance during the seventeenth century: "The signs that accompanied the conferral of the transference included headache, the appearance of pus at the crown of the head, the opening of the fontanel, and, among some, momentary loss of consciousness."[27] Nevertheless, Brauen-Dolma's observations on the millennial dimensions of the ritual do contribute to our understanding of

it, both in its past formation and in its present revival. For, as will become clear later in this chapter, the rituals of powa seem intimately connected with the construction of identities in an inherently unstable and so crisis-ridden world.

The particular version of the powa practice known as *Planting the Stalk* originated among the rediscovered treasures (*gter-ma*) that were traced back to the master Padmasambhava and his disciples. It had been discovered, probably during the fourteenth century, by an obscure figure named Nyinda Sangye, who is said to have recovered the texts from Black Maṇḍala Lake in southern Tibet. It was recorded that the esoteric methods he thus brought to light were so powerful that by means of them he was able to secure the liberation of all the spirits and animals inhabiting the lake itself. The association of the teaching's origins with the spiritual sublimation of the chthonic forces of Tibet is an important motif for the Drigung Powa Chenmo as well, though the precise location in which this connection is most apparent, interestingly, is removed from a lake to a mountain cave. Significant too is the report of some texts that Nyinda Sangye was the father of Karma Lingpa, the discoverer of the well-known "Tibetan Book of the Dead," for this association further strengthens the authority of the Drigung Powa teachings in connection with the rites of death.[28]

The title *Planting the Stalk* refers to a widespread test for the efficacy of the powa practice: after the adept has received the teaching and cultivated it in seclusion for several days, the opening of the fontanel grows sufficiently so that one is able to place a stalk of grass upright within it. In a famous passage David-Neel once reported witnessing this, and I can confirm that a similar degree of success in the technique has been observed also among contemporary Western Buddhist practitioners.[29]

This, then, was the teaching stressed by Könchok Rinchen and Rikdzin Chödrak. By making it, together with other valued elements of the Kagyü heritage, available to the assembled public, the hierarchy of Drigung was in effect inviting all to participate directly in the special charisma of the Drigung Kagyü line, an invitation that would no doubt enhance Drigung's standing among the Tibetan people at a time when several of the rival Kagyü lineages were in fact facing stiff opposition in Central Tibet.[30]

Until 1956 the Drigung Powa Chenmo continued to be held every twelve years, adhering to the general pattern of Nyingma and Kagyü teaching just described, combined with pilgrimage rounds through the sacred sites of Terdrom. In its traditional performance, however, the entire valley of Terdrom is supposed to have been in effect ritually sealed off from its surroundings, to become a self-contained realm for the duration of the pilgrimage. A description of this process was recently published in Tibetan and, as it has some importance for my analysis of the Drigung Powa Chenmo and much intrinsic interest, I offer a translation of it here:[31]

> The Monkey Year Powa Chenmo is convened at the place called "Drongur, the intersection of three valleys," situated in Zhotö Tidro (=Terdrom), during the period from the seventh through the fifteenth of the sixth Mongolian month. Because the two Drigung lords of refuge—the Chetsang and Chungtsang—were the chief officiants for the religious performance, we state in brief the old custom whereby they rode [from Drigung to Drongur]. On an astrologically propitious day, having ridden from Dridzong to Tetrak-thang, they spent a day performing the propitiations of Achi, the chief protective deity of Drigung, at length. After exoteric and esoteric prognostications favoring the ride up from Dokashak the lamas, incarnates, and monks of the seat at Drigung-thil would guide the horseback journey by stages. Following casual ablutions and consecrations at the Dzenthang Kyopa Temple, the Lama of Drongur and the chief steward of Terdrom would welcome the party at Khatsel-gang with incense, whereupon the chief steward would offer the maṇḍala, the symbolic offering of the cosmos, together with an explanation of the sacred features of the site. Then, there would be further ablutions and consecrations at the Maṇi Temple. Following a monetary offering at Chötsel they proceeded to Tayak-thang. That afternoon, together with an offering of fragrant incense to the local deities (*bsang*) and other observances, they performed a circuit of the hot springs and proceeded to Drongur via Dinggyel. Then, with the nuns of Terdrom and the lamas of Drongur performing a procession known as the "yellow rosary," they entered the great stronghold of Drongur. Following the admonitions that issued from the residence, the monks and nuns of Drongur and Terdrom made the preparations for the great teachings of the Monkey Year by stages.
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> Besides that, the taxpayers and others belonging to the Drigung administration had to appear for an assessment of revenue and be forthcoming with their payments. Then, beginning on the sixth day of the sixth month, the monks of Gar College and those of the college at Drigung-thil, together with the eastern and western retreatants of the seat and those of Salt Cave, gradually had to assemble at Drongur. After riding up with the lamas who were officials of the two colleges, they then had to invite into their presence the representations of the Buddhas' Body, Speech, and Mind [in the form of the images, books and symbols that were installed at Drongur for the teachings]. On the seventh day, the colleges of Gar and Thil were asked separately to pitch their assembly tents—the assembly tent of Thil, "Blue Heaven," and that of Gar, "White Snow Peak," had been the presentations of the lord of refuges Peme Gyeltsen (the twenty-ninth head of the lineage of Drigung, b. 1770). These two colleges together would then request that the great tent of empowerment, the commission of the Ven. Thukje Nyima (the thirty-second head of the lineage), be pitched above the religious court of Drongur.
>
> From Gar, four "servants of virtue" with four deputies from the larger taxpaying households, such as those of Khengchugyü, would have to shoulder the responsibility for the adherence to the religious laws according to Gar, along with the laws of the monastic and lay public in general. During the afternoon of the seventh day, at the valley closing the fortress of Drongur, all would have to listen to a proclamation of the ordinances of the religious law. Then by stages, following rounds in the habitations of the two colleges, and the most important campsites of the public, the path was closed, and it was arranged that neither mundane business nor affairs involving unclean sorts of things should arrive there. The entire legal power for the duration of the religious assembly was then held as the responsibility of the "servants of virtue" and the deputies.

Clearly, then, the lay and monastic populations of the Drigung valley were generally drawn into some degree of involvement with the pilgrimage, and this required a profound reconfiguring of ritual and economic and indeed even of spatial relationships. There have been, of course, many alterations resulting from the great changes that have taken place in Tibet since the festival's last fully traditional performance in 1956. Some of these will be discussed in greater detail below. Let us just note for the moment that the old revenue system has long been dismantled, so that the fiscal responsibility for the 1992 performance was in the hands of the Mendrogongkar district government together with Drigung Monastery, aided by a grant from the Tibet Autonomous Region's (TAR's) Council on Religious Affairs (*chos-tshogs*). Moreover, the ideal of a complete sealing-off of Drongur, so that it became for the duration of the festival a ritual and legal realm unto itself, could at best be recapitulated only symbolically, if, indeed, it had ever been fully effected in the past. Finally, given the greatly reduced monasticism of the region (as is the case throughout Tibet), the elaborate configuration of assembly tents described above was realized only in a much reduced form.

In the wake of the Tibetan revolt of 1959, followed by the onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the observance of Drigung Powa Chenmo was forbidden, and Drigung-thil and other religious sites in the region, even some that were very remote and difficult of access, suffered almost complete demolition. Those monks and lamas who had not fled from Tibet in 1959 were mostly forced to disrobe and join rural work units in nearby communes or in their native districts. (The young Drigung Chetsang, for instance, prior to his 1975 escape from Tibet, was consigned to a work unit at Tsünmo-tse, between Mendrogongkar and Lhasa.) Some were subjected to much harsher treatment and as a result perished during the Cultural Revolution years. After the ouster of the Gang of Four in 1978 and the subsequent inception of Deng's reform program, which permitted a degree of liberalization to take place, Pachung Rinpoche (deceased during the late 1980s), one of the few learned monks associated with Drigung who had survived in Tibet, began initial restoration work at the monastery and attracted others affiliated with Drigung to join him in his efforts. At about this time, too, a charismatic woman, Tendzin Chödrön, appeared on the scene at Terdrom and came to be regarded as the Drigung Khandro. This title is traditionally conferred once in each generation on a female adept residing at Terdrom who is held to be the emanation of Padmasambhava's Tibetan consort Yeshe Tsogyel.[32] An extremely forceful personality, Tendzin Chödrön has played a pivotal role in the re-creation of the nun's community at Terdrom.

By the early 1990s the local government of Mendrogongkar, under whose jurisdiction the Drigung district falls, responded favorably to the requests of the monastery and the local public to convene the Drigung Powa once again, in August 1992, and they succeeded in securing the permission of the authorities of the TAR to do this. Remarkably, this happened despite the setbacks to liberalization policies in the wake of the Tibetan protests of the late 1980s and the martial law

that followed, the pattern of deliberalization in Tibet having been compounded by the generally hard-line position on political and social protest that has come to characterize the Chinese Community Party (CCP) under Li Peng and Jiang Zemin.[33] This perhaps explains in part why the event was not well publicized in advance and the attendance of non-Tibetans not encouraged. Nevertheless, I had the good fortune to be among the handful of foreigners who made their way to the festival during its revival, to join the pilgrims who had gathered there in their treks to hallowed sites, and to attend the public teachings that were conferred in the course of the weeklong program.[34]

THE DRIGUNG POWA OBSERVED

In accordance with established tradition the teachings of the revived Drigung Powa Chenmo were conferred during the period from the eighth through the fifteenth lunar days of the sixth, or monkey, month of the monkey year. In 1992 this was the period from August 6 through 13. Normally, the occasion would be presided over by the two foremost hierarchs of Drigung, the Chetsang Rinpoche and the Chungtsang Rinpoche, the direct heirs to the incarnation lines of Könchok Rinchen and Rikdzin Chödrak. In 1992, however, both of these figures were living in India and were unable to return to Tibet for the celebrations, to the disappointment of many with whom I spoke. About a half dozen high-ranking lamas of the Drigung school, who remain in Tibet, were present to officiate at the Drigung Powa Chenmo. They included the Riwang Tendzin Rinpoche, Soktrül Rinpoche, Nuba Namka Gyeltsen Rinpoche, Nyedak Rinpoche, and Angön Rinpoche.

Some of the pilgrims I interviewed, expressing widespread Tibetan distrust of the Chinese government, reported that they regarded as prudent the decision by the Chetsang Rinpoche and Chungtsang Rinpoche to remain safely in exile, for some suspected that they would have courted kidnap by the authorities had they returned. Recent experience, however, suggests that such extreme fears are not in fact very well founded, though the possibility that they would have faced lesser difficulties cannot be ruled out.[35] Be that as it may, later that same year, in November, the teaching of the Drigung Powa was in fact granted by the two leaders of the sect to their adherents in exile in connection with the official opening of the Drigung Kagyü Center in Dehra Dun, India. Some Tibetans in India and Nepal later expressed to me the view that this was therefore the spiritually more authentic event, but in Tibet itself in August no one I interviewed was of the opinion that the authenticity of the revival was at all in question.[36]

Following tradition, the pilgrimage opened with the procession of the leading lamas and their attendants from Drigung Monastery to Terdrom, where ablutions were performed before proceeding to Drongur. By the sixth of the Tibetan month (August 4), many monks and nuns of Drigung, Terdrom, and adjacent convents had begun to assemble there and to make preparations for the teachings as well.

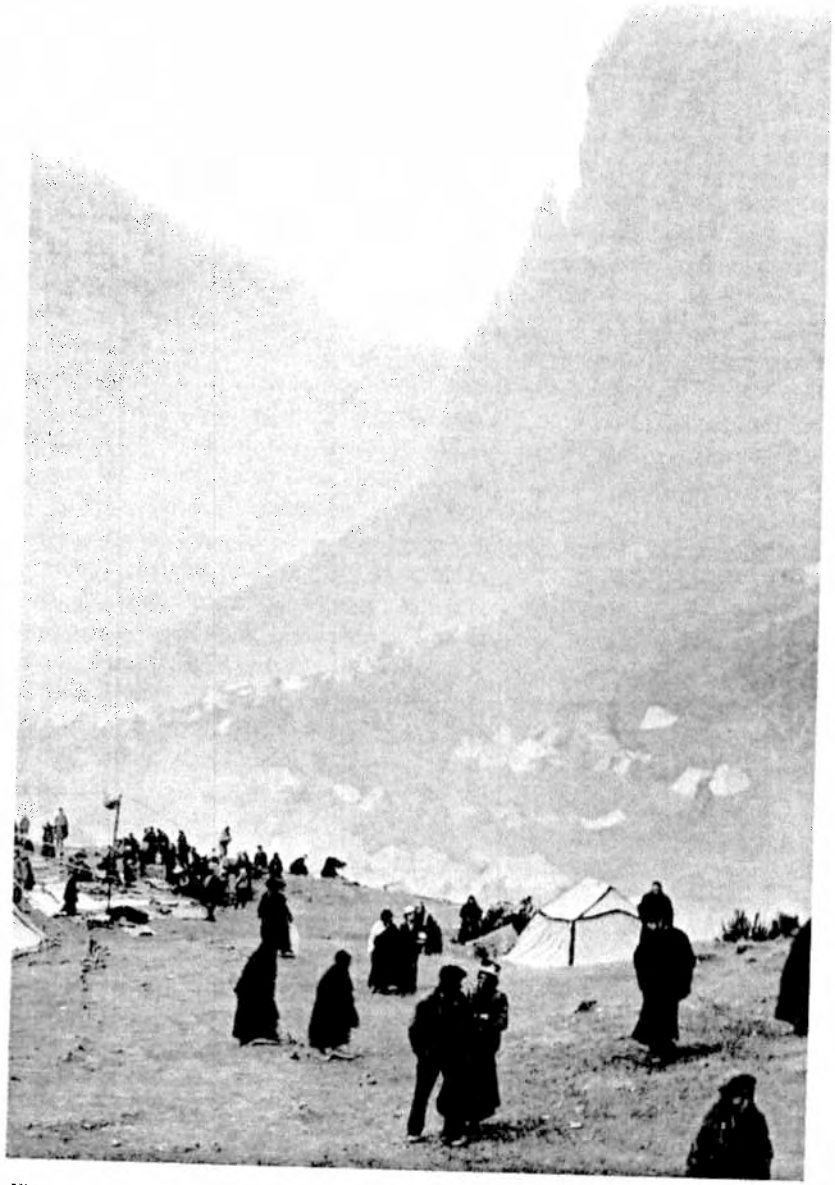

Figure 4.1. The campsite at Drongur. The pinnacle rising above is the Snake-headed Cliff *(brag sbrul-sgo-can)*, the guardian of the gate at the Terdrom valley.

By this date, too, lay devotees and monastics from nearby districts started to arrive in large numbers, together with smaller numbers of pilgrims from distant locations, some of them connected through sectarian allegiance to Drigung, such as Nangchen in far eastern Tibet and parts of the Kailash region in the far west. The small area of relatively flat ground at Drongur soon became a little sea of tents, an overcrowded but jovial campground.

Beginning on the seventh (August 5), Drongur became symbolically sealed off from the world below by the proclamation of religious law, and during the remainder of the festivities monk policemen (*dge-skos* or *dge-gyog*, "servants of virtue," but popularly equated with the *rdab-rdob*)[37] would be conspicuously present as tangible evidence of this, though actual traffic between Drongur, Terdrom, and the Drigung valley continued unabated. Besides the authority of the religious law, contemporary Chinese civil law seemed but thinly represented: throughout the entire course of the revived pilgrimage there was no military presence, only a small company of local Tibetan policemen, not more than a dozen of whom were in uniform, though there were known to be some others present in plain clothes. It was clear that neither the monastic nor the civil authorities anticipated difficulties. My few encounters with the representatives of the Mendrogongkar government, however, left me with the distinct impression that they were not without some anxieties: the local government officials of the Mendrogongkar district, in whose precincts Drigung is situated, were clearly delighted with the reinception of the pilgrimage but very worried that it might become an occasion for nationalistic protest. When I first arrived at Drongur, I was made to feel very welcome by the pilgrims, but representatives of the local government were visibly unnerved by a foreign presence and told me in no uncertain terms that I could not be accommodated and would have to leave immediately. It was only after the monastic leaders provided them with some reassurance that the fear of possible foreign agitation was quietly dropped.[38]

The actual cycle of teaching began on the eighth (August 6), the commencement of the second half of the waxing phase of the moon and thus a date for regular religious observances. From this time, until the fifteenth, when all present assembled together for the instructions of the powa, the activities of most of those in attendance were only loosely connected with the formal rounds of teaching. These were delivered in a large tent set up in the field in front of the small Drongur Monastery, without the tents of the individual colleges described in the account translated above, thus simplifying to some extent the more elaborate arrangement of assembly tents that would have characterized the pilgrimage until 1956. Besides attending the teachings, many laypersons preferred to perform prostrations and circumambulations, or to pursue mundane but necessary occupations, such as trade.[39] Among those assembled, too, were religious specialists of various types, loosely or not at all affiliated with Drigung, who regarded the event as a special opportunity to pursue their own paths of practice. The presence of large numbers who were for the most part only peripherally connected with the

Figure 4.2. A "monk policeman" at the doorway of Drongur Monastery explains the monastery's rules of access to a lay pilgrim.

main teaching program, and engaged instead in activities otherwise regarded as suitable, lent a carnival atmosphere to the festivities, so that Drongur became increasingly like a Tibetan Buddhist Woodstock as the days progressed. The wide variety of costume, both the local dress of the laypersons who had arrived from remote districts and the many different styles of religious garb, further accentuated this impression.

The actual program of religious instruction, therefore, was followed throughout only by a minority of those present, above all by the ordained monks and nuns of Drigung and its affiliated monasteries and temples. Their routine began at daybreak each morning with the daily offering of fragrant juniper smoke (*bsang*) to the local deities, followed by a formal procession of the monks and nuns from the monastic quarters to the assembly in the main tent. The morning was then given over primarily to prayer services with offerings of tea and the dedication of the offerings that had been sponsored by the laity and others.[10] After a late morning break for the main meal of the day, the designated teaching was conferred to the religious and laypersons in attendance, with a different lama presiding each day. These daily programs were prominently posted on a wall of Drongur Monastery, permitting those present to select the particular teachings they wished to attend

Figure 4.3. Nyingmapa adepts from the nomadic region of Nakchukha gather before onlookers in the campground to perform the rite of *chö (gcod)*, Cutting, the visualized dismemberment of one's own body as an offering to all living beings.

Figure 4.4. The monks of Drigung assemble before Drongur Monastery at dawn to begin the procession to the morning's session of prayer and religious instruction. The monk seen in the portal holding a white offering scarf *(kha-btags)* is the Soktrül Rinpoche, who would confer the teaching of powa itself at the pilgrimage's culmination.

and to record accurately the titles of those in which they participated. The general schedule was given there as follows:[11]

Day 1. August 6. Nyedak Rinpoche confers the initiation of Buddha Śākyamuni and receives the formal request of those in attendance to bestow the powa-teaching.

Day 2. August 7. Riwang Tendzin Rinpoche confers the initiation of the six-syllable mantra of Avalokiteśvara (i.e., the well-known formula *Oṃ Maṇi-padme Hūṃ!*) and receives a similar formal request. (This would be repeated on each successive day.)

Day 3. August 8 (= tenth day of the lunar calendar). Nangse Könchok Tendzin Rinpoche confers the initiation of the Vanquisher of the Lord of Death ('Chi-bdag-zil-gnon).

Day 4. August 9. Gambu Rinpoche confers the initiation of Padmasambhava in his peaceful aspect.

Day 5. August 10. Nuba Namka Gyeltsen Rinpoche confers the initiation of the goddess Parṇāśabarī (Ri-khrod lo-gyon-ma).

Day 6. August 11. Nyedak Rinpoche confers the initiation of Padmasambhava in his wrathful aspect.

Day 7. August 12. Riwang Tendzin Rinpoche confers the initiation of Amitāyus, the Buddha of Longevity, according to the tradition of Siddharajñī.

Day 8 (full moon). August 13. Soktrül Rinpoche confers an extended discourse on the merits of teaching the doctrine, and then bestows the actual instructions of the powa.

There is a general pattern of development to be discerned here, an initiatory progression that would be clear at least to some of the monks and nuns, as well as to religiously educated laypersons, who attended these teachings on a daily basis. We may say that the progression of the teachings is one from universality within the Buddhist tradition to specificity in relation to the particular tradition of Drigung and from teachings that govern the cultivation of positive attributes in this life to those that focus on inevitable mortality and death. Thus the initiation of the Buddha Śākyamuni represents the Buddhist tradition in the broadest terms, while that of Avalokiteśvara more particularly addresses the outlook of the Mahāyāna. Though this is still extremely broad, it must not be forgotten that the bodhisattva of compassion is always regarded by Tibetans as the special patron of their land.[12] The two initiations of Padmasambhava move beyond even this Tibetocentricity to establish a special connection with the Drigung Kagyü lineage and the Drigung Powa Chenmo, for both are derived from the "treasures" discovered by Rinchen Püntsok in the peaks looming above Drongur, and were first taught by him publicly in the very place in which the pilgrims are now assembled. Further, there is the contrast between the initiations of the Vanquisher of the Lord of Death and of the goddess Parṇāśabarī, both teachings concerned with dispelling spiritual and temporal obstacles overall, and the two culminating teachings, which focus directly on the specific obstacles to longevity and to the attainment of fortunate rebirth.

The double progression just described is further reinforced by its correlation with the waxing moon, splendidly visible above the valley's crags at night. Though these and other similar relationships were articulated by members of the religious elite who were present, clear consciousness of them was for the most part expressed only by such persons. For, as has been already noted, only a small percentage of those present actually participated in all these teachings, and were not apparently expected to do so.

In contrast, certainly the favored activity, for the lay pilgrims at least, as well as for many of the nonmonastic religious,[13] was in fact pilgrimage. At daybreak every morning, as the monks offered incense and the procession to the assembly began, large numbers of persons set out to trek to the many sacred sites that are accessible from Drongur. The most famous and impressive of these expeditions is the ascent to the massive Kere Yangdzong Cave, the Great Assembly Hall in which Rinchen Püntsok made his discoveries, the basis for the teachings bestowed on the fourth and sixth days. The site is believed to be hallowed by the meditations of

Padmasambhava's consort, Yeshe Tsogyel, who, according to a tradition with which virtually all the pilgrims I met seemed familiar, dwelled in retreat here for seven years, practicing the widely revered Great Perfection (*rdzogs-chen*) system of meditation.

To ascend to the cave, one must first return to the Terdrom hot springs and from there turn to circumambulate the peaks that rise directly above Drongur, which are thought to house the guardians of the valley. The path spirals upward and the geographic configurations on all sides are described as embodying important aspects of the Tibetan esoteric Buddhist world. On the way I passed, for example, a site identified as the charnel ground (*dur-khrod*), a favored place for tantric practice, which is situated beneath a series of spires that are themselves regarded as the Ḍākiṇīs of the five Buddha families. When I stopped to rest there, I found a small congregation gathered to perform the rite of Cutting (*gcod*), a meditational and ritual practice that is renowned for its exquisite chants and whose practice is regarded as particularly well suited for cemeteries, whether metaphorical or real.[14]

The trail continued to ascend until, approaching the summit spires, I discovered myself to be now perched on the cliffs some 2,000 feet directly above Drongur. Turning to the highest peak, the pilgrim is greeted by the great, gaping mouth of the Great Assembly Hall. Inside, I first visited the small retreat cell of Yeshe Tsogyel, before beginning a harrowing climb up a makeshift series of wet and slippery ropes and ladders, for a tour of the summit of the peak from the inside. The configurations of the tunnels are all imbued with symbolic significance and are described as recapitulating the physiology of the subtle body, whose channels and energies are the foci of yogic methods including both the practices of powa and Cutting. In the cave the ordinary order of things is thus in a sense inverted, for now one finds oneself located within the body that, in meditation, one otherwise visualizes within the physical body. The pilgrims who complete the ascent to the cave, therefore, are granted, in virtue of their undertaking, an especially powerful performative initiation, introducing the esoteric lore that forms the background to the culminating teaching of the pilgrimage overall.

Following the tour of the cave, one makes a rapid descent via the steep slope of skree that falls from the side of the cliffs. This was perilous, and if it had any special symbolic significance, it was for the moment lost on this pilgrim, who was exclusively preoccupied with self-preservation. As it happened, it was at this point that I rejoined the teachings on the afternoon of the fourteenth (August 12), while the Riwang Rinpoche was bestowing the blessings of longevity to those in attendance.[15] I was by now in fact very grateful to be able to receive them. (Perhaps this was the point I had missed!)

The next day was the full moon. At daybreak all who were present began to gather around the teaching tent, trying to sit close, so that they would be certain to hear the powa instructions clearly. This would probably have been a real difficulty in former times, but in 1992 a primitive but adequate portable public address system was used. The teaching, in fact, did not begin until the early afternoon,

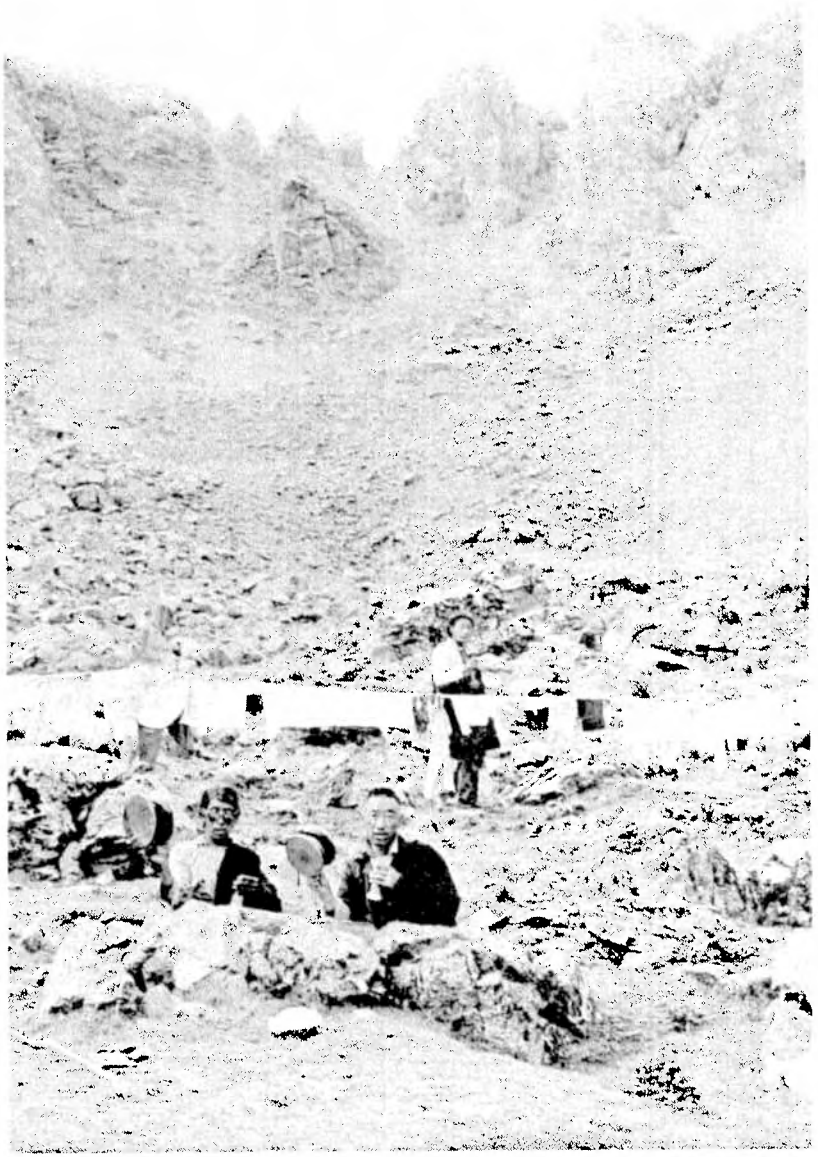

Figure 4.5. Pilgrims ascending to the cave of the Great Assembly Hall pause to practice the rite of Cutting at a sacred spot designated a "charnel ground" (*dur-khrod*).

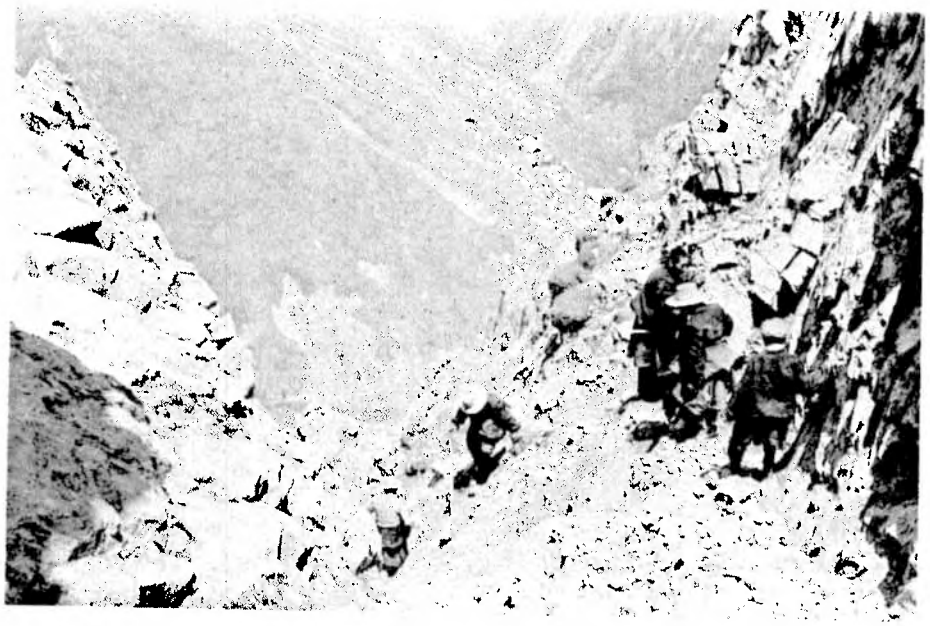

Figure 4.6. At the beginning of the perilous descent back to Drongur. The white specks seen below are the tents in the campground.

though all seemed content to stake their claims for choice places early. Following a general discourse on the benefits of propagating the doctrine, and of attending to it correctly, the actual teaching of the powa, which in 1992 was conferred by the Soktrül Rinpoche, lasted little more than a half hour. In my previous experience of large, public teachings among the Tibetans in India and Nepal, I have seldom seen a crowd that was not to some extent restless, even when such revered figures as the Dalai Lama and the late Gyalwa Karmapa have presided. On this occasion, however, the assembled crowd adopted contemplative attitudes and listened to the Soktrül Rinpoche's every word, completely still and silent. Some of the devotees wept softly as the Rinpoche explained the visualization of the subtle body, the gathering of consciousness in the heart-center at the time of death, and the means to swiftly project that concentration of energy to the pure land of Amitābha.

Though I would not suggest adopting Victor Turner's approach to the study of ritual as a general interpretive framework for the investigation of Buddhist and Tibetan rituals of all types,[46] this did seem to be a quintessentially Turnerian event. For in this public rehearsal of death persons from many different regions, representing diverse facets of the Tibetan world, had been brought together and introduced to that most characteristic of liminal states; and in participating then in a common set of meditations and exercises, something much like Turner's conception of communitas was surely engendered among them. Considering, in particular, Turner's insistence that religious pilgrimage generally does place pilgrims in a liminal passage and that the emergence of communitas is a characteristic feature of such pilgrimage experience, it would appear that the Drigung Powa Chenmo, by compounding pilgrimage with an imagined performance of death and rebirth, succeeds in accentuating these themes in a direct and striking manner. After concluding the transmission of the powa, final prayers of dedication were recited and then, in an instant, everyone was hurrying about in an effort to break camp in order to descend down the narrow path to Terdrom before nightfall, so that the trail became hazardously crowded. Within an hour, the entire camp site was virtually clear, and only the abundant garbage left by the pilgrims remained.[47] Following final ablutions at the springs, the pilgrims departed to return home, or to continue their pilgrimages elsewhere.

Figure 4.7. Early on the morning of the full moon, pilgrims gather around the tent from which the powa teachings will be given.

Before concluding this description of the revived Drigung Powa of 1992, I should add some brief observations of a political nature. The pilgrims themselves were well aware that political demonstrations would inevitably have had negative ramifications for the future development of such events and also seemed to feel the religious value of the pilgrimage was too great to compromise. However, those present were outspoken in the opinion that this was an especially *Tibetan*, that is, non-Chinese, happening, and small groups convened in the evening on several occasions to display furtively the flag of the government-in-exile and to hum the

Figure 4.8. As the powa is conferred, those in attendance adopt attitudes of concentration and devotion.

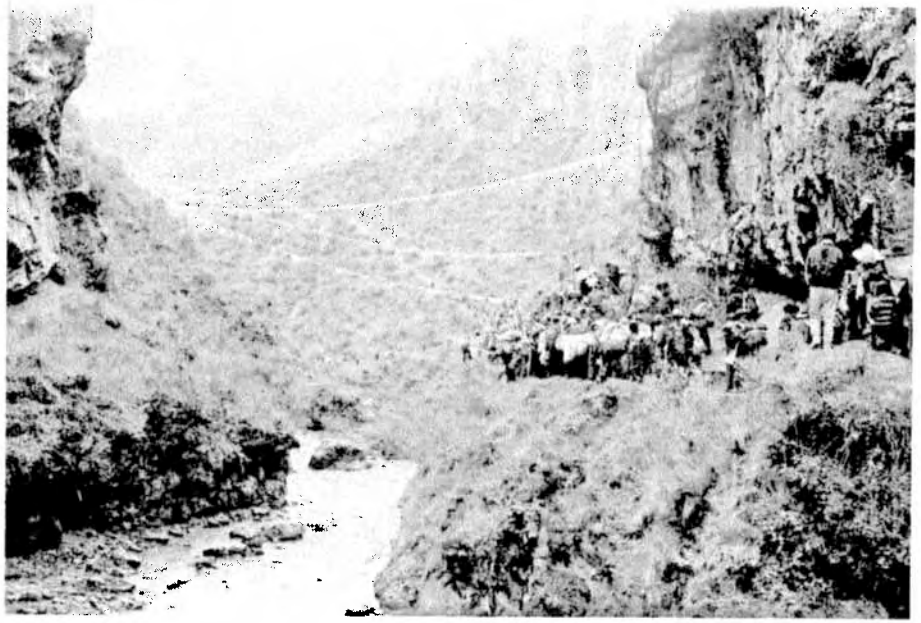

Figure 4.9. Following the teaching of the powa, the pilgrims break camp and begin to descend the narrow trail to Terdrom before they are caught by nightfall.

national anthem of free Tibet. Very few actually participated in these soirées, but virtually everyone I spoke to volunteered with pride that this was known to be taking place: "Last night we showed the flag!" they whispered. "Last night we showed the flag!"

TIBETAN PILGRIMAGE PAST AND PRESENT

It has often been remarked that Tibet, before its forced entry into the People's Republic of China, had only a very weak state structure, whose authority, such as it was, was supported by little coercive force.[18] Indeed, large parts of the Tibetan world were often outside of the Central Tibetan state altogether and were subservient to other states or to local princes or virtually stateless. Despite this, however, and despite the presence of strong tendencies, intensified by the exigencies of geography and poor systems of communication, to accentuate the particularisms of region, dialect, and sect, there were traditionally, and persist today, strong sentiments of affinity and cohesiveness running throughout the Tibetan cultural world. The relative coherence of Tibetan culture, considered in light of the powerful forces that seem to oppose any such unifying disposition, presents a general problem in the study of Tibetan civilization, requiring some attempt at explanation.

It seems plausible at once to seek such an explanation in part in the analysis of Tibetan religion. But here some caution is needed, for Tibetan religion, unlike, say, traditional Judaism or Islam, does not have even in theory a highly uniform body of religious-cum-legal obligations that apply to the entire community of the faithful.[49] The very great variations of Tibetan religious life, according to differences of status, education, and obligation, among monastics and laypersons and individuals of different sectarian and regional background suggest that Western models of religious commitment cannot be readily applied to Tibet. Indeed, in Tibetan scholastic philosophy there was even a bit of debate concerning just what was required in order for one to be considered a Buddhist at all, and the preferred answer was that the taking of refuge in the Three Jewels alone was definitive.[50] Obviously this is much too thin to account for the deep continuities running throughout the sphere of Tibetan civilization.

To indicate more precisely the nature of the problem, we may consider briefly some conclusions drawn by Sherry Ortner in her early work on Sherpa rituals. The issue we confront here is underscored in her supposition that Buddhism promotes individualism to a remarkable degree: "Sherpa Buddhism . . . retains the central Buddhist tendency to isolate and atomize the individual, and devalue social bonding and social reciprocity. Indeed it is hard to imagine how Buddhism could be Buddhism without retaining this bias. A Buddhism of social bonding and communal solidarity seems a contradiction in terms."[51]

Clearly, however (and as Ortner, too, seems to suggest), the coherence of Tibetan culture becomes unintelligible if understood solely in such terms. In *Sherpas Through Their Rituals*, Ortner sought to resolve this difficulty with allusions to the Tibetan state:

> In Tibet, where the Sherpas originated and where their religion took the form that it retains for the most part today, the religion was supported by the theocratic state. State support of religion, in turn, allowed the monastic community to cut itself off from society more completely, because it was not directly dependent on the laity for support. Thus although Tibetan Buddhism absorbed a great many elements of popular religious practice and belief, it did not get involved in popular social life as such.[52]

This perspective requires that we posit an almost ubiquitous and uniform "Tibetan state," capable of supporting a massive religious establishment while almost thoroughly concealing from laypersons their ultimate role in the maintenance of that establishment. Such a state must also be supposed to have been relatively stable over a very long period, if it was to have engendered the peculiar social arrangements that are demanded of it. However, this appears to be not adequate to explain the role of religion in the formation of Tibetan culture and identity, for, as a matter of fact, the ethnography and history of Tibet provide little evidence in support of this odd picture. Tibetan monks were routinely supported by their families, and the larger Tibetan monasteries depended in part on estates and other appanages, requiring an ongoing involvement in "popular social life," for such purposes as recruitment and fund-raising and to fulfill the ritual functions they were expected to perform on behalf of the laity. The religious life of Tibet, moreover, was at no time limited to the great monastic centers and the activities directly sanctioned by them. A whole range of small temples and shrines, local rites and festivals, lay religious and itinerant preachers, to mention just a few of the alternatives, thrived with but tenuous ties to the "theocratic state," and that state, indeed, did not exercise authority in large parts of the Tibetan world.

With this in mind, it is clear that the symbolic dynamics of religious systems within Tibetan culture should be considered in important respects as having primacy over state institutions in our investigations of the religious dimensions of Tibetan cultural and national identity.[53] In this connection pilgrimage may be examined as one of the paradigmatic phenomena contributing to, and perhaps even to some extent engendering, the cultural unity of the Tibetans. Pilgrimage, among other things, promoted trade in both goods and information. It brought persons from far distant parts of the Tibetan world into direct contact with one another and thus militated to some extent against divisive regionalistic tendencies. By ordering the cycles of pilgrimage according to calendrical cycles, by establishing the locations visited and the routes traversed, and by promoting specific religious teachings, historical narratives, and symbolic interpretations of the landscape and the events taking place within it, the Tibetan religious world constructed for its inhabitants a common order of time, space, and knowledge.

But pilgrimage, even while engendering Tibetan communitas, also involved various particularisms; for the pilgrimages themselves were specifically tied to particular times, places, and institutions. Thus, for instance, the Drigung Powa Chenmo, though attracting Tibetans from all sorts of places and promoting cults, like that of Padmasambhava, whose following extended throughout Tibet and involved adherents of all sects, was equally an event that enhanced the standing of the Drigung Kagyü order in particular. And the Drigung Kagyü order, in its turn, may be seen to embody precisely the problem confronted by Tibetan civilization overall: how does one achieve some measure of unity, given great dispersion and little coercive force? Besides the question, therefore, of enhancing Drigung's status within the Tibetan world in general, there was a specific, perhaps more pressing requirement that the Drigung Powa Chenmo may have to some extent addressed, namely that of calling in the sect's own adherents and reinforcing, in this way, the center of its authority in their eyes. There is perhaps a fractal logic at work here, significant structural features of Tibetan culture and civilization being recapitulated at different levels, on different orders of scale.

This dialectical relationship between widespread, in some cases even universal, Tibetan cultural symbols and the particularities of time, place, and person provides an appropriate point of departure for the interpretation of a particular event, such as the Drigung Powa Chenmo. In this connection it seems worthwhile especially to reflect on the apparent homologies obtaining among features of ge-

ography, ritual, and body and, in some instances, possibly history as well. Thus the ascent to the Kere Yangdzong Cave, the teaching cycle of the Drigung Powa, and the rehearsed passage of the principle of consciousness from the body at death are all, from a formal point of view, equivalent. For the homology of the cave and the subtle body, whence consciousness departs from the crown, is again recapitulated in the performance of the powa at the culminating moment of the entire sequence of teaching (much as it ought to be, too, at the culminating moment of life). Death is here thematized as a liminal passage, but at the same time as a culminating and, literally, peak experience. We may suspect as well that the historical displacement of the fundamental locus of the teaching of *Planting the Stalk* from a spirit-filled lake—in Tibetan mythology the very image of the underworld realm of corruption and death—to a mountain hermitage further exemplifies a similar principle. Thus, in the symbolic order exemplified in the Drigung Powa, body, ritual, landscape, and history come to be mutually embodying, and so cosignifying.

As described above, it may appear that the 1992 performance of the Drigung Powa was primarily a replication of similar performances in the past. Such claims made in other contexts regarding rituals revived after long periods of interruption have sometimes been greeted with skepticism, and I think some reservations about this must apply here as well. Bruce Lincoln has compellingly argued, for instance, with respect to the interpretation of the Ncwala ritual marking the supremacy of the Swazi king, that relatively "minor" changes had to be understood in the context of the changing colonial situation in which the Swazi have found themselves in this century. In the present connection Lincoln's remarks on our understanding of Swazi affirmations seem apt: "Of all grammatical forms, I know of none more subtle and problematic in their sociopolitical implications than pronouns of the first person plural that, when skillfully employed, permit speakers to construct groups in which they join with unnamed others and stand apart from others still: others who fall outside this 'we.' "[54] In the case of the 1992 Drigung Powa, it must be noted that the changes were not minor at all: the two lamas normally expected to officiate were in exile; the monastic population was considerably reduced; the Tibetan state and the Drigung estates had been dismantled and political and economic life now determined by the CCP—these and many other alterations escaped no one's attention.

If the general approaches to the interpretation of Tibetan pilgrimage sketched out here have some merit, then, we may expect to see the continuation, resumption, and revival of traditional pilgrimage operating in part as both an assertion of and an initiation into a distinctively Tibetan cultural and ethnic identity in the face of such changes. At the revived Drigung Powa Chenmo there was indeed some evidence that something of this sort was taking place, as was reflected both by the pointed remarks of some of those in attendance, their pride that the Tibetan flag had been displayed and the anthem hummed, if only for a moment, and the obvious concern on the part of the local organizers that the pilgrimage not become an overtly political event. As these observations suggest, the conditions prevailing in the Tibetan world are by no means what they once were, and we cannot expect that the practice of pilgrimage will simply recapitulate the past, without reflecting the great changes that continue to transform the Tibetan world throughout. Indeed, future researchers will have to ask how events like the revived Drigung Powa Chenmo are received and understood by, for instance, the growing numbers of unemployed Tibetan youth who cluster around the billiard tables and bars in the towns. The eventual answer to such questions will depend in part on the degree of success with which traditional cultural symbols are creatively redeployed given the harsh actualities surrounding the cultural life of contemporary Tibet.

To conclude in brief, the study of Tibetan pilgrimage contributes much to our understanding of the Tibetan past and certainly deserves more thorough consideration in this regard. The role of the pilgrimage in Tibet's present and future, however, must be assessed with some caution, taking care not to project the past too facilely onto a changing scene. It will be particularly important to follow Lincoln's counsel and weigh with special care each pilgrim's utterance of the pronoun "we."