

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES AMONG THE BUDDHISTS IN MUSTANG DISTRICT, NEPAL

TOMO VINŠĆAK
Etnološki zavod
Filozofskog fakulteta
Sveučilišta u Zagrebu
Ivana Lučića 3
10000 Zagreb

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The research team from the Zagreb Faculty of Philosophy's Ethnological Department was in August and September 1993 in Nepal. It was the first field research of that kind in more than three hundred-year-old history of the University of Zagreb conducted on the subcontinent of India. The team has spent a month in Nepalese Mustang District in the Himalayas, which is at the altitude of more than 3,000 meters. The main aim of the research was to explore ethnologically and to document audio-visually the traditional, originally Tibetan, way of life and Buddhist religion of people living in that part of the Himalayas. This paper is a result of both the author's own field research and the available bibliography.

Nepal is a Himalayan kingdom, situated between India on the South and Tibet on the North. Unlike its neighbours, it has never been colonized. Nepal is a very old country that has not gone through many cultural changes, primarily because it was closed for foreign influences.

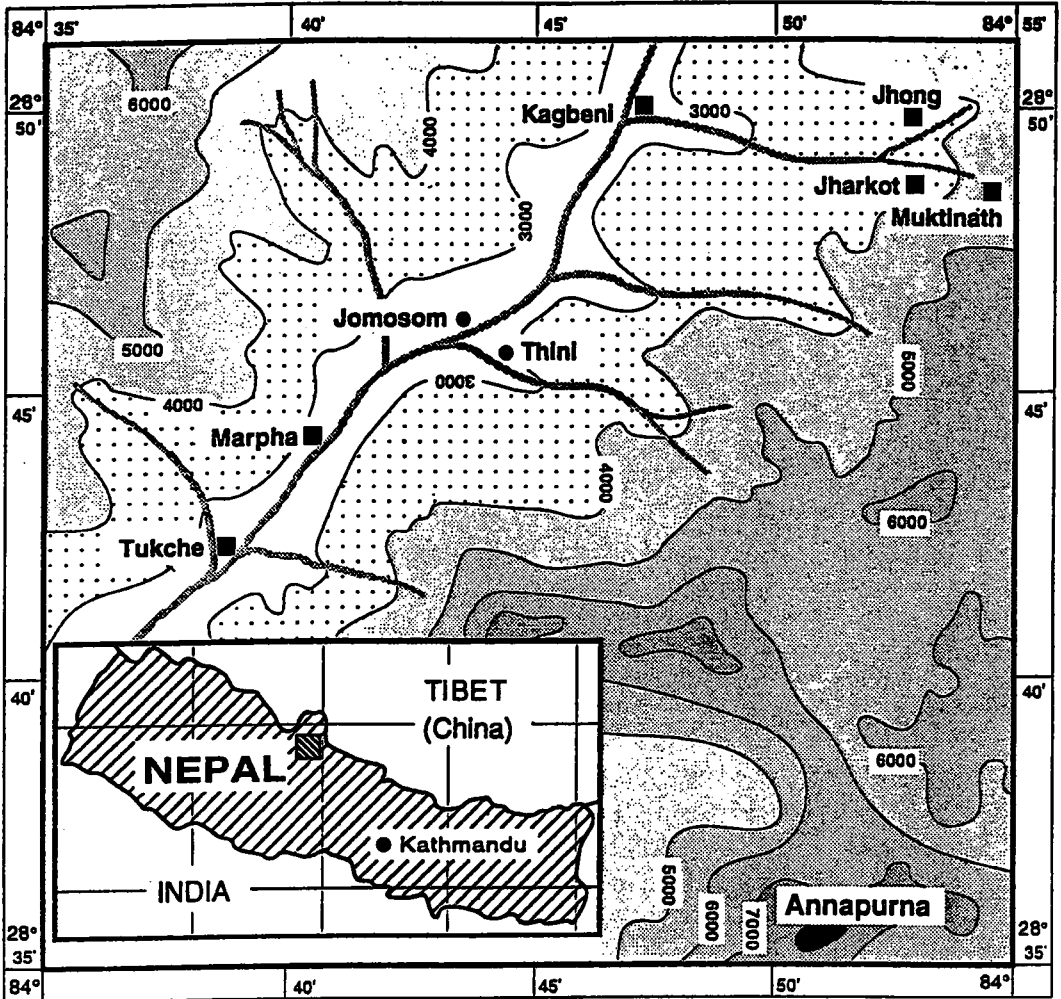
Today, there are 35 different ethnic groups in Nepal, and they make the total of 18 million inhabitants. Each ethnic group lives in a certain area defined by geographical and climate factors, scientifically called *ecological niche*.

About 80% of Nepal's inhabitants are of Hindu religion, about 18% are Buddhists, 2% are Muslims and 0.21% are Christians (Rieffel 1990:54). Languages spoken here belong to one of the three major groups - Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, or the old native languages that had slightly changed due to their intermingling with those who came later. Speaking of races, here there are ethnic groups and tribes that belong to Mediterranean, Mongoloid, or Austro-Asian racial type. Nepal is commonly related to as a melting pot of different languages, races, cultures and religions. Luckily, there have been no religious or national wars, because all the people living there consider themselves to be primarily Nepali.

The main object of this research were the Buddhists speaking Tibeto-Burman languages. In the part of the Himalayas through which the river Kali Gandaki flows, Mustang District, those peoples are the natives who have been living there from times immemorial.

Mustang District is divided into Lower, Middle and Upper or Lo Mustang.

If we go upstream the Kali Gandaki river's canyon, we first enter the people Thakali's region. Their main centre is Tukche. Nepalese anthropologist Bista put them into the Middle hills and valley people's group (Bista, 1987:86).



■ The research sites*

* Map from: Ancient Nepal, N. 130-133, June-January 1992-93 p. 10, Kathmandu, 1992-93

Going more upstream, there are people who, according to Bhakti Hirachana (from Marpha), also consider themselves to be Thakali, but Bista thinks of them as Panchagaun, i.e., the inhabitants of five villages. Their centre is Marpha, two hours walk away from Jomsom, the administrative centre of the whole Mustang District. Geographically and administratively, the regions of the Thakali and the Panchagaun belong to Lower Mustang.

After Jomsom, there is the region of the Baragaun people, the inhabitants of twelve villages, who belong among the Himalayan people. Their language and physical features closely resemble those of Lo in Upper Mustang. They like to be called Gurung, although, according to their origin, they are not (Bista, 1987:181). Their centre is the medieval town of Kagbena. The inhabitants of six villages near Muktinath are in the Baragaun group as well.

Along the Nepal-Tibet border there is Upper Mustang or Lo Mustang. People living there are called Lopa. Even today they have a nominal king, in Tibetan called *Lo-Gyalpo*. His personal name is Jigme Parwal Bista.

The Hindu Nepali call the Buddhist Tibetans *Bhote* or *Bhotias*. These names have derogatory meaning. The Tibetans call themselves *Poipo* - their name is derived from Tibetan word *Po*, which stands for Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist name for Hindus is *Tipetia*. An anthropologist has gone so far as to say that culturally, ethnically and linguistically, Lo is almost purely Tibetan. This statement could startle many Central Tibetans but it is certainly true as a general observation. Neither the language of Lo - which includes many different dialects - nor its people or its local customs have ever been studied in detail. Nevertheless, those people are *Bhotias* and there is no doubt that throughout its history Lo has been a participant in Tibetan civilization (Jackson 1984:2).

This area is both ethnologically and culturally very interesting, because many ancient elements of life (e.g. polyandry), culture, religion and beliefs are still preserved. Many of those traditions are hard to find even in Tibet itself, because they have been destroyed since the Chinese occupied Tibet. The research crew has been living and working for two weeks in the villages situated directly below Torong-La, one the highest Himalayan saddles, near the rich valley of the river Dzong Kola, between the altitudes of 3,500 and 4,000 meters.

Here there are several villages inhabited by the Buddhists: Dzarkot (Tibetan *Dzar*), Dzong, Chongur, Rani Puwa and Muktinath, the holy pilgrimage place for all the Hindus and Buddhists.

Dzong, name of a village, on Tibetan means *fortification*, and there really was one. Its ruins still jut out in the middle of the village. Today it is a Buddhist monastery and a school for the newly come monks, who will spend many years studying the holy Buddhist texts. After that, some of them will become lamas. Besides about 50 students, a few older lamas-teachers live here as well, one of which paints holy pictures in the old, traditional way. Second born son from each Tibetan family becomes a monk even nowadays.

Followers of four Tibetan Buddhist orders, Nyingma-pa, Kargyud-pa, Geluk-pa, and mostly Sakya-pa, live in villages near Mustang (Ramble 1992-93:50). Before Buddhism spread from India to Tibet through Nepal in the 8th century, the Tibetans had had Bon - their own religion or belief-system with a distinctive meditation technique and religious teaching. It is an old, pre-Buddhist religion, which reflects in itself both old shamanic and animistic cults with magic common to the natives inhabiting the vast area from Tibet across Mongolia to Siberia. It is based on the belief that there is a spirit (*anima, Tib. bumi*) in each thing, river, lake, mountain, cliff, animal and human being.

It is commonly believed that Buddhism has in its special way enriched the old believes and brought them closer to all the strata of society. But although changed and enriched, Bon is still present as a distinctive system of believes and folk form of Buddhism, and it is closely related to Tantrism. Tantrism was brought here by Padmasambhava himself in the late 8th century. It is expressed as the ultimate form of Buddhism and its characteristic is the adjustment to the era we live in right now, the Kaliyuga. In this era of decay of the original spiritual values it is necessary for man to get to know his own physical and sexual energy and to use it to gain his life aims. This recognition of dark forces and of the need of subduing them has enabled Tantric Buddhism to triumph over the old Bon Believers, using a large number of Bon methods at the same time.

Muktinath, located in a poplar grove, is the Hindu and Buddhist sacred shrine and pilgrimage site. It is known to all the Hindus for its 198 sacred water wells. In the great Indian epic poem Mahabharata, composed 300 years BC, Muktinath is called Mukticetra, meaning *place of salvation*. Brahma, the Creator himself, has left a sign here - he has lit a fire on the ground, water and stone. One can see this miracle (burning natural gas) in a small Buddhist shrine below the main Hindu temple (*mandir*). Every Hindu has to visit this place at least once during his life, wash in sacred water and drink it (Bezručka 1985:117). A bit lower from Muktinath there is Jwala Mai or Tolimember gompa, the place of pilgrimage for all the Buddhists. Through its base flows a stream, and above the stream three holy fires burn from the hole. It is said that Brahma has lit them. The one that has been burning from the ground has recently been extinguished, so only two fires are still burning - one on the water and one on the stone. According to the legend, the gompa is built on the place where Padmasambhava or Guru Rimpoche, the legendary teacher who is believed to have brought Buddhism from India to Tibet, has meditated. The legend says that this foot-print can still be found in a stone not far from the gompa. He had practiced *gtum-mo*, i.e., the yoga of inner warmth. This technique has always been used by monks who have been looking for their insight without any food or clothes in lonely places high in the Himalayas. It is believed that he is originally from today's Northern Pakhstan, and that he is, according to the Buddhist believes, the incarnation of the Buddha himself. He had fought with shamans and Bon-demons by his power of meditation and his spell skills. After the long-lasting and wearying fight, Padmasambhava had finally won the battle, and then he had founded the oldest Buddhist order called *Nyingma-pa*. Young women wash themselves in water that runs out of the base of the gompa, believing that it would bring them fertility and release after death. Tour through the sacred places or pilgrimage is the basic human activity and an obligation for all the Hindus and Buddhists. Hindus from all over the world have four sacred places called *chardhum*, that they have to visit at least once during their lifetime. Those places are Pashupatinath in Nepal, and Kedirnath, Benares and Amarnath in India. Muktinath is one of the eight sacred semi-centres. Buddhists have four centres and eight semi-centres. The four centres (*nechheshi* on Tibetan) are Kangir on the Kailasa Mountain in Tibet, village Labchi near the Everest in Nepal, Chari, placed between Sikkhim and Tibet, and, finally, the city of Kathmandu in Nepal (informers, R.R. Kunwar).

Soma Namgyel lama, a well-known doctor of traditional Tibetan medicine, lives in Dzarkot. Besides being a physician, he teaches children Tibetan, their mother tongue, in an old, traditional way - by rhythmic singing of sacred texts. He collects medicinal herbs and makes herbal remedies using the old formulae. He is a member of the Buddhist *Saskya-pa* order and the chief of the Centre for Traditional Tibetan Medicine, which is well known in Nepal and abroad.

Just like every second-born son becomes a monk, every second-born daughter becomes a nun, on Tibetan called *juma* (Tibetan *tsun-ma*) (Thapa 1992:135). The nuns take care of the maintenance of



Muktinath - the place of pilgrimage for all the Buddhists (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)



The Yartung festival - the lama is at the head of the procession, blessing the fields; Muktinath (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)

the sacred places, but they also perform special rituals. Their parents' help and some modest contributions are their only sources of financial support. Their nunhood forbids them to get married.

Dzarkot is one of seven Nepalese centres of Bon. *Pembo* lama Tsamba Takla, who officially considers himself to be a member of the Buddhist *Nyingma-pa* order, lives here. He is sixty-year-old father of seven children. The oldest of them is a doctor of Buddhist philosophy, and has graduated from the Buddhist university in India. The village Bon-lamas are allowed to get married and they live in the place of worship or gumpa together with their families. The ritual and magic knowledge is transmitted from the father to the son. A lama is expected to set an example to the whole village. He is one of the main carriers of both the secular and the spiritual lives of a village and the future of the Tibetan people is in his hands. The word *pembo* is also used by the Sherpa tribe to denote the village doctor, who is called *jhankri* by the native tribes of Nepal (Kunwar, 1989:63). This kind of folk Buddhism that can be found in Mustang is sometimes called *Jhankrism* (Bista 1987:193).

There are two basic groups of Buddhism today in the world: *Hinayana* (*Theravada*), represented mostly by Ceylonese and Burman Buddhism, whose cannon is older and written on the Pali language, and *Mahayana*, spread throughout Tibet, China, Nepal and Mongolia, with cannon written on Sanskrit (Radhakrishnan 1964:426).

Unlike *Hinayana*, *Mahayana* preaches the belief in the God Saviour. *Dharma*, or Tibetan *chos* is the all-penetrating spiritual force which is the ultimate and the highest life principle. Buddhas, creatures gifted with the highest intelligence and love, save the world from the decay. There were myriad of them in the past and there will be myriad of them in the future (Radhakrishnan 1964: 436).

Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism is divided into the four main orders: *Nyingma-pa*, *Karhyud-pa*, *Sakya-pa*, and *Gelug-pa* (Davy 1990:213-216).

Nyingma-pa is the oldest Buddhist order. Its founder was Padmasambhava in cca. 750 AD. It is said to have absorbed the Bon believes. The well-known Tibetan Book of the Dead originates from *Nyingma-pa* order. Lama Tsamba Takla from Dzarkot is officially a member of this order, but he practises the old Bon rituals.

Kargyud-pa is derived from *kargyud*, meaning *word*, i.e., *conveyed teaching*.

Sakya-pa order was founded in cca. 1073 AD, and it got its name after its first monastery called *Sakya*, meaning *gray soil*. A monastery and a school in villages Dzong and Kagbena belong to the *Sakya-pa* order.

Galug-pa is the order of *yellow hats*. Today's Dalai Lama is a member of this order. *Gelug* means *virtuous behaviour*. *Yellow hats* is the Chinese name given to the followers of *Galug-pa* order. Members of other three orders are the *red hats*. *Dalai Lama* is the title given by Mongol king Altan-khan, and it means *Ocean Lama* or *the Teacher as Great as the Ocean*. *Gjalva Rinpoche*, which is Tibetan for the Dalai Lama, means *Precious Shelter*. The contemporary Dalai Lama lives in exile in India (Norbu, Turnbull 1967:340).

As I have stated above, the followers of a special type of Buddhism, formed by centuries long intermingling of old autochthonous *Bon* believes with *Mahayana* and *Tantric* Buddhism, live in these parts of the Himalayas, as well as in other parts of Nepal and Tibet. One must be careful when using the term *Bon* for this type of Buddhism. Today, it is a mixture of believes which differs from both the original *Bon* and the original Buddhist teaching (Ramble 1986:104-107).

Just as the followers of the Tibetan *Mahayana* Buddhism have their pantheon, so do the *Bon* believers. Magic is still a constituent part of both religions. The only difference is that *Bon* emphasizes the state of trance or a kind of ecstasy in which the *Bon* Lama is put while performing certain rituals. *Bon* derives from concepts, rites, and observances which are common to both religions but which, because they show differences of intent, aspect, or emphasis, may become indexes of the differences between the *Bon* religion of today and Tibetan Buddhism. These differences are clues which point to the nature of the earlier religion of the land. They can only be studied comparatively, and are found in the following fields: (1) pantheon, (2) magic, (3) prayers, and (4) offerings. The pantheon, most of which is shared by the two religions, is comprehensively summed up in the Tibetan bipartite term *lHa aDre* ("god-goblin"), which clearly reflects a dualistic concept of existence. Another system of three categories suggests a tripartite view of the cosmos. Those categories are: (1) those above, the *lHa* ("gods"), (2) those of the middle region, the *Sa bDag* ("earth lords") and/or the *gNYan* ("argali"), or strong ones, and (3) those of the underworld, the *Klu* ("serpent spirits"), or *Nagas* (Ekvall 1964:24).

Holy Buddhist texts are used by both religions, with stress on the rhythmic repetition of syllables accompanied by *dramaru* drum, made of wood or human skull, bigger drum, cymbals, bells and wind instruments, such as trumpets made of human thigh-bone or of some kinds of sea shells.

Both of them are familiar with the *puja* ritual - offerings and gifts for the gods who are asked for help and protection in this life. The main Buddhist aim is the salvation from pain and suffering produced by worldly life and the break of the *samsara* wheel, i.e., the circle of death and re-birth. Ignorant people yearn after re-birth in the world of gods (Tibetan *Lha*), and wise men know that it is followed by the retrogression towards the empire of demons and titans called *Lha-ma-yin*. For the Buddhists, a man is just a temporary accumulation which is disintegrated by the death, after which only a certain wish or thirst for existence survives. It is created from the ignorance and supported by *karman*.

The *Bon* followers ask their gods for success, happiness, health, well-being and protection in this life, and after their death they would like to resettle on heaven, which is similar to the belief of the North American Indians, as well as to the Christian world picture. There are three concepts which belong exclusively to *Bon-po* and are a part of the system, as known historically and now practised: (1) a dualistic conceptualization of existence and religion, (2) the significance of heaven in relation to the afterlife, and (3) the nature and role of man of *gSHen* lineage, who is the reputed founder of the *Bon* religion (Ekvall 1964:18).

Bon is not a uniform religion; it is composed of the mixture of tribal cults, demonology, animism, shamanism, and believes related to nature and weathering factors. Today it is different from the way it used to be before Buddhism came into Tibet. Formerly, the destiny of every inhabitant of a Tibetan village was in hands of three people - a village shaman, a priest and a doctor. Shaman was very respected, but at the same time people were afraid of him, because he was connected with both the good gods and very evil and dangerous spirits and demons.

Today, the *Bon* Lama has taken over the role of the shaman. He is the spiritual leader of the *Bon* clan and the clan could not survive without him. From their birth and wedding till their death, members of the *Bon* clan get spiritual and transcendental knowledge and help from their Lama. Spirits often help people in different difficulties in their lives, but they can also harm people. If a guardian spirit (and every Tibetan has one) realizes that his protégée does all kinds of forbidden deeds, he is ready to kill him to save him from the sin, meaning unacceptable bad things according to their world picture. That

is why the exorcism (the expulsion of evil spirits by prayers and religious rites from villages of haunted people) is very well developed in *Bon-po*.

On the confluence of the Kali Gandaki and Dzong Kole rivers there is the medieval city of Kag, or today's Kagbeni. It is a lively town, placed on the junction of caravan roads leading towards Upper Mustang, Dolpo, Tibet, Muktinath and Manang. The entrance into the heart of the town is guarded by two big clay statues representing pre-Buddhist gods, guardians of the town. The male god stands on the Northern and the female god on the Southern side of the entrance. Statues like these can also be found in other places in Mustang, and their existence witnesses about the religion that was present in these parts before Buddhism. Ethnologically speaking, they refer to the ancestor cult and they are offered gifts during certain rituals.

A village must be cleaned from the evil spirits at least twice a year. At the end of August 1993 those rituals took place in Marpha and Kagbeni.

The ritual consists of carrying of holy Buddhist books (108 volumes) through the village and nearby fields. Books are composed of long sheets of paper placed one above another inside of wooden cover. Those books can weigh up to 10 kg, and they are carried by boys and girls forming the procession. The ritual procession is guided by village lamas, who read sacred texts, play the drums and blow the horns (the *dunchen* type). Besides lama, there are three men and three women, who are elected every year to lead the procession. They are dressed traditionally. One man carries the statue of the Buddha and women carry pots filled with *chhang*. To play such an important role is an honour for every Tibetan. Having gone all over the fields, having made the magic circle across the fields and the village and having blessed them with alcohol drink called *chhang*, the procession returns into their village. Rest of the village inhabitants waits for them there lined up. Each of them must be hit on the head by the sacred book to receive the blessing. Boys who carry the books can use this opportunity to hit harder the girls they like most. Each villager gets food and sweets as a present. This is a way of making the village community firmer and stronger. This kind of processions of villagers in prayer for the crops is known in other parts of Tibet as well (Bell 1928:51).

The Tibetans inhabiting these parts of the Himalayas have three types of annual rituals: (1) rituals for subduing spirits and demons and making them unable to harm people, (2) rituals for exorcising spirits from the village, the magic circle or the haunted individuals, and (3) rituals in honour of the ancestors. All these rituals are very old and they lead us to the very beginning of the history of religion and civilization. It is important to note that they are performed on strictly selected days of the year in accordance to the astrological picture of the celestial bodies and the shift of the seasons.

A separate type of folk customs is the *Yartung* festival, which takes place at the end of the farming year, at the end of August or at the beginning of September, depending on the full Moon. The festivity's head is Tsamba Takla Lama. It is devoted to the main village guardian. People thank him for the good crop of this year and ask him for fertility in the next year, as well as for the well-being of people.

One of the main characteristics of the old *Bon* religion was the offering of animals as sacrifices to the gods. This custom was preserved in Kagbeni up until 50 years ago (Ramble 1992-93:54). A sacrifice called *aya* was offered to the local gods called *Pha-lha* and *Jo-bo* three times a year. The offering was usually a sheep, a goat or a yak. The biggest and main offering was yak, on Tibetan *Loyak*. After killing a yak and offering a sacrifice to the gods, the yak's body would be cut into small pieces. The shaman who performed the ritual would take yak's liver and use it to predict the next year's health of people and cattle and the amount of crops.



The town of Marpha - the ritual of carrying books (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)



The town of Kagbeni - one of the two clay figures, guardians of the town (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)

The official Buddhist orders did not like such rituals with living offerings and they did everything they could to exterminate them. The ritual offering of bull is known to other nations as well. The Iranians used to kill bulls in their *Mitraist* cults. The connection between Tibetan sacrificing yaks and Iranian sacrificing bulls can be guessed, but it has not been scientifically proven yet. During the *Yartung* festival in 1993 in Muktinath a yak was ritually killed and its flesh was distributed to all the clans from the nearby villages.

The blood sacrifices are not offered any more, except perhaps for some hidden places in the Himalayas, but a substitute has been found. The prohibition against killing and sacrificing men and animals was placed upon the Bon-po at the instigation of Padma Sambhava, who also taught them to make substitute effigies of the victims (Ekvall 1964:28). The effigy in form of a yak is made of barley pastry called *isampa*. The effigy is called *torma*, and it undergoes the same ritual procedures as if it were a real yak. Entering any Tibetan village, a foreigner would first notice the prayer flags, which wave on the roof of every house, attached to the mast. These flags are several meters long linens with prayers and the symbol of the wind-horse called *lung-ta* written all over them. As the wind from the South to the North through the Kali Gandaki canyon blows almost always, the flags are always blowing and giving a certain mystic atmosphere to the whole village. The wind-horse takes over the role of the owner of the house and the prayer written on the flag finds its way to the god by the blowing of the flag. The Tibetans are very practical people in these things - they also use the water power to move the prayer wheels called *mani-chorkor*. There are prayer wheels in all sizes - from the little ones that are held in hands and move that way to the ones several meters high, set in motion by water or wind (Kunwar 1989:200). The prayer mills are rollers made of bone, wood or metal. They have paper pads with prayers or pledges written on them inside.

A special trap - the spirit trap - is placed above the front door, so that the evil spirits cannot enter the house and harm people. The central part of the spirit trap is made of goat or sheep skull with horns, supported by a willow-rod structure which is interwoven with straw and woolen threads. Inside of the skull there is the sacred prayer, which was put here by the *Bon* lama when he installed it. When an evil spirit or a demon gets caught into the woolen threads, it is destroyed.

A dog skull is built in the foundation of the house as a means of protection.

Bon is today considered to be a part of Buddhism, and *Bon* lamas can easily be recognized by their long hair curled in a special way. Some parts of the ritual itself are performed in the direction opposite of the one the other Buddhist orders use. When going round sacred places such as *chorten* walls of *mani* walls or *gompa*, the *Bon* followers circumambulate counter-clockwise, while all the others circumambulate clockwise (Bista 1987:193). The swastika, *yung-drung* on Tibetan, a symbol of well-being in temples, also has its forks turned left.

The *chortens* (mchod-rten, Sanskrit *stupa*) are erected everywhere where the holy presence is felt, i.e., mountain peaks, canyons, village gates, etc. They are conceived as three-dimensional *mandalas* and they consist of five elements, which, placed one above another, represent the five *chakras* of the subtle human body or the five basic elements that compose the world - ground, water, fire, air and ether. *Chortens* represents the Buddha's body itself. Just as the first Buddha's followers used to approach him from the left, the today's true Buddhist believers circumambulate the *chortens* clockwise. *Korlam*, or circumambulation of sacred locations in a clockwise direction, express the belief that man revolves around Buddha as the planets rotate around the sun.

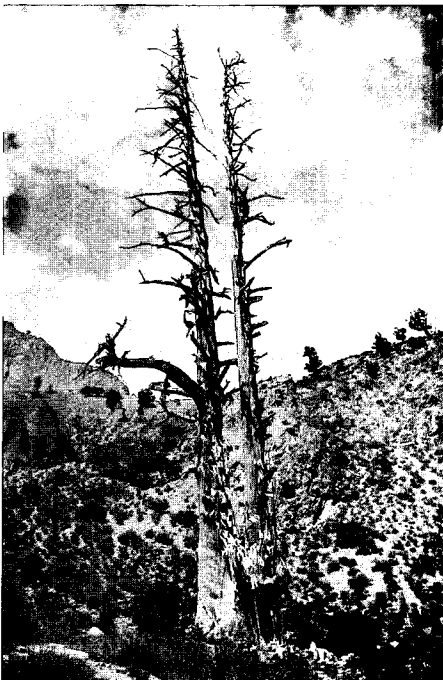
As soon as an individual's behaviour becomes strange to the villagers they start searching for a



The spirit - trap (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)



The town of Kagbeni - the entrance of the Red House with the curtain showing Tibetan symbols - the Moon, the Sun and two swastikas (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)



The sacred double - tree, the town of Marpha (photo: T. Vinšćak, 1993)