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**Territorial Control by "Sealing" (*rgya sdom-pa*):
A Religio-Political Practice in Tibet¹**

*There are all sorts of game animals,
Within the snowy enclave of A-chen.
A strict seal was put in place [to protect them],
By the prosperous ruler of rMa.²*

1. Introduction

Cultural practices intended to demarcate and set aside territorial units for the purpose of claiming control, for closure or for preservation of defined areas and their environments are common in many pre-modern societies. The Polynesian populations of the South Pacific, to take but one example, use the custom known as *rāhui* (*kahui*, *ahui*) to prohibit specific human activities in defined areas of territory. Imposing a *rāhui* is usually associated with cases of ritual pollution, claims over or conservation of resources, or trespassing and travel access. The operation of *rāhui* are related to the prestige and power of local leaders and also to belief in supernatural or magical powers.³ In ethnic Tibetan societies, we have historical and ethnographic records for cultural practices of very similar intent

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² *A chen gangs ra'i nang la / ri dwags sna tshogs spu tshogs / rma rgyal longs spyod can gyis / sdom rgya btsan po 'jog bzhag*, Tibetan text in Namkhai Norbu Dewang (1967:288).

³ On Maori *rāhui* see Best (1904); Firth (1929); and White (1892). For related Polynesian examples, see Craighill Handy (1923); and Oliver (1974).

that clearly have both political and religious dimensions.

In pre-modern Tibet, a tradition known as "sealing" (*rgya sdom-pa*)⁴ areas of territory can be traced from at least the 12th century, up until the late 1950s. To date, the important topic of Tibetan notions of territoriality and the practices associated with them has remained little known and poorly understood. The only exception to this has been recent research on local mountain cults and territorial deities. As for the practice of territorial sealing, no previous critical scholarship exists on the topic. According to Tibetan textual sources and informants, territorial sealing had a number of different applications, and it is the purpose of this research to begin examining some of them in a preliminary manner.

2. "Sealing the Roads"

The earliest references to socially significant types of territorial sealing occur in relation to the deeds of powerful early Tibetan tantric lamas, such as Zhang g.Yu-brag-pa brTson-'grus Grags-pa (1123-1193). In his *Shog dril chen mo* it is simply mentioned that as part of his worldly activities during the 12th century Bla-ma Zhang "sealed the roads" (*lam-rgya*).⁵ One modern Tibetan-Tibetan dictionary defines *lam-rgya* as "a law which forbids travel on such things as narrow paths",⁶ yet this is too simple when considering the range of sources which describe this practice. Later discussion of Bla-ma Zhang's activities in the *Deb ther sngon po* also notes his use of *lam-rgya*,⁷ while the 16th century *Mkhas*

⁴ I use the form *rgya sdom-pa* for convenience since these elements are the most common type of construction of the expression in the cases I examine. *Rgya* usually has prefixed qualifiers added (*lam-rgya*, *ri-rgya*, *klung-rgya*, *nya-rgya*, *chu-rgya*, *chos-rgya*, *ngon-rgya*, etc.), while the verb *sdom/bsdams* (sometimes *sdom byed*) is occasionally replaced by *mdzad*, or more rarely by *'dzug* or *bkram*.

⁵ Zhang g.Yu-brag-pa brTson-'grus Grags-pa (1972:140, l.1).

⁶ See *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*, vol.3:2763, being the only dictionary I could find listing the term. S.C. Das, *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, p.1201, also has *la-rgya*, "government order (gen. prohibiting the killing of wild animals and birds in a mountain tract)", which seems in error. I have never seen this term in the relevant Tibetan legal and biographical sources; *la-rgya* normally means "prestige", "honour", or "reputation".

⁷ The whole passage in 'Gos Lo-tsā-ba gZhon-nu-dpal (1984:836, l.12-14) reads: *mi chos kyi yul du gzhi phab nas / lugs ma dang gnas gzhi dang rgyal khrims dang lam rgya dang rku skyabs dang 'khrug pa la sogs pa 'jig rten 'di ba'i byed spyod kho na 'dra ba sha stag tu snang //*.

pa'i dga' ston version mentions *ri-rgya klung-rgya lam-rgya*,⁸ and is worth quoting in full: "In general, that period was a time when Tibet was without a national law and had become fragmented. Therefore [bla-ma Zhang] restricted access to mountains, river valleys and roads to everyone. Against those who did not respect those restrictions, he performed acts of aggressive liberated behaviour such as military battles."⁹ In the context of these references, Bla-ma Zhang's sealing of roads (and hills and valleys) can only be construed as an institution for political control of territory in critical periods of war or social breakdown, and enforced by his authority and military capabilities.

Previous interpretations of these citations about Bla-ma Zhang have been somewhat confused concerning the type of territorial sealing involved. The dGe'-dun Chos-'phel and George Roerich translation of the *Deb ther sngon po* passage glosses it as "the preservation of game (*lam-rgya*)",¹⁰ while Rolf Stein states of the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* version that "Shang Rinpoche...stamps the mountains, valleys and roads with his 'seal' (*rgya*), adding a fearsome rite. This was a way of forbidding hunting."¹¹ While the idea of sealing territory which is expressed as "sealing the hills and sealing the valleys" (*ri-rgya klung-rgya sdom-pa*) does indeed get applied to hunting prohibitions in later sources (to be discussed below), I do not believe this is what Bla-ma Zhang intended. Other examples make this clear.

The *Deb ther sngon po* biography of Chos-kyi sMon-lam (d.1233), founder of g.Ya'-bzang monastery in upper Yar-klungs in 1206, mentions his institution of a *lam-rgya* over a specifically designated territory during the course of a religious ceremony (*ser-mdun*): "He sealed the roads above Bya-og-og and below sGa-'dra, above Dwags-po Krong-s-kha and below Mon-'gar mGon-po-gdong, beyond Gro-shul Cha-khröd and above Gangs-par gSer-chu-kha, beyond Lho-brag gTam-shul and as far as Yar-klungs Bya-sa."¹² Guntram Hazod has informed me

⁸ The whole passage in dPa'-bo II gTsug-lag 'Phreng-ba (1989, vol.1:808, 1.10-11) reads: *spyir de'i dus bod rgyal khrim med pa sil bur song ba'i skabs yin pas thams cad la ri rgya klung rgya lam rgya mdzad / rgya 'og tu mi 'du ba mams la dmags g.yul ngo sogs drags po'i 'phrin las mdzad.*

⁹ From David Jackson's precise translation (1994:63); Jackson's work also gives a good biographical overview of Bla-ma Zhang.

¹⁰ Roerich (1979:715).

¹¹ Stein (1972:146).

¹² 'Gos Lo-tsa-ba gZhon-nu-dpal (1984:771): *bya og og yan / sga 'dra man / dwags po krong-s kha yan / mon 'gar mgon po gdong man / gro shul cha khrod tshun / gangs par*

that at the same point in the *G.ya' bzang chos byung*, it specifies that Chos-kyi sMon-lam "established the regulations concerning the sealing of the four roads" (*lam rgya'i ma mo bzhi po mdzad*). These four roads are the connecting lines of eight early *Vinaya* temples (of Klus-mes and his disciples) which form two concentric rectangles with g.Ya'-bzang as their ideal centre. The outer borders of the sealed territory correspond almost exactly to the borders of the former left wing province (g.Yo-ru), and this itself was clearly part of a legitimation strategy for Chos-kyi sMon-lam's new religious and territorial seat of g.Ya'-bzang.¹³ It is typical of this early type of sealing that a specific territorial extent is defined. Thus, the famous 13th century *gcod* lineage yogin, Thod-smyon bSam-grub, who was active in Southern Tibet, is said to have: "Sealed the hills, sealed the valleys, and sealed the roads from Sril-ma La-kha as far as Kong-dang La."¹⁴ In such examples the *lam-rgya* sealings are about fixed claims of territory and authority by an individual religious hierarch, such as those implicit in Bla-ma Zhang's activities.

Another later example of this type of territorial sealing functioning as a tool for political control of an area is found in the actions of the Third Zhwa-dmar-pa Chos-dpal Ye-shes (1406-1452). He "sealed the hills and sealed the valleys" (*ri-rgya klung-rgya*; another version adds *lam-rgya*) in the area of Kong-lung Ral-gsum in southeast Tibet during 1434. He did so in order to control the local Tibetans who were fighting amongst themselves and with the neighbouring Klo-pa and Mon-pa tribes of the Himalayan foothills. His efforts were part of a package of measures to settle conflict and restore moral behaviour, and it is mentioned that he instituted a great legal code (*khriims yig chen mo*) which included punishments to rectify breaches.¹⁵ *Khriims yig chen mo* is of course the

gser chu kha yan / lha brag gtam shul tshun / yar klungs bya sa'i bar la lam rgya mdzad /
Roerich (1979:657) again has that he "fobade hunting" for *lam-rgya*.

¹³ I am indebted to Guntram Hazod for mentioning this to me at the Bloomington IATS Seminar, and for his letter of 12 March 1999 elaborating upon it; see now Tsering Gyalbo, Hazod and Sørensen (2000:78-79).

¹⁴ 'Gos Lo-tsā-ba gZhon-nu-dpal (1984:1145, l.14-15): *sril ma la kha nas kong dang la yan chad du ri rgya klung rgya lam rgya mdzad /*. Roerich (1979:986) has here: "He prohibited the killing of wild animals and fishing in the hills, from Sil ma-la-kha as far as Kong-dang-la."

¹⁵ In Si-tu Pañ-chen Chos-kyi 'Byung-gnas and 'Be-lo Tshe-dbang Kun-khyab (1972, vol. 1:494), the core passage reads: *lo gsum gyi ring la 'thab rtsod rkun jag med cing ri rgya klung rgya / bu lon la bsnyad pa'i gtes nang len sogs byung na chad pa yod pa'i khriims*

name used in the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* to refer to the first law code attributed to Srong-btsan sGam-po, and which the later Tibetan historiographers allege he based upon Buddhist moral principles when retrospectively styling him as a *chos-rgyal* type ruler. An interesting passage in the biography of an early Karma-pa hierarch which is contained in the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* actually draws a comparison between the lama's wide-ranging use of *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial seals and Srong-btsan sGam-po's virtuous deeds.¹⁶ As we shall see below, by the 15th century, *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial seals had become in fact a legislative aspect of the mediaeval Tibetan *chos-rgyal*'s virtuous deeds.

There are various other early religious hierarchs and practitioners who, acting as powerful or authoritative individuals, engaged in this type of territorial sealing. There would appear to be no reason to relate most of these instances to any specific prohibition on hunting, and indeed hunting is simply not mentioned. Yet, other references cause us to begin to consider that, in some cases at least, banning hunters and gatherers from entering specified areas may also have been one aspect of the intention of this type of early territorial sealing. The *Deb ther sngon po* version of the biography of the *sNying-thig* lineage holder and founder of the holy place of Tsa-ri gSar-ma, Thar-pa-rgyan (alias Kumārarāja, 1266-1343), states: "From Kong-po up to g.Ye he sealed the roads, and sealed the fish (*nya-rgya*), and sealed the hills." Curiously, the *Mkhas pa'i dga' ston* version of this same passage only mentions that he made a *lam-rgya*.¹⁷ It seems that an

yig chen mo bcos /. Note that the sealing is pronounced in his 29th year, given as *lcags-pho-stags* in the text, which is in error for *shing-stag*, 1434. See also dPa'-bo II gTsug-lag 'Phreng-ba (1989, vol.2:1047) for the same incident, although here *lam-rgya* is added along with various other ritual and ethico-religious (as opposed to legal) methods to encourage virtuous behaviour: *mdor na kong lung ral gsum klo mon dang bcas pa 'thab rtsod dang sdig zas kyis 'tsho ba mams la gang 'dul gyi chos bstan / mthong thos dran reg gi 'gro don mdzad / ma ni dung phyur / gzungs sngags 'don pa / ri rgya klung rgya lam rgya / tshe thar srog sdom sogs la bkod / sha btson sdug bsngal gyis nyen pa namis bton / 'khrug rtsod mams bsdums te gnas skabs dang mthar thug gnyi gar du bde bar mdzad / mang zhig smin grol la bkod do* /.

¹⁶ dPa'-bo II gTsug-lag 'Phreng-ba (1989, vol.2:998, l.10-11): *de phyin yul gru thams cad du rim par byon / gar phebs thams cad du ri rgya klung rgya / chos rgya dkar pos thams cad bde legs dang ldan pa srong btsan gyi 'phrin las ltar mdzad*.

¹⁷ 'Gos Lo-tsä-ba gZhon-nu-dpal (1984:248, l.13-14): *lam rgya dang nya rgya dang ri rgya la sogs kong po nas g.ye la thug gi bar du bsdams* /. Note that *nya-rgya* commonly means "fish trap", but that can be discounted with the verb *bsdams* here. Cf. also dPa'-bo II gTsug-lag 'Phreng-ba (1989, vol.1:577, l.3-4): *g.ye dwags kong po mams la lam rgya*

attempt to stop the catching of fish is intended here by *nya-rgya...bsdams*. If so, this is the earliest direct reference to *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial sealing being intended as a form of environmental protection. There are early references which indicate sealing was perhaps related to encouraging ethical behavior in relation to all living things. The biography of the Rwa Lo-tsa-ba, rDo-rje-grags (11th century; Hugh Richardson dates him c.1000-1080), mentions he "established such things as sealed hills, sealed valleys, and sealed roads" (*ri rgya / klung rgya / lam rgya la sogs pa mdzad*). He did this for the sake of "inferior beings" (*skye-bo dman-pa mams*), along with encouraging abstention from killing on special days of worship, observing fasts, and liberating animals.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the early sources I have surveyed give no detailed indication of how the early *lam-rgya* and closely associated types of territorial sealings were applied and enforced. We assume they depended greatly upon public respect for a lamas' moral and political authority, but also upon fear of the lama's magico-ritual powers. My informants state that the practice of sealing in more recent times invoked powerful wrathful deities, including local territorial gods and more general "protectors of the teachings" (*chos-skyong*), whom the lama "entrusts with the function" (*'phrin-bcol*) of punishing those who violate sealed areas. This will be discussed again below.

3. "Sealing the Hills and Sealing the Valleys"

We have noted above that along with *lam-rgya*, "Sealing the hills and sealing the valleys" (*ri-rgya klung-rgya sdom-pa*) was an expression sometimes used for political closures of, and controls over designated territories. However, it is certain that by the 15th century, this term also became synonymous with more Buddhist inspired ethico-legal institutions used to especially prohibit all kinds of hunting and trapping of wild game animals (the term "hunting hill seal", *mgon ri-rgya*, is even found in some early documents),¹⁹ as well as some forms of natural produce harvesting. While *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type sealing came to have this intent and retained this specific meaning until recent times, it remained

mdzad. bDud-'jom Ye-she rDo-rje's (1996:189) 20th century version of the Thar-pa-rgyan biography states: *ri rgya dang / lam rgya dang / chu rgya la sogs pa mdzad nas bde 'jom la bkod*, and explains this as his aiding travellers on dangerous narrow paths and a demonstration of his compassion for creatures like game animals and fish.

¹⁸ Rwa Ye-shes Seng-ge (1989:264).

¹⁹ See, for example, lDan-ma 'Jam-dbyangs Tshul-khrims and Nang-chen mKhan-po rDo-rje (1997:131-132).

nonetheless a territorial sealing with many basic features similar to the *lam-rgya*. However, the later use of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type sealing was not only an instrument of individually powerful lamas and yogins. We find it being the particular preserve of local Buddhist lay rulers (usually styled *khri* or *chos-rgyal*), of heads of state such as the regents and Dalai Lamas of the dGa'-ldan Pho-brang era, and of institutions such as monastic communities. Establishing a *ri-rgya klung-rgya* territorial seal became a legislative act. Indeed, we gain almost all our detailed knowledge of later *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type sealing from historical Tibetan legal and administrative documents, including codes of monastic regulations or monastic constitutions (*bca'-yig*), public proclamations and decrees (*rtsa-tshig*, *bca'-tshig*, *bka'-shog*, etc.), and state law codes (*khrim-s-yig*).

The first comprehensive examples of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type territorial sealing to specifically prohibit hunting and fishing are found in documents issued by the lay Buddhist king (*chos-rgyal*) of rGyal-rtse, Rab-brtan Kun-bzang 'Phags-pa (1389-1442), between the years 1415 and 1440. Apart from the detail they offer, these sources are also interesting as they contain several earlier precedents that prevailed in the application of sealing up until the 1950s. Firstly, there is the development of two different and parallel traditions of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing: one which is found in individual monastic codes of rights and regulations; the other which is found in the form of general decrees and laws issued by the ruler and the state, and usually proclaimed in public. Secondly, there are a series of Buddhist doctrines and ideas that constitute a distinctive religious rationale for sealing of territory.

These two different traditions of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* seals express the practice of sealing in two contrasting spacio-temporal dimensions. We can describe these two different traditions as "individual monastic" and "state public" ones. In the individual monastic regulations, sealing was applied to a generally smaller, well defined unit of territory over which the monastery had rights and control, while time was a constant: smaller units of territory were sealed in perpetuity. In the state public decrees and proclamations issued by rulers, by contrast, space is the constant since the laws theoretically applied to all sealed areas, or even the whole area of the kingdom or state itself, but they are also related to specified periods of the annual Tibetan Buddhist ritual calendar: a general sealing is enforced only during certain important calendar months or ritual periods.

3.1. Monastic Territorial Sealing

For an example of the first type of sealing, let us look at the regulations for the rGyal-rtse Chos-sde monastic community, which were issued by Rab-brtan Kun-bzang 'Phags-pa in the early 15th century. The following extract is part of a longer section concerning regulations intended for a defined territory outside the walls of the monastic compound (*lcags-ri'i-phyir*), generally referred to as the *dgon-pa'i nye-'khor*, which is either owned by the monastery or under its legal control: "Within the area [bounded by] the river course and the black rock of Rin-chen-sgang to the east, the dByen-zlum reliquary shrine and [mountain] pass toll-station below the cliff to the south, bTsad-skor Ma-ñi-sgang to the west [and] the grey rock to the west of the Chos-sde, if it happens that hunters, traders and others take the lives of animals, the punishment of having to offer a communal tea serving [to the monks] will be imposed. Furthermore, the sealing of the hills and the sealing of the valleys to [my] subjects ought to protect them continually. The fish of Pho-ma are sealed...Furthermore, each of the existing regulations for the sealing of the hills to [my] subjects is immediately binding, and the superintendence and guarding of them in perpetuity is to be undertaken by the lamas of the various retreat monasteries and their resident monks, and especially by teachers and students from the Chos-sde."²⁰

Monastic territories such as this, which were sealed against the activities of hunters and others, were defined in different ways. Many, as above, had precise boundaries fixed in relation to natural landmarks or cultural features. For instance, the early 17th century monastic territory established around bKra-shis Chos-rdzong in Brag-g.yab by the first hierarch, Grags-pa rGya-mtsho (1572-1692), was defined by naming thirteen local places and topographic features circumscribing an area sealed particularly against hunters (*rngon-rgya*).²¹ Others

²⁰ 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:198): *chos sde'i shar gyi rin chen sgang gi chu rgyud dang brag nag po lho'i brag 'og dbyen zlum mchod rten dang / la btsas / nub kyis btsad skor ma ni sgang / byang gi brag skya la kha mams kyis khongs su / ri dwags rngon pa dang / tshong pa sogs kyis dud 'gro'i srogs bcad pa sogs byung na / mang ja 'bul ba dang bcas pa'i chad pa 'gel / gzhan yang mnga' zhabs kyis ri rgya / klung rgya rgyun du bsrung rgyu pho ma'i nya rgya / [...] gzhan yang mnga' zhabs kyis ri rgya'i bca' tshig rang rang na yod pa mams 'phral du dam cing / phugs su rgyun sring ba'i do dam so rtogs dgon pa so so'i bla ma de bzhugs kyis dge 'dun mams dang / gtso cher chos sde nas dpon slob mams kyis mdzad cing / m 'ong pa na rgyun brtan pa'i do dam dpon blon bya ba la dbang sgyur ba nams kyis mdzad 'tsha.*

²¹ See fol.17v of the *bca'-yig* in Schwieger and Dagab (1989:33).

existed within more simply defined boundaries. The Seventh Dalai Lama (1708-1757) describes a sealed monastic precinct surrounding De-mo Chos-sde Blo-gsal-gling as existing at "...a distance as far as the sound of a conch trumpet can be heard."²² Alternatively, at the religious centre of dGa'-ldan Thub-bstan Rab-rgyas-gling, the sealed area was to be established "...in the hills and valleys within one call's distance from the monastery."²³

As we have seen from the 15th century example of rGyal-rtse Chos-sde above, the supervision and enforcement of sealed monastic territories was generally performed by the clergy from the local institutions themselves. In some cases, specific clerical ranks were designated for the task. At the great Karma-pa centre of mTshur-phu, for example, the chief disciplinarian (*dge-bskos*) had two assistants (*dge-g.yog*) who were charged with enforcing the territorial seals that had been proclaimed by decree.²⁴

The punishment metered out to those who violated a sealed monastic territory varied from institution to institution. Fines in kind were common, but they were always described as "offerings". A violator might have to offer one or more communal tea servings (*mang-ja*) for the assembly of monks in the monastery, or offer ceremonial butter lamps and scarves as well in certain amounts.²⁵ More interesting is the use of the local protective deities, who usually have a special shrine (*mgon-khang*) dedicated to them within the main temple complex. One *bca'-yig* for a dGe-lugs-pa establishment states: "When itinerant game hunters appear [within the sealed monastic territory], they should be punished by gathering their weapons in the protector's temple and in addition exhorted once again to observe lawfulness."²⁶ Part of the logic behind this is that a major type of offering to protector deities are weapons of all kinds, and their surviving shrines are usually full of assorted antique arms and armour, reflecting their martial and wrathful natures. We also know that hunters and others who wanted to renounce the taking of life would offer their weapons at a *mgon-khang*, while

²² Dalai Lama VII (1976:461, 1.5-6); cf. also a similar example in Schuh and Dagyab (1978:247, 1.27-28).

²³ See the *Dga' ldan thub bstan rab rgyas gling gi bca' yig*, in: *Bca' yig phyogs sgrig* (1989:166).

²⁴ See Rin-chen dPal-bzang (1995:309).

²⁵ For example, see 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:198); Dalai Lama VII (1976:377, 1.2-3); Schuh and Dagyab (1978:247, 1.27-8); and Dalai Lama XIII (1981:184, 1.1-3). For further discussion of these issues, see Huber (2004).

²⁶ Dalai Lama XIII (1981:82, 1.1-3).

swearing an oath in front of the deity never to harm living things again. Judging from the deference and care present-day rural Tibetan men (women are usually barred from entry) display when entering such shrines, one can easily imagine that any punishment connected to these protective deities would have been an edifying one for the violator. Some *bca'-yig* mention violators like hunters having to recite religious texts in the protector's temple.²⁷ There is also a tradition of sealing that is practiced by lay communities (particularly pastoralists), and that is associated with local territorial cults and their deities, as will be discussed below.

Finally, it is important to note here that while many monasteries defined territories around themselves in which they forbade hunting and other activities, only some of them actually proclaimed and maintained *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type seals to support and administer their territorial claims. A survey of more than forty different *bca'-yig* texts revealed that only about one third of them proclaimed actual sealed territories.

3.2. State Territorial Sealing

For an early example of the second type of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing, namely that proclaimed by the ruler or state to the public, let us turn once more to the activities of Rab-brtan Kun-bzang 'Phags-pa of rGyal-rtse. The rGyal-rtse *chos-rgyal* issued and publicly proclaimed (*phyogs kun tu bsgrags pa*) a *khriims-yig* in 1430, a section of which reads: "The existing sealed hills and sealed valleys in all regions such as hermitages are never to be violated, and are to be left in peace. At the time of the four festivals [celebrating the Śrāvastī miracles during the waxing moon of the 1st Tibetan month, the Buddha's awakening on the 15th day of 4th month, his turning of the Wheel of the Doctrine on the 6th day of 6th month, and his descent from the realm of the gods on the 22nd day of the 9th month], and the three festivals [held each month],²⁸ the hills and valleys are to be sealed to all [my] subjects and their violation is to be thoroughly renounced."²⁹

²⁷ Kong-sprul Blo-gros mTha'-yas (1975:306, l.1-3).

²⁸ This expression is clarified in the *lcag-spre'u rtsa-shig* of 1440 ('Jigs-med Grags-pa 1987:262) as: *zla ba byung ngo cog gi dus bzang gsum*.

²⁹ 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:222): *dben gnas la sogs sa phyogs gang dag na'ang / ri rgya klung rgya yod pa mams la ni / nam yang 'tshé bar mi bya bde bar bzhag dus chen bzhi dang dus bzang gsum mams la / mnga' zhabs byings kyi ri rgya klung rgya dag bsdams shing 'tshé ba'i bya ba kun nas spang /*.

One of the main reasons for this specific timing being given in the documents is that any positive deeds (that is, in Buddhist terms) which are performed on these holy days, such as abstaining from taking life or imposing a blanket territorial seal against hunters and other life-takers, are believed to generate thousands of times more merit for the practitioner than at other times. The reverse is also believed to apply, where the karmic consequences of negative acts are multiplied greatly. Thus, in another decree (*rtsa-tshig*) of 1440 the *chos-rgyal* specified: "On the three festival days of each month and between the 1st and 15th day of the 1st, 3rd, 4th and 8th Tibetan months, there are Buddhist festivals, therefore one must abstain from taking life."³⁰

One often wonders how Tibetans came to adopt Buddhist customary (as opposed to canonical) practices such as this. In this case, we know that imperial decrees banning the taking of life during Buddhist festival periods were issued in China as early as 619, and throughout the T'ang Dynasty,³¹ and that the same custom entered the Yüan law codes³² which had some influence in Tibet under Yüan administration during the 13th-14th centuries.

In early 17th century sources, we find a much more temporally extensive *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing of all state controlled territory, and one which is specifically aimed against hunters. In the gTsang *Zhal Ice bcu drug* law code current at the time of the gTsang-pa *sde-srid* Karma bsTan-skyong dbang-po (r.1621-1642), it states: "It is ordered that the hills be sealed and the valleys be sealed from the time of the festival of the Śrāvastī miracles [during the waxing moon of the 1st Tibetan month] up until the tenth month."³³ This long sealing period offered blanket cover for all major rituals in the year. In addition, we should also consider that it coincides with the pregnancy and birthing season for major game animals. Several of my Tibetan informants confirmed that there was a pre-modern awareness about prohibiting hunting during breeding and pregnancy periods. A recent in-depth study of Tibetan antelope hunting revealed that the species has long been hunted specifically during breeding and pregnancy, since animal behaviour at those times offers hunters ideal opportunities for trapping

³⁰ 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:262): *zla ba byung ngo cog gi dus bzang gsum dang / hor zla dang po / gsum pa / bzhi pa / brgyad pa / rnam kyī tshes gcig nas bco lnga'i bar sangs rgyas kyī dus chen yin pas srog gcod spongs /*.

³¹ See Ch'en (1964:229, 283).

³² See Ratchnevsky (1985:346-348).

³³ *Zhal Ice bcu drug*. 90: *cho 'phrul dus chen nas zla ba bcu'i bar ri rgya klung rgya bsdoms pa gnang ba*.

and shooting.³⁴ This may have been a motive for such a long-term sealing. These extensive periods of blanket *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing are not defined in the major legal and administrative codes of the dGa'-ldan Pho-brang era, such as the *Dwangsh shel me long* of sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho (1653-1705) or the *Zhal Ice bcu gsum* dating from the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682), although both codes do advocate sealing in general.³⁵ Long duration *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing was revived during the 20th century under the active rule of the Thirteenth Dalai lama. He issued a series of decrees (*rtsa-tshig*) which were officially circulated to all parts of his jurisdiction and publicly proclaimed. Some of these orders were actually entitled "Hill and Valley Decrees" (*Ri klung rtsa tshig*), due to their content. The relevant clause in the decree of 1932, for example, ordered: "Regularly, from the festival which celebrates the Śrāvastī Miracles in the [waxing period of the] 1st Tibetan month, up until the 30th day of the 7th month...it is important to seal the hills and seal the valleys."³⁶ The Regent sTag-brag sPrul-sku (in office 1941-1950), using a slightly different reckoning of the festival periods, carried on this tradition as late as 1944.³⁷ The general dGa'-ldan Pho-brang era law codes did, however, adopt one of the temporally specific *ri-rgya klung-gya* sealings found in the earlier *Zhal Ice bcu drug* code of gTsang. The particular date on the ritual calendar was stated as being: "During the religious festival of the fifth month, the hills and the valleys are to be sealed."³⁸ The festival of the fifth Tibetan month is the popular "Universal Incense Offering" (*'Dzam-gling spyi-bsangs*). It is a major time for worship of the many local deities said to have been tamed by one of the first tantric lamas in Tibet, and which then converted under oath to being protectors of Buddhism. These deities are mainly nature spirits redefined within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon and cosmology. They often dwell on mountains, in rivers and springs, and in the subsoil. Some of them are those invoked by lamas to guard

³⁴ See Huber (forthcoming).

³⁵ See, for example, sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho (1987:210), and *Zhal Ice bcu gsum*:156, 157. The Bhutanese *bKa' khrims* of 1729 also advocates *ri rgya lhungs* [*sic.*] *rgya bsdams pa* (bsTan-'dzin Chos-rgyal 1986:136).

³⁶ Dalai Lama XIII (1981:334, 1.5-7): *rgyun gtan mnyan yod cho 'phrul mchod pa'i dus ston hor zla dang po nas bzung bdun pa'i gnam gang bar [...] ri rgya klung rgya bsdams 'khos bgyis*. The same passage is found in the 1901 decree (Dalai Lama XIII 1901: 1.37-41).

³⁷ sTag-brag sPrul-sku (1944: 1.4-9).

³⁸ *Zhal Ice bcu gsum*:157; cf. *Zhal Ice bcu drug*:108.

sealed territories, while others rule over pilgrimage mountains and other holy sites or monastic precincts. Other such beings, which dwell in remote places, are popularly believed to be owners of the game animals, or they use these wild animals as their mounts and as their "livestock". Hunters believe such deities can sometimes become angered when game animals are caught and killed. These deities are also highly offended by certain types of pollution of their abodes, such as blood that a hunter might accidentally spill in a spring, lake or stream when processing a game carcass, or the smoke from flesh roasted over a campfire. All Tibetans consider these deities capricious and dangerous, and they are deemed (mostly retrospectively) a major cause of illness, natural disaster and bad fortune, and thus people devote careful ritual attention to them. It is due to these concerns, on the part of the pre-1959 religious state itself, that the *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealings were specifically aimed at hunters to protect against upsetting the deities during their special time of annual worship.

While the general nature of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing expressed in the dGa'-ldan Pho-brang era sources offers few variations on the 15th century examples, one notable development is a tendency towards enumerating the classes and species of wild animals to be protected, as well as those exempt, within a sealed territory. This began in the *Zhal lce bcu gsum* of the early dGa'-ldan Pho-brang state and developed until a more or less complete protection is offered by sealing to the two main Tibetan categories of large wild animals hunted as game, the "herbivores" (*ri-dwags*) and "carnivores" (*gcan-gzan*). This legal protection is further extended to include lesser creatures of harvest and control, such as birds, fish, otters, and even bird's eggs and bees. The stock phrase for inclusive protection of wild beings within sealed territories is "all creatures great and small dwelling on dry land and in water" (*srog chags skam gsher du gnas pa che phra thams cad*). The only exceptions are wolves, which may always be hunted due to the threat they pose to livestock.³⁹

4. Later Buddhist Ideology of Sealing

It should be clear by now that any of the types of sealing I have discussed do entail, in some fundamental way, a claim upon or control over territory, whether temporary or permanent, plus the intent and ability of its enforcement. This is more explicitly the case with early *lam-rgya* seals. Yet, over time, the Tibetan elite who resorted to sealing articulated the practice exclusively with Buddhist

³⁹ See *Zhal lce bcu gsum*. 156; Dalai Lama XIII (1901; 1981:334, 1.5-7).

doctrines and ethics in a manner that tends to overshadow the under-laying juridical-political basis and intent of the institution. Again, we find evidence of this only from the 15th century onward, during the period of the mediaeval rulers styled as *chos-rgyal* or *khri*.

From the 15th century on, sealing became closely associated with the idea of "the gift of fearlessness" (*mi-'jigs-pa sbyin-pa*) being offered to sentient beings—principally wild animals—protected within sealed territories.⁴⁰ *Mi-'jigs-pa sbyin-pa* is a translation of the Sanskrit *abhaya-dāna*, a familiar concept from the Mahāyāna Buddhist literature. *Dāna* is the first of the six perfections (*pāramitā*), and is of three types: The gift of (i.) material goods, (ii.) of fearlessness and (iii.) of the Buddha's teachings. It is an old idea in Tibet, and one finds *abhaya-dāna* fully treated in some of the earliest indigenous Tibetan systematic expositions of Buddhism, such as in the twelfth chapter of sGam-po-pa's (1079-1153) *Thar pa rin po che'i rgyan*.⁴¹

Most descriptions of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing in the later literature come with stock phrases referring to how they function as examples of *abhaya-dāna* which "offer the protection of fearlessness to defenseless living creatures"⁴² or that they are needed because "the living creatures of the hills and valleys should breath freely without fear for their lives."⁴³ Similarly, a territory sealed against hunters' access to wild animals is described as being "an island of freedom (*thar-pa-gling*), offering the gift of fearlessness."⁴⁴ Offering the gift of fearlessness was also cited by lamas as a reason for other practices, like purchasing and freeing the lives (*tshe-thar*) of animals destined for slaughter.⁴⁵

Other Buddhist justifications were also introduced in relation to *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing. These specifically concern the benefits for those who established and maintained a sealed territory. They clearly indicate that the sealers themselves would enjoy direct soteriological benefits from practicing sealing. For example, by proclaiming and enforcing sealed territories a 15th century ruler

⁴⁰ Once again, the first mention of this in the documents is with Rab-brtan Kun-bzang 'Phags-pa ('Jigs-med Grags-pa 1987:272, l. 13-14, 19-20).

⁴¹ See the passage in Guenther (1986:157), and 'Jigs-med Gling-pa's definition in his *Chos spyod bcu'i gtam* (1991:498).

⁴² 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:272, l.13-14).

⁴³ sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho (1987:210).

⁴⁴ Schuh and Phukhang (1976:111).

⁴⁵ See 'Jigs-med Gling-pa (1971:405). On *tshe-thar* and other associated practices, see Holler (2002).

is said to have "accumulated merit by way of the 10 virtuous actions (*dge-ba'i bcu*)" and "cleansed the effects of negative actions."⁴⁶ It is also likely that Buddhist interpretations of Indian *Arthaśāstra* theories of statecraft and kingship that circulated in Tibet influenced rulers to use territorial sealing. We know of only one rather late reference to this in the legal documents. In the twenty-one article administrative code of the Fifth Dali Lama's Regent, sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho, the *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing section is immediately preceded by a quote which sets out the general duties of a king as an environmental steward, and which is taken from the *Cāṅkya-rājanītiśāstra* translated in the Tibetan Buddhist canon.⁴⁷ Buddhist Lamas who sometimes advised local rulers on the art of statecraft also told them they should set up sealed territories. In one of 'Jigs-med Gling-pa's (1730-1798) exhortations to Tibetan rulers, he states: "For the sake of enduring benefits and happiness, establish the law based on the eight branches and ten virtues, and seal the hills and seal the valleys."⁴⁸

Influential lamas and clerics, who often went about privately setting up their own sealed territories, had a range of other Buddhist motivations and benefits in mind as well. A lama in western Tibet, bSod-nams Blo-gros (1456-1521), read verses in several Buddhist tantric texts about the virtues—namely, being spared evil rebirths—of directly saving the lives of hundreds of beings. On the basis of these teachings, he states that he established preserves to protect game animals from hunters around two monasteries that he founded.⁴⁹ Individual lamas also had to be prepared to invest their own resources in sealing. 'Jigs-med Gling-pa, who often expressed his great love for animals, purchased and sealed the territory of a whole hill or mountain (*ri-rgya byas*) as an act of compassion when he learned of the destructive honey harvesting practices of the local community there, which killed countless bees.⁵⁰ On another occasion, at Ro-lam Me-long-mkhar in eastern Mon, he instigated the sealing of a river (*chu-rgya 'debs*), compensating the local fishermen out of compassion for the fish, and investing much silver, coral and amber, plus 20 *angul-srang* for sealing hills and areas

⁴⁶ 'Jigs-med Grags-pa (1987:271, 1.1-10; 272, 1. 13-14).

⁴⁷ sDe-srid Sangs-rgyas rGya-mtsho (1987:210); *Tsa-na-ka*:25-27.

⁴⁸ 'Jigs-med Gling-pa (1991:143): *yun du phan dang bde ba'i phyir / yan lag brgyad dang dge bcu'i khrims / 'cha' zhing ri rgya klung rgya bsdam /*.

⁴⁹ See Snellgrove (1967:I.57.12-I.58.22).

⁵⁰ 'Jigs-med Gling-pa (1971:393, 1.5-6).

with beehives.⁵¹

5. Local Community Sealing

There did exist a number of possibilities for localized territorial closure in Tibetan lay communities. Around holy mountains (*gnas-ri*) that were spatially represented or organized as *maṇḍala* landscapes, local community ceremonies which "closed the doors of the holy place" (*gnas-sgo bsdams*) marked the seasonal closure of pilgrimage circuits and sites.⁵² Other types of reported closures were usually associated with access to, use, and maintenance of local resources, such as grazing, fuel, timber, water, hunting, and gathering, although how these differed from *rgya sdom-pa* sealings remains unclear.⁵³ A tradition of *ri-rgya klung-rgya* type territorial sealing existed at the level of local lay communities in parts of Tibet, although I have only heard of this practiced in eastern pastoral regions to date. It is perhaps significant that in those regions, which have been referred to as being "stateless" by some scholars, political control and law and order were highly fragmented and localized, and there was no over-arching authority like the Central Tibetan state which could institute and enforce the type of blanket sealing described above.

Informants from parts of A-mdo and Kham describe customary, local forms of sealing of territory, which they call *ri-khrims* or *ri-rgya*, or occasionally refer to with other terms.⁵⁴ These local sealings are performed for two closely related reasons. Firstly, areas are sealed to protect local resources such as game animals, fuel, and medicinal plants, which could be both economically valuable and associated with local deities. Secondly, their purpose was to guard against any disturbance of the local territorial deities of the *gzhi-bdag* and *yul-lha* type. These two reasons were related since it was believed activities such as hunting or gathering near the dwelling places of the usually martial-like local deities could provoke and anger them, bringing various kinds of misfortune to the community who lived within their sphere of influence. Customary sealing was usually done to hill or mountain areas and water sources as these are considered the typical abodes of the territorial deities. For this reason, such sites are often

⁵¹ 'Jigs-med Gling-pa (1971:423, 1.6-424, 1.1; 430, 1.1-2; 448, 1.2).

⁵² See Huber (1999:189).

⁵³ For examples, see Diemberger (1994:145-6); March (1977:90-3); and Ramble (1999:7).

⁵⁴ Some protected areas, for example in A-mdo rMe-ba, which have all the features of a sealed *ri-rgya* territory, are in fact locally referred to as being a *tshe-thar* territory.

identified as "fierce hills" (*ri gnyan-po*) or "fierce springs" (*chu-mig gnyan-po*) because they are considered highly sensitive due to the potential wrath of their non-human denezins.

Namkhai Norbu noted the use of customary territorial sealing when visiting pastoralists of rDza-chu-kha and mGo-log gSer-tha in mDo-khams during 1953.⁵⁵ His earlier observations tally well with what my informants from neighbouring pastoral regions of 'Dzam-thang, rNga-ba, rMe-ba and rDzo-dge recently reported. All evidence indicates that the most socially significant aspect of customary sealing of territory was a great anxiety concerning the breaching of such sealed areas by members of rival neighbouring communities and opportunistic strangers travelling through a region. This prompted regular seasonal inspection of sealed territories by mounted groups of armed local men, a practice known as *ri-bsher*, literally "hill inspection". Those who "broke the hill seal" (*ri-rgya bshig*), by hunting or by digging for herbs for example, could be punished severely. This sort of anxiety about hill seals was generated by a widespread cultural dilemma. A local community feared most the consequences of disturbance to their own territorial deities, believing that resulting misfortune would be delivered to them first and strongest, whereas outsiders acting as poachers were far more likely to feel they could act with impunity in another community's sealed territory. Feuds and vendettas between neighbouring pastoralist groups did frequently break out over cases of interference with customary *ri-rgya* areas.⁵⁶

A final instance of localized *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing is that found in cases of weather-making rituals resorted to by agriculturalists. In traditional Tibet, all types of weather conditions were believed to be subject to the moral relationship prevailing between human communities and local deities dwelling in the environment.⁵⁷ Thus, ritual protection against frost (*sad-srung*), for instance, was sought by farmers at critical periods during the cropping cycle. A *sad-srung* ritual text included in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* makes clear the direct connection between human moral behaviour and "warming up the ground" (*sa-gzhi drod-'debs*) in order to combat frost. It advocates that a *ri-rgya klung-rgya* sealing be placed upon the territory in question as part of precautions to ensure that the

⁵⁵ Nam-mkha'i Nor-bu (1994:201-203).

⁵⁶ This is also noted by both Nam-mkha'i Nor-bu (1994:202-203) and Ekvall (1964:1125).

⁵⁷ See Huber and Pedersen (1997).

territorial deities (*gzhi-bdag*) are not offended.⁵⁸

6. Possible Origins of Territorial Sealing

In closing, I will briefly comment on the possible origins of the *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial sealing I have been discussing herein. I must stress, however, that much more research needs to be done before any firm conclusions about origins can be arrived at. If I were to speculate on the basis of the later evidence which we have available, I would consider that *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial sealing appears to be a syncretistic development. At least some aspects of these practices most probably derive in part from the social importance of early pre-Buddhist cults of territorial deities, and the maintenance and expression of authority of such cults.⁵⁹ Also, one would have to consider some related ancient ideas concerning certain parts of the natural environment and the deities associated with them as being highly sensitive to human intrusion, and thus the use of social institutions to restrict access to them.⁶⁰ Throughout the development of Tibetan religious history, there has been an active assimilation by organized and institutionalized Buddhism and Bon of local territorial cults and deities. In general, this assimilation is one possible avenue for the introduction of aspects of *rgya sdom-pa* type territorial sealing into the repertoire of the lama and the monastery.

Furthermore, both the idea and terminology of seals and sealing are found in some Buddhist *sūtra* and *tantra* texts translated into Tibetan. We also know that early Tibetan lamas applied various types of external sealing, such as the "command seal" (*bka'-rgya[-ma]*), which refers to a restriction of access a lama can place upon certain teachings by commanding that they remain closed, and not be revealed or "opened" and read until specified. Another important type of "sealing" of teachings and sites is found in the tradition of hidden religious "treasure" (*gter-ma*). Places where *gter-ma* are hidden are ritually sealed. This can have a physical dimension in which a site is marked in some way. Much of this marking seems to focus around use of the ritual dagger (*phur-bu*), where a treasury (*gter-kha*) is, for example, said to be "sealed by a ritual dagger on a rock

⁵⁸ See Klaus (1985:114, 232).

⁵⁹ See here especially Karmay (1996).

⁶⁰ Kvaerne (1980:186) has discussed a common narrative theme in Dunhuang documents, in which a hero figure commits some act which destroys a state of natural harmony, thereby angering a supernatural being, and resulting in disease, near-death or death itself.

pillar."⁶¹ It can also invoke a localized deity, such as the "entrustment" (*gtad-rgya*) given to a *mkha'-gro-ma* protector of a treasure as the final step of its "concealment" (*sbas-rgya*). Such protectors are appointed to guard the concealment site and obstruct anyone (except those appointed) from extracting its contents. Treasure texts themselves often end with phrases like *rgya rgya rgya*, meaning "seal, seal, seal!", but referring to their "secrecy" (*gsang-rgya* or *gsang-ba rgya bsdams-pa*) in general. The questions to be asked here are clearly not just about the origins of *rgya sdom-pa* territorial sealing, but about the origins of the particular practices found in Tibetan *gter-ma* culture as well.

Another possible area of influence is the introduction into Tibet from its Buddhist neighbours of institutional definitions of legal territorial rights associated with the practice of monasticism. Clearly some of these arrived by way of the translation of *Vinaya* texts. However, there is a difference between what the canonical texts state and customary practices like *rgya sdom-pa* sealing. Some of the early Buddhist institutions of the Tibetan imperial era (7th-9th centuries) were already provided with certain rights and privileges by the state to ensure their long-term support. Early religious foundations had territories and resources in the form of monastic estates (*lha-ris*) dedicated to them and protected by royal edict.⁶² During the next period of comprehensive state organization, namely that imposed under Yüan Dynasty rule, the rights of control over the territories and local resources associated with specific monasteries were subjected to frequent imperial decrees. A series of recently published Yüan decrees of this type (in both 'Phags-pa and Tibetan scripts), issued in Tibet between 1277/1289 and 1345, give specific legal protection to the rights of monasteries concerning the territories which surround them and the resources these areas contain, including grazing, timber, rivers, prohibition of hunting, and so on.⁶³ Such decrees predate the advent of the formal *bca'-yig* in Tibet, but their contents offer the same type of territorial and resource rights that later Tibetan *bca'-yig* define for monasteries, and which are associated with *rgya sdom-pa* type seals.

Here I only wish to suggest that the points I have just mentioned above all appear potentially important when turning in more detail to questions of the origin of *rgya sdom-pa* sealing in Tibet.

⁶¹ *Ka ba'i brag la phur bus rgyas btab yod* (Buffettrille 1994:17).

⁶² See Richardson (1985:23, 51, 97).

⁶³ See *Bod kyi lo rgyus yig tshags gces bsdus* (1995: Documents 1, 2, 3, 13, 14).

7. Afterword

Although elderly Tibetan informants remember territorial sealing being practiced up to the time of the Chinese occupation in the late 1950s, I have not personally encountered any contemporary example of this tradition still in use. However, during July-August 1999, I came across what is perhaps a modern incarnation of the same practice of "sealing" during a visit to A-mdo and Khams. The Chinese government had just declared a halt to all logging right throughout eastern Tibet areas, and forested regions were being marked with large signboards (in Tibetan and Chinese) announcing their legal protection. The new Tibetan term referring to these protected areas, and found on government signs, is *ri-rgya nags-bzo*, "sealed hills afforestation", with *ri-rgya* here being equivalent to the Chinese *feng-shan*.

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