

Losar, the Tibetan New Year

Date : February 1, 2016

by Dr. Phuntsog Wangmo



Losar celebration with horses. Photo L. Ottaviani

Tibetan New Year is called Losar and is celebrated to welcome in the New Year. New Year is a festival common to the whole world and celebrated at different times, according to the way the beginning of a new year is calculated. There are, however, great differences within Tibet regarding the preparations for the auspicious ceremonies of the New Year determined by the customs of certain regions. Tibetan people who live in high, snowy regions have many traditional festivals, the New Year being the most elaborate.

In Tibet there are several different ways of calculating the beginning of a New Year and various ways of doing the preparations for the auspicious ceremonies. For instance, there is a New Year called 'New Year of the small sheep' or 'new sheep' (*gsar am beu lug lo gsar*) that begins on the first day of the twelfth lunar month; there is the 'Kongpo new year' (*kong poi lo gsar*) that begins on the first day of the tenth lunar month; and the 'Nyarong Losar' (*nyag rong gyi lo gsar*) that begins on the thirteenth day of the twelfth lunar month. These different ways of determining the beginning

of a new year have reasons that can be traced to a very ancient past. In any case, the various New Years celebrated in specific regions of Tibet are called 'small year' (*lo chung*), while the new year calculated as the first day of the first lunar month is called 'great year' (*lo chen*) and is celebrated in all the three regions of Tibet (*dbu gtsang, mdo stod, mdo smad*) by all the Tibetans who live in or outside Tibet.

Although the different ways to celebrate the New Year in Tibet vary slightly according to different provinces, for the most part they are similar. The preparations, which start on the beginning of the twelfth month, and culminate on the twenty-ninth day of the twelfth month, begin with the house being cleaned well, inside and out, smoke coats are removed from the firewood and kitchen and round marks are made on the pillars and beams of the kitchen with white flour.

There is the tradition of preparing a soup called 'soup of the twenty-ninth day' (*dgu thug*), for dinner. That same evening, together with the offering of a sacrificial cake (*gtor ma*) to the gods, done by monks in the monastery, for the sake of casting off the bad influences of the previous year, each household carries some old clothes, broken kitchen utensils, some dirt from cleaning the house, a little of the soup of the twenty-ninth day in a broken bowl, and some pieces of dough mixed with some dirt from a body (symbolizing the removal of impurities and with specific diseases the place of the disease is touched) modelled with five fingers in the dough, placed in a jar with the clothes, fallen hair, etc., to the nearest cross road.

The main ingredients used to prepare the soup are meat, tiny sweet potatoes, rice, wheat, various greens, and cheese. Small pellets of dough are prepared and cooked in the soup. Some of the pellets are slightly bigger than others; if one or more of the bigger pellets of dough falls into the bowl of someone, what the pellet contains serves as an indication of the character, behavior of the person and a sign of what will happen to the person in the future, i.e., chili (harsh and scolding speech), coal (black heart), paper (unstable), wool (patient), wood (inflexible), salt (lazy), sugar (empty sweet talk), bone (good and strong character), stone (stable and kind). Also placed in the soup are the sun (famous for showing the way for other beings) and moon (good and helpful for other beings), shoes (travelling), a polar star (intelligence) and a religious scripture (teachings and scholarship) all modeled in dough.

The substances put in the pellets vary a little according to the various regions, for instance in the nomadic regions a piece of the leather from the collar of animals is placed in the bigger pellets to predict whether the cattle will be good or not in the next year. Before eating the soup, the articles to be thrown away are prepared, a little soup is poured in a broken bowl and all this is carried away to the cross road. That night these articles are taken away by four or more young men, one of who carries a stick with a bundle of dry hay, which is then ignited.

Heading the group, the young men turn around three times in the house saying: Come out! Come out. The group leaves the house and the last of them lights firecrackers as a symbol of chasing away the bad influences. Once they arrive at the crossroad (in Eastern Tibet it is the young men

who arrive) they imitate the sound of a barking dog and most of the firecrackers are lit. After the young men have thrown away the ransom, they return to the house without looking back. During the time of giving away the ransom, it is considered that if a member of the family (except those who went to give away the ransom) does not return to the house but lingers around for business or other purposes, in the following years they will encounter misfortune. When the young men return to the house, everyone eats soup, drinks ale (*chang*) and converses in a relaxed and playful way. As the bigger pellets are found in the bowls of various people, the significance is explained and is cause for merry laughter.

On the thirtieth day, the house is prepared for the festivity arranged with new tables, chairs, carpets, etc. Different foods are prepared: food for the family and guests and food that is offered to the gods. The house is cleaned again in the late afternoon of that day and the special sweet New Year biscuits called (*kha zas*) are arranged beautifully in an inter twined pattern on the altar of the house together with dry and fresh fruits, cheese, and butter. In Eastern Tibet there is the tradition of preparing what is called powdered butter that consists of roasted barley flour to which butter, sugar, honey, and milk are added. In Central Tibet this is substituted by an offering placed in a nicely painted box with two compartments; one compartment filled with roasted barley flour and the other with roasted wheat.

These offerings are place on the altar in the following way: at the centre plates with nicely arranged sweet biscuits, next to it, a head of a sheep made with butter (in ancient time it was probably a real sheep head that was placed there) and the head of the sheep is adorned with jewels and scarves and the mouth smeared with butter. The sheep symbolizes an offering for the cattle herding of the past year and an auspicious factor for the success in cattle herding in the New Year. Next to the sheep's head is a nice jar containing fresh sprouts of barley or wheat planted a couple of weeks before, as an offering for the past year's crops and an auspicious growing season for the New Year.



Cham dances at Khumbhum Monastery in Amdo, today Qinghai Province, to celebrate Losar.
Photo F. Grassi

Early on the first day of Losar, the main person responsible for the house, usually the mother, gets up early in the morning to prepare the *chang skol*, a Tibetan ale made with barley to which tiny sweet potatoes, molasses, and butter are added and then boiled. This ale and some sweet New Year biscuits are distributed to the members of the family while they are still in bed. Then a little later, from 5:30 to 6 am, the members of the family get up.

Another tradition is to leave a bucket of water outside the house exposed to the stars. This water is called water of the stars, *dkar chu*. In the morning, before the stars have disappeared from the sky, this water is brought into the house and hot water is added or the *dkar chu* is heated, and when it is lukewarm, the members of the family wash the five limbs, the face, mouth, hands and feet, with the water. In the very cold regions of Tibet, the water is not left overnight as it may turn to ice, but is only exposed to the stars for a while in the early morning before dawn. It is believed that the power of the stars reflected in the water can contribute to elimination of diseases and other impediments that the person may have.

When the family members meet, as soon as they have woken up, they greet each other with the phrase '*bkra shis bde legs*', which means 'Good luck and happiness to you!' Then the members of the family wear their best clothes and ornaments and sit in their respective seats in order of seniority. Two youths, a female and male or two of the same sex, distribute *chang* or ale from a

new stock, to members of the family in order of seniority reciting auspicious verses for their fortune, long life and religious activities. In turn, the older members recite auspicious verses for the younger members. The powdered butter is presented to each member of the family who in turn takes the powder three times, scattering it in the air reciting, for example in the Eastern regions: 'A mouthful of powdered butter, the glory of merit, and everlasting happiness and joy. Oh what a joy!' (*phye mar gyi kha gang/bsod nam gyi dpal gang/ skyid dga la yun ring/ a la la ho*). In Central Tibet the auspicious words are: 'Good luck, happiness and abundance; may the beautiful mother be healthy and gain everlasting happiness; may this day of the New Year bring us together again in happiness'.

After this, tea is distributed in porcelain cups adorned with the eight auspicious symbols or in wooden cups adorned and covered with silver. Then the members of the family take breakfast of roasted wheat and rice with sweet potatoes, butter and a resin called *bras bsil*. Then offerings are made to the front altar in the home and then in the temples. Another important activity of that morning is to go to meet one's teacher and offer the traditional white silk scarf and other offerings and express one's wishes for his or her long life and happiness.

On the second day of the New Year, people visit the houses of close relatives and receive visits of close relatives. On the third day, all the members of the family go to the top of the house to change the prayer flags on the prayer flag pole on the roof of the house and remain for a while on the roof offering the powdered butter to each other and drinking tea. Then, after breakfast, together with the other inhabitants of the area, they go to a sacred place nearby and authenticate prayer flags and perform the *bsang* ritual by offering the smoke of the juniper and other fragrant substances to the gods. From the fourth day onward the people visit the houses of the neighbors and invite guests for meals. They enjoy the festivity, merrily engaging in various games and sports: playing dice, bagchen, singing, dancing, riding horses, tug of war to measure strength, archery competitions, and running competitions. The festivity usually lasts for fifteen days, but for another fifteen days the people are still infected with the atmosphere of the New Year and unofficially continue to celebrate.

Reprinted from issue 71 of The Mirror

Calligraphy of New Year greeting by Giorgio Dallorto

