

How to Fund a Ritual: Notes on the Social Usage of the Kanjur (bKa' 'gyur) in a Tibetan Village¹

Geoff Childs

The Kanjur (bKa' 'gyur, translated words of Buddha) is a collection of texts that forms the core of Tibetan canonical literature. Most major Buddhist institutions in Tibet have (or had) a collection of these works, each volume carefully wrapped in cloth and stored within specially constructed alcoves housed within a temple. In recent decades, studies of individual texts within the Kanjur as well as investigations into the history of the collection as a whole have been carried out by philologists and religious specialists (e.g., Nattier 1991; Eimer 1992; Silk 1994; Harrison 1996). The research has led to a better understanding of the contents of the collection, as well as details on the historical relationships between different versions of the Kanjur. Despite the admirable scholarship that has gone into the study of the Kanjur, very little is known about how it is regarded by commoners or used in the ritual life of villages.

In this paper I describe a ritual in which the symbolic capacity of the Kanjur—a capacity that derives from the fact that the texts are a physical manifestation of the Buddha's teachings—is deployed to help secure the health and livelihood of lay people. In addition I detail village-level funding mechanisms that ensure that the ritual can be performed on an annual basis. The purpose is to shed light on pragmatic dimensions of religious life in a Tibetan society by demonstrating the close relationship between texts, rituals, economics, and social organization.

THE SETTING

Sama is an ethnically Tibetan village situated in the upper reaches of Nepal's Nubri Valley, a place where locals engage in the typical highland economic triad of farming, herding, and trade. Religious affiliation is Rnying ma pa, in particular Snying thig and Byang gter. Most communal religious activities center on Pema Chöling (Padma Chos gling), a temple complex perched on high ground above the village. Rather than being comprised of a congregation of monks, Pema Chöling is a communal temple where householder lamas (*sngags pa*) conduct rituals with the help of celibate monks (*dge slong*), nuns (*a ni*), and lay practitioners (*mchod pa*) who have rudimentary training in the recitation of texts and in how to construct liturgical accouterments.

Pema Chöling possesses two xylograph editions of the Kanjur, one from Lhasa and one from Nartang.² Both were procured from Tibet during the 1940s. For most of the year, both collections remain idle, wrapped in cloth and deposited in specially constructed shelves within the Kanjur *lha khang* (temple) which was built specifically to hold these works. Despite the fact that these books are not read or studied throughout the year, they are regarded as treasured objects and are highly valued for their role in ensuring the health, welfare, and prosperity of all community members.

DESCRIPTION OF THE KANJUR FESTIVAL

One of the highlights of the ritual cycle in Sama is the annual Kanjur Kora (circumambulation of the Kanjur; *bka' gyur skor ba*).³ The event that will be described here took place in 1997, commencing on the 16th day of the 2nd month of the Tibetan calendar (March 25th). There is no specific date slated for the beginning, but Sama's clerics concur that it should start on an auspicious day shortly after the 15th day of the 2nd month. The festival coincides with the end of the annual retreat period (*mtshams*), a time during which many men seclude themselves from village life by taking up residence in small homes surrounding Pema Chöling. During *mtshams*, they renew spiritual commitments and receive instructions from senior monks and lamas. The Kanjur Kora also takes place just prior to the re-commencement of agricultural chores. The festival therefore unites the community during the transition between the winter months of tranquility and the summer months of intensive productive activities.

On the first day of the festival, Sama's head lama (a *sngags pa* who holds his position by virtue of primogeniture) presided over a protective prayer ritual (*sku rim*) held in the main temple of Pema Chöling. Meanwhile, many *mchod pa* assembled in the Kanjur *lha khang* where each was issued a copy of the Kanjur's *dkar chag* (table of contents), which was recited in unison by all. When this preliminary reading was complete, the head lama cast *tsam pa* (roasted barley flour) into the mouths of all participants as a blessing. The individual Kanjur volumes were then taken from their alcoves and distributed to readers. Only the low level *mchod pa* engaged in the recitation; lamas and high ranking monks voluntarily excluded themselves, whereas nuns were discouraged from participating. Each individual received a text and commenced reading at his own pace. The most adept reader can complete a volume in a day, whereas novices may take as many as four days to work their way through a single volume.

Logistical support was provided by assistants (*gnyer pa*) who were responsible for churning out food and beverages from Pema Chöling's kitchen. The festival required the assistance of four full-time helpers, including two commoners (*yul pa*) who acted as *gnyer pa*, the *chos rims* (a villager appointed on an annual basis to maintain the orderly functioning of rituals) and the *chos g.yog* (assistant to the *chos rims*). In addition, other members of the community were called to work when additional assistance was required. To recruit them, the *chos g.yog* circulates through the village in the evening, calling out the request for assistance.

Being a *gnyer pa* is a time-consuming task, involving several days of work from dawn until dusk. They are compensated for the time lost to their own households through payments of either cash or grain. The *gnyer pa* need to be familiar with the schedule of events in order to manage smooth transitions between rituals, readings, and breaks. Readers took rests at intervals determined by the *gnyer pa*, at which time they congregated outside and were served a full meal or tea with *tsam pa*.

From the 16th to the 26th of the month [a period of nine days since they took a break on the 21st of the month and the 24th day was eliminated (*chad*) from the calendar] the reading of the Kanjur continued from morning until evening. A total of forty-nine males and one female participated in the reading.

The *gnyer pa* recorded the number of days that each reader participated. On an average day, about forty males took part in the recitation of texts. On the 27th of the month, a few minor ceremonies were held in the temple in preparation for the circumambulation of houses on fields scheduled for the 28th. However, a blizzard struck, postponing the circumambulation until the 3rd day of the 3rd month. In the case of inclement weather the *chos rims* makes the decision to continue or postpone the event. His main concern is to safeguard the sacred texts by not exposing them to the elements.

On the morning of the circumambulation, well-scrubbed and nattily attired *mchod pa* ascended the hill to Pema Chöling where they participated in a short *bsang* ceremony (rite of purification). Afterwards, men and boys (not necessarily those who participated in the reading) wrapped from one to three volumes of the Kanjur in a piece of cloth that was then strapped to their backs. Preceded by two boys blowing conches, five men carrying banners, a man bearing a statue of the Buddha, and an instrument section consisting of horns (*rgya ling* and *dung chen*), cymbals (*sil snyan*) and drums (*lag rnga*), the book-bearers departed from Pema Chöling and descended the hill toward the village. The *chos rims* took up the rear. En route, groups of elderly men, women, and children sat beside the path and lit piles of juniper. They received blessings (*byin brlabs*) by bowing their heads beneath the books as they passed by.

The objective was to carry the Kanjur around the perimeter of the village and surrounding fields. The route was broken into sections. After circumambulating each section, the entourage stopped and all participants were served food and refreshments at one of four different homes. The first stop is traditionally at the home of Sama's head lama. A temporary altar was constructed to hold the Kanjur; *chang* and other victuals are placed as offerings before the volumes. As in all Tibetan rituals, the local social hierarchy is reflected in seating arrangements. The *sngags pa* and high ranking monks sit closest to the altar and are served first, whereas *mchod pa* sit furthest away and are served last.

Throughout the day the progression alternated between circumambulating and feasting. Near the end of the day, during the final feast in the village, several *mchod pa* and the two masked figures went ahead to Pema Chöling to prepare for the culminating ritual event, a brief *chams* (sacred dance) performance. A lama passed out hand-written copies of the words to be recited during the *chams*,⁴ which they performed after the book-bearers arrived at a field behind Pema Chöling. After the *chams*, the book-bearers proceeded to the Kanjur Temple where they were greeted by two masked figures representing protectors of the Kanjur as they filed inside and replaced the books to their respective alcoves. All participants then partook in a final feast within the main temple.

According to a senior *sngag pa*, the Kanjur Kora is akin to taking refuge in the three jewels (*dkon mchog gsum*), symbolized during the circumambulation by a statue of the Buddha (*sangs rgyas*), the volumes of the Kanjur (*chos*), and the community of devotees who carry the books (*dge 'dun*). The benefits of performing the Kanjur Kora on an annual basis include: crops will flourish and will not be adversely affected by insect infestations; the bovine herds will remain healthy and productive; community members will be free from ailments;

and households will prosper. According to these goals, the Kanjur Kora can be interpreted as an agricultural rite involving the physical delineation and protection of economically productive territory with the intent of ensuring bountiful harvests and human health. It is no coincidence that this particular ritual is performed just prior to the commencement of the planting season.

FUNDING THE EVENT

Funding for the annual Kanjur Kora comes from a combination of mandatory village-level taxes and voluntary patronage. Performance of the festival requires a significant investment in both time and resources. For a period of nine days, the Kanjur readers require food and beverages, as well as cash remittances. Fuel is needed for cooking, and the *gnyer pa* have to be compensated for their efforts. Furthermore, during the circumambulation phase the book-bearers must be satiated five times with food and beverages. In brief, significant finances are required to complete the ceremony.

The bulk of finances are generated through the village tax system. In Sama, the most basic term for household is *grong ba*. Within the household, it is the *khyim bdag* (household head) who is responsible for each household's jural and economic obligations to the village. Throughout a household's development cycle, the family generally oscillates between nuclear and joint phases. When a couple gets married, they reside with the husband's parents in a temporary joint family arrangement until the birth of their first child. This event precipitates a fissioning process, whereby the son and his wife will move out and establish an independent, nuclear household. Upon formation, the new household enters into the tax system of the village. The young couple receives a "loan" (called either *ma rtsa* or *bu lon*) of 75 measures ('bre)⁵ of corn and/or barley from the village administration—regardless of whether or not they require such support. Each subsequent year until the death of the *khyim bdag* the household is obligated to repay five measures of barley, five measures of corn, and four measures of rice. The repayment is considered "interest" (*skyed kha*) on the loan, and is used to fund four communal rituals that are performed on an annual basis. Thus, the creation of a new household is affirmed through accepting the loan and entering into a repayment scheme. The grain thus generated is used to fund communal rituals. In return the household has a right to use all communal resources around the village, most notably the pastures for grazing and the forests for construction lumber and fuel. Sama's tax system is conducted independent of larger polities, and thereby differs from traditional village-level tax systems in Tibet (see Goldstein 1971 and Surkhang 1986).

Additional funding comes through cash that is collected from each household just prior to the festival. Two men appointed by the *chos rims* go from house to house collecting a tax (*khral*) of 100 Rupees (roughly \$1.70 in 1997) and recording the contributions in his account book. In 1997 some households were unable to give the full amount, so a total of 6,916 Rupees were gathered from 76 households. The cash is earmarked as payments for the Kanjur readers, the two *gnyer pa*, and the lamas. The standard payment for readers is 15 Rupees per day of participation, yet can vary depending upon the skill of the individual. Faster readers receive higher payments.

The *gnyer pa* are responsible for keeping accounts of all the food and

materials that are donated, distributed, and consumed each day. For example, one entry in the account book reads: “On the 16th day of the month the *gnyer pa* record that 29 *'bre* of rice, 30 *'bre* of corn *tsam pa*, and 25 *'bre* of barley *tsam pa* [were consumed]. 30 *'bre* of grain for liquor production was given to Tsering, 3 bottles of *a rag* (liquor) were received.” Or, “On the 19th day [of the month], the following was used: 32 *'bre* of barley *tsam pa* and 45 *'bre* of rice. 30 *'bre* of grain were given to Dawa for liquor production, 3 bottles of liquor were received.”

In addition to the mandatory taxes used to fund the event, several options are open to individuals who wish to acquire merit (*dge ba*) and prestige by making contributions above and beyond those that are compulsory. Some people contribute wood to the kitchen at Pema Chöling so that meals and tea can be prepared. Others act as patrons (*sbyin bdag*) for the five feasts that are held in different parts of the village during the circumambulation. Each of the feasts is organized by specific neighborhoods in the village; within each neighborhood one or two households volunteer to act as official patrons. The cost is not negligible. For example, one sponsor used 29 *'bre* of rice, several *'bre* of potatoes, salt, and a small quantity of dried greens. Liquor and tea were donated by 14 other households in his neighborhood. The patrons change from year to year according to who has prospered and has a surplus. At the conclusion of each feast, the *sbyin bdag* (i.e., the *khyim bdag* of the sponsoring household) is publicly honored.

In summary, the Kanjur Kora is funded through a combination of voluntary donations and compulsory taxes. However, the festival is by no means ancient, because the texts were only obtained in the 1940s. Prior to that time, a similar ritual was held each year called Bumkor ('Bum skor, 'Bum is the Hundred Thousand Verses of Prajnaparamita, see Gutschow 1998 for the description of such a ritual). The funding of Sama's Bumkor was in the hands of a few prosperous families, and was not supported through the current tax system. On a practical level, the performance of Bumkor is quantitatively different from Kanjur Kora, since there are far fewer volumes (18 versus over 100) to be read and carried about the circumambulation route. Therefore, the shift from Bumkor to Kanjur Kora required an increase in funding; asking only a few wealthy families to support the entire event became unreasonable. Therefore, the current village tax system was devised in part to accommodate the increased logistical requirements.

Whereas the entire village tax system is designed to support the Kanjur Kora and other communal ceremonies, the sponsorship of feasts along the circumambulation route remains open to individual households. The dual sponsorship system acts as a mechanism for redistribution within the village. The spring is generally a time when food stocks are running low. Bovines are less productive due to nutritional deficits, and trans-Himalayan trade is impossible due to snow on the high passes. At this critical time of year, Kanjur readers are fed three meals a day that are drawn from communal stockpiles generated by the tax system, and circumambulation participants are afforded a day of feasting at the expense of households that have managed to accumulate a food surplus for that year. In a time of nutritional shortages, the ritual effectively transfers food from the coffers of the village and its wealthiest

households to those who may otherwise be suffering from hunger.

CONCLUSION

Over the years scholars have amassed an impressive corpus of studies on Tibet's sacred literature. In the meantime, anthropologists and scholars of Tibetan religion have increasingly turned toward the study of village-level ritual performances, practices that in the past tended to be relegated to the category of "folk religion." The purpose of this study is to show how sacred texts, such as the Kanjur, are seen by lay people as being far more than collections of philosophical treatises. They are permeated with protective forces that, when properly deployed, can ward off economic calamities and bring prosperity to an entire community. This particular dimension of the Kanjur, as an interactive object of worship, is so important in Sama that an entire tax system was developed to fund a ritual designed to unleash the protective capacity contained within the written words of the Buddha.

Notes

1. This paper was originally given at the Eighth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, held in Bloomington, Indiana in 1998. Research in Nubri was made possible through financial support from Wenner-Gren and Fulbright-Hays.
2. The Lhasa edition was procured by the grandfather of Sama's current head lama. While on pilgrimage to Lhasa during the 1940s, he found a wealthy sponsor who was willing to underwrite the printing expenses. Paper was procured from Bhutan. As an interesting tangent, see Jampa Samten's description of how a copy of the Kanjur came into possession of Tawang Monastery nearly 300 years ago (Jampa 1994:393-402). The Narthang edition was obtained at about the same time. For recitation purposes, the Lhasa edition is highly preferred due to the clarity of the print. The Narthang impressions were made from blocks that seem to have degenerated by the time they were used to print Sama's copy.
3. This is not the only ritual in Tibetan societies where texts are used as objects of veneration. For example, the entire Kanjur or specific texts within the collection are recited aloud in the presence of an ill person in the belief that such an action has curative powers (Filippi 1995:199; Bell 1992:73; Waddell 1988:225; Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:225). In Eastern Tibet, Rockhill encountered several wealthy laymen who regularly commissioned the reading of the Kanjur in order to accrue merit (1891:104). He also refers to a group of monks who received an annual salary so that they could continually recite from the Kanjur (Rockhill 1891:164). Fürer-Haimendorf mentions an annual Kanjur reading within a village temple of Khumbu, Nepal, (1964:115-116). Like in Sama, funding for the event is derived from a village-level tax system (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964:273). According to the Rinpoche of Tengboche Monastery in Khumbu, Nepal, "Sherpas have these [Kanjur] volumes read often for many purposes: for rain, for the crops, for less sickness and misfortune, for peace in the villages and so that in the future, we will all be like the Buddha" (Zangbu and Klatzel 1995:27). Das mentions an annual Kanjur reading at a small Nyingmapa temple near Wallungchung in Nepal (1970:29). Similarly, one of Bell's informants in Tibet told him that each year, the entire Kanjur is read through from cover to cover in order to assure prosperity for humans and their animals, and to ward off illness in the coming year (Bell 1992:73). During the late 1940s when a Chinese military incursion seemed imminent, all monks were ordered to perform public readings of the Kanjur (Harrer 1954:263). Waddell makes a

- passing reference to a springtime custom of circumambulating the fields with texts, the purpose of which is to “charm away evil spirits” (1988:226). In Tsum, Nepal, Kawakita refers to an annual Kanjur reading and circumambulation festival (1957:199-200). In Zangskar, monks perform an annual reading of the 'Bum scriptures followed by a circumambulation of the fields in order to assure agricultural success and village prosperity (Gutschow 1997:45). Finally, Wangdu and Diemberger's book on Shel dkar in Southern Tibet contains a photograph of lay people carrying books about their fields in the annual “*chos skor*” (1996:173).
4. The following is the text that they chanted. Spellings are suspect.

e ma ho/ de nas nyi ma lho nub tsham shad na/ nas chen rdo rje gdan gyi nub
 byang tsham/ Inga yab gling phran za' byed srin po yul/ dus gsum sangs rgyas
 tham gyi byin blab pa'i/ gling chog khyed par can la gsol ba debs/ hum/ sngon
 kyi skal ba dang po 'das pa'i dus/ ma tam ru dra dral ba'i rdzas gyad la/ sang
 ngag byon pa'i gnas gyad byin rlab pa'i/ tsi ta o rgyan gnas su bab pa las/ rten
 drel khyed par can la gsol ba debs/ rdo rje phag mo byin gyis blab pa'i gnas/
 ma mo mkha' 'gro tham cad dbang dus pa'i gling/ sang sngag di'i rang dra di ri
 ri/ gnas dir phyin pa tsam gyi byang chub thob/ gnas chog khyed par can la
 gsol ba debs/

5. One 'bre (the basic unit of volume) of grain is measured using a cylindrical wooden container. In Sama, the volume of the vessel is 1,275 square centimeters. Translating Tibetan weights and measures into their western equivalents is complicated by the fact that they vary by locality. Even in a relatively small valley such as Nubri, the size of the 'bre is not consistent from village to village. The same applies in Dolpo (Jest 1995:397) and Zangskar (Osmaston and Rabgyas 1994:122).

References

- Bell, Charles. 1992[1928]. *The People of Tibet*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Das, Sarat Chandra. 1970[1902]. *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*. New Delhi: Manjusri.
- Eimer, Helmut. 1992. *Ein Jahrzehnt Studien zur 'erlieferung des Tibetischen Kanjur*. Wien: Universität Wien.
- Filippi, Filippo de (ed.). 1995. *An Account of Tibet: The Travels of Ippolito Desideri 1712-1727*. New Delhi: Asian Educational Services.
- Fürer-Haimendorf, Christoph von. 1964. *The Sherpas of Nepal*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goldstein, Melvyn. 1971. Taxation and the Structure of a Tibetan Village. *Central Asiatic Journal* 15(1): 1-27.
- Gutschow, Kim. 1997. Unfocussed Merit-Making in Zangskar: A Socio-Economic Account of Karsha. *Tibet Journal* 22(2): 30-58.
- Gutschow, Kim. 1998. Per Ager or Through the Fields: A Pilgrimage at Sani, Zangskar, in the Kashmir Himalayas. Paper delivered at the 8th IATS Seminar, Bloomington, July 1998.
- Harrer, Heinrich. 1954. *Seven Years in Tibet*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Harrison, Paul. 1996. A Brief History of the Tibetan bKa' 'gyur. In *Tibetan Literature*, eds. Jose Cabezon and Roger Jackson, 70-94. Ithaca: Snow Lion.
- Jampa Samten. 1994. Notes on the bKa'-'gyur of O-rgyan-gling, the Family Temple of the Sixth Dalai Lama (1683-1706). In *Tibetan Studies*, ed. Per Kvaerne, 393-402. Oslo: Institute for Comparative Research in Human Culture.
- Jest, C. 1975. *Dolpo: Communauté de langue Tibétaine du Népal*. Paris: C.N.R.S.
- Kawakita, J. 1957. Ethno-Geographical Observations on the Nepal Himalaya. In *Peoples of Nepal Himalaya*, ed. H. Kihara, 1-362. Kyoto: Fauna and Flora Research Society, Kyoto University.

- Nattier, Jan. 1991. *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press.
- Osmaston, Henry and Tashi Rabgyas. 1994. Weights and Measures Used in Ladakh. In *Himalayan Buddhist Villages*. John Crook and Henry Osmaston (eds.), 121-138.
- Rockhill, W.W. 1891. *The Land of the Lamas*. New York: The Century Co.
- Silk, Jonathon A. 1994. *The Heart Sutra in Tibetan*. Wien: Universität Wien
- Surkhang, Wangchen. 1986. Government, Monastic and Private Taxation in Tibet. *Tibet Journal* 11(1): 31-39.
- Waddell, L.A. 1988[1905]. *Lhasa and Its Mysteries*. New York: Dover.
- Wangdu, Pasang and Hildegard Diemberger. 1996. *Shel dkar chos 'byung: History of the "White Crystal"*. Wien: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Zangbu, Ngawang Tenzin and Francies Klatzel. 1995. *Stories and Customs of the Sherpas*. Kathmandu: Mandala Book Point.