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## A Ritual Winter Exorcism in Gnyan Thog Village, Qinghai

### Abstract

The possible origins of Monguor (Tu) people in Tongren County, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, are discussed in the context of a ritual winter exorcism in Gnyan thog Village, Qinghai Province. *Bang* rituals and the possible origins of *wutu*, an exorcist winter ritual, are described, as well as the ritual as it occurs in Gnyan thog Village, Tongren County. For comparative purposes, a similar ritual is described in the nearby area of Rdo sbis, Xunhua County.

**Key words:** Monguor (Tu)—China minorities—Tibetan—exorcism—ritual—Baoan (Bonan)—Mongolian—Qinghai

Gnyan thog<sup>1</sup> (Nianduhu 年都乎) Village, Gnyan thog Township, Tongren County 同仁縣, Rma lho (Huangnan 黃南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, is located in the east-central part of Qinghai Province, situated in northwest China. West of the Rong bo River, the village is home to 250 families and has a total population of approximately 1,500. Gnyan thog residents are officially classified as Tu (Monguor), a non-Islamic Mongolic people numbering 190,000. They live primarily in Qinghai and Gansu 甘肅 provinces. CHEN's (1986a) "Baoan" 保安 linguistic study lists informants as being "Monguor" and from the villages of Gnyan thog, Tho rgya bod skor (Baoan Xiazhuang 保安下庄), Ska gsar (Gashari), and Sgo dmar (Guomari 郭麻口), all located in Tongren County. ÜJIYEDIIN (1994) utilizes material from the same sources in an English-language monograph entitled "Introduction, Grammar, and Sample Sentences for Baoan." Gansu Province is where the great majority of China's 12,000 citizens officially classified as "Baoan" dwell.

Further complicating matters, those classified as Monguor living in nearby Wutun 吳屯 speak a creole (CHEN 1986a) that is virtually incomprehensible to Gnyan thog residents. Additionally, Zhu Yongzhong, who is a Monguor native of Minhe County, understood little of the Gnyan thog language while in the village collecting and filming materials for this paper. Gnyan thog residents' language has many affinities with Mongol and Tibetan, and has more lexical terms in common with these languages than with Chinese. These taxonomic conundrums illustrate the complex ethnic circumstances of many eastern Qinghai communities.

This paper provides a detailed description of the *wutu* ritual performed on 30 December 1996.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, we discuss the various explanations of the origin of Gnyan thog residents, provide an account of the origin of Gnyan thog Castle, describe ritual sacrifices to local mountain gods, describe *wutu* ritual, and conclude by summarizing a similar ritual in a nearby Tibetan area.

## ORIGIN OF GNYAN THOG VILLAGE RESIDENTS

1. YAN and WANG (1994, 861) write that most historians contend that the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾<sup>3</sup> mingled with Mongols, Tibetans, Chinese, Muslims, and other groups, eventually forming the Monguor nationality during the Ming 明 (1368–1644) and Qing 清 (1644–1911) dynasties.
2. According to such historical documents as the *History of Xunhua*,<sup>4</sup> the ancestors of Baoan Four Villages (Baoan Situn 保安四屯)<sup>5</sup> were Chinese from south China (Jiangnan 江南) and Hezhou 河州 (in present-day Gansu Province).
3. According to the *Wang Yanyi Tablet* 王延義碑,<sup>6</sup> the ancestors of the four villages were from Longxi 隴西, Gansu Province.
4. QINGHAISHENG BIANJIZU (1985, 177) suggests the ancestors:
  - a. came from the present Huzhu Mongghul Autonomous County 互助土族自治縣, Qinghai, 700–800 years ago
  - b. were from Sanchuan 三川 in the present Minhe County
  - c. had a close relationship to the Hor<sup>7</sup>
  - d. were from inside China
  - e. were from Mongolia
5. CHEN's references (1986a, 1986b) suggest that the ancestors were:
  - a. from Muslim Mongols living in Tuojiagou 脫家溝, Gansu Province
  - b. from a Xinjiang 新疆 Mongol group
  - c. immigrants from Yangtuoja 楊脫家, Dongxiang 東鄉, who came on business, settled and married local Tibetans
  - d. from Baoningfu 保寧府 (today's Langzhong County 閬中縣), Sichuan 四川 Province
  - e. originally Muslims from Dahejia 大河家, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture 臨夏回族自治州, Gansu Province
  - f. descendants of the local Monguor headman (*tu qianzong* 土千總)

An informant told us that the ancestors of Gnyan thog, Sgo dmar, Ska gsar, and Tho rgya bod skor (Chinese, Baoan Xiazhuang) residents were from Mongolia, and were stationed here by the emperor's command. He also claims that the Baoan Castle 保安城 was built in 1589 by them, along with Wutun people, Han Chinese, and others.

6. Another informant, Mi rkyang (b. 1913),<sup>8</sup> gave the same account as Sha bo tse ring: they are descendants of Mongol frontier soldiers who were in the area at some unknown time in the past.

GNYAN THOG ANCIENT CASTLE (NIANDUHU GUCHENG 年都乎古城)

Our informant Mi rkyang gave the following account related to the origin of Gnyan thog Castle:

Once the emperor gave silver to the local headman Rab brtan to build a castle in the local area. The headman carefully studied the topography and finally chose the place where it is located today. He had his men build walls on three sides, but not on the south side, for the riverbed on the fourth side provided a natural defense. He built a temple with the money he saved. Later, some people falsely charged him with corruption. Finally, he was arrested and beheaded in Xining. Milk issued from his body when he was killed, just as he uttered his last words, proving the punishment was unjust. The emperor then sent officials to investigate. They found the temple nearby and a picture of the emperor in it, which further proved his honesty to the emperor.

LOU MA A YI (1990) offers the same basic story with one difference: the headman who built the castle was Kha rgyvi skya lo (BSOD NAMS TSHE RING 1995), a well-known man in A mdo Tibetan accounts who was killed in a similar way. Today, most village homes are on the castle site.

The local headman Rab brtan (Wang Lafudan 王喇夫旦) appears in such historical documents as the *History of Xunhua* (QINGHAISHENG BIANJIZU 1985). According to this record, Rab brtan lived during the time of Emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (reigned 1721–1725). He was a descendant of Wang Yanyi and the thirteenth generation of the local headmen. The nineteenth-generation descendant of the headmen, Sha bo tshe ring, is in his sixties today.

*WUTU* ORIGINS

The ritual's primary goal is to expel all evil of the past year from the village. The date of the ceremony is the twentieth day of the eleventh lunar month.

YAN and WANG (1994, 886) provide a brief comment that states *wutu* means "tiger" and that it derives from the language of the Chu people (Churen 楚人),<sup>9</sup> who lived during the Warring States Period 戰國 (475–221 BC) mainly in today's Hunan 湖南 Province. They state further that *wutu* is a ceremonial offering of sacrifices to mountain gods and that it has been performed in excess of 150 years.

HAN (1995, 152–53) names this dance "tiger totem dance" or "tiger dance." He gives a brief description of the "dance" and further discusses its origin:

Qiao Yongfu, the discoverer (of this performance) thinks that

Nianduhu Village is a Tu dwelling area. Tu and Tibetans have other names for “tiger,” but the performers are called *wutu*, which is the same as the ancient Chu name for tiger *wutu*. Therefore, this is the “*wutu* dance” brought by immigrants from a Chu area to Qinghai.

Other scholars believe this tiger dance is not from outside, but is a remnant of Qiang 羌 tiger totem worship. The Qiang people worshiped the tiger as a totem, and the Yi, who have a blood relationship with the Qiang, retain the tiger totem dance. Other nationalities such as Luoba 洛巴, Tujia 土家, and Pumi 普米 also adore and have taboos concerning tigers.... Therefore, this tiger dance originated from the Qiang worshipping of totems, expelling of devils, and praying for happiness.

HAN (1995) agrees with the latter opinion. The author consulted LI (n.d.), but this reference is not available to us. Yan and Wang’s and the “discoverer’s” explanations are perplexing. Why would an ethnic group in Qinghai that formed around the thirteenth century adopt a word used approximately 2,000 years ago by people far away from their present home to name one of their rituals?

Mi rkyang gave the following oral account for the origin of *wutu*:

Once the emperor became seriously ill. No medicine or religious activity made him any better. Rab brtan, the local headman, then visited the emperor. He promised to try any religious means that he could to cure the emperor’s illness when he returned home. He did his best, but he still could not make the emperor any better. One night some days later, the local deity Ri lang<sup>10</sup> visited him in a dream and indicated that the emperor’s illness would be cured and he could have a long life if certain religious rituals that we now call *wutu* were performed. Rab brtan next ordered local people to do what Ri lang had described in his dream. Finally, the emperor recovered from the illness and it was believed that the ritual had been effective. The emperor was very pleased to be well and ordered Rab brtan to perform the ritual every year for the purpose of benefiting the local village and the entire kingdom, as well as the emperor himself.

#### BANG CEREMONIES

On the night of the nineteenth, the day before the *wutu* ceremony, young village men go to Ri lang Temple situated on a hill west of the village to perform ceremonial religious activities called *bang*, or an offering of sacrifices to local mountain gods. They chant, perform religious ceremonial dances, sing

folk and love songs,<sup>11</sup> drink liquor, and chat. *Bang* is also performed on the eighth, twelfth, and fourteenth days of the same lunar month in the village. Women may attend. Mountain gods<sup>12</sup> are offered *bsang*<sup>13</sup> and liquor. People believe that the mountain gods will especially help childless couples have babies if they make offerings during these days.

#### WUTU RITUAL

Seven young men 16 to 35 years of age are selected to perform *wutu*. The selection is based on the village leader's recommendation and the young men's willingness. Some young men are willing to perform it and others are not. Some do it only because village corvée labor is not required of them for the ensuing year. Once selected, a person usually performs *wutu* for three years running. The actors are also called *wutu* during the ceremony.

At about two o'clock in the afternoon, the seven *wutu*, a *lha ba*,<sup>14</sup> one or two *thang ka*<sup>15</sup> painters, and the templekeeper go to Ri lang Temple. Young village boys follow and watch. The seven *wutu* first go to the *lab tse*<sup>16</sup> near the temple. They remove birch branches from the *lab tse* and cut them with their knives until they each have two sticks approximately two meters in length, which they take to the temple. Next, Ri lang is offered liquor. The seven men remove their upper clothing and roll up their trousers, exposing their thighs. Then they smear *bsang* ash on their bodies. The *bsang* ash is nearly white and provides a base on which the *thang ka* painters dab tiger stripes using black ink mixed with liquor. Deity heads are also painted on the chests of some *wutu*. A piece of white paper is tied in the hair of every *wutu*. The *wutu*'s sticks are also decorated with small pieces of white paper at one end. We asked young men at the site what the paper signified but they did not know. Every *wutu* also carries a knife at his waist that he later uses to cut up mutton in the village. The *lha ba* is dressed in a Tibetan robe and a five-Buddha hat (Tibetan, *rigs lnga*) and holds a flat drum and drumstick. The *wutu* may drink liquor, which they believe makes them feel warmer, for temperatures are often sub-freezing.

The *wutu* hold their sticks and kneel in front of the Ri lang image. The *lha ba* drums while the templekeeper offers liquor to each *wutu*. This requires them to immediately be silent and remain so until the ceremony concludes. Then they turn back, form a line and dance out of the temple, with the *lha ba* drumming and another young man beating a gong behind. They circle the square clockwise in front of the temple. Afterwards, as boys shout and firecrackers crackle, the five youngest *wutu* (*wutu chung bo*) run as fast as possible down the hillside towards the village. Meanwhile, the two oldest *wutu* (*wutu che bo*) dance slowly to the village along a path. Behind them walks the *lha ba*, who beats a drum, and a young man, who beats a gong.



FIGURE 1. Our informant Mi rkang.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 2. The local deity Ri lang.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 3. Ri lang Temple door leaves.  
(photo by Kevin Stuart)



FIGURE 4. Painting a *wutu*.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 5. *Wutu* in front of Ri lang Temple.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 6. *Wutu* with the *lha ba* and the templekeeper.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 9. The two oldest *wutu* dancing along the village alley with meat in their mouths  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 7. A *wutu* on a house roof.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 8. *Wutu* eating at a home.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)

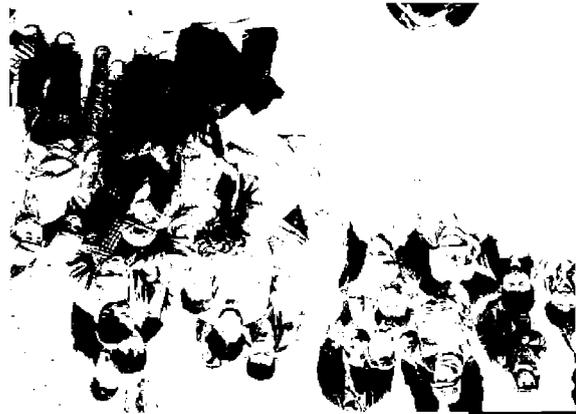


FIGURE 10. A *wutu* jumping over a fire.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 11. *Wutu* washing ink and ash from their bodies at a stream below the village.  
(photo by Skal bzang nor bu)



FIGURE 12. Two young women of Gnyan thog Village wearing traditional clothing that is almost never seen today.  
(photo by Kevin Stuart)

The two oldest *wutu* do not climb over walls and visit homes.

Villagers are now standing on the flat tops of their adobe houses to watch the proceedings. Women hold round pieces of baked bread with holes in the centers. Every home also prepares cooked beef or mutton, which may be eaten or taken by *wutu*.

Once the five youngest *wutu* reach the village, they divide into two groups and climb up the walls of housing compounds. They jump to a roof of one house and then cross over to the next. It is taboo for them to go into a home courtyard through the gate, for it is believed that evil beings may follow. The *wutu* may also climb down to the yard of a compound using a ladder that may be against the roof and enter the home to have meat and soup that have already been prepared, and then leave through the gate. Men standing on the roofs may assist by pulling them up. Women put pieces of bread on the sticks. Many village homes are visited in this fashion. Afterwards, they wait for the two oldest *wutu* near the village entrance.

When the two oldest *wutu*, the *lha ba*, and the young man beating the gong reach the village entrance, old men offer a strip of silk (*kha bdags*)<sup>17</sup> to the *lha ba* and both raw and cooked pieces of meat to the *wutu*, who grip them with their teeth. Holding the meat reminds them not to speak. The meat is also a means for enticing evil out of the village as it is believed that evils follow food. At this moment, villagers converge along the village alley and on roofs. Women put bread on the *wutu*'s sticks as they pass by. Males light firecrackers. When the sticks are heavy with bread, children may collect the bread and later return it to the *wutu*. Ill elders may lie down along the way so that the *wutu* will jump over them. Ill people may also roll *rtsam pa* dough on their bodies and give it to the *wutu* in the hope that illness will be removed.

Once all the *wutu* are again together, villagers crowd around them. All the *wutu* dance. As people shout, firecrackers rattle-tattle, and guns are fired, all the *wutu* rush out of the village towards the stream at the base of the village. They throw their sticks and some bread onto the frozen river and then wash the ink from their bodies.<sup>18</sup> Next they put on their clothes, which have been brought by children, and start back to the village. At the village entrance, straw is burned. The *wutu* jump over it, which is believed to keep evils from following them. This marks an end to the ceremony, which lasts a total of approximately two hours. That evening, they gather to eat the meat and bread collected from village families.

On the same day, in Hor rgya Village located on the opposite side of the stream just mentioned, families position empty baskets with the mouths of the baskets facing Gnyan thog Village. It is believed this prevents dispelled evils from entering their village. Once, according to informants, many Hor

rgya villagers became seriously ill with such diseases as leprosy. These illness were believed to have been caused by evil beings chased out of Gnyan thog by the *wutu*.

#### A SIMILAR CEREMONY

In most Tibetan villages of Rdo sbis (Daowei 道韋 Township) in Xunhua Salar Autonomous County, about 100 kilometers south of Tongren, similar religious ceremonies are performed. On the seventh day of the first lunar month, the “black day” (*nyin nag*), monks are invited to the village temple for *vbar ma*, a religious activity to expel evils from the village. The *vbar ma*, a female devil figure, is made with *rtsam pa*. After chanting, the monks put the *vbar ma* in a small sedan decorated with strips of colored cloth. In each home, people roll *rtsam pa* on their bodies to remove illness and mark the ages of all family members on small pieces of birch for males, and willow for females, with charcoal. Each mark signifies one year of age. Then the *rtsam pa* and the pieces of wood are taken to the temple and put in the sedan. Families also offer small amounts of money and small strips of colored cloth to the *vbar ma*. Then the sedan is carried by four young men. At this juncture, male villagers set off firecrackers, shoot guns, and whistle, while the females throw dirt at the men. The men carry the sedan to an appointed place without looking back because to do so would allow the evils to return to the village. When the sedan bearers return, they wear their caps reversed, so that the brims point to the rear. They also put stones along the path to the village. This is all done to prevent evils from following them.

#### NOTES

1. The Wiley system of Tibetan romanization is employed with one exception: a “v” is used for the twenty-third letter of the Tibetan alphabet, rather than (‘). Gnyan thog Village is said to be above (*thog*) the dwelling place of a *gnyan*, which is a deity that lives underground and is capable of causing disease to humans, hence the name of the village.

2. Norbu and Zhu visited the village 29–30 December 1996. Zhu filmed the proceedings using an 8mm camcorder. A copy of the film is held at the Himalayan and Inner Asian Resources in New York City. Stuart visited the same village in the early 1990s at the time of *wutu*.

3. Also referred to as Tughun, Tukuhun, Tu-yü-hun, To-yü-hun, and Bee-su. “Tuyuhun” refers to an ancient nationality located in the present Yi County 義縣, Liaoning Province 遼寧省, known as the Xianbei 鮮卑, that was part of the Donghu 東胡 and was located in eastern areas of Xiongnu 匈奴 territory. At the end of the third century BC, to avoid Xiongnu attacks, the Tuyuhun moved to the Big Xianbei Mountains 大鮮卑山 in northeast China and, thus, came to have the name Xianbei (YAN and WANG 1994, 821). In the third century AD, the Tuyuhun moved to western regions of the present Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. In the fourth century they moved to the present southeast Qinghai,

southwest Gansu, and northwest Sichuan, where they lived with the Di 氐 and Qiang. Later they conquered the Qiang. Between 580 and 600 AD, a Tuyuhun leader married a daughter of the Sui emperor (Sui Dynasty 隋朝 581–618). During the Tang Dynasty 唐朝 (618–907), a Tuyuhun tribal leader became one of the Tang emperor's sons-in-law and was designated as "Qinghai King." In 683 the Tuyuhun were exterminated by the "Tubo" 吐蕃. "Tuyuhun" also refers to a Xianbei man who established the Tuyuhun Kingdom (245–317) (YAN and WANG 1994, 822).

It is worth noting that the term "Tubo" refers to the name of an ancient Tibetan power established by Srong btsan sgam po (Songzanganbu 松贊干布; reigned 629–650) in the seventh century. The Tubo were destroyed in 824 AD. They developed from agricultural tribes living in the present southern mountainous areas of Tibet. The name was first used in the Wei 魏 (220–265), Jin 晉 (265–420), and Northern and Southern (420–550) dynasties. In the seventh century, a powerful tribe on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau adopted this name and established a Tubo kingdom. In historical records of the Song 宋 (960–1279), Yuan 元朝 (1271–1368), and Ming dynasties, Tubo are also referred to as "Xibo" 西蕃. Until the 1950s they were all generally called "Zang" 藏 (YAN and WANG 1994, 117, 821). (We are indebted to Dr. Chen Qiang 陳強 for translating the material in this note.)

4. *Xunhua Zhi* 循化志 was written in the Qing Dynasty (QINGHAISHENG BIANJIZU 1985, 175).

5. In the past, they were called "the four villages" (Sizhaizi 四寨子): Wutun, Tuotun 脫屯, Jitun 季屯 and Litun 李屯. In Tibetan, these villages are presently known, respectively, as Seng ge gshong (Chinese, Wutun), Tho rgya (Chinese, Baoan), Gnyan thog (Chinese, Baoan Xiazhuang), Sgo dmar (Chinese, Guomari), and Ska gsar (Gashari). The latter two villages were originally one village. Local Tibetans continue to refer to these villages as "the four Chinese villages" (Tibetan, Rgya kre tsi bzhi).

6. The tablet was put in place in the eighth lunar month of 590 and is still kept in Gnyan thog Village Temple. Serious damage makes portions of the inscription indecipherable. The inscription records the stories of Wang Yanyi, the contemporary headman of "the four villages," who supervised the construction of Baoan Castle. The inscription also describes soldiers being sent to Baoan Castle to guard it (QINGHAISHENG BIANJIZU 1985).

7. Today, Monguor are referred to as "Hor" in written Tibetan. QINGHAISHENG BIANJIZU (1985, 178) does not say what the term refers to, but suggests it should be further studied. GOLDSTEIN (1978, 1219) defines Hor as, "Mongolians, Turks, Uighurs and northern nomads." YAN and WANG (1994, 822) state:

Huo'er 霍爾 is a Tibetan word. It is the name of a nationality. In the Han Dynasty 漢朝 [206 BC–220 AD] Chinese called the nomads in western China "Hu'er" 胡爾 and "Hu" 胡. In the Tang Dynasty, Tibetans borrowed "Hu'er" as a term to refer to western nomads, which they rendered "Huo'er." Since the Yuan Dynasty, "Huo'er" has referred specifically to the Monguor nationality.

8. Mi rkyang means "unmarried" in Tibetan. He was a Rnying ma sect monk in his youth.

9. XIA (1989, 1748) states that "tiger" is one meaning of *wutu* in the Chu 楚 language.

10. The Chinese name is Erlang 二郎. This is a male deity venerated by certain Qinghai Monguor, Tibetans, and Han Chinese.

11. They sing songs in Tibetan. Most songs are not sung in Monguor.

12. Ri lang, Bya khyung, Drma chen, Gnyan chen, and Dgra vdrud.

13. An offering to mountain gods consisting of *rstam pa* (cooked barley flour), butter, and sugar burnt with conifer branches.

14. A man who falls into a trance after summoning a mountain god or a local deity to possess him.
15. A flat, rectangular image, which may be painted or appliquéd, that usually features a deity from the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon.
16. A raised rectangular platform into which are inserted arrow and spear-shaped branches as offerings to local mountain gods. The mountain gods are believed to protect the village from injury by evil beings and in times of conflict with other villages.
17. A strip of silk is offered to individuals and deities to show respect.
18. However, if the river is frozen, as it was in 1996, the bread and poles scoot along the river surface. Furthermore, the *wutu* had difficulties finding enough water beneath the ice to wash away much of the ink. However, the bathing that occurs at the river is mostly symbolic of washing away evil. Later, the young men may bathe in a public bath at Rong bo Town or at home.

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