

Location

Skya rgya Administrative Village is in Skya rgya Township in the western part of Gcan tsha County, Rma lho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, which is located in China's northwestern Mtsho ngon Province. The village is at the base of Srin po, a majestic snow-peaked mountain that exceeds 5,000 meters in elevation. The Yellow River, resembling an immense uncoiled serpent, is an hour's walk from the village.

Subdivisions and Population

The village has four subdivisions¹⁰—Rog ma, Pha bzhi, Bar rtsig and Skyang tse. Each subdivision has thirty to forty families, except for Rog ma, which has seventy-six households. Each subdivision consists of six to ten kinship groups or *tsho ba*. In total, the village has more than 200 households with a population of approximately 1,500 people. All residents are Tibetan. A six-grade primary school founded in 1972 is situated in the village center, which in 2004, was attended by 154 local Tibetan students. There were also fifteen teachers.

History

According to elders, Skya rgya owes its name to two brothers, Skya ye and Nag ye, who settled in the area and controlled surrounding lands. Consequently, this place was once called Skya nag. Over time, however, the name changed to Skya rgya. The village leader in 2006 is reputed to be a descendant of the Tibetan king, Langdharma (Glang dar ma).¹¹

¹⁰ Villagers refer to these subdivisions as '*dui*,' which is a Chinese term that translates as 'production team.'

¹¹ The current village leader's father was a hereditary leader. The son however, has essentially no power, which belongs to the village leader appointed by the local township government. There are no elections in Skya rgya for village leaders.

According to Tibetan accounts, Langdharma was the last Tibetan king. He was born in 815 AD and was the son of Droza Temolak ('bro bza' khri mo legs) and King Trisong Deutsen (Khri srong lde'u btsan). He ascended the throne in 839. During the six years of his reign, many Tibetan Buddhists were killed and scores of monasteries and scriptures were destroyed at his bidding. A monk, Lhalun Paldor (Lha lung dpal rdor), assassinated him in 845 when, according to one account, he was reading an inscription on a monument to previous kings in front of the Potala Palace. Following King Langdharma's death, Tibetan Buddhism once again blossomed throughout Tibetan areas. The assassination of King Langdharma led to the collapse of the Tibetan kingdom.

According to local elders and certain historians, Skya rgya belongs to the Dong (Idong) Tribe, one of the four original tribes of Tibet that was a military force in early times. During the rule of Chief Padma skyabs,¹² this area was invaded and devastated by the Mongol army. Padma skyabs organized the villagers, rose against the Mongols, united the local leaders and eventually regained control over the local area. He continues to be fondly remembered.

Religion

The Geluk monastery, Gsung srog, and the Nyingma temple, Sgang,¹³ are near the village. Gsung srog Monastery originally was located in the Sa skya (Sakya) Region in Tibet in the early thirteenth century. Due to religious conflicts, the monks scattered. Afterwards, the monastery's head lama, Kun mkhyen shes rab dpal bzang, led a group of his monks to A mdo in search of a better site for the monastery. He stopped at Skya rgya and established two small monasteries in different locations separated by a large valley that henceforth was called Mani Valley. The local deity or *gzhi bdag* of that place was very strict. Therefore, the two monasteries had to offer *bsang*¹⁴ at different times, otherwise the deity would not be able to enjoy the *bsang* offered by both monasteries—it would miss the offerings from one monastery if they both made offerings simultaneously. One day, two monks who were in charge of making *bsang* wanted to learn what would happen if they burned *bsang* at both monasteries at the same time. When they did this the deity lost a whole day's meal because he was running here and there, not knowing where to go. This so infuriated the deity that he destroyed the larger of the two monasteries. However, the smaller one (today's Gsung srog Monastery) continues to exist and in 2004, its Tantric college had more than 100 monks. Local villagers consider it to be the most important monastery. Seasonally, monks in the local monasteries hold such festivals as Rgya lo smon lam, Gos sku gsham pa, Byams pa gling skor, Gsum pa'i bdag 'jug, Bzhi ba'i smon lam, Drug pa'i dbyar gnas, Bdun pa'i stod sgrubs, Bcu ba'i lnga mchod, Bcu ba'i ma ne and Bcu ba'i seng gdong.¹⁵

¹² Padma skyabs, the fifty-seventh generation of descendants of King Langdharma, was a brave, knowledgeable chief of Skya rgya Village.

¹³ Sgang Temple or Rin chen chos gling sngang (The Precious Sanctuary of the Dharma), is a temple frequented by local tantric practitioners. The temple dance performed there has a history of 300 years and is still intact.

¹⁴ *Bsang* is incense used by Tibetans. It often refers to dry juniper branches that emit a fragrant smell when burnt. Incense offerings can also be placed on smoldering *rtsam pa*.

¹⁵ Rgya lo smon lam = The Great Prayer Festival held from the seventh day to the fifteenth day of the first lunar month; Gos sku gsham pa = Displaying the *tangka* held on the eleventh day of the first lunar month; Byams ba gling skor = Circumambulating the monastery carrying a Maitreya *tangka* held on the thirteenth day of the first lunar month; Gsum pa'i bdag 'jug = Self-empowerment Ritual held during the third lunar month; Bzhi ba'i smon lam = The Great Prayer Festival held from the seventh day to the thirteenth day of the fourth lunar month; Drug pa'i dbyar gnas = The Summer Retreat held from the fifteenth day of the sixth lunar month to the first day of the eighth lunar month; Bdun pa'i stod sgrubs = Dharma Festival held from the third day to the tenth day of the seventh lunar month; Bcu ba'i lnga mchod = Offerings on the Anniversary of Tsong kha pa's death held on the twenty-fifth day to the twenty-ninth day of the tenth lunar month; Bcu ba'i ma ne = Mani Festival held during the tenth lunar month and Bcu ba'i seng gdong = Ritual of Self-initiation held from the fifth day to the tenth day of the tenth lunar month.

Villagers are sometimes excluded from certain monastery festivals. For example, during Drug pa'i dbyar gnas, monks go to a mountaintop with tents, food, drums, trumpets and cymbals to beseech the heavens for rain. They spend one week there. Laymen may not participate.

Villagers venerate A myes Srin po, a local mountain deity; A myes Dam chen of the Nyingma (Rnying ma pa) Lineage in Sgang Temple and A myes Yul lha in Gsung srog Monastery as their tutelary deities. Local villagers often beseech these three deities by going to their respective shrines and offering them *bsang* in order to gain good fortune for their families. Whenever a villager goes out for work or other business, they first visit these deities, offer them *bsang* and pray for good fortune.

The village leader is the chief organizer of local religious activities. He also holds regular meetings that are attended by older men at which government policy and village affairs are discussed. Local tantric practitioners wearing masks of deities, humans or animals periodically perform religious dances in the Sgang Temple courtyard.

Death

Bya 'phen pa,¹⁶ water burial, cremation and stupa burial are practiced with *bya 'phen pa* being the most common. The place of final departure where corpses are taken is about an hour's walk above the village. The body is taken to this site, *bsang* is burnt, a conch is blown, vultures gather and then the corpse is chopped into pieces and fed to vultures. The bodies of ordinary Living Buddhas and higher lamas are usually cremated after being rubbed with butter, and the ashes are kept in a designated place as a final dedication to the monastery.

People prefer to die at home rather than away. If someone dies in a hospital or elsewhere outside their home, the corpse is not brought back inside the home because it is believed this may cause illness and even the death of family members.

No mourning period is observed when children under the age of seven die and no religious activities are conducted. Several male relatives take the dead child to the Yellow River, wrap it in new white thin cloth and then give it to water animals as a food offering.

When someone over the age of seven dies, a man from the family immediately visits the head of Gsung srog Monastery to call the *bdun ba sa* or 'the seven,' who are seven monks. They are selected by the head of the monastery and sent to the bereaved home to chant Buddhist prayers for the first seven days of the funeral ritual, which is the most important funeral period. When the chanting time ends, the seven monks return to the monastery loaded with tea bricks; their pouches are stuffed with cash that cheers their spirits.

During the first seven-day period, representatives of every village family visit the bereaved home. All the village old men, women and girls are required to fast,¹⁷ sit on

¹⁶ Villagers say that *bya 'phen pa* was first begun in the eleventh century in Lhasa to fulfill the last wish of 'bri gung chos rgyal (Drikung Chosjal), a renowned tantric master. Villagers believe that feeding corpses to birds is a chance to do good deeds, is environmentally beneficial and unlike graves, does not require digging the earth or taking land out of cultivation.

¹⁷ In general, people eat and talk every other day during this 'fasting' period.

the *heezee*¹⁸ and chant *mani* in melodious tones. People who visit the bereaved family do not cover their heads during this time of mourning. Young men are divided into groups and assigned such tasks as visiting every household to collect flour and a kilo of rapeseed oil; making a huge fireplace that will accommodate a large pot; frying a large amount of *go dmar* or 'red bread,' which are thin round and square bread pieces; fry long strings of dough in spiral form or *sog sog*;¹⁹ cook noodles; serve food and greet and escort guests. Almost every household in the entire township visits the home with gifts of bread, tea bricks, wheat grain and cash. The quantity of gifts is determined by how close the visiting family is to the family of the deceased.

The family of the deceased serves three meals to all the villagers for about two weeks—in the morning, at lunchtime and in the evening. Just before a meal is served, a trumpet is sounded from the roof of the deceased's home and village children then run eagerly to dine.

After three days, the corpse is taken to the place of final departure before dawn. A son or a relative of the deceased chops the corpse into pieces with an ax. A conch is blown as the men²⁰ recite Buddhist prayers. Vultures flock to the site and eat the corpse. It is a very bad omen if vultures do not come. It suggests that the dead person committed many sins in his life and the pieces of the corpse are taken back to the village and cremated outside the family courtyard. This is essentially the end of the funeral ceremony if the family is poor.

By convention, the mourning period lasts forty-nine days. It is the responsibility of sons to cover the funeral expenses. If the family's financial situation permits, family members visit such monasteries as Bya khyung, Rong bo and Lha ri²¹ and give monks tea bricks, bread, flour, rapeseed oil and cash in the hope that the spirit of the dead person will be safe. Alternatively, the family may visit monasteries and prepare the best food that they can afford for the monks.

A final ceremony is conducted one year after the exact time the deceased died. Afterwards, every member of the affected family may bathe, women may plait their hair, men may brush their hair and family members may sing, drink liquor and wear new clothes.

Nearby Muslims

Muslims classified as Hui by the Chinese government live about twenty kilometers away in Dong sna²² Town, which is situated near the Yellow River. They often visit the

¹⁸ 'Heeze' is a Tibetan word that lacks an accurate standard written form. Today, it is often written incorrectly in literary Tibetan as 'tsha thab' that translates as 'hot stove.' This is incorrect because the *heezee* is not a hot stove, rather, it is a hollow platform made of stones with a thin layer of dry, hard earth on top. Coals and smoldering straw and grain husks are placed inside to heat it. Felt is spread atop the *heezee*, which is where family members sleep and important guests eat. Chinese: *kang*.

¹⁹ The sound of this fried bread being eaten is the name of this bread.

²⁰ Women and girls do not attend.

²¹ Bya khyung Monastery is located in today's Dpa' lung (Hualong) County. Rong bo Monastery is located in today's Reb gong (Tongren) County. Lha ri Monastery is located in today's Zhun hwa (Xunhua) Salar Autonomous County.

²² Chinese: Kangyang.

village with mules loaded with baskets of fruits and vegetables to exchange for grain, wood and medicinal herbs. Older Hui women and men of this village speak perfect Tibetan that is much better than their Chinese. An older man (b. 1931) from the village confided, “We have the same blood; we have the same ancestors. We used to marry each other, shared the same customs and observed the same traditional principles. It was Ma Bufang who converted us to Islam.”

Languages

Although local residents speak A mdo Tibetan dialect, in the course of frequent contact with neighboring Hui, many older Skya rgya men (b. ~ 1970 and earlier) have learned to understand the local Chinese dialect, which is very similar to Qinghai Chinese Dialect, and can reply in simple Chinese. However, very few women born in 1970 and earlier speak any Chinese and almost no women in this group can read and write any Tibetan. On the other hand, most men in this age group can read simple Tibetan. Villagers born after 1970 had increasing access to government-sponsored education. In 2006, approximately forty Skya rgya villagers had either graduated from a college or university or were currently students, and about ninety percent of school-age children attended primary or middle schools.

Housing

In the past, a common home was a one-roomed, large high-ceilinged, adobe-wood structure with a big *heezee*. This is where the family slept, cooked, ate and lived together. The family's horses, mules and donkeys were also kept in this room at night to protect them from cold. Generally, when you walked into such a room, the cooking area and the *heezee* were on the right, and the animals were kept in an area reserved for them on the left. Nowadays, Skya rgya inhabitants live in flat-roofed Tibetan-style adobe rooms that are built around a rectangular, adobe-wall compound. The rooms are bedrooms and storerooms, a room for donkeys and mules, a room for goats and sheep and a large room with a kitchen, *heezee*, chairs and a sofa for entertaining guests. Structures are generally one-story. Older homes are generally two-story (Photograph 5). Certain richer families live in brick structures (Photograph 9).

Livelihood

The majority of residents are engaged in half-farming and half-herding, which are important income sources. Trees are cut from conifer forests that are a thirty-minute walk from the village and sold to Muslim traders. A large log sold for approximately 250 RMB in 2004. Smaller poles sold for 25–30 RMB.

The forest is divided into two parts. The village controls one part and the other is State property and policed by forest guards, who receive government salaries. Caterpillar fungus is also present. Though not as plentiful or as large as those found in Mgo log (Chinese, Guoluo) and Yul shul (Chinese, Yushu) prefec-

tures in southern Qinghai, they are present in the higher parts of mountains. Women collect this medicinal herb and sell them to Muslims. Village men annually leave the villages and go to Mgo log, Yul shul and Mtsho byang (Chinese, Haibei) prefectures to collect caterpillar fungus.

Crops include wheat, barley, peas, rapeseed, sunflowers, potatoes and a few vegetables. Corn was a main crop until the late 1950s but it is seldom cultivated nowadays. Right after the great starvation period that local villagers refer to as *skal ngan tha kha* or the 'miserable period' from 1957-1960, locals cultivated wheat and barley. There were good harvests and everyone agreed that products made from the wheat flour were very tasty. Afterwards, wheat became the main crop. Weeding fields and harvesting crops is mostly women's work. Men and women both do irrigation and milling work. Plowing with *mdzo*,²³ male yaks and mules is men's responsibility.

Livestock include yaks, cattle, goats, sheep, mules, horses and donkeys. Yaks and cattle provide meat, milk, butter, yogurt and animal skins. Only a few families raise chickens. Mules, horses and donkeys help in agricultural work. Wheat and barley flour, butter, yogurt, rapeseed oil, potatoes, pork, mutton and beef are main foods.

Men provide cash to sustain the household and are active and influential in their families' daily life. The husband controls and inherits the family property and the wife is subordinate to the husband, even if he lives in her parents' home.

It is not seemly for a woman to handle weapons or ride horses or mules and they are excluded from certain religious and public meetings. Women and girls cook, care for children, wash clothing, feed the pigs, keep the house clean and perform other domestic chores. They generally confine their activities to their households, fields, nearby forests where they collect fuel and nearby grazing areas. A married woman should be able to manage the family's property, home and children when her husband is away. Old people and children live in the mountains year-round and herd livestock.

Clothing

Older Skya rgya residents wear robes lined with wool or lambskin. In recent decades, Western style suits, jackets and jeans have become popular and people under the age of around forty have stopped wearing their traditional costumes, except on such special occasions as the New Year period and weddings.

Recreation

Recreational activities include singing folk songs, Tibetan religious dances, camping in summer²⁴ and archery competitions.

²³ A *mdzo* is a male cross between a yak and a cow and is used to plow fields. *Mdzo* are also sold for their meat.

²⁴ In summer, families may pitch tents on mountain grasslands and spend some days there, enjoying the beautiful scenery and warm weather. People clad in their holiday best greet each other.