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# Woven Narratives from Tsum Valley: Reconfiguring Local

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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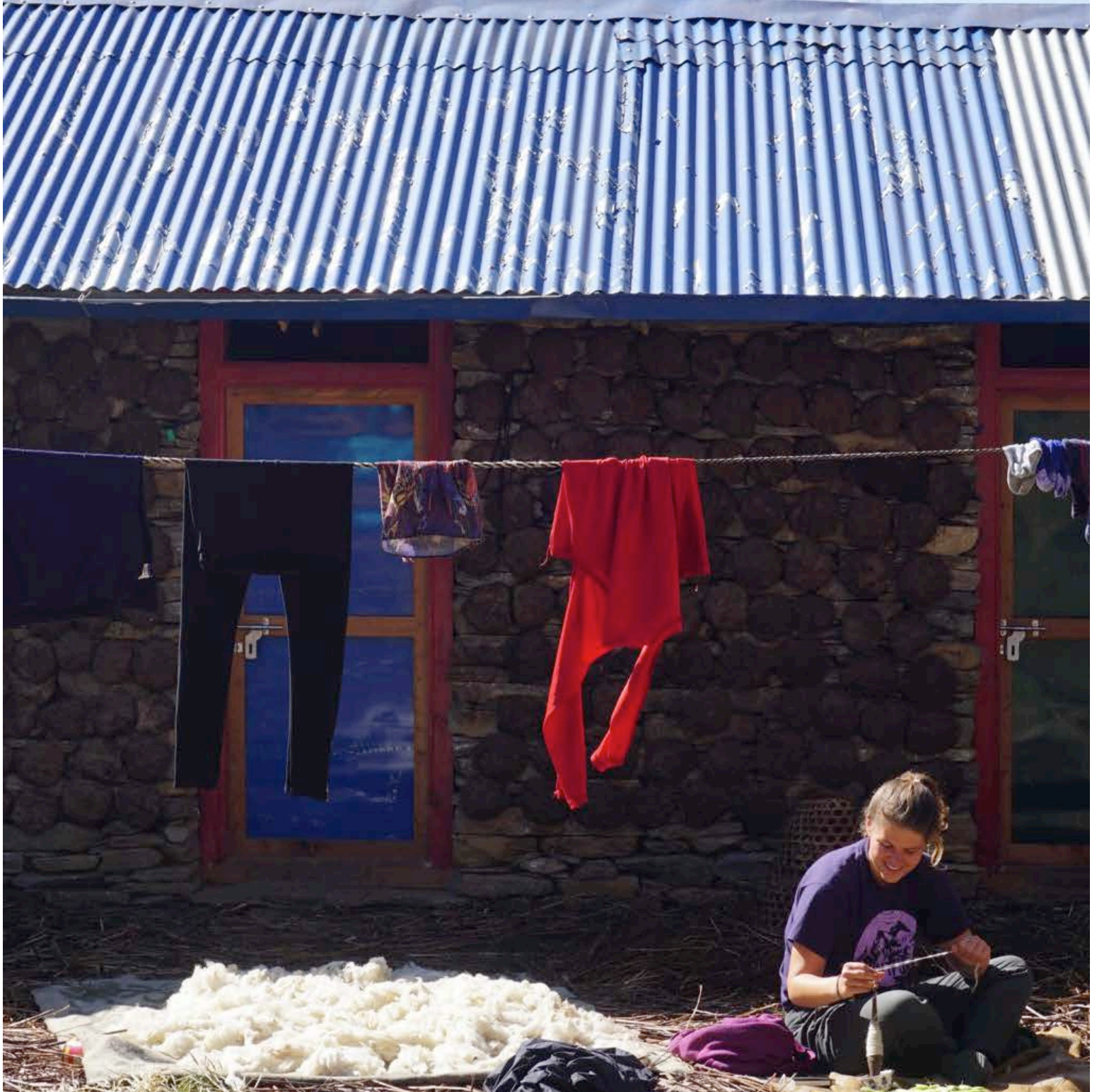
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# Woven Narratives from Tsum Valley: Reconfiguring Local

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## ***Abstract***

Tsum Valley is on the border between Nepal and Tibet. It exists as a border land and a trekking trail and a home. Despite its label as a “Hidden Himalayan Valley,” Tsum is currently undergoing changes that make it increasingly connected to the globalized world. I set out to study and learn weaving in Tsum. I dispersed within my account of learning the craft with scenes from everyday life to better understand how weaving and production of the *chu pa* fits into work, family, economy and community. For my study I stayed in one home in Lamaguan, Upper Tsum to understand how much a small family unit and local community could be redefining the space between what is considered old, new; local, foreign. In the end, I wanted to present an account of what I saw and what my typical day was like. I fought the impulse to label what I saw in Tsum, therefore I do not provide any analysis. In the end, I have a collection of stories, information, instructions, and a diary all wrapped up in one account of life from within my adopted family.

## *Introduction*

It is 4:30 pm. The large dzo and dzomo are making their way back to their homes from grazing land across the village. The air is filled with the sound of their slowly clanking bells which are tied around their necks; they alert oncomers who might mistakenly come across their path. The sun is setting and illuminating the forested “jungle” side of the valley, where the snowy mountains peak out from the smaller hills that stand in front. I have just finished washing my clothing in the concrete communal faucet outside the house. I am keeping Tsering company as she scrubs her brother’s down jacket. No matter how much soap she applies, it seems to still retain the dirt embedded deep in its fibers. Pu watches Tsering scrub with his arms folded behind his back. His face is dark with his 6 years of sun, and his nose is running after spending the day in the cold. After the pack of dzo moves by, we see Dorjee, Tsering’s brother on the other side of the chorten with one of the four horses that their family owns. The horse isn’t cooperating with Dorjee and after a couple of failed attempts, he manages to jump on its back and ride it past us. Tsering and I laugh but Pu, clapping his hands and howling with amusement is the most entertained.

When Tsering eventually gives up on her brother’s jacket and we decide to head back with our wet laundry, we hear a crashing sound from the forest. It is the sound of the trees falling from the thick, forested cliffs as people on the slope are cutting them down from high on the mountain. A split second later, we hear another sound, starting from the opposite set of rocky, desert-like cliffs that support the high domed glacier in the west. “Ahh-oooo!” It is the sound of the foxes. The sound starts from across the fields and in a few seconds we hear them all around the valley. Tsering and I laugh because they sound a little like bad singers.



Sunset on the mountains east of Lamagaun.

Lamagaun is a small village about a 45 minute walk from Chokhang Paro, the start of the Upper Tsum Valley. Perched between two very different mountainscapes to the east and west, and green fields to the north and south, the village exists almost within its own flat bowl. On one side is a small canyon that leads to a crystal clear glacial river. Every day, people from the village cross the chain bridge over the river to retrieve their dzo and yaks from the other side.

Life in Lamaguan is made up of these small quiet moments with the mountains -- the setting sun, and the howling foxes from the pine trees. It is made of the golden top of the new monastery; the women who walk around with drop spindles in their hands and crows' feet around their eyes etched from years of intense sunlight. Lamaguan is also soda cans from China, Nepali merchants celebrating Tihar, and trekkers coming from countries like Germany, the United States, and Australia.

I came to Lamagaun wanting to learn more about how to weave. I quickly learned that to learn a craft here in Lamagaun is to also learn about the work, place, people and issues that surround it. Also, to actually learn how to weave I would have to stay and learn from one teacher. Done throughout the day and in between the other daily tasks in Lamagaun, weaving is just part of life here. Therefore I would have to do my best to not up-end that flow of daily work and instead learn the craft according to how it is actually used and performed in the context of daily life.

Weaving is often thought to be the modern world's link to the old. Generations of people and cultures have practiced weaving. In the 21st century, we commonly think of it as a dying art, only to be saved by protecting old ways of life from the effects of globalization. It is also widely believed to be linked to authentic and traditional ways of life of groups of people.<sup>1 2</sup> While the link between craft and cultural heritage might be true, studies of their relationship commonly ignore the ways in which we can understand *contemporary* practice of craft. In the present, there are practices that we have not yet seen before, hybrids or traditional tools and imported techniques. Consumerism and how the practice traditional practice changes when it comes into contact with an economic market is also one question for scholars studying the "living heritage" associated with weaving and textile production. Many scholars would argue that proximity to globalization means the craft is inherently in danger.<sup>34</sup>

In C.H. Harris's "From Loom to Machine: Tibetan Aprons and the Configuration of Place," Harris discusses the ways in which handmade handicraft (whether it be actually hand-woven or marketed as such) presents a kind of mystical and alluring connection to place, especially in the case of the *pang gdan* and Tibet<sup>5</sup>. However, the actuality of that physical

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<sup>1</sup> T.J. Scrase, Precarious Production: Globalization and Artisan Labor in the Third World. *Third World Q.* (2003), 24, 449–461.

<sup>2</sup> V. Leesuan, Folk handicrafts: Local identity. *Silpakorn Univ. J.* (2010), 30, 163–182

<sup>3</sup> Yang et al. Preservation of cultural heritage Embodied in Traditional Crafts in the Developing Countries. A Case study of Pakistani Handicraft Industry. *Sustainability* (2018) vol 10, issue 5

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO. Why Safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage? <https://ich.unesco.org/en/why-safeguard-ich-00479> (accessed on December 9, 2018)

<sup>5</sup> CH Harris, "From Looms to Machine: Tibetan Aprons and the configuration of Space" *Environment and Planning – Society & Space.* (2017)



connection from land to craft is lost through modern and globalized ways of producing, trading, and selling products such as the *pang gdan*. If an object is produced locally and not for sale in any kind of economy, Harris might argue, it has fulfilled its mythologized importance.

The way we, speaking from the scholarship that has a primarily western audience, view and understand the craft can be clouded by our obsession with what we like to think of as “pure” or “authentic.” Many scholars, have explored the construction of authenticity in anthropology in art. We know that authenticity is a relative term defined by the observer. Throughout the history of anthropology, the authentic has been translated as opposing the modern, or “western” ways of life. Additionally, the authentic is tied to creating divides in culture and nations and defining distinctions between different cultures, and groups of people.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, defining something as authentic or traditional tells us more about the western observer who makes these distinctions than anything or anyone else.

The distinction between modern and traditional is in fact embedded in the dynamic definitions of and associations with handicraft. Though of a skill that is devoid of skill and technique, it is meant to describe a piece that can be done by the layperson. However, paradoxically, in the move to machine and rapidly increasing use of technology, the association with handicraft has been revitalized as something that requires skill.<sup>7</sup>

In Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” he argues that the ubiquitous ease of art objects intrinsically disrupts the way in which objects relate specifically to their own temporality.<sup>8</sup> In the case of handicraft that is not produced by a machine, there is inherently a kind of skill that would be impossible not to recognize and appreciate. Therefore the focus of the object is less on spectatorship and more on the object itself. Benjamin would undoubtedly discuss weaving and handicrafts of an example of arts that are not burdened with accelerating reproducibly. The craft does not place an emphasis on the artist or spectator and is thus antithetical to modernity.

These distinctions between what we find as local and foreign are of continued interest in Upper Tsum, as a place that is currently under the dramatic but uneven forces of globalization. However, that is not to say that Laugaun has always existed in its own bubble. As a border place, Lamaguan has been not only on the periphery of two countries but also a multitude of different ways of life.

Tsum, as a place that exists in the borders of centralized nation-states, might actually have more in common with Tibet and other Himalayan communities rather than other parts of Nepal. Therefore it might be considered to lie in the area coined by Willem Van Schendel as “Zomia”. Zomia exists as a “place between places”. Under the influence of multiple axes of

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<sup>6</sup> Handler R., “Authenticity” *Anthropology Today* (1986) 2(1) 6–9

<sup>7</sup> Peter Betjemann, “Craft and the limits of Skill: Handicrafts revivalism and the problem of technique” *Journal of Design History*, (2008) Vol21, Issue 2, 183–193

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version (1935),” in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. M. Jennings et al., trans. E. Jephcott et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2008), 19-55.

centralized power, its influence and culture are commonly overlooked in studies that would classify and separate South Asia and Central Asia as different areas of study.<sup>9</sup>

The best way to understand Lamaguan as a dynamic border place is to look at how specific features of life and place can exist simultaneously in communities, economies and spheres. By focusing on one aspect of life from one place and one family I can better understand what life is like, specifically, how the outside world influences Lamaguan and how it is currently changing. Altering the barrier between what is considered local and what is foreign, my confined account of the world from the Lamagaun perspective demonstrates that the world for Lamaguan is changing in uneven, bumpy and often indefinable ways.

My teacher is Tashi Lama. She weaves the fabric that will be used to make her own *chu pa*, the traditional dress worn by the people of Tsum and other Himalayan communities across Nepal and Tibet. Tashi makes her own fabric for her *chu pas* from wool she buys from Tibet and dye she gets from Kathmandu. She uses a machine as old as her second eldest daughter, Tsering Bhuti and says that she doesn't quite know when she learned the skill because it has been so long. I learned every step she takes to make the fabric for her and her husband's *chu pa*'s -- from preparing the wool to the dying. I stayed with Tashi, her daughter Tsering, her son Tenzin Dorjee and husband Wangdu, known in Lamagaun as "Appi" in their home to learn both about what life is like in Tsum and also how crafting the *chu pa* fits into that life<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Willem Van Schendel. "Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* (2002), vol 20, 647 - 668

<sup>10</sup> Note about citation and sources: All of my information comes from my own observations, and/or Tsering Bhuti Lama, if not stated explicitly.

## *The Chu Pa: Comfort and Quality*



Sherup Ligel, or “Pu”, donning his own homemade *chupa*. Men wear the *chupa* as young children, in their old age and for special occasions.

Tashi has made enough fabric for two *chu pas* in the last two years. Both will be for her. The piece currently on the loom is for Appi, but male *chu pas* have sleeves so this one will require more fabric. Tashi has 2 homemade *chu pas* she wears most commonly now. Both are a deep brown color that, I learn from Tashi and her neighbors, is the most popular in Upper Tsum. (In Lower Tsum, they prefer the black *chu pa*). Appi tells me that the traditional dress of Tsum is similar to the dress in central Tibet. They wear similar brightly colored headscarves and have the same woven belts. Because central Tibet has such a similar dress code, the parts of the outfit are easy to get when trading with Tibet. In fact, the *chu pa* is one of the only pieces that is still made almost entirely by hand. *Pang gdan* are woven but the thread is not handspun, same for the belts. Shirts and the bright colored handkerchiefs women wear on their heads are bought from Tibet.

When I ask about why it is so important to make *chu pas* by hand I get a similar response from many people in Lamagaun: “They are more comfortable” and “They are higher quality”. There is a consensus that the machine made *chu pas* are thinner and are of a lower quality. While *chu pas*, fabric and thread can be bought from Tibet, people in the village insist that it is important that they make their *chu pas* by hand.

Most women make the fabric for the *chu pas* themselves. However, women commonly do not sew the outfit themselves. Tashi, for example, has Nyma Soma sew her *chu pas* for her. Nyma is taking care of two grandchildren when I talk with her as we walk along the Mani wall near Tsering's home. One child is on her back and the other is holding her hand. She tells me she makes a lot of *chu pas* for people in the village. She makes about 15-16 a year. Each one takes about a day to sew (men's take a half a day longer) and she gets compensated by exchanging work or food. She says she has been doing it for a long time but is able to spend more time now in her old age because she doesn't have to focus on other work.

While women don't normally wear the full traditional dress, (complete with the back apron, fur hat and belt) they do wear the *chu pa* and *pang gdan* and the spoon that hangs from the belt almost every day. Men, on the other hand, do not wear the outfit and instead wear jeans, t-shirts, and jackets. Men wear the *chu pa* only for special events. They also tend to wear them when they are children or in their old age. When I ask Tsering about the differences in clothing choice of the people in Tsum, Tsering tells me that women cannot wear clothing other than the *chu pa* because people would talk about them behind their back. She, as someone not living full time in the village anymore, is fine without one, but any other woman would be a topic of gossip and ridicule in Lamagaun if she didn't wear one. Tashi explains the discrepancy similarly, stating that it is just what women do. When I ask Appi about not wearing the *chu pa* he says that it is a matter of comfort. It is not comfortable to be doing work in the *chu pa* because it is too constraining. Another seamstress of *chu pas* from Lower Tsum, tells me the same.

Interestingly, even though women can only weave the fabric for the *chu pa*, both men and women sew it. After seeking out Nyma, who sews Tashi's *chu pa*'s for her, I learn that Appi knows how to sew as well. He tells me that he learned a long time ago when he saw it done by people from a different village. "It is not difficult to learn," he says.

## *Home*



The wood-burning stove in the kitchen/dining room/living room. Appi sits on the right side of the stove while Tashi is on the left. The neighbor, who has come with some tea, is looking at Tsering's pictures from Mustang on her phone.

Tsering was born in Lamaguan but now lives in Kathmandu. She has five siblings. Four out of five of the children left their family home in Tsum. Tsering lives with her aunt and many "sibling cousins" in Swayambhu. Her older sister and two youngest brothers live on the other side of Kathmandu, in Pharping. It takes about 3 hours and 700 rupees to see them. Her sister is a nun at a monastery and her two brothers go to a Tibetan school and live with other relatives. Tsering's other brother lives in India, studying as a monk. Tenzin Dorjee, the eldest son, is the only one who still lives at home in Tsum.

It is common for children in Tsum to live separately from their parents and villages. In fact, you rarely see anyone in Lamagaun from ages 9-18. Tsering left Tsum when she was 9 years old after she finished primary school. There is no secondary school or college near the village so children will commonly go to Kathmandu or the secondary school in Phillim<sup>11</sup>. This is why Tsering lives with so many cousins; they all go to Kathmandu for school. Tsering tells me she went to school two years too late, like many people in the village. Now she is 20 years old but still in twelfth grade. She had to lie about her age when first attending school in Kathmandu to get into secondary school. Now, living in Kathmandu for almost her whole life and attending a Tibetan school until grade ten, her friends are not from Tsum, they are Tibetan, or Sherpa or Mustangi. Now she goes to college for tourism and management where there are a lot more Nepali students. In Kathmandu, she says, she is exposed to a wide range of different people and

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<sup>11</sup> The school is along the trekking trail. The building is newly constructed with support from Japan. When we were there they were awaiting a group of British volunteers.

things to do. She listens to Nepali, Tibetan and English music. We both bond over our middle school obsessions with One Direction and Justin Bieber. She likes to go out to the movies with friends. She only recently tried the famous Kathmandu pizza place, Fire and Ice and made crepes at home before coming on the trek.

All of this is not to say that Lamagaun is not still Tsering's home. At 3:30 pm Tsering and I walked from Chokhang Paro to Lamagaun, the last leg of our trek to her home. We have just passed the 3 tall, dead trees that she says mark the start of her village. Along the way, we see women in the fields, herding dzo. They call out to Tsering, "sing Bhuti! sing Bhuti! Are you coming home? How long will you be here?" She responds with a huge smile on her face as she waves back. When we pass two more groups of women who also call out to her, she turns to me and says "I think they are my relatives but I have no idea what their names are." All during the trek, she has been telling me that we just passed a cousin, aunts, uncle. We both laugh.

The living room (kitchen and dining room) at Tsering's house is filled with pictures of the family: one from Tsering's middle school, one posed family portrait was taken in Kathmandu, a few from after Tashi and Appi's marriage, one of a 6-year-old Dorjee riding a horse with a huge smile on his face. When we arrive, Tsering immediately helps her mother with the tea, finding the pot to heat the water. We make buckwheat pancakes and Tsering comments on how cooking here is so much different than in Kathmandu. "I have to find where everything is!" "The stove is too short!"

Dorjee is happiest to see his sister. Dorjee is tall and lanky. He has an earring in one ear and recently shaved one side of his head to make a semi Mohawk. They are the closest out of the siblings despite living so far apart. Tsering will bring him back clothing and other presents he can't get in Lamagaun. This time she has brought him back bluetooth headphones. For the entire ten days of my stay, I rarely see them come off of his head.

Dorjee is different from the rest of the siblings. He has the closest relationship to his home. Tsering tells me that most of the eldest men from Upper Tsum stay in their villages to take care of their father's property. She tells me that it is Dorjee's choice to stay and that he wants to stay here in the village. Dorjee went to school in Gorkha for a few years after primary school. When he was back on holiday in 2015, the earthquake hit and he decided to stay to help his father take care of the home.

Tsering and Dorjee, despite living so far from one another, find ways to stay in touch. Tsering says they talk a lot on the phone and text whenever he gets wifi. He doesn't do the same with his other sister, Sonam. In fact, when the family called her a few times, he didn't want to talk to her. Tsering tells me that her sister only came back to visit last year and before that she had not been home in 11 years. Now, she doesn't recognize people in the village and people don't recognize her.

Tenzin Dorjee with one of the family's horses. He is wearing the headphones Tsering brought him. Dorjee likes to ride. He has already gone to Tibet with his father and friends on horseback 5 times this year.



## *The First Steps*



Tashi, (left) beating the wool to get the water out. It needs to be washed twice before it can be left out to dry at the house (right)

Tashi pulls out a large bag of wool and dumps it onto the tarp in the middle of the courtyard. The tufts of wool are clumped together and it takes a while to separate them from one another and spread them flat on the ground. The batch first has to be “dried” for a few hours under the cloudless November sky. This wool has been brought back from Tibet. Appi went only a few weeks ago. This is the lower quality wool, it costs 20 rupees per kilogram. The fibers are not quite as fine and there is more dirt stuck to the clumps. Tashi will sometimes get the higher quality wool that cost about 360 rupees per kilogram.

The wool we are using is from sheep. Here in Tsum, not many villagers own sheep. Horses and Dzo are common in Lamagaun.<sup>12</sup> The sheep we see here in the valley are usually owned by Tibetan herders who come to drop their herds off for more lush grass.

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<sup>12</sup> All of the yaks are up higher on the mountain for the summer. Tsering points them out to me, they look like black dots covering one of the faces of the peak.



After a few hours in the sun, we take the wool to the concrete faucet outside the home. We pack it all in a straw basket and dump all of the wool next to the stream of piercing cold water coming from the tap. We split the washing into five loads, a batch of wool goes in the strainer-like straw basket as water runs over it and the basket is thrust up and down.

“It’s like flipping an omelet,” Tsering says as her mother shows us the right way to thrust the weighed down wool. Under the wool and the straw basket is a metal bowl to keep the water from spraying. The water in the bowl gets murkier and murkier and murkier as the water washes away the dirt, dust, and grime from of the fibers. Next, we take the sopping wet wool out of the basket and place it on the concrete faucet. Tashi lifts a long wooden pole over her arms and pulls it down with a hard “thwap” sending water flying on to all of us. Excess water is removed by beating the now globular-like batch of wool with a pole. Hitting with a lot more force than it appears, beating the wool is intensive labor. Each twap leaves a dent and eventually more and more water drains from the sopping bundle of wool. We wash and then beat each batch of wool and then it is time to dry it. First, we shake it and fling it side to side in the basket. Then it is hung up in the middle of the courtyard and left in the sun to dry.

The now-clean wool is dried in 3 hours. In Tsum, where the altitude is about 3,500 meters, cloudless days are hot and the light is intense. I realize that the construction of the home, especially the courtyard style utilizes the rays of the sun well while also blocking the constant wind that comes through the valley in November. Thus, a lot of work is done for drying in the mid-morning. Laundry, making *chura*, drying fruit, the wool is no different. Done any later, it would have been past the optimal time for sun and the wool would have frozen overnight on the line.

The clumpy, cleaned wool hangs off the rope in the middle of the courtyard. After a few hours, it is dried and I am given two old wooden brushes with steel teeth and put under the careful supervision of Appi and *Momola*<sup>13</sup>. Pala informed me that they all know the right way to brush, even those who do not know how to weave. I put on a fleece skirt to wear on top of my lap to keep the wool from getting all over my clothing. Seated on the tarp in the afternoon sun, I am told to hold one of the brushes steady in my left hand, the bristles facing up and the wooden exterior on my lap. I place small tufts of matted, sculpted wool on the left brush and then the right is used to gently swoop over the wool so that the fibers stretch between the two brushes. After a couple of tugs on the fibers from left brush to right brush, I quickly flip the brushes so that the right one is on my lap, face up, and the left brush is pulled across the other. This recenters the wool in the brush and allows me to easily get all of the wool the same light, fluffy consistency. Eventually, when the wool is all the same and there are no tufts or clumps sticking together, I flip the wool back to the right side and the two brushes are rubbed together, up and down to roll the wool into a long cylinder that is then plucked off of the steel bristles.

After a few minutes, I am still very slowly brushing the wool, not yet used to the rhythm. Appi asks to take the brushes from me and tells me that I need to do it all faster. Brush, brush, brush, flip, brush, brush, rub. Brush, brush, brush, flip, brush, brush, rub. *Momola*, whom I had just met, is amused by the lesson and tells me that this is the easy part. Spinning and using the

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<sup>13</sup> Grandmother in Tibetan/ Tsumke.

tep will be much, much more difficult. It was around 3 o'clock. I was sitting on the tarp with the family, the sun was almost setting within the courtyard. Appi and Momola are quiet and together we listen to the sounds of the brushing which has a calming, constant effect.

Unlike washing the wool, which makes sense to do early in the day, all at once, in one batch, subsequent steps like brushing, spinning, playing and weaving, can all be done sporadically, at random times in the day whenever there is time. There is always brushing to be done and always wool that has been brushed.



The author, brushing the clean wool next to a thermos of *pur cha*.

## *Tea*

The dog outside the front door of the house starts to bark and everyone looks up from the stove and the conversation we are having about a cousin who recently bought a scooter in Kathmandu. Appi tells me that the dog they have now is a little useless. He barks at neighbors and local people but not at tourists that pass by.

“Su?”, Appi shouts at the visitor. The two neighbors shout back and Appi goes down to greet them. Two sisters come up to the home with filled backpacks. Tsering tells me that they have come to offer tea to the family. The two sisters sit down on the floor in front of the stove and unpack their bag, 4 canisters of tea, two wooden bottles of *arag, katse*, 3 ramen packets, and two Sprites, one for Tsering and one for Dorjee. Getting cups for everyone in the family, they go around and fill everyone's cup to the brim and make Tashi get the pot to start heating up the arak they have brought. We have already had dinner and I had already had at least three cups of *Pur cha* before they came in. Tsering tells me that it is common for neighbors to surprise families and come over to offer them tea and snacks, especially when a child is home from Kathmandu.

Drinking tea at the house is a game to be mastered. Every neighbor, friend, and relative that comes to the dining/living/kitchen knows the rules. Teacups are constantly refilled. There is

no such thing as just having one cup and finishing. Most people only drink when the next refills are being doled out. If you bring tea, you serve it to the family and the family serves you theirs. *Arag* and *Chhaang* are served with a fried egg for special occasions. For the first round of drinks, when someone pours in your glass, you take a sip right away and it is immediately refilled. If you are a close friend, it will be harder for you to say no to more tea. Tashi is one of the best at getting people to drink more tea before she refills. She stands over the glass cup covering the tea kettle over the rim of the glass, implying that she is not afraid to have the tea overflow all over the table just to get them to drink more.

Everyday neighbors and relatives and are in and out of the house. They come to get shoes from the store or to talk with Tsering but always end up coming to the house for tea, and, if it is anywhere near breakfast, lunch or dinner time, a meal. The house constantly has the large red thermos filled with butter tea and I hear the blender at least four times a day to make a new batch. Tsering's home now uses an electric blender to make their *pur cha*. Before the blender, they used a long wooden cylinder and mixed it by hand.

There are also more general rules of the dining room. Amala always takes the seat on the left side of the stove while Pala sits on the right. In the house, everyone has their own cup and plate. Tashi and Appi keep theirs where they sit. Dorjee prefers to sit farther from the stove and usually leaves his plate on any one of the tables. He also recently got an orange mug that he uses for his tea in the morning. I have told them that I can't drink too much of the hot, strong and homemade *arak* so they ironically give me a small cup that has the Budweiser logo with some Chinese writing under it. Visitors are given cups from one side of the cabinet while family members get them from another.

Pu, the little boy who comes around the house almost every day also has his own glass for tea. Pu's real name is Sherup Ligel. He lives one house over from the family. His father is one of the two lamas that live in Lamagaun. His father is currently in Kathmandu for a meditation. Earlier in the year, he was in Tibet. Sherup's mother and grandmother take care of him and his sister who is 4 years old. Pu's mother has a lot to do being on her own. Pu comes to our home because there are more people to come and order around.

Tsering told me that 2 years ago Pu wouldn't talk at all. They were worried that he might have a disability but now, all Pu does is talk. He loves to order people around and is especially amused that I cannot understand. Pu calls Dorjee "ouu" which means father. Pu calls Tsering, who isn't around a lot, *Ouu ani*, or uncle's aunt. Pu has become part of the family. If I didn't know who exactly is related to whom I would assume that Pu was the younger brother of Tsering and Dorjee. The family feeds him meals, putting him to work sometimes with small tasks like peeling beans. In return, Pu is a great source of entertainment for the family.

## *Spinning*

Tashi spinning wool. She is able to keep the thread far from the spindle top and keep the spindle moving at all times, two of the hardest parts for the author.



After the wool is brushed to an even, fluffy, consistency, it has to be transformed into a thin thread. Spinning relies on wool being wound around a propelling spindle to separate a thin strand from larger wool and pack it tightly into a taught thread. “Homespun” spinning commonly uses the spindle, or a pole that can be spun by hand so that the fibers of the wool stretch and tightly pack together. Himalayan communities, including Tibetan peoples, have historically used a “top”-like spindle that is spun on the ground by one’s thumb and index finger. The spindle is set on the ground, usually with a small cup to allow it to spin without toppling over. When Tashi first showed me how do spin, she did it with ease and fluidity. Holding the clump of wool in her extended left hand, she flicked her index and thumb together to get the spindle to spin clockwise. After a few seconds, she would flick the spindle the other way and guide the newly spun thin thread to the bottom of the spindle where the thread collected in a football-like shape. The spindle was constantly in motion, spinning back and forth as the thread became longer, shorter and longer again. She would even take her teeth and periodically pull the string to get a clump out of the middle.

Simple in concept, the technique was incredibly difficult to implement. I sat on the straw ground with the spindle and a decommissioned teacup Tashi had designated for spinning. First, mastering how to make the spindle spin fast and stay up was difficult enough. After a couple of poor attempts where the spindle cup and thread all fell over, Tashi came back from the barn with some old dzo dung to provide extra support under the cup. After some time with the wool, I soon realized that my thread would be nowhere near as even and as thin as Tashi had managed to

make her's. In the end, my thread alternated between clumps of wool that seemed to stick together and make it so thin that it would just break. The end product was a fat, bumpy string about three times the size of the thread needed and sprinkled with knots where I had given up trying to spin the broken parts together. Holding the string so far from the spindle was difficult because it was hard to control what parts of the wool you wanted to spin and stretch. The first day I worked on spinning was difficult, especially when I realized how little I had actually produced in the 3 hours that I had been working.

"Its okay, this can be used for mattresses!" Tsering told me as I sat and worked on the spinning. She told me that her mother spins some wool for mattresses and some for her weaving. The kind for mattresses looks more like yarn and is better if it's a little thicker. It made me feel a little better to know the string would actually be used for something other than practice.

### ***From Tsum to Manaslu to Mustang***

At around 5 pm, the sun is setting over the mountain to the west of the valley. The evening brings in fog and the tips of the snow-capped mountains peak out periodically through the blanket of grey. It is getting dark. The horses have come back to the house and Dorjee is leading the dzo into the bottom floor of the house. Tsering and I set out to find the two "small ones," the thigh-high calves that herd separately from the adult dzo, fitting through small nooks in the stone fences bordering the barren fields. Every day we have to guess which direction they have gone. Pu comes along. He considers himself an expert herder and points to the west, announcing that the calves have gone that direction.

Today is especially cold. After chasing the second one through the village we are frozen and go up to the wood stove to warm our hands. Most days here can be split up between when we use the sun and when we use the stove to warm us up. The dining room, in addition to pictures of family, has three large posters of tourist attractions in Nepal -- Everest "the top of the world", Bhaktapur in Kathmandu and Lumbini "The Birthplace of Buddha." As Tashi and Appi come to take a break from their work, drink some butter tea and warm their hands, Tsering starts to tell us about her recent trip to Nubri Valley. "The stoves are much bigger there; they look the same but they are twice as big." She demonstrates the size with her hands. "They also have a lot more trees there. When I was with the tourists from Canada they kept saying it looked a lot like where they were from." Tsering talks a lot about her recent trips to Manaslu and to Mustang. In October she went on a trek with his large group through Tsum and Manaslu and used the money she got from guiding to pay for a class trip to Mustang. She shows her family pictures on her phone and often compares Tsum and Nubri when she tells me about her trek.

Tsering got her guiding license in the spring of this year. She had support from a Canadian sponsor who has hiked through Tsum many times and knew Tsering's cousin. In her guiding class of 40 people, she was the only woman. In Tsum, there has only been one other woman guide and she is now based in Switzerland. As we travel from guesthouse to guesthouse on the way to and from Tsum, it is clear that Tsering is special. People stop her to confirm that

she is a guide. They want to know where she is from, how old she is, how long she has been guiding, where she has been, if she has done the Manaslu trek, where I am going. When a group of young girls from Maccha Khola said hello to us, Tsering says that we should talk to them, assuming they wanted to talk to me, the American. Instead, they want to know more about Tsering. they ask her all about her family, her guiding and her hair.

Most trekkers that come to Tsum also do the “Manaslu Trek” in Nubri. It takes about 4 days to get there from Lamaguan. Appi tells us that he has never been to Nubri. Despite traveling countless times along the trekking trail that leads to Tsum, he has never gone west. However, he has been to Mustang. When he was 18, he was a porter for a short period of time. That was before Tsum was open to trekkers so he was a porter for other regions of Nepal, including Mustang and Langtang. He stopped when he got married at 19. He told us that back then he got paid 170 rupees per day.

The rest of Tsering’s family has not traveled nearly as much. Her brother has only been to major cities in Nepal, having gone to school in Gorkha and to visit his relatives in Kathmandu. Her mother has left Tsum to also visit Kathmandu and to go to some pilgrimage sites in India and Tibet when she was younger. On the other hand, Momola has not been passed Arghuat, the town where the road used to end and the starting point of the trek to Tsum.

Tsering’s guide training has already allowed her to travel to places that her family has never been. Like her father a long time ago, she is using the tourist industry in Nepal to her advantage. Who knows where Tsering will be in a few years. She has also been able to come into contact with people from all over the world who tell her about opportunities and new places where she might one day be able to travel. We spent a lot of time with Jackie and John, a couple from Revelstoke, Canada whom we meet for the first time in Solukhumbu. They loved Tsering and her rarity as a women guide from Tsum. We talked a lot about Canada and they alluded to the possibility of even finding her a job near their home in Canada.

Tsering has a bright, wide-open future, partly due to luck, partly due to her mastery of English and partly to her own determination and confidence. But it is also evident that her travels are slowly connecting her family and Lamagaun to the rest of the country and possibly the world.



Tsering on our trek to Tsum.  
In the distance is Ganesh Himal, the tallest, most famous peak visible from the valley.

### ***“Inji Tep!”***

The thread spun by hand is thin and can be broken easily. To make it thicker, it is paired with another strand to make a two-ply thread. The plying process also uses a spindle but a drop spindle instead of one that spins on the ground. The drop spindle looks more like a pole than the spindle used to spin. It has a shaft (with no bulge) and a weight at the bottom. The top of the pole also has a helical groove. Tashi and Tsering and others from Lamagaun call it and the action it is used for “*tep*”. To spin the strands together using a *tep*, a ball of yarn with the two strands of yarn together is held under your left armpit, the string must be tight around the pole and in the grooves at the top. I place the spindle between two palms, cocking back the right hand and then shooting it forward, a little like you are trying to quickly rub something off of your left hand. To do it right, the spindle should shoot out of our hands and hang in the air while it whirls. As my left hand hangs on to the string, I can let more of the string out by turning the ball of thread with my right hand.

The entire process is a balancing act. It requires a rhythm to make it all come together. Women in Lamagaun, and in Tsum Valley will commonly ply their wool with a *tep* while they work on other tasks, many times you can see women with the spindle spinning at their feet as they carry a child on their back or herd their dzo back into their homes. Unlike the other spindle, it is very portable and therefore can be done anywhere. It is also advantageous to use the *tep* while standing instead of sitting because it allows you to spin more of the thread at one time. After hand spinning and plying the thread together I really appreciate how labor intensive it is to even make the materials for weaving. Not only does all of the yarn have to be spun but it also has to be wound into balls with the individual string, the ball with the two strands together.

Hand spinning alone seems like a project that could extend for a lifetime. Getting enough thread to actually make the fabric for a *chu pa* seemed impossible. When I asked about how much time it takes to get amount of thread she needs, I learn that actually only one of the strands that are plied together with the *tep* is handspun, the other one is machine spun and bought from Tibet. “It would take too long to hand spin both, but using two machine-spun pieces would reduce the quality.” Tashi explains to me that many people that make *chu pas* use a mix of the machine and the handspun yarn. Looking at the handspun and machine-made strands, it is virtually impossible to tell them apart. Their color width and shape as all exactly the same.



The author, learning how to use the drop spindle, or “*tep*”. The spindle is supposed to hand in the air as it spins, plying two stands together. Tashi looks on with her finished *chu pa* fabric in hand.



The spindle used for homespun wool (left) and drop-spindle used to ply (right). The thread made by the author is significantly thicker than the thread needed for the drop spindle.



## *On the Trail*

Starting at about 1,700 meters, the landscape in Gandaki Valley is lush farmland and terraces decorate the mountains. On the trek up to Tsum Valley, we pass farmland, dense jungle, waterfalls, and plains. It is hot. The sun is intense so we seek respite in the cool glacial waters rushing opposite to the direction we climb. As we climb higher, the snowy peaks of the Himalayas appear in the distance. When we reach Lokpa, the water splits and we follow the brilliantly clear blue stream up to the mountains that seem to start their stretch up to the sky. “After lunch, we will go down a little, then up a lot, then down again and cross another bridge.” Tsering gives me and the two other trekkers the rundown as we wait for our lunch in Lokpa. The next few days, we will be climbing to eventually reach the plateau where Lamaguan and Upper Tsum rests. Tsering, of course, has the path to her home committed to memory. I ask Tsering if she knows how many times she has gone from Soti Khola, the start of the trek, to her house in Lamaguan, and she says maybe 15 times in her lifetime. When she has done it in the past she has been traveling with relatives or friends. Now, as a guide, she can get paid to bring strangers to her home.

Lamaguan lies on a trekking trail. Periodically we will see *injis* pass by with trekking poles, large backpacks and expensive cameras. The trekking route usually stops in Chokhang Paro, Tsering tells me. “October is the busiest season. About 20 tourists will pass by the village at that time.” Now, late in November, there are maybe one or two groups a day. There are 2 lodges in Lamaguan and more up farther in Tsum. Because the path is set and trekkers rarely stay between Chokhang Paro and Nile, the lodges get very little traffic, even in the high season. Tsering says that many lodge owners are banking on there being a stop in the village where their lodge is when the road finally reaches Upper Tsum.

Paradoxically, the draw for tourists trekking Tsum is its remoteness, as compared to other treks in Nepal. Tsum is described on trekking websites and by local guides as an “untouched” land of old cultures and natural beauty. One website advertises by asking potential tourists to, “discover the secret Tibetan Buddhist land lying at the edge of one of the most secluded Himalayan valleys.”<sup>14</sup> Only opened to tourists and trekkers in 2008, Tsum presents itself as a way for foreigners to connect with Himalayan cultures from long ago. Even the name of the valley, Tsum, translates to “vivid”.

Talking with tourists on the way up, Tsering and I found this assumption to be true, that many people when asked why they were here in Tsum was because they had heard it wasn't as busy and that they would get the chance to see more authentic cultures. “We came for the Buddhism and the low altitude,” said, one woman. Many people also say that they find out about the trek to Tsum through word of mouth. They had a friend that did the trek and said that they had to do it as well, not unlike a well-kept secret that only a few outsiders have been clued into. Another man from Germany told me that he had seen Solu Khumbu about twenty years ago, but now he would never go because of the increase in infrastructure. But what struck me most as we

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<sup>14</sup> “Tsum Valley Trekking”, [guideinhimalaya.com](http://guideinhimalaya.com). Accessed December 8.

climbed higher and higher into Upper Tsum was the visible increase in infrastructure. Much of it is from lodges, increased connection to Kathmandu to and foreign aid. Billboards with the Canadian flag and “British aid” are common next to bridges and hydropower plants. For example, many of the large chain bridges were built by British Gurkha troops.<sup>15</sup>

Donkeys caring 25-kilogram bags of rice and tanks of propane up the trail were a common sight on the trail. They were also the reason why all of the food was so expensive as we went farther up. Many more products are being made available in the upper regions of Tsum. In a lodge in Chumling, five days into the trail, I see a group of Czech tourists drinking Tuborg, a popular beer in Nepal. Tsering tells me that a long time ago when her mother left Lamaguan and went to Kathmandu as a young girl they had to carry all their food on their back because there were no lodges to stay in. She also tells me that at that time rice was just becoming a staple for people in Tsum. It used to be that it could only be used on rare occasions because it had to come from warmer climates.

One of the most frequent items I see on the backs of donkeys is building materials. Large slabs of tin, metal rods. Now, in Lamaguan, I notice that a good number of the houses have tin roofs rather than stone slate roofs. “It was after the earthquake, the slate roofs were dangerous since they fell off of the houses very easily”.<sup>16</sup> Now, when you see towns in Upper Tsum from a distance, the most noticeable color is the bright blue among the browns and greys. When we leave Tsum Valley, it is the end of the tourist season. Many lodges are closed. We meet a group of cooks from the Manaslu region that are all coming down to Kathmandu for the winter.

### ***The Formula: Using the Loom***



The author, passing the elliptical ball of thread through the vertical sets of string. Tashi looks on to make sure the formula is followed.

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<sup>15</sup> Tsering and I counted 10 total on our way back to Kathmandu.

<sup>16</sup> Namgyal Ngodup, Tsering’s cousin told me this

The middle of the loom from the side. There are four frames that direct the layers of vertical string using a system of perpendicular strings and knots. Each of these frames is connected to a peddle below.



The massive wooden loom sits under the overhang of the second floor of the house. It rests in front of the stable and the ladder that leads up to the rest of the house. Tashi estimates the machine to be about 20 years old. The loom has a rectangular body or structure and vertical strings, held together by a pole that makes the stings taught. In the middle are four rectangular frames perpendicular to the vertical strings. Each frame has strings with knots that force the vertical strings to separate the vertical strings into 4 layers. These frames are all attached to paddles on the ground. Closest to the seat there is a elliptical ball of yarn and a free frame with wooden stead running through the vertical string. The vertical strings are made up of sets of 2 unplied strings together while the elliptical ball of yarn (what becomes the horizontal stand) has the plied string. Tashi tells me that both of these sets are, again, half machine made and half handspun.

As I look on, Tashi first explains to Tsering how to use the machine so that she can impart the instructions onto me. Sitting at the wooden bench, she demonstrates the “formula” for weaving, which at first seems like a series of random stomps on the paddle and passing the elliptical ball of thread across the taught, vertical stings. The whole machine makes a large creaking noise as Tashi taps a paddle. Tashi pulls the “comb” towards her on the loom with a sharp bang each time. After Tsering tries for a bit, I begin to pick up the formula.

First, while the comb is far away from the fabric, she passes the elliptical ball of yarn through the gap between the top and bottom layer of strings. It is pulled tight across the row of strings.

Second, Tashi hits the unoccupied paddle on the same side of the elliptical ball of string.

Third, Tashi takes the comb and pulls it down over the horizontal string, quickly hitting the finished fabric three or four times, so that the horizontal string is packed into the vertical. The process is then repeated.

The formula becomes a pattern of alternating the elliptical ball of yarn from one side of the loom to the other and changing feet from one paddle to the paddle next to it. There are of course small tricks to make the finished product look neater. For example, the comb should not be too far down and hitting it should be done slowly and then faster. Every other time when using the right two paddles, the layers of string also get stuck together and it becomes harder to pass the ball of string through. Tashi knows exactly where to put her hand in the frames to get it unstuck, but I require her guidance to know exactly what to do after it gets stuck. Tashi tells me you know you are doing the right formula when the stitches in the final fabric all go the same direction.

## ***Work and Snacks***

It is 8:47 am. The sun will rise over the mountains in another twenty-five minutes. Tsering is packing a sealable metal bowl with rice and freshly made curry by the wood stove. Dorjee is outside applying some product to his newly half-shaved head in front of the small mirror that lives by the ladder. “Zen Dorjee!” Tsering shouts at her brother” “Ouu” he shouts back before reluctantly climbing the staircase to collect his packed lunch, still running his fingers through his hair.

Today is the first day of three Dorjee is leaving to work on the hydropower project near Nyakyu, one town south of Lamaguan. The project is to benefit 3 towns that currently run on solar power. He has to get there at 9 am but will be late, as he has been last the past 3 days he had to work. Tsering usually makes his breakfast, his lunch and milk tea. Dorjee slurps down the last of his breakfast ramen and flips the canister of milk tea to make sure it doesn't leak before he stuffs it in his bag. He also grabs his smart phone and bluetooth headphones that Tsering brought him from Kathmandu off of the solar charger. He asks what time it is and when he looks at his phone, and we realize that his phone is displaying the wrong time, 11:16 am when it is now 9:05. Tsering and I laugh as she gets up to shove her brother out the door.

The hydropower project the Dorjee leaves to work on is one example of some of the communal work done in the valley. Large projects like this require the coordination of people beyond their village and are done over many days. The hydropower project might be finished by next year but until then, Dorjee and other young men have to go for three days, every six days. There is also talk about needing a bridge between Chokhang and here, one topic of discussion is how they will find people to build it and from which village they should be from.

Coordination between villages is not just a problem for the present. Historically, the people of Tsum have cooperated to get upper villages more wood. Because the forest is thicker lower down, in the fall when the most wood collection is occurring, villagers will construct an assembly-line like process in which wood is brought up from a lower village to a higher village. In fact, Appi was out all day once when he was bringing wood from Nyakyu to Lar, the next village north of Lamagaun, from there people will bring it farther up to villages like Nile and Chhule.

Cooperation and communal work also occur at a smaller level, within the village of Lamagaun. When I first arrived in Tsering's home her father came back with four men who had been dropping off wood in their home the entire day. Doing trips from the forest to the west to the house they were able to get the family all the firewood they need for the winter in one day. After their work was finished, they ate buckwheat pancakes and drank tea with the family. The men rotate their collection of firewood. A few days later, A group of women come over to help with collecting mulch. I am told that the village starts with the firewood, which is primarily collected by men, and then later, the mulch for the stable and fire is collected by women. That is not to say that the mulch looks any less difficult to carry. Women use two separate baskets, one on the bottom and one on top to contain the large mass of dirt and plants that reaches to almost twice their height. Collection lasts about four days as groups of women go from house to house and pile up more and more mulch for the winter.

A lot of the work is dependent on the season. I am told that firewood and mulch are being collected because it will be winter soon. The last of the crops, potato and wheat were just pulled out of the ground before I got there. Even sewing and weaving are dependent on the seasons. Tashi tells me she does more work on her *chu pa* in the winter when she has more time. She also makes one *pang gdan* and one carpet each year and both are done in the winter.

"In the village, work is never done," Tsering laughs one day while we are at the wood burning stove. Her mother is winding the thread she had spun earlier into a ball. Living with Tashi has made me realize that the bulk of the work involved in weaving is actually preparing the wool. Because it is a simple task, winding the wool into a ball can be done throughout the day, everyday. Even after dinner, drinking *pur cha*, Tashi never seems to have idle hands.

At the same time, work at the house seems constant but relaxed. While there is a lot of lifting of heavy things or leaving to go work on a project there are also many hours for laying in the sun and drinking tea. There is a lot of time to stop to talk to people or go over to a neighbor's home for a visit. Snacks are also part of the work. Tsering and I were often in charge of distilling the arak, drying the *chura* and roasting the tsampa.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of the day, people in Lamagaun sit close to the fire, warming their hands, preparing *dendue* and heating the *arag*. Taking a break from *pur cha*, Tsering and I enjoy our instant coffee we get from the shop downstairs. Tashi is standing up as she slowly stirs the *dendue*. *Dendue*, a dish made from tsampa and hot water, is mixed in a pot that falls perfectly into the circular hole above the wood stove. It gets to an almost a hard consistency and is paired

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<sup>17</sup> Tashi wanted us to make more to send back home with Tsering in Kathmandu. I am told that the Tsumpa bought in Kathmandu tastes significantly worse.

with what Tsering presents to me as “spicy liquid”<sup>18</sup> and curd. Tashi plops the *dendue* on the liquid filled plate with two wooden spoonfuls. Appi takes the plate and trusts it so that the spicy liquid covers the other side of the viscous pile of brown.



Women collecting mulch and brush from the forest opposite the village. Collection happens in the fall before winter covers the forest with snow.

### ***One Step, One Full Day***



Tashi, stomping on the finished *chu pa* fabric as it soaks in hot water. She is here for about 5 hours to prepare, tighten and clean the fabric

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<sup>18</sup> The “spicy liquid” is made from a chilly mixture and rancid cheese. The cheese is curd that has been left out for a long time. It smells like rotten eggs. The family has made fun of themselves for liking the cheese and liquid so much. One neighbor, when coming over to offer tea was joking that she had once seen parasites in the cheese she used for her spicy liquid but ate it anyway.

To make one *chu pa*, the fabric must measure about twenty centimeters across by twelve meters long. It can fit along the length of the courtyard and the entire length of the house. Preparing it for dyeing and sewing takes an entire day. It is first stretched as long as possible, along the length of the courtyard, then laid out in the sun for about an hour. Tsering helps her mother by standing and holding out the fabric so that her mother can pull the brush in downward strokes along the fabric. Then Tashi takes out a large wooden bowl from the storage room where we make *tsampa* and *arag*. She makes a fire and puts a large pot of water on it. She dumps some of the water and the *chu pa* fabric into the wooden bowl that she has taken outside, removes her shoes and starts to stomp on the fabric. Every 20 minutes she tells Tsering to come and change the water. Tashi is stomping for about 3 hours. After the 1st hour, Tsering brings the large thermos of *pur cha* to her mother and she periodically sips some tea as she continues to stomp. After the first round of stomping, Tashi takes the *chu pa* fabric out of the water and leaves it out to dry on the line. A little while later, a neighbor comes over to buy some wool from the shop. Tashi enlists her to help with the next step –holding the fabric over a small fire created in the courtyard to dry and tighten the fibers.

Back to stomping. After being left out in the sun and dried over the fire, Tashi places the *chu pa* fabric back in the wooden bowl with another bath of hot water. Again, Tsering comes to change the water. By this time it is the afternoon. Tashi is stomping on the fabric for another 3 hours before she is finally done. Together with Appi, she lays out a long board and places the long *chu pa* fabric over it. On one end she had a wooden pole and she begins to tightly roll up the fabric, squeezing all of the water out of it as she goes. Appi sits on the other side of the fabric and holds on to it as they pull it tight from either end.

The fabric, wound up like a Swedish roll, is still wet when it is placed in a bag and put under a large rock in the storage room. It stays there overnight and then placed in the sun the next day.

### ***The Hidden “Tibetan” Valley***

Geographically, Lamaguan has Tibet on three sides --to the east, west and north. Upper Tsum juts out like a peninsula from Nepal, into China. However, surrounded by high mountains and politics, the barrier between the two is sharply delineated.

Tsum Ke, or the Tsum language is very similar to Tibetan. “It is the same but has a different melody,” Tsering tells me. Many words are similar but it emphasizes different sounds and uses some phrases that are specific to Tsum. Tsering also tells me that people can understand Tibetan but respond in their own language. Tsering knows both Tibetan and Tsumke because she went to Namgyal Tibetan School in Kathmandu. Her brothers now also go to a Tibetan school. Dorjee,

after going to primary school in Lamagaun and before secondary school in Gorkha, went to the monastery in Mu Gomba for two years to learn Tibetan.<sup>19</sup>

Culturally, Tsering's family recognizes the ways in which they are similar to Tibet. When talking about the similarities between the way people from Tsum and people from central Tibet dress, Tashi explains that their ancestors most likely came from central Tibet. Tashi also wears a Tibetan flag button on her *chu pa* almost every day.

Tsering's father and brother frequently travel to Tibet. Appi travels there about 10 times a year. This year he has already gone seven times and Dorjee as gone five. The small shop that Appi owns sells Chinese products almost exclusively. The Sprite and Coke cans all have Chinese characters, they sell Lhasa beer and Chinese chocolates. The family calls the ramen they get from the shop "Chinese noodles." Tsering and I take some of her favorite "Chinese soldier cookies" for our trek back to Kathmandu.

All of the meat that the family eats in the house is also from Tibet. As a strict Buddhist community, the people in Tsum have a long history of not killing animals for meat in the valley. They will only eat meat when they get it from Tibet or they are able to get the meat from an animal that has died. Appi had just come back from Tibet when I arrived and the family was eating a lot of the dried meat he had saved from the trip.

People in Lamaguan, who have a long history of trading with Tibet, have the ability to get an identification card that allows them to cross the border into Tibet with ease. Because Tsering doesn't technically live in Lamaguan, she would not be able to get the card and could not cross the same way. However, she says her cousin was able to cut across the border recently by pretending he is Tibetan. That is not to say that that the path to Tibet is easy. The path takes them through a mountain pass that is 5,083 meters high. Last spring, Appi tells me, one man was killed by some falling ice in the pass. He says the man's blood stains are still visible when he travels through.

Spring is one of the most dangerous times to cross the pass but it is also the time that is most profitable for people in Lamagaun, particularly because they are able to collect "Urzu Gombu" and sell it to people in China. I hear a lot about Urzu Gombu while I am in Lamagaun. Important to Chinese medicine, the herb is able to make people feel full when they have not eaten. It can only be collected in a small range of land in high altitude plains in Upper Tsum, right on the border between Tibet and Nepal. People from Tsum go to these small areas to collect the herb and then sell it to China. Urzu Gombu is the main "source of income" for people in Tsum and is the reason why many families are able to trade, have lodges and shops, Appi tells me.<sup>20</sup>

While Tsum's proximity to Tibet is important for their cultural and religious ties, for Tsering's father it is clearly an economic gateway. One day before dinner, Appi shows his

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<sup>19</sup> When we visited Mu Gomba together, Dorjee pointed out his room where he used to stay. It is now a room for trekkers. Now, not many monks actually stay at the monastery or school.

<sup>20</sup> Appi tells me that Upper Tsum's proximity to Tibet makes it differ from its counterpart in Lower Tsum. The main economy in Upper Tsum comes from trade. In Lower Tsum, there is more of a focus on sustainable farming and craftsmanship. Lower Tsum People make woven baskets and do many of the wood paneling decorations in homes.



collection of money from all around the world. He has gotten most of the money from his trade with Tibet. He shows me a note from Bhutan, Malaysia, China and Qatar. He keeps the collection tucked in the family's shrine in the living room.



The family's shop, filled with soda, alcohol, fabric, food and eggs all from Tibet.

### *A Terrible Mistake*

Tashi, stirring the fabric in the large pot of boiling water and dye. The fabric and water are meant to look dark so she doesn't realize the dye is making the fabric black instead of brown until it is too late.



At 6 am in the morning, Tashi prepares a huge pot of boiling water with dried *Pang Ju*, a sour herb that collected on the mountain west of Lamagaun. The plant is collected in the spring and saved until it can be used for the dying process. Sitting on the fire for about 2 and a half

hours, the water begins to turn a beautiful brown, not unlike a large pot of tea. Tashi takes the *Pang Ju* out of the pot.

“Now all of the sour is in the water.” Tsering tells me to try one of the fruits that has been soaking. As she predicted, it was not as sour as it was before the process. Assuming that this would be the only coloring needed for the dying process, I was surprised when Tashi got out two large bags to artificial dye.

“These are from Kathmandu,” she says. “They are too expensive, 2000 per packet.” Tashi explains that she is dying two of her *chu pas* this year, one from last year and one from this year so she is adding double the amount she would need for one. She measures three cups of the first dye, the one she explains is the brown. Then she adds a spoonful of the black dye.

The night before, Tashi had sewn the *chu pa* so that it was folded in half for the dying process, which made it easier to feed in to the dye. Tashi stirred the fabric with a wooden paddle. Lifting the fabric up and down.

After 10 minutes, Tashi realizes there might be a mistake. We move the pot outside where she can see the fabric better. She takes it out of the pot, her hands already stained with the dye. She realizes that it is not the right color. Instead of the right brown with a maroon undertone, the fabric is a solid, stark black. Tashi is clearly upset, murmuring to herself and trying to wash the black out of the pieces of fabric. Searching, pouring out some of the black water, looking at the *pang ju*, we don’t know what went wrong. She calls over a neighbor who also inspects the fabric and tisks to herself as she flips it over in her hands.

After some time, we figure out that she has mixed up the dyes. The “brown” dye is actually black. It is in a brown package and says “black” in English in the front. The brown was hard to see in the dark storage room where the fabric was added to the dye.

These two *chu pas* have taken her 2 full years and now, at one of the final steps, she does not have the result she wants. For Tashi, this mistake is more than just ruining a project, or burning a cake that you made. This is the clothes that she wears everyday. This is two years of work. When *chu pas* are homemade, they are almost never black in this valley.<sup>21</sup> She says she will stand out. Now she only has two older *chupas* but one of them is getting too thin and the other is a little short on her. Also, the *chu pa* on the loom is not for her, she is making it for Appi.

This is the first time Tashi has made a mistake with her dying –and with her *Chu pas* in general. She blames herself for not checking and Tsering for not reading the package. “I thought she knew better than me” Tsering said, “she has done it so many times, I didn’t think to read the packaging.”

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<sup>21</sup> Black *chu pas* are actually more commonly worn in lower Tsum and among younger people living away from the valley. Tsering tells me that when she dresses in a *chu pa* for special occasions, she wears a black one.



Dried *pang ju*, the sour herb boiling in a large pot of water for the dye. It is collected in the valley during the spring.



The packet of black dye bought from Kathmandu. Tashi adds too much to her mixture, thinking it is brown. The packet says black in English.

### ***Conclusion: WiFi and WeChat***

Sitting around the stove, the family is conversing in Tsumke while I wait for an occasional translation from Tsering. After a few minutes, Tsering gets up from her folding stool to grab her phone from the solar charger. She says she is going with her mother to get WiFi now so that her mother can talk with her brother in Taiwan. It is rare that Tsering is here to help her use WeChat so they need to go before we leave in a few days. Together we run out to our room to put on more layers, hats, and gloves. The one lodge in town is a five-minute walk from the home. Near one of the Mani walls in the center of the village we spot Dorjee with his 2 friends listening to Hindi music. One of them is smoking a cigarette and they do their best to ignore us as we pass. Tsering won't let him. She calls his name and he comes over to ask what we are doing. Tsering gets up in his face and ask if he has been smoking. When he denies it, she smells his breath. They both laugh as she hits his arm and tells him to be smart.

Huddled together we ring the bell to the lodge again and again, until finally a woman with big eyes and a bright smile lets us in. We buy our recharge cards in her small shop, (1 hour for 150 rupees) and are led to her home for tea and instant coffee before we are allowed to use the wifi. In her home there is a large flat screen TV that looks out of place next to the wooden jugs and candles that line the adjacent shelf. After we are given coffee, we are also force fed noodles despite having already eaten a large dinner of homemade *thenduk*.

Tsering tells me that she used to come over to this house for “TV time” when she was young and her old house was just next door. She remembers that the TV she used was the older one, half the size of the flat screen in the opposite corner of the room.

After our unplanned second dinner, we returned to the main part of the lodge. We are given blankets as we enter the passwords into our phones. Tsering helps her mother navigate WeChat, pressing the button when she talks and playing it back to her when she was done recording. Tashi laughs as she hears herself on the phone. Tsering kept showing her mother how to play it and send. Tashi would always give it back to her daughter to send it. After a few minutes, Tashi’s brother has not responded and our phones disconnect from the WiFi. We are unable to reconnect. In the end we realize it is too late and decide to go home and go to bed.

“Maybe we can come back tomorrow,” I suggest. When Tsering asks her mom is that is what she wants to do she tells her daughter that it is the full moon tomorrow night so we will have to go earlier. Every full moon, the mothers come together at a small shrine in the middle of the village to pray for their families. “They usually stay out to 12 or 1 am.”

When we finally begin to brush our teeth at 8:30, it already feels like the middle of the night. The horses’ small bells around their necks make a symphony of chimes as we look up at the sky. Because of the large illuminating moon, there appear to be fewer stars in the sky compared to a few nights earlier. The moon dominates the black sky. It casts a spotlight on the floor of the valley. We don’t need a flashlight to find our way inside to collect the small plastic bottles filled with hot water we have been using for our feet at night. We tuck in to our carpet-mattress bed, me on one side of the room and Tashi and Tsering on the other. I fall asleep almost immediately as I listen to the soft sound of Tsumke being murmured between mother and daughter.



### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Economic and cultural changes are rapidly impacting the life in the Tsum Valley. Perhaps the most evident change can be seen in the lives and homes of Tsum people from generation to generation. It will be interesting to study Tsum over the coming years, especially as the youth increasingly leave the valley to study and work in Kathmandu. In addition, it will be interesting to study the economic impact that the development of new and better roads to the valley will have as people including visitors from Nepal and foreign tourists travel there in increasing numbers. Will the Tsum Valley's relationship with China be as strong as it once was when this happens? What other cultural and economic changes will this bring?

Weaving and *chu pas* are just the tip of the number of crafts and art to be studied in Tsum. Handmade belts, aprons and carpets are also common crafts made in the valley. Do they have the same connection to the contemporary landscape?

Finally, one topic that I believe should be studied in Tsum is the relationship between Lower and Upper Tsum. Despite having similar cultures, language and history, their economies and livelihoods are very different. Thus there are a lot of stereotypes and prejudices existing between the upper and lower parts of the valley. Many Lower Tsum people come to Upper Tsum to work and there is a history of Upper Tsum families keeping servants from Lower Tsum. The tensions between the two are high and it would be interesting to delve deeper into prevailing issues in Tsum.



The author, being dressed up in the traditional way to wear a *chu pa*. Tashi cinches the woven belt to the amusement of Tsering and Habu, a neighbor who comes to help Tashi with spinning.

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